

Interwoven Narratives: A Qualitative Exploration of Adult Adoptees
Parenting Their Biological Children Across the Lifespan

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ABSTRACT

The lived experiences of adoptees have been largely unexplored, especially as they progress through their lifespan. The dominant discourse on adoption in Western academic circles and the wider media and society has tended to idealise the adoption experience or minimise its effects, yet the reality from the adopted person's point of view can be profoundly contrary to this. Adoption also has a fundamental effect on relationships, yet despite parenting being a common life experience and one of adulthood's core developmental tasks for many people, relatively little has been written on the nature and quality of adopted people's relationships with their biological children. In addition, there has been a surprising dearth of research examining the lifelong impacts of adoption in such a relational area.

I undertook a close examination of the lived experiences of adopted persons who have become biological parents and grandparents. Using a developmental psychology framework drawn from Erikson's eight-stage psychosocial model, I explored and braided three distinct strands into a coherent whole, held in place by the scholarly structural design.

The first strand used an ethnographic approach to allow adopted adults space to narrate in their own voices how they considered being adopted might have affected their parenting as their children grew and matured. The participants comprised nine adults (including myself as researcher) who were adopted in the early weeks of their lives through domestic adoption in Aotearoa New Zealand under a closed system. There were eight mothers and one father, ranging in age from 53 to 71 years at the time of interviews. All had adult children aged from their 20s to their 40s, and six also had grandchildren. The in-depth interviews created emotionally demanding but valued experience for the participants. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analysed interpretively and thematically. The second strand comprised a braided autoethnographic articulation and a profound and personal reworking of my lived experience as I juxtaposed the participants' narratives with my own. The final strand examined the range and breadth of extant theory and research into the life-long effects of closed stranger adoption and adoptees becoming parents.

By highlighting the interwoven layers of connectedness between theory and adoptees' experiences, this research adds complexity and nuance to existing literature, reflecting the profound pervasiveness of adoption across adoptees' lives. I found that, rather than diminishing with the passage of time, for the participants, issues actually became clearer and better able to be expressed. The findings of this doctoral research provide insights to adopted people, their children and grandchildren—and even to non-

adopted persons. The outcomes will also inform those in the clinical realm to develop better therapeutic modalities for this particular population.

ATTESTATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor used artificial intelligence tools or generative artificial intelligence tools (unless it is clearly stated, and referenced, along with the purpose of use), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Julia Field

1 May 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Dr Maya Angelou once said, “There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story inside you” (Angelou, 1969, p. 74); there have been many wonderful souls who have supported me to gather, process, and tell this story. This brief acknowledgement cannot do them justice.

First, to the participants who generously shared *your* untold stories and experiences with me for the purpose of this PhD: the narratives you shared demanded vulnerability and courage, and I honour each of you for your honesty and strength. Stepping out from the shadows of closed adoption is part of our lifelong journey of self-awareness and growth. Your wise and frequently poignant perceptions have profoundly deepened my understanding of how being adopted has affected us all.

Second, I would like to thank my supervisors Dr Rhoda Scherman and Dr Kay Hammond for seeing me through to completion. Kay, you have made tremendously valuable and insightful contributions, and your unwavering support during this research has been invaluable. Rhoda, I feel very fortunate to have had the benefit of your critical adoption and research knowledge and experience, and your input and encouragement has strengthened this work. My proofreaders, Priscilla Cameron and Helga Arlington: your meticulous attention to detail and nuance and the care you’ve taken in refining my work has been exceptional. I am grateful to you all for your confidence in my ability to finish this dissertation despite the challenges that emerged along the way.

The 4-year journey has contained the warp and weft of personal challenges as well as highlights. Over this period, I farewelled my birth father Jerry in 2021: the same year that our family was rocked by a violent home invasion with significant ongoing physical and emotional aftereffects. My adoptive father John passed away on 30 April 2024, just as I completed the dissertation. Prioritising my professional life as a fulltime counsellor has meant that I have had to fit the PhD into weekends and holidays, and I acknowledge the many occasions when I was “off the radar” to family and friends as I was consumed with the importance of this project. However, the highlights of welcoming a granddaughter and two grandsons during the gestation of the PhD have been transformational. Their lives are a source of deep joy that has supported the momentum that I have needed to sustain.

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And to my four children, who have been the solid ground beneath me for 37 years and the inspiration behind this offering. I carry each of you with me in every fibre and strand of who I am; my love for and connection to you has been the defining influence in the weaving of my life. Without you, I know I would have unravelled. This completed dissertation is dedicated to you, and I hope that my telling of these untold stories will help you—and others who were kept—to gain deeper insight into the tapestry of adoptee experience.

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FOREWORD: CHEROKEE DOUBLEWEAVE

Like me, my paternal grandfather Newell was a bastard, too.

He and his younger sister were conceived while their mother's husband, John Cantrell, was in the state penitentiary for selling "bootleg whiskey" in the Appalachian Mountains of North Carolina in 1913. On leaving jail, John was not pleased to find his brood of children had grown by two. To add insult to injury, the children were half-caste First Nations, since their father was Native American Cherokee. By all accounts, he was a gentle man who had helped the young wife by chopping firewood and bringing occasional chickens so she could feed her family while her husband was behind bars. Enraged, John nonetheless legally adopted the two, giving them his surname, Cantrell. The boy, Newell, grew up bearing the brunt of John's whiskey-fuelled rage, in poverty and hardship. Newell inherited his skill with a fiddle, weakness for alcohol, and anger. The music and alcoholism were handed down, along with the shame of being half caste at this time in American history when people were taught to be ashamed of indigeneity. His anger was predominantly projected onto his eldest son, my father, Jerry.

Jerry's recollection of his childhood is of hunger, poverty, and his father being gone for days at a time, playing banjo and fiddle and womanising. Jerry's mother, my grandmother (to whom he was born when she was just 14 years old) had three children under 5. Jerry recalls a time when there was a single onion left in the house for the four of them to eat. Jerry grew up with a chip on his shoulder, leaving home as soon as he could. Leaving law school and joining the US Navy for compulsory military training, he was assigned a job on the USS Staten Island, an icebreaker which stopped in the port of Lyttleton, New Zealand, before it recommenced its long trip down to Antarctica in the summer of 1963. While on shore leave, he met a young woman working in a café in Christchurch, who was about to start the final year of her degree in English and French.

Sparks flew. I was conceived.

Jerry continued down to Antarctica and wrote to her every day. She denied being pregnant, gave birth to me at the end of September 1963, left me in the care of the Department of Social Welfare, and then sat her final university exams and headed to the USA to be with him.

I was left behind.

The Cherokee Connection

At the time the first Europeans landed on North American shores, Cherokee territory extended across parts of eight modern US states. The Appalachian region was a deep forest with land cultivated by the Cherokee people along rich river bottoms, growing food for their families, hunting wild game, and gathering native plants for food,

medicine, and for making things they needed. When the European explorers ventured into Cherokee territory, they encountered impenetrable stands of tall willowy plants lining the banks of rivers and streams. That plant was rivercane, used by Indigenous people to weave baskets.

The Cherokee are known for their distinctive rivercane doubleweave baskets. Rugged, sturdy, and beautiful, it is very difficult to weave, as it starts on the interior bottom and is woven up the sides to the desired height. Whilst it is woven in one continuous weave, the doubleweave is actually two baskets, one woven inside the other; however, the inside and outside surfaces are constructed independently of each other, and there is no obvious indication of beginning or end. Further, the inside and outside patterns of a doubleweave basket can be different, a trait that sometimes confounds the viewer. Cherokee students in the 1950s and 1960s attempted to learn the beautiful but complex technique and remained amazed at its structure. One student wrote that the “unusual and intricate” weave required a person with “magic in their fingertips” (Fariello, 2009, p. 21)

I love this metaphor as it is so visceral and so personal. Weaving reflects my barely claimed First Nations cultural narrative and has served to tether me to the narrative of my ancestors and solidify my sense of belonging. I see my intersectional identities as adopted person, biological parent, counsellor, Pākehā female, and autoethnographic scholar as all interconnected, twisting under/over, under/over, under/over, repeatedly.

This dissertation on the experiences of adopted persons who are biological parents across the lifespan is written as a “doubleweave.” Whilst it is one continuous four-year weave, it is in effect two perspectives, one woven inside the other, a merging of “outsider” ethnographic research (the exterior basket) and “insider” autoethnographic research (the interior basket). Like the warp and weft of the rivercane, everything affects and touches everything else. Multiple narratives and perspectives weave and overlap each other, at times in parallel, at times illuminating intersections.

Figure 1

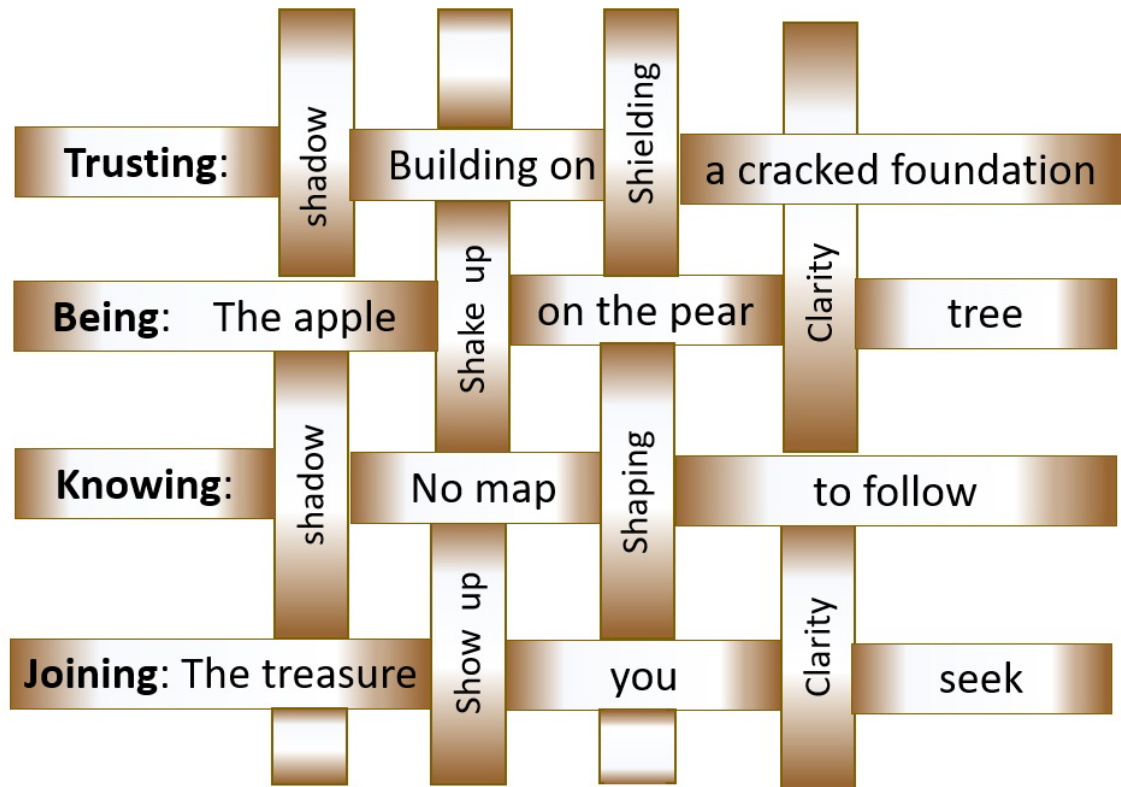
Cherokee Woman Weaving a Doubleweave Basket

Source: <http://garlandmag.com/article/cherokee-doubleweave-baskets/>



Figure 2

Schematic of Overarching Themes Interwoven with the Structural Template of the Thesis



I have endeavoured to ensure the descriptive text is kept separate from the theoretical analysis, opening with a scholarly introduction explaining the context of my research, the extant literature informing it, and the rationale and methods of my chosen form of narrative enquiry. I then alter direction into a creatively braided exploration describing the data gathered in an evocative way, linking my and my participants' narratives to rhetorical and narrative theory before closing with a discussion of heuristic and therapeutic implications.

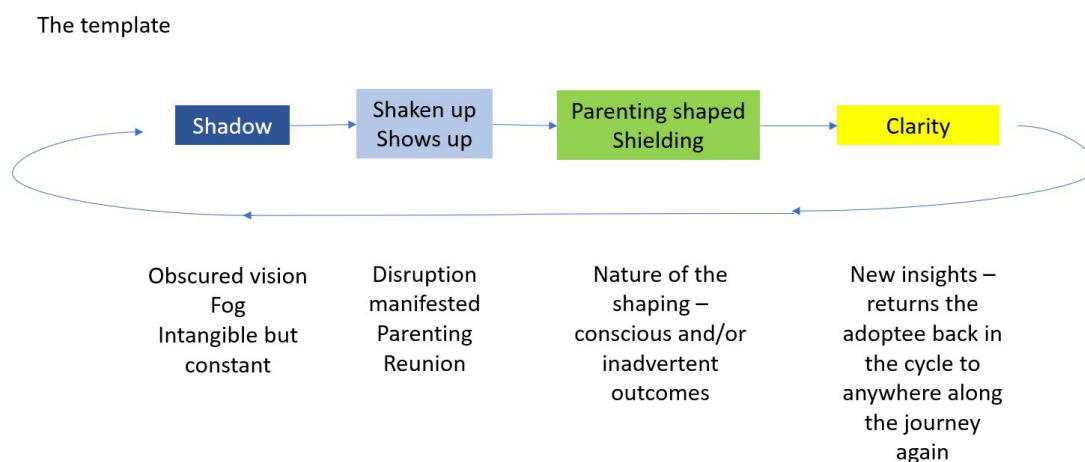
I present my findings in each overarching theme by bringing in the relevant literature in order to discuss participants' stories before juxtaposing these with my own narrative following a template which structures the story. Though it is unconventional to highlight words in academic writing, deliberate formatting choices have been made as part of the interaction with the reader, in order to emphasise the structure of my findings and create a structured narrative.

This template (Figure 3) describes and structures my findings, following a cyclic progression. The starting point is in shadow, a place of foggy, obscured vision. It is constant, ever-present, and intangible. This state is then disrupted ("shaken up")—possibly through the experiences of parenting, or possibly in reunion with one's biological family—and this disruption is manifested and revealed ("shows up") in a

multiplicity of ways. From this place of disruption, parenting attitudes and practices are deliberately and inadvertently formed (“shaping” and “shielding”) which leads the individual to new insights and clarity, then returning them back to an earlier part of the cycle where the progression occurs again.

Figure 3

Templated Structure



Preparing the cane for a doubleweave basket involves multiple steps—cutting, splitting, peeling, stripping, and trimming. Harvesting and preparing native roots and bark in order to dye the cane is a separate process that requires an extensive knowledge of plants and their habitats. In the hands of Cherokee basket weavers, four plants—black walnut, bloodroot, yellowroot, and butternut—provide endless variation. They are used in different combinations and with different materials to form baskets of differing shapes and sizes. On a finished basket, this natural colour palette is a characteristic that makes their baskets stand out as authentically Cherokee. All of these steps must be completed before weaving can begin.

In a similar way, through the course of this dissertation, there have been multiple steps, and I have chosen multiple strands of knowing, appraising them with a weaver’s eye. Like the warp and weft of the rivercane, each strand touches, and is interconnected with, the other strands. I intentionally embraced a methodology that resonated as an authentic tool of meaning making, and, as a new member of academia, I position my narrative by interweaving ethnography and autoethnography. I have used my own particular palette of insider knowledge, foregrounding my personal lived experiences as a person adopted in 1960s Aotearoa New Zealand and of becoming a parent in an autoethnographic framing of my story. Alongside this I have woven together ethnographic descriptions and critiques of cultural norms with the

voices of other adopted persons and the extant literature pertaining to the topic. Each of these strands is held in place by the scholarly structural design.

Figure 4

Doubleweave Baskets



Source: <https://garlandmag.com/article/cherokee-doubleweave-baskets/>

Doubleweave baskets are items of beauty and complexity, and they are also useful; this notion of functionality elegantly completes the metaphor. Thus, the final evaluation of this dissertation will be that of the reader, assessing the extent to which my findings have resonated, engaged, instructed, and informed them. My desired outcome is a beautiful and rigorous piece of scholarly writing that offers a substantive contribution to understanding the lifespan perspective of the impact of adoption on the lives of adopted persons, those who love them, and those who engage therapeutically with them.

INTRODUCTION

The Purpose of This Research (What I Hope to Achieve)

A Cherokee doubleweave basket is intricate, complex, beautiful—and also *functional*. It is useful. This dissertation is designed to be all of these things. My goal as an adoptee-counsellor-academic is to use my personal and professional experiences as lenses to interrupt some of the established metanarratives around closed stranger adoption (i.e., being raised in a genetically unrelated “stranger” family), illuminating and bringing increased clarity and an enhanced social understanding of its lifelong effects on the adopted person.

Why Adoption?

It has been said that, as academics, we study what puzzles us most.

(Van der Kolk, 2014)

I am adopted.

My adoptive parents had a history of loss. My mother’s father died suddenly when she was 2, and she was raised by a grieving widow; my father’s mother died when he was 4. He was a gentle man, but emotionally avoidant and unavailable. Neither parent was ever treated for grief or trauma. When they married in 1954, they anticipated having a large family. They were infertile. After 7 years of trying to have their own child, my older sister and I were adopted under Aotearoa New Zealand’s then-policy of closed stranger adoption. The home in which we were raised was built on appearances and secrecy.

My sister and I were by no means a rarity. There were many more of us. We adult adoptees comprise a significant portion of the Aotearoa New Zealand population. More than 6% of all children born in the late 1960s were placed into the closed adoption system (Iwanek, 1998), and between 1955 and 1985 more than 80,000 people were legally adopted. Some simple calculations show how many of us are directly impacted by adoption. For each adopted person, factor in a birth mother, father, and grandparents, in addition to an adoptive mother, father, and grandparents, plus just one sibling, one partner, and two children. This is a staggering 1.2 million people: 23% of our current total population. Despite this high prevalence of adoption, the dominant cultural narrative has minimised or denied the complexity of the adoption experience and its pervasive effects over an adopted person’s lifespan.

I was a poster child for closed stranger adoption. To the outside world I was a high achiever, had a successful academic and professional career, and had healthy and independent adult children and a loving, committed relationship. But behind the scenes, woven through my entire life were struggles with self-hatred, eating disorders,

self-injury, and suicidality, as well as lack of trust, relationship sabotage and breakdowns. As part of my training to be a counsellor in 2016 and 2017, I undertook a critical systematic literature review, and came across academic articles about how being adopted affects intimate relationships. I also learned about the intergenerational transmission of trauma and the effects of abandonment and a lack of emotional validation. It started to occur to me that, perhaps, it wasn't *all* my fault; *perhaps there was something else going on here*. As long ago as 1943, the so-called "subtle effects" of removing an infant from its mother had been described as lying "so deeply buried in the personality" that, in the light of "present" knowledge, it was "not possible to evaluate them" (Clothier, 1943, p. 222). Perhaps these subtle effects had played a role in my life? Perhaps being removed from my mother as a newborn had actually been harmful?

Discovering the seminal work by Bessel Van der Kolk (2014), I learned that my adaptive reactions; dysfunctional patterns towards Self and partners; and profound sense of dislocation, self-abandonment and self-hatred made some kind of sense through a trauma-informed lens. Whilst uncomfortable, this was a profound shift, after having blamed myself for my entire life. A further assertion that therapy often starts with "some inexplicable behaviour" (p. 148) resonated deeply; up until this point, so much of my life had not "made sense" to me at a fundamental level. I wanted to know more.

Why Autoethnography?

Around this time, I was introduced to a qualitative paradigm that foregrounded a person's personal history and lived experience: autoethnography.

The experiences in your life, both past and present, and who you are as a unique individual, will lead you to certain questions about the world and certain problems related to why things are the way they are. It is important to honour your own personal history and the knowledge you have accumulated up to this point, as well as the intuition or instincts that draw you toward a particular direction, question, problem, or topic—understanding that you may not always know exactly why or how you are being drawn in that direction. Ask yourself questions that only you can answer: "What truly interests me? What do I really want to know more about?...Whether by epiphany, aesthetic moment, or intuition, we begin autoethnographic projects by starting where we are. From there, we begin to situate ourselves in story—our own story, the story told in existing writing and research on our topic or experience, and the stories told by others. Many, perhaps most, researchers do this work simultaneously, moving inward and outward and inward again, from epiphany, aesthetic moment, or intuition into an interpretive community, the group of researchers who also write

about our topics and whose conversations we want to join. (Madison, cited in Adams et al., 2015, pp. 48–49)

I knew that the effects of closed stranger adoption was a topic that truly interested me, and I wanted to know more about it. Further validation for this autoethnographic exploration was my own “knowing” that being an adoptee had fundamentally influenced every aspect of my life, affecting my sense of identity, my capacity to trust and to love, and my relationship with my children. I knew that my positioning and life experience absolutely drove my thirst for research, and autoethnography told me that *my knowing mattered*. I was further inspired by the research by adoptees themselves, coming to understand that gathering information from an adoptee’s point of view is imperative. Adoptees are a unique population with an exclusive ability to increase the knowledge of adoption within the field by sharing their own insights and opinions. My desire was to use my insider knowledge of adoption to really penetrate inside adoption. Writing had always been the way I made sense of my world, but I knew the topic was bigger than “me.”

Why Braid Autoethnography with Ethnography?

I decided that an autoethnographic methodology could be enhanced and expanded by involving and “privileging” the voices of *other* adult adoptees from the “closed” adoption system of the 1950s through 1970s. By foregrounding adoptee voices, juxtaposing these with my own story, and weaving them together with the extant literature, I could compare and contrast and thus provide insights into deeper and more nuanced understandings. I would invite participants to explore, reflect on, and describe their lived experiences in-depth, open-ended interviews regarding how they considered their adoptee status may have influenced them, putting the culture of closed adoption under a microscope.

Why Parenting?

There were both “push” and “pull” factors around this topic. The primary motivation was because I knew that parenting was the relationship that had grown me up. My connection to my four children was, collectively, the first and only constant in what was good and real in my life, the place where I knew that I mattered and belonged *as myself*. I had a definite curiosity to ascertain whether this had been the case for other adoptees.

In addition, I was aware from my literature review that despite parenting being a common life experience and one of adulthood’s core developmental tasks for many people, relatively little was known about the nature and quality of adopted people’s relationships with their biological children. It seemed that there was a surprising dearth of research examining the lifelong impacts of adoption in such a relational area.

I also knew that I was neither ready nor equipped to unpack what was going on for me in my relationship with my adoptive parents, or in my intimate relationships with partners. But with my children, I could.

The more I reflected on the topic of being a parent in my own life, the more I saw connections to my identity as an adoptee, coming to regard parenting as a conduit for adopted people to revisit, reframe, and reflect on how adoption had woven in and out of their lives into the present.

I knew how much I struggled to articulate the effects of adoption in my life, because I knew it was invisible to everyone else. I knew it was an ostinato always playing, underneath all the other music. I knew it was hidden, but felt it leaking into everything. I *knew* at a somatic level, but I didn't yet trust my own knowing. To paraphrase T.S. Eliot, it was unknown but remembered: not known, but heard.

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
Through the unknown, remembered gate...
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea. (T.S. Eliot, 1942)

Why Now?

Māori have a saying, *Mā te wā*. It has many interpretations, but one of them is *when the time is right*. The time felt right for me, for several reasons.

First, my literature review had signposted a doorway into a topic that was deeply meaningful to me personally, and which I believed would augment what little was currently known regarding the interplay between adoption and parenthood, and how these two significant life events interacted with each other across the lifespan.

Second, I felt I had journeyed far enough in my life to be ready to turn around and look back, with the clarity of time and perspective.

Third, because I had the love, support, and encouragement of my partner, it felt safe.

Fourth, I wanted to understand myself better.

Finally, and most importantly, my children were what mattered most in the world to me. And I was finally ready to confront that.

[My children] were “angel guides” for me when I was weak and frustrated and in so much pain from the darkness of not knowing who I was. Their lives have

spurred me on in hopes of making the connection to solve not only my mystery, but theirs as well. (Lifton, 1994, p. 266)

Who is This Research For?

Adoptees

First and foremost, I aimed to deepen the understanding of the nuanced lived experiences of adoptees and our children and grandchildren. I sought to understand more about myself, consider ways in which being adopted may have impacted me, and, in turn, how much it may be impacting other adopted adults, particularly regarding the ways we navigate relationships. I have identified that there is a paucity of research that has been conducted regarding how we adult adoptees reflect on the meaning of adoption as we move through different life experiences and various adult roles, and I sought to demystify and illuminate some of the ways in which being adopted continues to affect many core aspects of a person's life, whether or not they are aware of it.

The Kept

My intention is to enlighten those who were kept. They were not adopted, and thus have no reason to know that being adopted is an entirely different way of being in the world. This is especially for those who know and endeavour to love us—our partners and friends.

It is also intended for those who support anyone who seeks to work therapeutically with this population. There is currently little bespoke professional training available for counsellors and other practitioners who wish to become more responsive and sensitive to the unique issues that adoption creates.

Because our experiences are largely invisible to the kept, my hope is to challenge the assumptions that still prevail in our media and wider society, bringing a new lens to what has been hiding in plain sight.

Academia

It is hoped that this research will usefully contribute to this largely unexplored aspect of adoption in the academic and clinical literature, particularly as it pertains to its reach across the lifespan. As adoptees enter adulthood with its own developmental challenges the early issues are not necessarily resolved (Janus, 1997), and the fact of being adopted must be integrated into the narratives that adoptees construct as they become adults. Being able to closely examine and gain insights into the lived experiences of adopted persons who have become biological parents and grandparents, will provide a more robust framework for understanding the lifelong effects of adoption.

How I Have Gone About this Research

Research question: To what extent, and in what ways, might being adopted have affected the complex developmental processes of parenting across the lifespan?

My study has closely examined the lived experiences of adopted persons who have become biological parents and grandparents. In-depth interviews have been recorded, transcribed, and analysed interpretively and thematically, in order to create a phenomenological text that is concerned fundamentally with the meaning of lived experience.

I have engaged deeply with the data in ways that are systematic and academically robust. Braun and Clarke's (2006) 6-phase process of reflexive thematic analysis has been utilised. The successive steps of generating, reviewing, defining, and naming themes have entailed ongoing and flexible engagement with the entire dataset, starting deductively with expected themes drawn from my earlier literature review (Field & Pond, 2018). I have then sought to inductively generate new analytical themes, interpretive insights, constructs, and explanations. The autoethnographic writing process I undertook from the outset of my research journey has been interwoven with my participants' stories and comparisons of my story with theirs, employing the richness of multiple, different voices and then turning the lens back again on my own self-reflection and understanding of meaning. This has continued throughout the research journey, with my autoethnography evolving in tandem with the progression of the project, with the examination, comparison and revisiting of difference and contrast impacting the meanings given to the experiences (Sawyer & Norris, 2015).

Throughout the Methodology chapter, I have explicitly outlined the aspects of this research that were used to enhance the quality of this study. These include the steps undertaken to incorporate explicitly reflexive practices, such as the ongoing memoing process. As a consequence, reflexivity is woven throughout this doctoral research. In line with Sandelowski (2000), I have endeavoured to achieve rigour by making my research and analytic process visible and auditable through detailing the sequential steps and providing justification for their use.

In the four findings chapters, Erikson's psychosocial stages have supported a framework of overarching themes within which the key themes identified by my participants and myself have been examined. I have woven into these themes a tapestry of verbatim quotes. Where they have been edited for clarity, this is indicated. The quotes are emotionally engaging and serve to powerfully illuminate the richness and depth of content elicited from my participants.

The nature of the braiding and the design, structure, pattern, and colours of the narrative strands have emerged as the process has unfolded over the past 4 years, in the same way that the weaver's design emerges *as they weave*.

Language

A note about my choice of language in this work: It is clear across the adoption literature and in social media that the uses of terminology in this space can be fraught. It is my belief that language is extremely powerful, and shapes discourses in myriad ways. There are a range of terms that have been debated and remain contentious to some. For example, there are many who regard the term "birthmother" as a coercive and reductionistic term, reducing the biological mother to the status of a birthing vessel (Merritt, 2022). Others feel that to say, "natural mother" implies that the adoptive mother is in some way "unnatural" or "artificial."

I do not wish to obscure the voices of adopted persons in this thesis by using unfamiliar or clunky nomenclature. As such I have chosen to use the terms "adopted person", and "adoptee" interchangeably to refer to myself and other adopted persons, considering that, as a member of the adoptee population myself, it is up to me to use whatever language I feel is authentic and clear to the reader.

I have also deliberately chosen to use the terms "birth mother and father" and "adoptive mother and father" in lieu of "biological", "first", or "natural", again for reasons of clarity and because they are widely recognised and accepted conventions across the academic and popular literature.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review locates my research into adopted adults' experiences of parenthood within the extant body of knowledge about adopted people, using Erikson's eight-stage psychosocial model of development as a scaffold. This provides context for the types of research that have been carried out regarding adopted people's experiences across the lifespan.

In this chapter I begin by outlining the concept and practice of closed stranger adoption. I then use the stages of Erikson's psychosocial model of development to describe the research literature pertaining to the impacts of adoption. Adoptees' developmental and psychosocial challenges and outcomes as they move through the lifespan are described. The second part of the review provides a précis of the academic literature pertaining to theoretical models of parenting, and finally, the limited existing research regarding adult adoptees and parenthood is summarised. Whilst all topics are intertwined, they are treated as distinct categories for clarity.

Closed Stranger Adoption

The practice of adoption is widespread and has been prevalent in most countries for millennia. For a range of sociohistorical and political reasons, English-speaking countries such as the United Kingdom, the United States of America (USA), Australia, and Aotearoa New Zealand embraced "closed stranger adoption" in the decades from the 1950s to the 1980s (Else, 1991). Closed stranger adoption refers to a legal and confidential process in which identifying information is withheld from the birth parents, the adoptive parents, and consequently, the child—ensuring privacy regarding the adoptee's origins, and that there is no contact between the parties. The adoption order that legitimises this process effects the legal transplant of the child, conferring on him or her a new name, identity, and birth certificate. In so doing, all biological and genetic links are transmuted by decree. Thus, all relationships with the child's family of origin are permanently severed, creating artificial parent and family relationships which favour the adoptive parents, who are genetically unrelated "strangers" to the infant (Iwanek, 1998).

The New Zealand Adoption Act 1955 described the procedures for obtaining an adoption order and its legal effects and is the legislation under which the participants in my research were adopted. This period came to be known as the "baby scoop era," in which the prevailing social and psychological theories of the day shaped a coherent doctrine of adoption enacted with strict laws sealing adoptees' birth records in perpetuity. With the stroke of a pen, our adoptive parents were granted a son or a

daughter and the facsimile of “natural” parenthood. This amended and fictitious birth certificate certified us as born to our adoptive parents.

At that time, Aotearoa New Zealand and other Western countries held views and expectations regarding what constituted socially acceptable organisation of families that differed considerably from those held today. In the 1960s, the normative family structure in New Zealand, as in many Western societies, was modelled on an idealised nuclear family, typically consisting of a married heterosexual couple with their biological children living together in a single household. The husband/father was often the primary breadwinner, while the wife/mother played a central role in homemaking and childcare. This norm reflected prevailing and widely understood societal expectations and cultural values at the time regarding familial roles, relationships, and behaviours within the community (Else, 1991). For example, discourses around illegitimacy were byproducts of colonial times when there was great stigma, scandal, and dishonour associated with being born “out of wedlock.” The social discourses regarding adoption during the 1950s and 1960s are examples of a postmodern notion of reality (Ellis, 2004). They became “fixed” and cemented, favouring the interests of infertile couples over those of disenfranchised others (“promiscuous” girls). Closed stranger adoption became not only a means for childless married couples to become parents (thus completing society’s normative family expectations) but also hid illegitimacy and allowed an unmarried mother to put the adoption “behind her” and have a “fresh start” (Else, 1991; Haenga-Collins, 2011). Else (1991) has described the adoption process as social engineering by “rescuing the child and helping the childless” (p. 53).

Thirty years later, members of Aotearoa New Zealand parliament acknowledged that adoption practices under the 1955 Act had been “premised on false assumptions” (Iwanek, 1998, p. 27). The number of closed adoptions taking place in Aotearoa New Zealand had dramatically declined due to various interrelated factors. These included many sociocultural shifts in New Zealand society: the introduction of the Domestic Purposes Benefit (DPB) enabling financial support for single parents to care for their children; the abolition of the “illegitimate” status when the Status of Children Act 1969 removed the legal distinction between people born legitimately and illegitimately; increased acceptance of de facto marriage; increased access to contraception and legal abortion; and declining pressure and influence from medical, legal, and social professionals as well as religious organisations on mothers to relinquish their children. Despite vehement opposition by some, the 1985 Adult Adoption Information Act “opened the books,” allowing adoptees over the age of 20 to apply for a copy of their original birth certificate and other identifying information held in Department of Social

Welfare files. Birth parents were also permitted to apply for the release of their child's adopted name, once the "child" was over the age of 20.

Adoption numbers in this country were at a peak in the years 1968-1971, with more than 6% of all children born placed into the closed adoption system, the highest number of domestic adoptions per capita in the Western world (Else, 1991; Iwanek, 1998). In total, the years between 1955 and 1985 saw more than 80,000 children legally adopted, which Else has described as "a social experiment with unknown and uninvestigated outcomes, conducted on a massive scale" (1991, p. 197). As a consequence, adult adoptees make up a significant portion of the Aotearoa New Zealand population.

Systematic research and scholarly analysis of adoption began in the late 1950s (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Over the ensuing 70 years, research about adopted people has spanned a wide range of topics including cognitive and academic development; psychological adjustment; physical development; self-esteem and identity; and relationships with adoptive and birth families, peers, and intimate partners (Grotevant & McDermott, 2014). Several different theories regarding adoptees' psychological development and adjustment (Armstrong, 2010) have influenced areas of research focus and study. However, Erikson's 1963 model of epigenetic stages of personality development focused on human psychosocial development right throughout the lifespan. Several authors (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Grotevant, 1997; Hoopes, 1990) have studied adoptees' lifelong development through Erikson's theoretical lens, considering how the experience of adoption interacts with and is woven through the eight developmental processes throughout the lifespan. Since this theory has salience for the many developmental challenges that adoptees face (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Duemer et al., 2016), I have chosen to proceed from an Eriksonian perspective.

Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Erikson proposed that as individuals pass through eight life stages, their identities and functioning are determined by the extent to which the specific developmental tasks of each stage are mastered along bipolar axes. These stages are characterised as psychosocial crises centring around changes in biological, psychological, and social processes (Sneed et al., 2006). Brodzinsky et al. (1992) have usefully overlaid the developmental tasks for adoptees onto this model. These are noted in Table 1, and their applicability and relevance discussed.

Table 1

After Erikson—Developmental Tasks for Adoptees According to Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig (1992)

Age	Stage	Description	Psychosocial task	Overlay in adoptee; adoption-related tasks
Birth to 18 months	1	Trust vs Mistrust <i>Can I trust the world?</i>	Learning to trust others to meet basic needs	mastery of trust for adopted person—more complex developing secure attachments in context of primal wound/delayed placement roots of attachment challenges
18 months to 3 years	2	Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt <i>Is it okay to be me?</i>	Personal control; establishment of “self” as an identity Beginnings of self-awareness and beginnings of partial independence from caregivers	learning about birth/reproduction developing language and verbalised “sense of self” adoption narrative beginning (shaped by adoptive parent discourse) adjusting to initial information about adoption
3 to 5 years	3	Initiative vs. Guilt	Desire to do things for themselves	recognising differences in physical appearance (especially in interracial and intercountry adoption)
6 to 12 years	4	Industry vs. Inferiority	Many advances in social, cognitive, physical and emotional development Self-concept and self-esteem start to emerge	prolongation of “family romance” stage “adopted child syndrome” (Kirschner) higher rates of externalising and internalising behaviours understanding the meaning and implications of being adopted searching for answers regarding one’s origin and the reasons for relinquishment coping with stigma associated with adoption
13 to 19 years	5	Identity vs. Confusion <i>Who am I?</i> <i>Who can I be?</i>	Development of a sense of identity Physical and emotional changes of puberty Cognitive development and abstract thinking emerge Striving towards independence and autonomy	overrepresentation in mental health and clinical settings adjustment problems higher rates of suicide further exploration of the meaning and implications of being adopted connecting adoption to one’s sense of identity coping with adoption-related loss, especially as it pertains to sense of self considering the possibility of searching for biological family; desire to search for birthparents emerges distinctly in adolescence (Vaccaro, 2012) reworking of attachment issues (McGinn, 2007)

Age	Stage	Description	Psychosocial task	Overlay in adoptee; adoption-related tasks
20 to 39 years	6	Intimacy vs. Isolation <i>Can I love?</i>	Fostering intimacy—relationship establishment and building. Issues of attachment and identity formation resurface.	further considerations about searching for biological family; beginning the search capacity for intimacy may be compromised due to earlier unresolved attachment and identity-formation issues (from earlier stages). adjusting to parenthood in light of the history of one's relinquishment
40 to 64 years	7	Generativity vs. Stagnation	Drive to meaningfully contribute to future generations and society Issues of attachment and identity formation resurface.	further exploration of the implications of adoption as it relates to the aging self further considerations about searching for biological family as birth parents age coping with adoption-related loss
65 + years	8	Integrity vs. Despair	Facing one's mortality and impending death	final resolution of the implications of adoption in the context of a life review final considerations regarding searching for surviving biological family

Although Erikson's psychosocial theory of human development over the lifespan has many aspects that rendered it suitable as a framework to follow, important questions do arise regarding its usefulness as a framework for understanding contemporary human development. Whilst reflecting Erikson's own search for personal and social belonging, his writings understandably express the sexism of his day (Horst, 1995). Erikson began formulating his theories during the pre- and immediate post-World War II context, incorporating ideals of American industrial and consumer capitalism inspired by the growth economy of the 1950s and 1960s.

As such, Erikson's work tended to emphasise normative family structures (as previously described), which privileged the experience of white, middle class, European and American men, based on patriarchal and conservative heteronormative assumptions (Armstrong, 2010). He wrote relatively little about the unique experiences of women, which by omission contributed to obscuring and making women's experience invisible, rendering his work somewhat problematic as a framework for understanding women's development (Horst, 1995). From a feminist standpoint it can be argued that Eriksonian theory was constructed from a perspective that excluded or ignored the lived realities of women's lives and the lives of other marginalised groups without the social privilege held by Erikson and his theory-building colleagues.

In addition, Erikson tied individual psychosocial development to a biological blueprint, thus emphasising a certain uniformity of experience. This brings into question its relevance for investigations of identity construction in a rapidly changing, multicultural context. From a postmodern perspective, contemporary critiques of Erikson's theory posited that the rigid linear and hierarchical nature of his developmental stages was unrealistic and that his focus on the development of a singular identity excluded the possibility of multiple identities (Armstrong, 2010).

As previously noted, Eriksonian theories of adoptee development have been used to increase awareness of adoption issues by mental health professionals (see Table 1). However, the applicability of Erikson's theory may be limited by the previously noted omissions, along with its ability to incorporate the social construction of adoption over time (Henderson, 2002). The social construction of adoption includes societal assumptions linked to how it is understood, for example, the primacy assigned to blood ties and genetic information; the construction of adoptive parenthood as "second-best"; the construction of adoptees as "inferior" due to their unknown genetic material; the construction of biological parents as irresponsible, immature, and selfish; and considerations about the concept of self-discovery (Armstrong, 2010; Wegar, 1992). These assumptions and constructions are all essential to understanding adoptee

narratives, as adoptive identity cannot be understood outside of the context of social understanding of kinship and family (Grotevant et al., 2007; Wegar, 1992).

Applications of Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

These critiques related to the historical and sociocultural context of the development of Erikson's theory of lifelong psychosocial development have not erased its contemporary usefulness. As it has already been widely used as a basis for understanding adoptee development, its use makes it possible to build on the comprehensive work done by previous researchers, theorists, and clinicians (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Grotevant, 1997; Hoopes, 1990). Several factors make Erikson's theory a useful framework for exploring the developmental journey of adopted people.

First, the eight-stage epigenetic model with its mechanisms of psychosexual and psychosocial development provides valid, sound, and useful explanations for individuals' changes across the lifespan. From birth onward, women negotiate the same psychosocial conflicts as men. If Erikson's theory is seen as explanatorily sound, but descriptively incomplete (since it describes male development only), women's development can be conceptualised as different, not in degree but in kind, from that of men. Women and men construct their senses of themselves as individuals through their experiences as gendered beings in a gendered society (Sorrell & Montgomery, 2001). Rather than being an explanation for human development, biological determinism is a theoretical and political tool frequently used to justify the disempowerment of all marginalised groups, including women. Instead of regarding biology as a deterministic component of psychosocial process, Erikson's theory provides a framework for conceptualising embodied genderisation as a psychosocial developmental process over the lifespan.

Second, although Erikson's theory has been criticised as too linear, the range and combinations of strengths and weaknesses that constitute successful development do allow for a more inclusive and less stigmatising approach. Healthy development is not merely defined in one way but is regarded as the most adaptive response to the given situation; hence, a nonnormative situation is not assumed to create pathological development (Armstrong, 2010).

Third, in considering the impact of the social construction of adoption, it is necessary to reconsider and reestablish Erikson's original emphasis on the social context of development. As an immigrant, Erikson was especially attuned to how profoundly the culture in which a person lives affects them, and his lifelong work explored the complex interplay between individual psychological development and social context (Stevens, 2008). Social contexts of oppression, disenfranchisement,



poverty, violence, war, discrimination, and natural disasters have all been seen to interact with the child's developing psyche within what was, sociohistorically, the normative family structure (Armstrong, 2010). Adding this dimension to the understanding of adoptee development also helps to address critiques from current perspectives, which suggest that the current focus on the biological and psychological factors—to the exclusion of social factors—of adoptee development are pathologising (Grotevant et al., 2007; Wegar, 1992). Viewing adoption as a socially constructed concept can allow better understanding and a greater ability to challenge the norms and assumptions of the social context in which individuals, families and communities operate.

Fourth, Erikson's psychosocial theory proposed that cultural ideals, mores, and practices be considered as significant influences on and contributors to individual psychological development. He argued that cultural institutions, structures, and rules are transmitted to and internalised by individuals through their participation in social relationships. Thus, adoptive parents, peers, intimate partners, and other members of a person's social milieu are not only individual participants in developmental processes, but also carriers of powerful societal and cultural messages. Aspects of Erikson's theory that have been mentioned thus far—the socioculturally and historically situated focus on identity development over the lifespan—are very much in keeping with concerns from a feminist standpoint regarding contextualised subjectivity (Sorrell & Montgomery, 2001). The overall integrative approach linking the development of an active self—produced by and responding to the social, cultural, and historical context—locates Erikson's theory firmly in the mainstream of contemporary theorising about human psychological and behavioural development.

Fifth, unlike the vast majority of 19th and 20th century developmental theories, Erikson's theory envisions identity development as an ongoing, evolving process through the years of adulthood. He regarded identity as extending and continuing to evolve throughout the eight psychosocial stages of the lifespan (Sokol, 2009). The proposition that psychological development and cultural context continue their interplay after late adolescence when reproductive and physical maturity have been achieved (Armstrong, 2010) was novel. This implies that participation in marriage and parenting is not merely about playing out scripts and programs developed in childhood and adolescence but related to continuing development in self-definition and self-evaluation (Sorrell & Montgomery, 2001). Many decades later, these perspectives fit well with contemporary theory and research. For example, findings concerning cognitive development and neuroplasticity indicate that the brain has a lifelong capacity to change and rewire itself in response to experiences and learning in family life,

relationships, and the workplace (Kolb et al., 2013). Psychologically and cognitively, our thinking processes are now considered to be a highly dynamic and constantly reorganising system capable of being shaped and reshaped across our entire lifespan.

Finally, Erikson's conceptualisation of identity development as a lifelong psychosocial process is very much in step with contemporary thinking in many disciplines. Many theorists and researchers from postmodern and feminist standpoints have implicitly or explicitly adopted analytical strategies congruent with the lifespan psychosocial framework, despite rejecting other aspects of Erikson's theory (Sorrell & Montgomery, 2001).

In my view, despite the criticisms of gender bias (and socioeconomic, political, and ethnocentric bias), Erikson's psychosocial model continues to have salience (Sokol, 2009). His framework with concepts of identity and its psychosocial construction and reconstruction across the lifespan, as well as his emphasis on cultural and societal influences on personality development, make it especially suited to the investigation of the relationships between parenting and the navigation of psychosocial developmental tasks. Thus, whilst Erikson's model of psychosocial development arguably contains weaknesses, it provides the underlying schema for the current study situated in Aotearoa New Zealand. I briefly summarise research findings pertaining to adopted people with these developmental stages in mind.

The Impacts of Adoption

Much of the extant literature on the adoptive experience has emerged from Western countries such as North America, Europe, and Australasia, so is largely representative of cultural practices and norms prevalent in these regions. Several theorists have noted that overall, the literature demonstrates that growing up in an adoptive family may pose several psychosocial complications for the adopted person (Bork et al., 2022; Corral et al., 2021). A summary of relevant research pertaining to the lifelong trajectory of the adopted person is summarised below.

As already noted, historically the years under investigation in my study (1950 to 1970) were part of a period of great stigma and condemnation with regard to out-of-wedlock conceptions, which required young mothers to relinquish their babies, usually against their will (Else, 1991). Indisputably, adoptees born in this era of sociocultural shame and blame started life as unwanted pregnancies. Hence, there was a high potential for negative, prenatal environments for offspring who went on to be relinquished by their mothers, predisposing them to a range of negative outcomes (Ludbrook, 1990; Rockel & Ryburn, 1988).

Pre-Birth Environment

A growing body of scientific and psychotherapeutic literature (King & LaPlante, 2005; Merchant, 2015; Nomura et al., 2019; Provençal & Binder, 2014) has explored evidence concerning the effects of maternal stress on the unborn child, which is summarised here.

The prenatal environment provides the unborn child with a security which no one else can, as a result of the mother's hormonal, physiological, constitutional, and emotional preparation, which science has now confirmed as beyond question (Cómitre-Mariano et al., 2021). We know now that there is a bidirectional transplacental cell exchange between the mother and her child beginning in the fourth week of pregnancy (known as feto-maternal microchimerism which results in the presence and persistence of foetal cells in maternal tissues). This means that not only have foetal DNA cells been found to stay in the mother's body up to decades after the birth of her baby, but the mother's cells also stay in her child's blood and tissues for decades, including in organs like the pancreas, heart, and skin (Morales, 2018).

King and LaPlante (2005) studied the effects of prenatal maternal stress on offspring, analysing longitudinal data regarding 150 children who had been exposed in utero to a major stressful event: in this case a catastrophic natural disaster ("Project Ice Storm"). Their findings strongly suggested that a major stressful event, independent of maternal personality factors, could negatively impact on an unborn child's cognitive and language development, and these effects persisted into middle childhood. The second trimester appeared to be a time of particular vulnerability vis-à-vis the timing of the stressor on the pregnant woman, adversely affecting peri-natal outcomes, infant temperament, behavioural and emotional functioning, and even the physical development of children exposed in utero. Talge et al. (2007) discussed the strong correlation between maternal and foetal cortisol levels in humans, reiterating that antenatal stress and/or anxiety in the mother means that her child is substantially more likely to have emotional or cognitive problems, including an increased risk of attentional deficit/hyperactivity, anxiety, and language delays. Nomura et al. (2019) examined the effects of in utero exposure to maternal depression on infant temperament following "Superstorm Sandy," a hurricane that hit metropolitan New York in 2012. Results showed that prenatal maternal depression was associated with lower emotion regulation and greater distress in 6-month-old children.

An extensive review by Provençal and Binder (2014) explored effects of prenatal conditions that were not limited to physical stresses (such as famine) but also exposure to trauma, reporting that epigenetic and even transgenerational changes were seen. They were able to demonstrate increased rate of depression and psychosomatic symptoms in the third generation of Jewish grandparents exposed to



the Holocaust and concluded, “In humans it is impossible to disentangle all these factors” (p. 16), concluding that increases in cortisol in the pregnant mother were transmitted to the unborn child and adversely affected foetal development. Chambers (2017) noted that a mother’s affective state during pregnancy seemed to significantly alter the genetic expression of the offspring. Cao-Lei et al (2020) have researched prenatal maternal stress and have suggested that maternal exposure to severe stressors modifies a wide range of somatic systems in the unborn child, and “may increase risk for a variety of disorders in adulthood” (p. 199).

Following on from this neuroscientific evidence showing that a pregnant mother’s emotional state can affect her unborn child, Morales (2018) suggested that the unborn child grows in an:

...emotional-energetic environment before birth. Nothing of what happens to his mother is unknown to it. Baby recognises his voice, emotions, and in them, it intuits the significant value of each one of his vibrations, be [they] empathic and cheerful—or rejection and wrath. The feelings are expressed tacitly between the mother and the child. (p. 2)

Basing her argument on foetal microchimerism, Morales (2018) postulated that the absence of early maternal attachment during pregnancy and post pregnancy may result in an emotional rejection of the child. Brain and biochemical alterations will occur in the developing baby due to the constant release of corticoid hormones from anger, stress, and persistent rejection and detachment by the mother.

Merchant (2015) presented an extreme but compelling case study. He argued that emotional memories could embed themselves in the unborn child’s psyche if there was prenatal trauma, noting that a birth mother could have intense negative emotion toward her unborn child:

The emotional state of the birth mother during pregnancy could harbour annihilation fantasies, rejection, disavowal and emotional abandonment of him. Such intense negative affects as these would be traumatic to the foetus...There is evidence too that a foetus experiencing maternal stress may have mental health issues much later in life, including depression, anxiety, phobias and suicidal ideation. (p. 612)

Merchant (2015) noted that within the psychoanalytic tradition the view was held even as far back as Winnicott in the mid-20th century that experiences in the womb can become embedded in the psyche/soma of the foetus, reemerging as memory traces later in life. He asserted that contemporary neuroscience research supports the hypothesis that emotional memory can become thus embedded with

“...whatever is left in the birth mother after an unwanted pregnancy—rejection, disavowal, annihilation fantasies culminating in her abandonment of him...” (p. 607).

The literature confirms that in utero babies not only receive nutrients and other substances through the placenta but also experience stress and begin forming bodily memories, even though this occurs before they have words to describe it (Parkes & Mintz, 2021). Lifton (1994) portrayed the unborn child as a “feeling, remembering, aware being” (p. 31); the potential implications of this for an adopted person are considered below. I now consider what is carried over into the first moments, days, and weeks of life ex utero.

Stage 1 (Birth to 18 Months)

The postpartum period is part of a biological sequence for infant and mother and, as Császár-Nagy and Bókkon (2018) have explained, they essentially form a single organism. Ideally there is an uninterrupted natural flow from the safe confinement of the in utero experience to being secure within the mother’s arms. The newborn’s experience of birth is that of arriving in a foreign place with unfamiliar auditory and olfactory assaults. In this context, high concentrations of noradrenalin in the newborn activate the lungs and ensure early bonding with the mother; her smell, contact, and warmth light up a pathway from the baby’s amygdala to its frontal lobe, connecting the newborn’s emotional and social brain circuits, reducing and controlling the inherent stress of birth (Bergman, 2014).

The literature is unequivocal that the mother’s smells, touch, and voice are profoundly critical for the infant in this early period. With regard to smell, infants show evidence of prenatal olfactory learning through an attraction to the odour of amniotic fluid that may reflect foetal exposure to that substance. Fascinatingly, human amniotic fluid appears to contain odour properties, which have been hypothesised to initiate parent-infant interactions (Vaglio, 2009). Shortly after birth, the baby is responsive to maternal odour, and bidirectional recognition and discrimination of odour between mother and infant is communicated (Vaglio, 2009). Infants’ behavioural pain responses (such as crying, grimacing, and motor activity) have been shown to be reduced by the odour from their own mother’s milk but not from that of other mothers, or from formula (Császár-Nagy & Bókkon, 2018). As soon as 24 hours after birth, a newborn will show marked preference for the breastmilk of their biological mother over that of a genetic stranger (Nishitani et al., 2009). In addition, the voice of the mother and the sounds of her heartbeat the infant was accustomed to hearing in utero are among the most important acoustic stimuli, and newborns show a clear preference for their mother’s voice. Fehlahaber (2016) has described the specific pattern of brain activity elicited in an infant’s brain in response to her mother’s voice as akin to a “neural fingerprint”

(para. 3). Due to human newborns' exceptionally immature state, suggesting that gestation is not complete with birth but needs to be completed outside the womb, postnatal care has increasingly emphasised the importance of the "fourth trimester" in forming positive life experiences for the newborn and mother as the transition from one body to a dyad of two is made (Karp, 2004).

Having established that the time shortly after birth represents a psychophysiological critical period for programming future physiology and behaviour, Császár-Nagy and Bókkon (2018) investigated what the effects of disruption might be. Based on their studies on early separation (in the first days and weeks following birth) they hypothesised that early maternal separation may induce similar epigenetic changes to those found in various mental illnesses and may also be implicated in neurodevelopmental disorders. A plethora of studies (Cao-Lei et al., 2020; Nomura et al., 2019; Provençal & Binder, 2014; Szyf, 2012) show that babies who are separated from their mothers suffer extreme stress, with their nervous systems going into overdrive with increased cortisol levels, trying to compensate for being separated from the only source of safety they have ever known.

Bergman (2019) described maternal-newborn separation as a source of "toxic stress" (p. 1087) and Császár-Nagy and Bokkon (2018), warned that it is one of the most potent stressors to which neonates can be exposed, potentially promoting the formation of neurodevelopmental disorders, and permanently "modifying neurobiological and behavioural parameters in adulthood" (p. 345). They also discussed how epigenetic information (inherited and acquired) in pre-, peri-, and early postnatal periods plays an essential role in unconscious processes and numerous brain functions in the mature organism. Other researchers have begun focusing on the ways prenatal and early childhood traumas—adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), as they are called—can impact the child's development and health, both physiologically and psychologically (Bergman, 2019; King & LaPlante, 2005). Bergman (2019) acknowledged that, until recently, it was difficult to imagine that a seemingly small effect in early life might impact an individual over their lifespan. However, he pointed to an expanding area of science (developmental origins of health and disease) which is exploring just such data; for example, when a mother and infant are separated at birth, methylation (the chemical process that adds a small molecule to DNA, affecting how genes work in cells) and adaptation have been demonstrated to be primary changes, with pervasive and profound ongoing impacts. He concluded that "separation immediately after birth, and for the hours and days that follow, should be avoided at all costs" (p. 1100).

Moskowitz (2011) explored the dyadic symbiosis between the two in what she termed “primary maternal pre-occupation” (p. 229), asserting that a mother conveys a reliable frame of reference by mirroring her baby, in countless subtle and nuanced emotional and perceptual ways. The primitive infant self automatically adjusts to the mother, and this mother-infant interplay is elegant both psychologically and physiologically. For example, the mother covering her baby in kisses serves a biological purpose—it changes her breast milk. When she kisses the baby, she samples the pathogens on baby’s face, which then travel to her lymphatic system which creates antibodies to fight those pathogens, which baby receives through breast milk (Sompayrac, 2015).

It is not difficult to extrapolate to some of the possible implications for an infant who is removed from their biological mother at birth and placed with a mother who has not known it for the previous nine months of gestation. In addition to the shock and stress the newborn is experiencing from the loss of the biological mother, the adopting mother may not be well-equipped to coregulate the infant, lacking the nine-month cellular and hormonal connection to the baby. If her confidence is shaky or uncertain, her mirroring of the infant may prove unpredictable, unstable, anxiety-ridden, or hostile, with resultant loss of attunement and reliable frame of reference, and deleterious effects on the individuating child who has experienced an abrupt loss of the safe state of symbiosis (Moskowitz, 2011).

With advances in medicine and neuroscience, the legacy of separating a newborn from its biological parents has come to be regarded by some researchers as preverbal trauma, leaving a mark on the baby’s nervous system (Chambers, 2017; Merchant, 2015; Merritt, 2022; Robert, 2020). Many people who were adopted in infancy have instinctively and somatically known that they have preverbal experiences which are imprinted in their implicit memories. It has been shown that predispositions in the individual to distinguish and respond preferentially to their own mother’s maternal scents and sounds are created prenatally, and that these predispositions prepare the way for the next phase in the development of attachment (Hofer, 2006). However, adoption systems and society more broadly have failed to apply the knowledge that science has confirmed. Severing a child from its mother and entire family system is a trauma:

Adoption is a trauma, a traumatic loss. Trauma occurs when a child is separated from his or her parent, the very relationship on which he or she relies for survival. For many children, this break in attachment and, more specifically, the removal experience itself is traumatic because it poses a threat to his or her primal existence. (Robert, 2020, p. 47)



Stages 2 to 4 (18 Months to 12 Years)

The natural flow from in utero to newborn leads on to the wanderings of the toddler and preschooler. Seeman (2020) has eloquently described how preschool children display limited comprehension regarding the meaning of adoption, possibly linking it to a way of being born, but not grasping what separation from the family they were born into actually signifies. Their adoptive parents may have emphasised that they were “chosen,” a common narrative (Wasson, 1977), and this may engender positive feelings (see Table 1). However, as they develop cognitively from 6 to 12 years, they become more capable of abstract thinking and more sophisticated processing. This is when questions about relinquishment and biological origins start to emerge, along with the ability to empathise with others, conceptualise, and process some of adoption’s complexities. Seeman (2020) and others (Brand & Brinich, 1999; Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Brodzinsky et al., 1998; Collishaw et al., 1998; Smit, 2002) have identified that this can be when adjustment difficulties begin to occur.

Brodzinsky et al. (1998) opined that unresolved grief due to loss of their biological parents might cause confusion and difficulty in adopted children, affecting their ability to fully identify with the adoptive family, then later individuate and healthily differentiate from them (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004). Difficulties with attachment (which is reviewed in a forthcoming section) were identified. Farr and Grotevant (2019) noted that disorganised attachment is more common among adopted children than nonadopted, and Van den Dries et al. (2008) found the same with reactive and insecure attachment. In a meta-analysis of adoption studies, Wierzbicki (1993) examined the relative adjustment of adopted children, confirming their overrepresentation in both outpatient and inpatient mental health settings, and increased likelihoods to externalise problems and experience academic difficulties compared to nonadopted peers. Collishaw et al. (1998) also found increased adjustment problems during childhood among adoptees compared to nonadoptees.

Stage 5 (13 to 19 Years)

Learning and behavioural issues have been found to be prevalent among adopted students in elementary, middle, and high school (Zill & Bramlett, 2014). Juffer and van Ijzendoorn (2005) conducted meta-analyses of research with international and domestic adoptees compared to nonadopted children and youth, examining behaviour problems and mental health referrals, as well as self-esteem. Results indicated that both groups of adoptees were more likely to be referred to mental health services, and also exhibited more externalising and internalising of problems, compared to nonadopted controls (Fergusson & Horwood, 1998; Grotevant et al., 2017). Keyes et al. (2008) found that for teenagers who had been adopted as infants, the likelihood of

having contact with a mental health professional during their adolescence was approximately double that of nonadoptees.

The key psychosocial task of adolescence identified by Erikson (1980), and subsequently developed in Marcia's (1980) research, is identity formation; the layering of this process of identity development is made even more complex when adding in cultural, racial, or ethnic identity development. In Aotearoa New Zealand, the dislocation of Māori adoptees and resultant loss of *whakapapa* (a Māori word meaning genealogy, lineage, or line of descent from your ancestors) has seen an even more tenuous positioning in the liminal "in-betweenness" experienced by adoptees (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2020). Adopted adolescents comprise anywhere from 5% to more than 20% of caseloads of mental healthcare professionals (Axness, 2016), and Miller et al. (2000) observed depressive symptoms and behavioural difficulties in clinical studies of adopted adolescents. Tieman et al. (2005) found that adopted adolescent males showed more problem behaviours than nonadoptees. Fergusson et al. (1995) found that the adoptee cohort in their large (Aotearoa New Zealand) study exhibited conduct disorders, juvenile delinquency, and substance abuse at significantly higher rates than the nonadoptees. Maté (2008), a physician with special interest in childhood development, trauma, and addiction, has posited that many adults who were adopted as infants continue to harbour a lifelong and powerful sense of rejection, referencing Slap et al.'s finding (2001) that the suicide risk for adopted adolescents is double that of their nonadopted peers. Keyes et al. (2013) reported that the rates of reported suicide attempts were more than four times greater in adopted adolescents in the US relative to those for nonadoptees (odds ratio of 4.23:1).

Overall, current literature demonstrates that adoptees face complexities during their childhood and adolescence, including struggles with feelings related to security, belonging, and identity (Colaner et al., 2014; Grotevant et al., 2017; Kalus, 2016; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011). It is reasonable to expect that these challenges might sometimes linger into adulthood (Penny et al., 2007), which is now considered.

Stages 6 to 8 (Adulthood)

Stage 6 (20 to 39 years), Stage 7 (40 to 64 years), Stage 8 (65+ years)

It is axiomatic that there is no single research finding that will apply to all adopted persons; as Brodzinsky et al. (2022) noted, we are an extremely heterogeneous group. Despite this, the meaning most ascribe to being adopted does appear to be reconstructed in progressive stages across the lifespan, with different life events causing changes in how adoption is regarded (Penny et al., 2007). There is a growing body of evidence that adoption has an impact on adoptees throughout their adult lives, although research has only recently started to focus on psychological well-

being and adjustment of adoptees after childhood, as they pass through Erikson's three developmental life stages of adulthood (Charon, 1994; Vaccaro, 2012). In Juffer and Van Ijzendoorn's 2005 meta-analysis, only six of the 64 empirical studies they identified had included (young) adult adoptees, while the other 58 studies had examined children and adolescents.

Wright et al. (2023) also noted that there were few studies exploring adult adoptee development. They summarised the foci of research into this cohort as relationships with adoptive family, searching for birth relatives, and the rates at which adoptees struggled with mental health challenges (Penny et al., 2007). Adoptees' experiences of separation, trauma and/or grief, and identity development, were considered unique from those of the general, nonadopted population (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; Grotevant et al., 2017).

Lifespan. Erikson's model of psychosocial development emphasised that identity development continued beyond adolescence, which suggests it important to determine the effects of adoption on identity right throughout the adoptee's life (Moyer & Juang, 2011). Few researchers have focused attention on the older age groups of adoptees, those who were relinquished in the 1940s to 1970s, who are currently 50–80 years old. Adoptees in Greco et al.'s (2015) study who ranged from their mid-20s to early 40s reflected on how their experiences of being adopted had waxed and waned in prominence across their lives. They felt adoption had become a more discernible feature of their self-concept and thought processes at times in their lives of significant change, for example, when establishing their own families. Other researchers who have compared adjustment and psychological outcomes for adoptees compared with nonadoptees, as well as birth-parent searches and reunions (Hughes, 2015; Krueger & Hanna, 1997), have similarly regarded adoption as an ongoing life experience, noting that it can place adopted persons at risk for lifelong psychosocial adjustment and attachment difficulties (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Haenga-Collins & Gibbs, 2015; Howe & Feast, 2000; Rosenberg & Groze, 1997).

The lifespan perspective in Erikson's eight-stage representation of the life cycle concludes with the final psychosocial task of living with integrity or experiencing despair in the face of one's mortality and impending death (Erikson, 1963). This culmination of all the developmental stages that have preceded it involves exploration and acceptance of the order and meaning in one's life narrative (Armstrong, 2010). Brodzinsky et al. (1998) have suggested that this final stage offers adoptees a final opportunity to contemplate their adoptive status, essentially reflecting on how their personalities and lives have been moulded by adoption: "So one last time, the adoptee

will metaphorically climb the stairs, open the closet door, and take down the box to deal with his 'issue'—the fact of being adopted" (Brodzinsky et al., 1998, p. 170).

Mental Health. In terms of the mental health of adopted adults, the literature is divided. Some studies have found few differences between the mental health of adopted adults and that of their nonadopted peers (Collishaw et al., 1998; Feigelman, 1997). By contrast, other studies have reported an increased risk and higher rates for adopted adults of developing a mental health disorder, lower psychological well-being, and an overrepresentation among mental health referrals for adult adoptees compared to their nonadopted counterparts (Cubito and Brandon, 2000; Levy-Shiff, 2001; Loehlin et al., 2007; Tieman et al., 2005). Westermeyer et al. (2014) reported higher rates of mood and anxiety disorders in adoptees compared to nonadoptees in a large sample of people aged 18 to 65+ drawn from the general population. Strand et al. (2020) have demonstrated higher rates of eating disorders for adopted persons between the ages of 15 and 41.

Melero and Sánchez-Sandoval (2017) systematically reviewed the academic literature from 1995 to 2015 regarding the mental health and psychological adjustment of adult adoptees between the ages of 20 and 40. They concluded that adult adoptees exhibited higher rates of depression, anxiety, neuroticism, and behavioural and personality disorders than nonadoptees. Similarly, Corral et al. (2021) in their meta-analysis of psychological adjustment in adult adoptees over the age of 18 demonstrated that adoptees had significantly worse psychological adjustment than nonadoptees across all outcomes.

Empirical research has also evidenced a higher proportion of adopted persons in therapy than of nonadopted persons (Baden et al., 2017; Miller et al., 2000; Vote & Kasket, 2017). There is some evidence to indicate that large numbers of adoptees seek psychotherapy at some point in their lifetime, up to three times more than nonadoptees, according to one study (Hertz, 1998). Other studies and meta-analyses have reported increased vulnerability and greater referral rates of adoptees to psychological services than their nonadopted counterparts (Borders et al., 2000; Jones, 1997; Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2005). Adoptees have reported higher rates of depression, anxiety, personality and behavioural disorders, and sought clinical care at higher rates than nonadoptees (Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017). They have also reported a desire for adoption-competent providers who could recognise relevant adoption factors when they arise (Baden et al., 2017).

Search & Reunion. Another significant focus of research into adult adoptee outcomes has pertained to searches for birth families by adoptees; the motivations, reasons, and triggers behind such searches; and search and reunion outcomes

(Bertocci & Schechter, 1991). The effects of developmental milestones, major life transitions, and key life events have been identified as the main triggers for searches for birth families (Howe & Feast, 2000; Kowal & Schilling, 1985). A small body of literature has begun to address the layers of identity loss in searches and reunions for Māori adopted people in Aotearoa New Zealand, rooted in having grown up not knowing their whakapapa and dislocated from their birth families and culture of origin (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2020; Haenga-Collins, 2017).

Relationships. Unlike other developmental theorists who have emphasised roles, responsibilities, developing stable life structures, and consolidating careers as focal aspects of adulthood (Horst, 1995), Erikson had a strongly relational focus. His attention tended to be on the importance of people fusing, bonding, coming together, and forming relationships. This section summarises some of the literature regarding the centrality of attachment needs in relationships, then turns to an overview of attachment and adoption. Following this the notion of relational “belonging” is briefly discussed.

Attachment Needs

Interpersonal intimacy is based on attachment needs which are foundational in the early years of life. Bowlby (1958), the originator of attachment theory, postulated that infants have an inborn tendency to seek and maintain proximity to a caregiver to ensure survival, which is independent from their feeding behaviour and organised around specific figures, usually the biological mother. Berman and Sperling (1994) discussed how infants seek proximity to one or a few specific individuals who can provide them with physical or psychological safety or security. However, Bowlby also contended that attachment processes are implicated and operating in relationships across our entire lifespan, and underlie how we form and maintain secure relational bonds in adulthood (Pietromonaco & Beck, 2015; Shaver & Mikulincer, 2014). Bowlby (1988) emphasised the centrality of people in our lives who are attachment figures: those who can be available, sensitive and supportive to us in times of need. He stated that the goal of attachment was “felt security” (p. 3) in order to be able to regulate our emotions, have healthy psychological well-being and thus be equipped to cope constructively with stressful events, maintain self-esteem and emotional stability, and confidently venture into the world as adults (Bowlby, 1988). Verzulli (2000) has explained that the functions of adult attachment are very similar to those in children. An adult partner replaces the parent as a secure base and safe haven. Attachment in infants is somatically activated by the sight, feel, and smell of the attachment figure; having eye contact; and being held in their arms. These behaviours are mirrored and replicated when adults form romantic attachments, with eye contact, touching, and physicality between the partners (Verzulli, 2000). In this process, a new attachment

figure is created, with the attachment drive being associated with this particular person. As adults, we seek proximity to our attachment figures for a number of reasons, including distress, just as children do.

Hazan and Shaver (1987) explored adult attachment behaviour persisting through the lifespan. They conceptualised romantic love relationships as attachment-based, categorising these according to Ainsworth et al.'s (1978) three styles of attachment: secure, anxious, and avoidant. Should perceived or actual threats to the relationship occur, or if the attachment figure is unavailable, then attachment-seeking behaviours will be activated, which will manifest in different behaviours, according to the specific attachment type of the individual (i.e., secure, anxious/ambivalent, or avoidant). There is considerable evidence in the research literature (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Mikulincer et al., 2002) that attachment is a crucial developmental process with far-reaching repercussions. In addition, there is a strong empirically established link between childhood attachment and adult romantic relationships in that early attachment experience is predictive of later satisfaction in intimate relationships. Thus, if the early attachment experience is disrupted, there is potential impact on future close relationships (Gleeson & Fitzgerald, 2014; Winward, 2005).

Attachment and Adopted Adults. Developing the capacity to be emotionally and physically intimate with a partner requires an individual to be secure enough in their identity to temporarily “merge” with another person and to have the capacity to trust (if this has developed successfully during infancy). It is widely proposed that, for adopted people, the trust stage of infancy, or the identity-formation stage of adolescence may be interrupted, incomplete, or prolonged (Armstrong, 2010). The adoption-specific aspects overlaid on Erikson's psychosocial developmental challenges for adults largely centre around interpersonal/intrapsychic issues like intimacy and feelings of isolation (see Table 1).

By assuming the premise that adoptees are likely to face more challenges in forming secure attachments in infancy, childhood, and adolescence, it logically follows that adoptees are more likely to face further challenges in forming and maintaining satisfying intimate relationships later in life, an aspect borne out in clinical and therapeutic work (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Carlis, 2015). From Verrier's (1993) assertion that “inside every adoptee is an abandoned baby” (p. 110) came a raft of studies focusing on how this wound has created long-lasting difficulties in relationships for the adult adoptee, due to the break in attachment (Groncki, 2010; McGinn, 2000; Topfer, 2012). Research on long-term adult adoptee attachment outcomes is limited, and research on their functioning and satisfaction in intimate adult relationships is more limited still (Field & Pond, 2018).

Could separation from one's mother at birth impact a person's ability to securely attach? The literature indicates that adoptive status has been demonstrated to significantly predict challenges in attachment and intimacy. Chavaux's 2003 research with 200 adoptees found that in terms of adult attachment styles, 74% were rated as insecurely attached, with nearly one-half of the subjects (44%) rated as having an anxious-avoidant attachment style, confirming that adoptee attachment styles differed vastly from the attachment styles of the general population. Feeney et al. (2007) examined the interplays between adoption, attachment, and relationship concerns, and concluded that adoption may be a risk factor for negative relational attitudes and relationship difficulties in adult life, particularly in terms of attachment security. They noted that "adoptees contend with their own unique set of attachment issues" (p. 18), with their findings suggesting that adopted women experience more insecure (avoidant or anxious) attachments within their romantic relationships. In addition, Groncki's 2010 research findings suggested that even very early separation and loss might have a significant impact on future "attachment-related experiences" (p. 49), including attachment experiences within romantic relationships, and confirmed that adopted women demonstrated more insecure attachment within their romantic relationships. This was supported by Despax, Bouteyre & Pavani (2021) who observed that adoptees were more sensitive to attachment security than nonadoptees.

In addition, it has been noted that some adult adoptees experience difficulties with separation, abandonment, trust, betrayal, rejection, self-worth, grief, and identity development (Collishaw et al., 1998; Jones, 1997). Lack of trust and unresolved feelings of uncertainty and rejection might manifest themselves as long-lasting insecure attachment to adult partners. Clinicians have observed that adoptees often carried "emotional baggage" with them from childhood into their adult relationships regarding abandonment and commitment, compromising their ability to find intimacy (Brodzinsky et al., 1992) or build and maintain close relationships (Corder, 2012). The adoptee might cope with perceptions of rejection, betrayal, and abandonment through distancing and detachment (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991; Curtis & Pearson, 2010; Feigelman, 2005).

Melero et al. (2023) prefaced their study of adoptees' psychological well-being and developmental adjustment in adulthood by clarifying that most previous studies of adopted people, in adulthood and during the whole lifespan, found more difficulties among adoptee groups if they were compared to nonadoptees. The adoptees in their 2023 research generally showed relatively high scores for well-being; however, well-being was measured using "yes/no" answers to superficial questions such as, "Are you involved in a stable romantic relationship?". It could be argued that denoting such

responses as indicative of “successful adjustment in adulthood” is somewhat disingenuous; a binary response tells us little regarding the quality of said relationship, or the subject’s psychological adjustment and satisfaction. Angela Baird-Hepworth (2021) utilised a qualitative approach in order to investigate adoptees’ experiences in intimate relationships. Themes from this research revealed that adoptees struggled with trusting others, including their families, felt insecure and anxious about being abandoned in relationships, and believed that their adoption played a continuing role in their lives. Although the sample of eight participants (aged 32 to 61) was small, the results suggested that adopted people struggled with identity issues, anxiety, fears of abandonment, inability to trust others, and codependency in their relationships. All of the participants suggested that they believed their adoption may have had something to do with their issues in relationships.

In summary, the literature indicates a likelihood that attachment and relational connection can be more of a challenge for adopted persons, affecting their ability to join with significant others in healthy interpersonal relationships. It could be argued that this might be further compounded by the extent to which they feel they belong with others, which is now briefly explored.

Belonging. Allen et al. (2021) have discussed how belonging is generally agreed to be a fundamental human need. The family is a key social grouping and source of belonging and relatedness (Koskinen & Böök, 2019); our sense of who we are and how we are related and connect to others is constructed by the stories about ourselves that we tell ourselves and others. Belonging involves a person’s culture, identity, character, and experiences, as well as the social milieu in which they exist. As explained below, there is a growing body of evidence that a sense of belonging relationally is not simply a cognitive concept, but one that occurs at a cellular level.

Allen et al. (2021) noted that struggles to belong are especially evident in groups that mainstream culture has historically marginalised, referred to as “outgroups” (p. 90). Outgroups might include individuals or groups from racial minorities, or who depart from the social norm with attributes or behaviours stemming from mental health issues, sexual or gender diversity, or disability. It can be argued that the subgroup of adopted persons fits the description of an outgroup. They depart from social norms around infertility and bionormative families, and their lives are often characterised by secrecy and stigma, particularly those who were raised during the period of closed stranger adoption. In an exploration of the interrelated components of belonging, Allen et al. (2021) noted that people in the aforementioned groups who have been disenfranchised, rejected, or ostracised, or have suffered trauma or abuse, may look to

alternative sources for belonging, since a sense of not belonging can become a motivation to seek and create opportunities to belong.

Notably, feelings or lived experiences of belonging or not belonging may not simply exist in our memories or cognition. In a pertinent discussion of the effects of social context on the expression of our genes (one of our most basic internal biological processes), Slavich and Cole (2013) outlined the principles of human social genomics. They elucidated research demonstrating that our gene expression is influenced by external social conditions, and—most importantly—how we subjectively perceive those conditions. Socioenvironmental experiences, such as being socially evaluated and included (“belonging”) or rejected (“not belonging”), can be appraised in different ways by different people. Factors that might come into play in this appraisal include whether individuals tend to regard stressful situations as “threats” versus “challenges,” how sensitive or relaxed they are to social threats, whether they have social supports available to them, their biographical and psychiatric history, and their internal cognitive-emotional resources. Furthermore, events that appear very different, for example, being socially rejected versus being physically attacked, may have the ability to initiate the same cell changes as if similar neurocognitive processes have been activated. In other words, social rejection and physical pain engage the same neural and endocrine pathways (Slavich & Cole, 2013).

In addition, adverse social experiences are associated with central nervous system alterations in other epigenetic processes, such as DNA methylation. Understanding this is important because these epigenetic responses affect the regulation of gene expression, influencing various biological processes such as our development, and how we differentiate and respond to our environments. The science is complex, but Slavich and Cole (2013) have noted that epigenetic processes illuminate one means by which adversities experienced at one point in time can lead to persistent changes in our long-term behaviours and health. In short, how we are shaped in the short and longer term as complex human beings is influenced not just by our environment (e.g., a stressful event to which we are exposed), but also by how our genes are consequently activated or deactivated, thus altering us at a cellular level. Further, Slavich and Cole (2013) have emphasised that it is the perceptions of the external social environment (e.g., as being friendly vs. hostile) that is more influential for gene expression than the actual socioenvironmental condition itself. Finally, they have emphasised that, due to the plasticity of our cells as they continually regenerate, experiences occurring at any point in time can influence our nervous systems for weeks, months, and years: “We are just beginning to understand how genomic activity differs as a function of the full range of positive and negative social conditions that

humans experience” (Slavich & Cole, 2013, p. 342). It is interesting that what we as humans experience emotionally and whether we feel that we belong or do not belong may not exist solely at a cognitive level but also at a cellular level. In summary, science is affirming that feelings we have experienced and how we have perceived these affect us—and continue to affect us—somatically, in our whole beings.

Belonging and Adoption. As this literature review has signalled, the academic research has shown that adoptees face complexities during childhood and adolescence, including struggles with feelings related to identity, belonging, security, and attachment (Colaner et al., 2014; Grotevant et al., 2017; Kalus, 2016; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011; Von Korff et al., 2006). Based on this emerging evidence of the effects on our central nervous systems, it could be argued that some adopted people— may develop a more acute sense at a cognitive and cellular level that they do not “fit”—a sense of not belonging similar way to that of others who experience a sense of marginalisation within mainstream culture (Allen et al., 2021). Blake and Coombes (2015) noted that this metaphor of “fit” was used frequently by their participants to capture the sense of belonging one achieved via biological kinship; the absence of fit was embodied through feelings of intense and lasting aloneness. It seems logical that an absence of “fit” might prime adoptees to be more reactive in intimate relationships or highly sensitive to a feeling of not belonging.

The literature is clear that the way adoption is communicated and handled in the adoptive family is extremely influential in how adoptees integrate all its multiple dimensions (Brodzinsky, et al., 1992). Koskinon and Böök (2019) have described these multiple intersecting dimensions that influence identity formation and the construction of “self” for an adopted person. These include relationships within their adoptive and birth families and the “fit” the adoptees experienced, along with their narratives about themselves. A “poor fit” between parent(s) and child can certainly also occur in bionormative families, if there are marked temperamental difficulties, or if the child is born prematurely, or ill, or there is postnatal depression or other factors occurring in the home. Many parents feel ill-equipped at times to cope with or interpret what their child might need. However, in adoptive families, a baby who has inherited everything from his biological parents and forebears—physical traits, temperament, intelligence, and everything else—must fit in with brand new adoptive parents who may be completely different. Again, in a biological family, even if the baby has a difficult temperament, he might be said to be “just like Uncle Harry.” But in an adoptive family, there is no such frame of reference, and the adoptive parents may feel at a loss about how to soothe and relate to their new child, resulting in problems attaching to the baby.

Grotevant and Kohler (1999) have suggested that in adoptive families, a key predictor of parent-child relationships is the degree to which the adoptive parents feel compatible with their children. These issues regarding the feelings of harmony or “fit” with each other increase as personal identity becomes more salient in adolescence (Hoghughi & Long, 2004). Moreover, Koskinen and Böök (2019) have surmised that attachment and nurture rather than biology are the primary means by which a child develops a sense of belonging in a family. However, they also observed that “most adoptees seem to long for a sense of connection with their birth families” (p. 223) which they attributed to a combination of normative identity tasks alongside societal narratives favouring the definition of biological kinship family ties as superior. An exploration of discourses in the literature around what constitutes “family” is beyond the scope of this dissertation, however, Griffith (1998) and Blake (2013) have explained how adoption as a social practice positions the adoptive family as “abnormal” since a notion of kinship through blood ties continues to hold primacy in our culture.

Certainly, the notion that a person’s identity and sense of self is inextricably tied to their biological genealogy and connections to forebears, denoted as the “bio-genealogical imperative” by Latchford (2019, p. 4), is pervasive throughout our culture and its institutions. Thus, an adoptive family will be assumed to be second best to a biological family. Latchford (2019) persuasively rejected this bio essentialist perspective. However, rather than positioning biological connection as an either/or dichotomy (i.e., as paramount or not mattering at all), as with most aspects of adoption, the lived experiences of adopted persons in this study illuminated the paradoxical middle ground wherein both can be seen to be powerfully influential. Furthermore, I would argue, where reconnection to and belonging within one’s biological family is unwelcome or impossible, this does not necessarily negate or extinguish the adoptee’s desire to belong there. Ahuriri-Driscoll (2020) has discussed the positioning of adopted persons in her study. She considered them to inhabit a liminal space between the dominant narrative of search and reunion which emphasises the importance of and need to search for one’s biological relatives (an essentialist and somewhat reductionist position regarding the “truth” of origins and thus our identity), and a more socially constructed identity wherein biology is not wholly privileged. For some adoptees, the complex and painful realities of reunion with biological families have heightened adoptees’ conviction that we belong in neither biological nor adoptive worlds, but truly in a “psychic homelessness” of no-man’s land (Blake & Coombes, 2015, p. 54).

In summary, adopted individuals who are traversing Erikson’s developmental stage of *Intimacy versus Isolation* may be powerfully influenced by their cognitive and somatic experiences, attachment styles, and perceptions of identity, and belonging

(Bouteyre et al., 2022). Building on from the notion that some adopted adults struggle with aspects of interpersonal relationships, attention is now turned to parenting, and how being adopted impacts how its relational aspects might be navigated.

Parenting

The second part of this literature review provides a précis of the academic literature pertaining to theoretical models of parenting. Arguably society's most universal and fundamental concern, given their reach and significance (Hoghughi & Long, 2004), family groupings have been noted by historians as existing as far back as half a million years across the historic sweep of human existence. The family as a social unit displays a longevity and durability that is nonetheless susceptible to the multiple impacts of historical, social, and economic forces (Herbert, 1993). Many theorists have attempted to identify core elements of parenting and construct a comprehensive conceptual framework within which modern views of parenting began to be shaped.

In the early 20th century, Freud emphasised the importance of early childhood experiences and how these might shape personality and behaviour (Knight, 2014); the type of parenting a child received came to be considered as a powerful influence on a child's personality development. Childhood suffering and poor family histories had historically been viewed within the context of poverty and ill-health. However, with the emergence of child psychiatry and psychology in the aftermath of World War II, with its massive disruptions to family life, professionals and academics began researching and reporting on the adverse consequences of family disruption on children.

Bowlby (1958) focused on the disruption of maternal love, and its consequences, opening up whole new areas of enquiry into parenting processes and outcomes, and the complexities of parent-child interactions. He instigated studies on the effects of forced separation of children from their parents, positing that continual disruption of the attachment between infant and caregiver could result in long-term cognitive, emotional, and social difficulties for the individual. Despite his attachment theory being heavily criticised as mechanistic and reductionist (Slater, 2007), many similarities between the psychoanalytic position and attachment theory gradually became evident, and it was accepted by many that the two are not necessarily mutually incompatible. In particular, Bowlby's formulation of his theory of attachment to explain the nature of children's bonds to their parents in terms of their biological function (subsequently much modified and elaborated by others) was a cornerstone with lasting influence on how parenting was researched and regarded (Holmes, 2014; Steinberg & Pianta, 2006).



American psychologist and researcher Urie Bronfenbrenner recognised that children's development is influenced by the interactions that they have over time with the people, objects, and symbols in their immediate environment (Rosa & Tudge, 2013). Creating the term "ecological perspective" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), he emphasised that the specific path of an individual's development was shaped by the interactions and influences in their surrounding environment, including parents, friends, school, work, and culture—contrary to the prevailing view that child development was purely biological (Salkind, 2006). Further, Bronfenbrenner considered the lack of parental interaction to be the most destructive force in a child's development; to ensure healthy child development, one or more adults must love the child unconditionally, investing time in active relational activities together.

Bronfenbrenner considered it useful to examine the dynamic interplay between parents and their offspring, noting the developmental tasks and dilemma of children and adolescents in the context of how they interacted with parents dealing with their own developmental tasks and dilemmas (Herbert, 1993). Whilst the child might be the focus of the parents' concerns and activities, the effectiveness of these activities was dramatically dependent on a multiplicity of social and ecological factors: parents' own relationships; economic circumstances; and the wider cultural, social, historical, and political contexts in which they lived and moved; as well as the parents' increasing experience and movement through developmental stages over time (Hoghughi & Long, 2004). Researchers now generally agree on the strong interdependencies between how people were parented, their intimate relationships, and the parenting of their own children (Steinberg & Pianta, 2006). These influences may well pass unnoticed. Parens (1974) considered that parenthood has a parent-child developmental alignment, with each "critical period" (p. 155) of a child's development reviving in the parent their own related developmental conflicts" (p. 155). Whilst he acknowledged that the myriad tasks of parenting "evoke varying degrees of anxiety and conflict in the parent" (p. 165), he posited that successful resolution of these developmental challenges would lead the parent to a new phase of intrapsychic integration and maturation. Axness (1994), an adoptee, made a connection between the parent-child developmental alignment and her nascent notion that adopted people enter the world already wounded:

I was familiar with the concept of Erik Erikson's that when one spends a lot of time with a child of any particular age, unresolved issues from one's own childhood at that age tend to be awakened. After having nudged and prodded and stirred up the soup of my psyche with the trials of motherhood, and my year's [of therapeutic] work...this foetus I'd invited to grow under my heart—a

budding girl-child—had secretly continued the unearthing process, which culminated in this spontaneous regression to my own pre-birth feelings. (p. 3)

Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective was used by Luster and Okagaki (2005) as the framework to address such questions as why parents differ markedly in the ways in which they care for their children, and which factors contribute to individual differences in parenting behaviour. Three main determinants of parental behaviour were identified: (a) the parent's personality and personal resources, (b) the child's characteristics, and (c) contextual sources of stress and support. In addition, the developmental history of the parents, including all of their experiences prior to becoming parents, was viewed as critically influential to parental personalities and personal resources. Bronfenbrenner's ecological perspective has informed my research, since it draws attention to the fact that the lives of parents and children are intertwined, and that understanding the influences on parents (namely, being adopted) is important for understanding their experiences of parenting.

A number of common ideologies exist regarding parenthood, and there are specific age, gender, and cultural differences in how individuals interpret and experience parenthood. Purewal and van Den Akker (2007) have explored motivations, including the importance of genetic ties, for people thinking about becoming parents. Their participants shared discourses such as a desire to have a child that is "part of them and their partner", and a "strong preference to have their own child rather than adopt or use [a] sperm/oocyte donor", in addition to beliefs that bonding and relating to them would be easier if the child was "biologically/genetically related to them" (p. 81). "A genetically related child was a preferred child" (Purewal & van Den Akker, 2007, p. 84).

Neil et al. (2023) have emphasised that the experiences of becoming a parent are affected by a wide range of contextual and demographic factors. Further, parenting is an amalgam of positive and meaningful experiences and those that are hugely demanding and stressful. As a parent myself, having raised four children, I was certain that my adopted status had been a significant and ongoing contextual factor across the nearly 40 years since I became a parent in 1987. I turned to the literature to see if this had been the experience for other adoptees.

Adoptive Status and Parenting: Critical Systematic Literature Review

A few studies noted that as adopted people become parents themselves, certain factors become more evident. Brodzinsky et al.'s (1992) study of clinical observations of adult adoptees in a therapeutic context suggested that concerns and painful issues were possibly being awakened for some adoptees experiencing pregnancy and parenthood. Other literature (Kowal & Schilling, 1985) suggested that,



for an adopted person, having a child might prompt identification with, or curiosity about, their own birth parents' decision-making process. The absence of hereditary information might also precipitate a search for the adopted person's own biological family. A participant in Richardson et al.'s (2013) study explained:

My feelings changed dramatically the day I gave birth to my son. [Giving birth] really provoked me to want to start looking again [for my biological parents] because I look at him and he is mine, you know he is my baby and I just realise what that meant. (p. 365)

Questions and anxieties around genetic and medical histories and the possible genetic transmission of (unknown) medical and psychological problems to the next generation were also prominent. Having no genetic history or medical background information (both common consequences of the sealing of records in "closed" adoptions) took on a greater magnitude when faced with the reality of birthing one's own offspring (Brodzinsky et al., 1992, Dekker et al., 2017). For the female adoptee, the capacity to reproduce was seen to be particularly fraught with mystery, anxiety, and awe (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991). Phillips (2010) highlighted several issues including hypervigilance and extreme fear and guilt, which arose during her own pregnancy and birth experience, and how being adopted affected her mothering style. Carlsten (2007) observed that adoptees seemed to be strongly embedded in the families that they had established, and either enmeshed with, or detached from, their children.

Reflecting on my own lived experience of complexity across all relationships, and with a sense that this might stem from challenges with trust and intimacy, I undertook a critical systematic literature review (Field & Pond, 2018) exploring the nature of intimate relationships for adult adoptees across the lifespan (rather than at a fixed point in early adulthood). The review examined research into how adopted adults responded and adjusted to the challenges of interpersonal relationships requiring intimacy and attachment, specifically those with a partner, but also with one's children. The intention of my literature review had been to explore and illuminate the extent to which and the ways that being adopted affected such a close and intimate relationship such as parenting, but at that time there was little research investigating the implications of adoptive status for becoming a parent. However, because parenting is almost entirely relational, requiring physical and emotional closeness, trust, attachment, and bonding, I considered it probable that the close interpersonal nature of the parent-child relationship might be more complex for some adopted people.

After systematically searching most major article databases and hand searching major adoption journals, the review included 15 quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods studies that fulfilled the selection criteria (with domestically adopted adult

participants over the age of 18 and included in the published and grey literature from 1997 to 2016). Eleven of the 15 studies specifically included data pertaining to how the adopted person viewed and approached parenthood at an emotional and intellectual level. Five key themes were identified (Field & Pond, 2018). Since this time, an additional eleven studies focused upon the adopted person as a parent have been identified, from the years 2015 to 2023 inclusive, suggesting that adoptees might experience additional dimensions to the complex developmental tasks of parenting their biological children across the lifespan. All the cited research has been situated within Western countries, and detailed descriptions of each study are located in Appendix A. Themes in common with the earlier literature review have been subsumed within each of the original identified five, and an additional three themes follow.

Theme 1: Genetic Connection with Offspring. There are two aspects to this theme. First is the strong emphasis on the absence of knowledge about one's own genetic history and heritage. That the 9 months of pregnancy and experiences of labour and delivery are frequently triggers for an adopted person from a closed adoption to commence their search for their biological parent(s) is well-documented in the literature (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Carlsten, 2007; Howe & Feast, 2000; Vaccaro, 2012). Prakash (2014) and Sherr et al. (2019) noted that parenting and parenthood have a transgenerational legacy, with the adoptees' unknown genetic information passed on to their children and grandchildren; their participants were found to be more likely to search for their birth families once they became aware of the impact their uncertainty about their genetic and biological origins would have on their children. This uncertainty and the sense of a "vacuum" of knowledge was pervasive throughout all the studies exploring parenting. Participants in Lutz's (2011) study raised specific concerns around the "gene pool" when considering starting a family. Pinkerton (2010) noted adoptee parents' preoccupations with inherited physical appearances, and Jordan and Dempsey (2013) described a sense of need for an adult adoptee to have family who were genetically related.

The second aspect to this theme was the genetic connection with one's offspring. In several studies, adoptees referred to a child who was genetically connected to them with something akin to reverence and awe (Benson, 2019; Despax et al., 2020; Egan et al., 2022; Hampton, 1997; Irvin, 2015; Jordan & Dempsey, 2013; O'Kelly, 2018; Pinkerton, 2010; Prakash, 2014). Whilst Hampton (1997) acknowledged the thrill that all new parents experience in meeting their newborns, she described her adoptee participants' reactions as that of absolute "enthralment over their relationship with their babies" (p.100), identifying a sense of genetic connection with someone for the first time in their lives, which was deeply and passionately felt. Nearly all

participants in Sherr et al.'s (2019) study mentioned the fact that they now had a genetic link or blood tie to another human being, as stated by a 70-year-old female: "The only person(s) I'm related to in the world are my son and my grandson" (p. 45). The women in Conrick's (2018) research spoke of their sense of incredulity and fascination at being in the presence of, and able to touch, someone who was like them in some way, which was clearly a powerful and significant experience for them. This was a similarly strong theme that emerged for Irvin's (2015) participants, with a notion of reassurance expressed by one as she explained what it meant to her that her daughter resembled her: "It's wild that she looks exactly like me. There's a comfort that I never had in my life before" (p. 104).

The impacts of not knowing one's own genetic history and heritage, and the enormity of experiencing a genetic connection with one's own children, were powerfully and universally expressed in these studies.

Theme 2: Parenting Has an Additional Meaning for Adoptees. Over and above the notion that becoming a parent is a major life transition for any person, the second theme that emerged suggested that parenting tasks held additional, deeper layers of meaning for adoptees. The primary finding from Conrick's 2018 study "Being Adopted and Being a Mother" was that motherhood was viewed through the "filter" of the adoption experience. Conrick noted that as her participants considered their mothering roles and themselves as mothers, they regarded their adoption status as a "touchstone" (p. 62).

Be clear about how you're feeling about your adoption and where you sit with that...because [motherhood] does raise questions. Be ready for the emotional baggage that may come...[motherhood] may start you thinking...it may stir things up...it just stirs the pot...It is about being on the adoption journey. [Motherhood] is one of the spikes because you think you're okay and then you have your own kids and you have to rethink everything again. (p. 71)

This deeper layer of meaning for adopted people becoming parents was also noted by Despax, Bouteyre and Halidi (2021). They identified that some of their adoptee participants' motivations to have children were shared by the general population (such as seeking unconditional love and wanting to parent better than their own parents had). However, over and above this, most expressed that becoming a parent was "a means of *mending their adoption history* by creating their own biological family and experiencing an intense relationship with their child(ren)" (p. 12, italics mine).

Relationships generally were revisited as adoptees parented. Egan et al. (2022), Despax et al. (2020), and Irvin (2015) all clearly identified that adoptees

reexamine their histories and identities with heightened curiosity, in addition to more closely considering their biological mother, other family relationships, and medical unknowns. Pérez et al.'s (2016) adopted female subjects were reported to have many more thoughts about their personal origins and about their own biological mothers than biological daughters did. Increases in empathy towards the birth mother were frequently noted (Conrick, 2020; Hampton, 1997). In addition, adoptees were significantly more likely than nonadopted participants to experience “cognitive conflicts” and difficulties regarding how they perceived themselves as mothers.

Parenthood also appeared to affect adoptees' relationships with their adoptive parents. Research studies have charted a mixture of effects: some positive, such as greater emotional closeness (Sherr et al., 2018), and others negative, noting increased emotional distance and anger (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Conrick, 2020; Hampton, 1997; Horowitz, 2011; Irvin, 2015; Phillips, 2010). O'Kelly (2018) noted no changes in participants' relationships with their adoptive families. Some adoptees regarded an “over” investment in parenthood as a means by which to distance themselves from their adoptive families (Despax et al., 2021). The issue of their adoptive mothers' infertility became problematic for some adopted females during pregnancy (Groncki, 2010), perhaps stemming from adoptive mothers' unresolved thoughts and feelings triggered about infertility. Horowitz's (2011) and Hampton's (1997) adoptee participants spoke of having assumed they too would be infertile, experiencing guilt towards their adoptive parents when they were not.

These deeper layers of meaning and impacts that filtered through the parenting experience were certainly echoed in the majority of studies, providing evidence that pregnancy and parenthood were times during which adult adoptees struggled with reawakened issues relating back to their adopted status and revisited “old issues in a new context” (Brodzinsky et al., 1992, p. 133).

Theme 3: Negative Feelings. The third theme across the studies exploring the impacts of adoption on parenthood was the range of negative feelings experienced as adoptees anticipated parenthood. Horowitz (2011) found that although adoptees had statistically stronger desires to have their own biological child compared to nonadoptees, these desires were tempered by more anxiety and increased levels of rumination than the nonadoptee sample. Adoptee mothers' pervasive anxiety was reported by Conrick (2018) and Nowlan (2016), with Horowitz (2011) reporting high levels of pessimism. Fear was also ever present (Pérez et al., 2016). For some the fear pertained to childlessness and infertility; for others it manifested as the recurrent anxiety of abandoning their child by forgetting or deserting it, or the child being orphaned or stolen (Despax et al., 2021; Hampton, 1997; Lutz, 2011; Pinkerton, 2010).

One of Conrick's (2018) participants expressed her extreme anxiety and overprotectiveness with the comment, "No one was allowed to hold my child, no one was allowed to touch my child. From the minute he was born, I did not let him out of my sight and I'm still like that now" (p. 66), suggesting that for some adoptees the negative feelings experienced might be pervasive and longstanding.

Theme 4: Belonging and Security. A more positive fourth theme emerged from many studies in which participants noted a new experience of belonging and security in their lives (Bork et al., 2022; Conrick, 2018; Edwards et al., 2023; Hampton, 1997; Irvin, 2015; Jordan & Dempsey, 2013; Vaccaro, 2012). A common theme for Irvin's (2015) adoptee participants was the sense of not having felt like they belonged in their adoptive families, nor in their lives overall, up until the birth of their own child. This was poignantly expressed by Melanie, a 35-year-old adoptee, who stated:

I never felt a sense of belonging my whole life, whether that be in my family or with friends. I always felt like an outsider, and I worked really hard to not let people know that, because I wanted them to feel really comfortable around me and enjoy their time with me, so I made sure they didn't know that I felt like an outsider. But at a fundamental level, I never felt a sense of belonging. (Irvin, 2015, p. 101)

Irvin went on to discuss that Melanie's relationship to herself had also been connected to her sense of belonging. She had never felt like she belonged until giving birth to her daughter; experiencing this biological connection with her child "created a belonging within herself as well as within her family" (p. 88) leading to a cascade of positive psychosocial benefits. Hampton's (1997) adoptee participants also emphasised this sense of belonging and safety once they had given birth, with one participant expressing that she "felt so safe having somebody in the world with me now" (p. 101). This was echoed in Conrick's study, with a participant stating that they experienced the family they had created as a place of connection and restoration: "It is the place I now fully belong" (2018, p. 64).

A significant number of Vaccaro's (2012) male adoptees reflected on how the process of becoming a father had resulted in having to confront their own needs, which underpinned their efforts to create a legacy of secure attachment for their own child/ren, to make up for what they themselves had lost. An adoptee parent participant in Edwards et al.'s research (2023) reflected that having a child had engendered within her a greater sense of completeness:

I also feel complete. I think that's what it is. I feel complete in myself that, you know...If I couldn't ever have children, I think it would be...well, I think it would be a very difficult and emotional life I would have. (p. 421)



It was clear that becoming a parent and experiencing a positive relational attachment to their own child/ren engendered a positive sense of belonging and security for many adopted people.

Theme 5: Visceral Dimension of Pregnancy and Birth. The fifth and final theme that emerged was the visceral dimension of physically carrying and delivering a child. Hampton (1997) and Pinkerton's (2010) female subjects emphasised that it was the act of giving birth that brought their own birth mothers' experiences (and the primal separation) into their conscious awareness. Pinkerton's (2010) participants experienced pregnancy as a time during which old issues relating to adoption were triggered for them, which significantly affected their birthing experiences, and in some instances provided a sense of healing. Hampton (1997) concluded that being adopted and giving birth were indeed psychologically related: "Seeing their babies emerge from their own bodies healed this construction of themselves as not belonging in this world, not being a real person" (p. 100). Several of Irvin's (2015) participants expressed that having a biological child had resulted in their experiencing less negativity towards their bodies and body image.

Neil et al. (2023) found gender differences between adoptee mothers versus fathers regarding the embodied and relational issues they raised. For their female participants, these related to the visceral dimensions of pregnancy and birth, in particular issues around conception, carrying a pregnancy to term, giving birth, and breastfeeding and bonding, but also maternal confidence and security. In contrast, for some of the male participants feelings of exclusion and loss were triggered. Neil et al. (2023) surmised this could possibly be a response to cultural norms around the centrality of the maternal-infant dyad and wondered whether adoptees' propensity to feel "on the outer" might result in a male adoptee negatively perceiving the closeness of the mother-baby bond as threatening his own relationships with the mother and baby. It seems plausible that a female experiencing the powerful somatic sensations of pregnancy, labour, and childbirth might feel more viscerally affected by and connected to what her birth mother had gone through. Research exploring men's emotional experiences of their partner going through pregnancy, labour, and childbirth suggest that their responses vary widely, from fear and anxiety to joy, happiness, and euphoria; from feeling pressured into attending, and experiencing discomfort and helplessness, to a sense of being supportive and actively involved (Arghavanian et al., 2019; Longworth et al., 2015). It could be argued that for a male adoptee in this situation there may be increased emotional intensity if he consciously or unconsciously identifies with the growth and delivery of the baby or makes a connection to what his birth mother experienced, however at this time this is not supported by the literature.

Additional Themes of Salience.

Counselling. Jeanette Conrick (2018) reported that, as adoptees became mothers, they were confronted by “unbidden” (p. 63) emotions and thoughts pertaining to adoption losses and their early years that surfaced for them. She described motherhood as being an “embodied metaphor” (p. 63) for their adoption losses and emphasised that the majority of participants had sought to address these feelings through seeking and attending therapy during the years of mothering. Other researchers identified the value of therapeutic support from a knowledgeable and able practitioner (Irvin, 2015), and noted its value in identifying and addressing harmful family dynamics and difficulties adopted persons experienced in relationships. (Despax et al., 2021; Neil et al., 2023).

Secrecy and Lies. A further theme that emerged strongly in Conrick’s (2018) study was regarding the paucity of information and discussion, and secrecy, that were hallmarks of their own adoption experience. Consequently, Conrick observed that participants placed a high value on values of openness and honesty in their relationship with their children. Lack of information and secrecy were also considered to amplify feelings of shame and loss for adopted persons (Benson, 2019; Neil et al., 2023) as well as negatively affecting their sense of belonging (Irvin, 2015).

Intergenerational and Lifelong Impacts. This concept was largely missing from the vast majority of studies, since participants were typically in their 20s and 30s. It was, however, a significant finding for Bork et al., (2022) who stressed that far from receding from adoptees’ consciousness, the impacts of adoption continued throughout adulthood, as adopted persons struggled to understand and make sense of their own adoption narratives and experiences, and were influenced by this and sought ways to grow, heal from, and make peace with the effects of their adoptions. Again, this study was conducted with a small sample (of five mother/child dyads), however it was especially valuable as the mothers’ ages spanned 55 to 64 and their adult children’s ages 23 to 34, thus affording a glimpse of intergenerational implications. These second-generation participants also expressed having been impacted by their family stories of adoption. Bork et al. (2022) elaborated that the (adult) children were always part of the adoption legacy, with their parents’ adoption narratives being passed down to them in myriad ways, for example, by ensuring that their own children knew how they felt about being adopted. The researchers concluded that adoption stories have value in being passed down as a form of “narrative inheritance” (p. 17) and such an inheritance may be influential in shaping first and second generations. Overall, the aforementioned studies and explorations into the intersection of being adopted and being a parent were characterised by a rich polyvocality. Adoptees spoke poignantly

but emphatically of loss, disconnection, confusion, distance, and complexity; and also of love, belonging, safety, and redemption as they embraced some aspects of adoption in their personal lives, and distanced themselves from others. This provided important corroboration for findings by Brodzinsky et al. (1992), who observed adoption to be “an issue that emerges, seems to be settled, and then reemerges at some alternative point along life’s path” (p. 4). I wanted to further illuminate the complexity and depth of an adoptee’s relationship with his/her child/ren, exploring the ways in which the effects of closed stranger adoption might have shown up across their parenting journey, in ways similar to or different from my own.

Summary

This literature review has summarised the body of existing adoption literature to locate my research within the extant body of knowledge about adopted people. I have given an overview of closed stranger adoption, then used the framework of Erikson’s psychosocial model of development to précis the evidence for a range of developmental and psychosocial challenges and outcomes for adopted persons as they move through the lifespan. In addition, I have outlined the academic literature pertaining to theoretical models of parenting and the limited existing research regarding adult adoptees and parenthood.

In reviewing the available literature on both adoption and parenting, it is evident there are some significant shortcomings in the research pertaining to adopted people. A majority of studies have focused almost exclusively on childhood and adolescence. In so doing, both ends of the spectrum of human experience have been neglected: the growing field of pre- and peri-natal research and the impacts of maternal/infant separation, as well as the challenges and insights gained from the passage of time as adoptees progress through the lifespan. Only a handful of studies, notably Brodzinsky, Schechter and Henig (1992) and Vaccaro (2012) and others have addressed adoptees’ trajectory through the later stages of the lifespan, exploring how they may process life events and relationships differently to non-adopted people.

A further weakness is that—until recently—much adoption research has failed to utilise qualitative methodologies. This is a grave oversight as the research has assumed that a complex and stigmatised topic such as adoption can be “measured” by researchers by way of empirically constructed questionnaires, and can be studied as one homogeneous population. Relying heavily in this way on externally gathered information, rather than the voices of adopted persons themselves leaves a conspicuous gap in academic research.

With such vacuums in the literature regarding a profoundly personal topic such as parenting and adopted persons, the necessity for qualitative, in-depth, lifespan



research becomes obvious. This current study bridges this information gap, offering a robust exploration which will hopefully serve to launch interest in further research in this area.

CHAPTER 2: RESEARCH DESIGN

Methodology

My methodology refers to the theory that underpins my framework and research procedures, providing the rationale for the qualitative methodological approach of a braided ethnography/ autoethnography using narrative interview and interpretive thematic analysis (Adams et al., 2015). My intention is to investigate, illuminate, and understand on a deep level my own and other adoptees' lived experiences of parenting our own biological children, exploring the complex intersection of parenting, adoption, and identity. Accordingly, I am drawn to a methodological approach that combines and "braids" together three aspects of "knowing": empirical knowledge, a researcher's ethnographic representation of adoptee culture, and an inside lens on my own lived autoethnographic insight. Zavattaro (2020) reminded me to hone in on studying and exposing the culture of adoption rather than simply writing only about myself, which risks slipping into autobiography. She noted that blending lived experiences and "story" into the cultural phenomenon (adoption) under investigation does require special navigation.

This section, therefore, includes information pertaining to this navigation: my philosophical axiology, epistemology, ontological framework, and methodology, which supported the paradigmatic underpinnings of my research. I will also discuss my adoptee positionality as a researcher. The methods and techniques I employed in data analysis are outlined, in addition to discussing the elements of rigour that have been incorporated into my research.

Axiology (My Aims in Research and What I Value)

My axiology concerns the qualitative values I associate with areas of theorising and doing research. I have reflected deeply across the entirety of this project on the extent to which my personal values have shaped how I designed and executed this research. These reflections include what I value, as well as the purpose of my research.

First, I value doing research "just" to understand and contribute to the body of literature and knowledge around this important aspect of life. In this case, I have sought to develop a deeper understanding of the phenomena of closed stranger adoption, and how adopted people are affected across their lifespan.

Second, I value my internal process, and have a strong desire to answer some persistent and intense internal curiosities I have held for much of my life.

Third, I value authenticity. Since the qualitative researcher endeavours to build close and trusting relationships with participants, an unparalleled level of disclosure



can result, providing an opportunity to tell a story few know much about. This invites insight into hitherto marginalised, stigmatised, stereotyped, or unknown populations—“a peek into regularly guarded worlds” (Tracy, 2013, p. 7). My methodology was chosen as it is a doorway to authentic data, especially well-suited to access tacit, “taken-for-granted” intuitive understanding of deeply relational subjects such as adoption and parenting.

Fourth, I value lived experience, with all the complexities that it entails. Qualitative research procedures and techniques enabled me as the researcher to get close to those who were being studied, attempting to see the world through their eyes, illuminating and faithfully portraying their lived experience—how they think, act, and make meaning (Tracy, 2013). What is already known from quantitative research about the adoption experience may be illuminated, explained or reinterpreted by qualitative data. As Jones et al. (2013) noted, instead of an intention to generate demographic information and generalised descriptions of cohorts and interactions with a “snapshot” of a situation or phenomenon, qualitative research seeks understanding of a sustained process, drilling down into participants’ rich, thick descriptions—what Tracy (2013) has described as “densely textured facts” (p. 3).

Fifth, I have a belief in the inherent worth and dignity of people. I have endeavoured to ensure that my work is inclusive, can be accessible to all, and is focused on appreciating the different perspectives others have.

Finally, as a social scientist researching adoption, I have a desire to make a positive change in our society by illuminating some of the myriad effects of adoption. I aspire to increase others’ understanding of the meaning and complexities of the adoption experience for those who were adopted as children and are now adults; their children and their children’s children, their extended families and all those who love them. For professionals who work therapeutically with adopted adults, including psychologists, therapists, and related community organisations, I see great value in this research, and hope that it can translate directly to insightful effects on therapeutic practice, and to inform future adoption policy. I will see my research as successful if people change the way they think about adoption and its effects, having more insight into their own or a loved one’s journey; if it contributes to demystifying the lived experience of adopted people; if therapists can use the insights gleaned in their practice; and researchers cite it in their further exploration.

Epistemology (Construction of Truth)

Epistemology refers to the construction of truth, what we can know and accept to be true, and how we know what we claim to know (Grbich, 2007). I certainly did not embark on this piece of research with epistemology as my starting point, but like most

social scientists, I began with a question needing to be answered. My question informed the methods I selected, which then informed my methodology and theoretical perspective, thus informing my overarching epistemology.

As a researcher, I acknowledge that I can never represent anything unproblematically, as all research leaves out some data, and the very nature of reality is perspective-dependent, dispersed, fractured. Interpretations may be multiple and contrasting. Laurel Richardson (1997) used the metaphor of a crystal with an infinite number of shapes, dimensions, and angles; acting as a prism and changing shape to deconstruct traditional validity, reminding us that “what we see depends on our angle of vision” (p. 124). Since I consider that insights are gleaned and gained from multiple points of view and by multiple participants (Atkinson et al., 2007), I have chosen to “braid” my autoethnographic strands with ones gleaned from other adult adopted people, striving for an empathetic, participatory, first-person perspective. By endeavouring to see participants’ viewpoints, attitudes and beliefs, I have gained some insight into the “partiality and subjectivity of knowledge” (Tracy, 2013, p. 253).

Ontology (What is Considered to be the Nature of Reality; What Can be Known, and How)

Seductive though they can be, I have resisted entirely, reductionist and essentialist notions that a complex phenomenon like adoption could be explained by referring to some supposed inner truth or “essence,” or that there might be one single objective “true” reality that exists regarding the adoption experience. Sawyer and Norris (2015) have reminded that conclusions reached in my chosen methodology may not result in a one-size-fits-all objective truth, but require more careful, in-depth examination and the exploration of contradiction and inherent tensions. Despite these tensions, the findings may prove to be personally and socially transformative, able to be widely interpreted by the reader (Farquhar & Fitzpatrick, 2016).

Since I believe that as human beings we actively and purposefully construct and interpret reality from the multiple, subjective meanings and understandings that are available to us, my preferred ontological paradigms of Narrative Knowing and a Social Constructionism approach align with my adoptee positionality.

Narrative Knowing

Broadly speaking, the textual approach of narrative is a “way of knowing.” Human beings have been telling and retelling stories for millennia, something that the social sciences have assimilated (life as lived, life as told) since we understand that human beings come to understand ourselves in large part by organising our interpretations of their world in storied form. We “edit” our lives in ways that make sense to us, have value, and enhance our understandings of who we are. In my life, it



was only when I started to narrate my inner experience to others that I started to be able to make sense of it. As a counsellor, I see through my clients' "retelling" or reflection on events, that changes can be brought about, and a person be seen as agentic, actively engaged in the creation of their own world.

Social Constructionism

The social constructionist view is that individuals are constituted by the social world and that knowledge is a creation (a "construction") that is brought into being through shared language. We use language to construct our sense of self and our sense of the world around us (Taylor & Ussher, 2001). Adoption research across sociological and psychological disciplines assumes the socially and culturally constructed nature of adoption (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2020) as well as the social constructionist notion that identity is subject to broader social, historical, and cultural forces. The interplay between adoption and identity has been widely explored by researchers (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Grotevant, 1997; Velleman, 2015); and so, I have attended to the wider cultural and historical meanings of adoption that exist in the social world and are widely accepted as "natural" by society, where we as individuals are shaped by sociological, psychological and linguistic structures which we do not control.

Accordingly, as a social constructionist, I have taken a critical stance in relation to taken-for-granted assumptions about the world, which are seen as reinforcing the interests of dominant social groups (Galbin, 2014). I have remained conscious that the way we all understand the world is a product of a historical process of interaction and negotiation between groups of people. As an individual, I am already and always located in society and thus my experiences are culturally and historically located so never value-free. Hence, I have been mindful that my ability as a researcher to critically reflect on my practice is likely to be influenced by cultural habit acquired through my acculturation into certain social groups in society—social class, gender, family, peer group, nationality—and then internalised so that I act, think, and feel in certain ways (King et al., 2019). My decades of lived experience interwoven with academic inquiry and "troubling" the societal discourse of closed stranger adoption—perpetual childhood, gratitude, silence, loyalty, and shame—have enabled me to review adopted adults as a marginalised and disenfranchised group in society.

My primary focus and goal of research, then, has not been to produce knowledge that is universally valid and fixed, since my work is but one truth among many potential others. Instead, I have focused on meaning, examining the ways in which events, realities and experiences are the effects of a range of social, linguistic, discursive and symbolic discourses operating in society (Braun & Clarke, 2006). There

will always be alternative meanings, and language is the means by which I aspire to create, convey, and potentially change understandings.

Adoptee Positionality

In recent decades, adult adoptee voices such as my own have begun to be privileged in the scholarly community instead of continuing to be perpetually positioned as ‘adopted children’. Having insider adoptee scholars engaged in the arenas of adoption-related research, practice and policy invites deeper exploration of “what is known.” In particular it interrupts and exposes taken-for-granted or commonly held assumptions about the cultural phenomenon of adoption.

As a social constructionist, I have sought to explore through narrative how I and others have coped with membership in the culture of adoption. As an adopted person, I have a lifetime’s experience of attunement to the multiple assumptions regarding adoption in everyday discourse. Some aspects of this culture of closed stranger adoption include denial, infertility, loss and grief, negation of the relevance of genetics, the embarrassment and shame of infertility, societal stigma and mores around the primacy of genealogical and biological inheritance, legal and socially sanctioned processes and regulations, issues of privacy, secrecy and divided loyalties, historical abuses, sealed Pandora’s Boxes, disenfranchised emotions, the language of “grateful” and “lucky,” and intergenerational myopia. Being adopted has been the silent ostinato of my life, operating at a foundational level in my psyche and intimate relationships in myriad ways. My personal struggles with the socially constructed identities of “abandoned baby,” “unwanted,” “grateful,” and “good adoptee” reached a zenith in my relationships, erupting when faced with the developmental tasks of parenting. Thus, as a researcher, I have turned the “anthropological lens” (Heyl, 2001) back upon myself, seeking to understand whether and how this adoptee status may have complicated my ability to be in a healthy relationship with my own children. This is not to suggest that I have been more accurate in my representation of adult adoptees who parent; nor that my and my participants’ experiences have been or will be every adoptee’s experience.

I do not consider this positionality as an adoptee to have been a liability, nor a reason to question my objectivity and ability to conduct rigorous research. Rather than silencing or disguising the personal reasons that have led me to choose this research subject, I have utilised my subjectivity and insider-status in my research. By intentionally choosing to foreground personal lived experience as an insider researcher alongside my studied population, I have applied a braided ethnographic and autoethnographic lens to this disenfranchised cultural group. Using my own experiences in closed adoption culture reflexively to bend back on myself and look more deeply at interactions between self and other has showed the ontological value of

weaving autoethnography with narrative ethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Having myself as the author/first participant means that I am not only the key informant of my own experience, but I also extend empathy to the experiences of the other participants, increasing the in-depth nature of the study. The components of this weaving process are explored in more detail in the next section, followed by a more in-depth consideration of the central notion of my role as an insider researcher.

Ethnography

Epistemologically, ethnography (“ethno” derived from the Greek *ethnos* meaning “nation, tribe, or race”) comes from the position that to really understand and “know” something, you cannot study it from a distance. You have to experience it for yourself. First-hand knowledge gained from experience is the best way to know. My research project has explored the experiences of a group of people within a culture (adult adoptees) who are connected by the lived experience of biological parenthood, providing “up close” insights into their world to understand how this culture of being adopted might have affected them, and how they have made meaning (Hamilton & De Jonge, 2010). D’Ardenne and Mahtani (1999) have warned that culture “is a complex and value-laden topic” (p. 3), and so with reference to adoption, I have chosen to define it in its broadest sense. Goode and Dunne (2004) defined a cultural group simply as a collection of individuals sharing a core set of beliefs, patterns of behaviour, and values, being identified by their ways of thinking and behaving.

Ethnographic research originated in anthropological studies which took a social and cultural lens to the study of people’s lives within their communities in foreign countries. Researchers would live among members of the studied community with the express intention of sharing and coming to understand this culture. This process often took many years since it was necessary to learn the language in order to interact with the inhabitants to understand daily habits, rituals, norms, and actions and thus the culture of the studied community. A new stream of ethnographic studies was introduced in the 1930s when sociologists started to explore their own communities as if they were unknown places (Atkinson et al., 2007). Ethnographic research began to take place anywhere, including within familiar settings, formal and informal organisations such as workplaces, shopping centres, and social media. The ethnographer’s aim, however, remained the same: to observe, analyse and understand a self or some aspect of a life lived in a cultural context by exploring how people interacted with each other and their environment, in order to understand their culture.

By the 1970s and 80s it had become clear to researchers that sociocultural and qualitative investigation and description did not sit well within “scientific” methods. A crisis of representation ensued in the fields of sociology, psychology, anthropology,

gender and race studies, as social scientists grappled with the notion that they were unable to separate their researcher selves from the research experience. Ethnographers began to explore more realistic ways of researching and representing others' experiences, including how they themselves were shaped and affected by what they experienced in the field (Adams et al., 2015).

Researchers' personal experiences were increasingly used to illuminate the culture under study, and all of their senses, body, feelings, and whole being were brought to the study— by using the “self”, one could learn about the “other”. Their writing became more meaningful and evocative as they included sensory and emotional experience. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2016) described ethnographic writing as “evocative, descriptive, and lively.... [It is] academic writing but it also requires creativity in rendering scenes, sights, smells, feelings, experiences, and people as lifelike as possible” (p. 161). They exhorted the ethnographer to use first-person language, creating a narrative text that assisted the reader to feel and understand exactly what it was like to be a member of the studied culture, in the field. The end product would emphasise not only cultural elucidation but comprise detailed description and quotations that were balanced by analysis and interpretation, the hallmark of ethnographic accounts.

With all cultural groups in society, the vast array of assumptions and attitudes that comprise that culture are known and familiar to those within the cultural group yet can be almost completely invisible to those outside it. A researcher who is a member of the culture being studied, who possesses insider knowledge, may be able to “see” what outside researchers may not. From my lived experience of non-adoptee ignorance regarding aspects of closed stranger adoption, it was critically important that to illuminate the culture under study more intensely (Bochner & Ellis, 2002), I would need to incorporate studying my own life and personal experience through a researcher's lens, in conjunction with studying other adoptee participants' lives. This brought me to consider utilising an autoethnographic methodology.

Adoption as a “Culture”

There is a plethora of academic attention (Wright, 2015) paid to the presence of subcultures in society, and despite disagreement concerning exactly what constitutes them and how they work, there are a few generally agreed-upon aspects of their functioning and interaction with broader culture. Subcultures can be seen as a collection of people who choose, for a variety of reasons, to believe similar things, engage in shared behaviours, but which have no formal leadership or membership. Other aspects include a shared identity among members, and shared beliefs and common experiences, with members experiencing a sense of marginalisation that set

them apart from others in the larger culture. I have long regarded being adopted as akin to a subculture.

My professional experience as a speech and language therapist illuminated a particular subculture to me that was frequently invisible to others—those who are hearing impaired, the deaf community. Individuals who are deaf use a different language to communicate; they learn about their culture and language from those who are not their family (most deaf children have hearing parents) and are united by shared experiences as persons with disabilities. Deaf individuals in most western societies live within the dominant culture, look the same as hearing individuals, and typically share the same cultural values. However, they are distinct and separate from the hearing population with regard to language, disability, stigma, and their own distinctive lived experiences (Maxwell-McCaw et al., 2019). Members of deaf culture have created their own unique cultural and social norms for communicating, interacting and experiencing the world around them. In addition, while they can move between these two “worlds”, they frequently express a preference for deaf culture in which they feel free to be more fully themselves.

The rationale for considering adoptees as a distinctive “culture” compared to non-adopted persons, stems from the unique experiences, challenges, and identity formation processes that often accompany adoption. As adopted individuals, we share common experiences differentiating us from the “kept”, including early separation from our biological parents and extended families, being forbidden by home and state to learn of our origins, being placed in stranger adoptive families, then navigating a lifelong process of endeavouring to fit into this family dynamic with which we may always feel out of synch. Adoption can significantly complicate the formation of our sense of identity. In contrast to the “kept”; as adopted persons we frequently grapple with questions of belonging, origins, and self-identity, which can differ from those who have not experienced adoption. In addition, adopted individuals often gravitate towards each other, seeking connection and understanding from others who share similar experiences, forming supportive communities and networks built around shared narratives of adoption. These shared experiences and support systems foster a sense of belonging and solidarity among adopted individuals, further reinforcing the notion of a distinct adoptee culture. Finally, as adoptees, we frequently face social stigma, lack of understanding, and stereotypes related to adoption from those who are not adopted. These shared experiences of stigma and discrimination contribute to the formation of a unique adoptee culture that is shaped by a collective response to societal attitudes towards adoption. Being an adoptee is a distinctive way of being in the world.

Berry (1992) proposed a model of acculturation to describe what can occur when people from different cultures must adapt to each other's ways of life. The model categorises adaptation strategies along two dimensions, depending upon the retention or rejection of the individual's "native" versus the "host" or dominant culture (Table 2). From this simple binary algorithm, four acculturation strategies emerge. *Assimilation* is when individuals take on the cultural norms of the dominant host culture, over their original culture. *Separation* occurs when individuals reject the host culture in favour of preserving their culture of origin. With *integration*, individuals can maintain their culture

		Value and Maintain Native Culture		of origin while still operating within the cultural norms of the host culture. Finally, <i>marginalisation</i> occurs when individuals reject both their culture of origin and the dominant host culture. Applying Berry's model of acculturation to adoption is far beyond the scope of this dissertation; suffice to say that for the majority of adopted people under closed
		YES	NO	
Value and Maintain Host Culture	YES	Integration	Assimilation	adoption, assimilation has been the blueprint for our lives. As Maxwell-McCaw et al. (2019) have noted, assimilation has always been considered the most "adaptive" acculturation style (p.3). Everything about our "native" culture—our biological families and our birth identity—has been erased, and we were required to live always within the cultural norms of the dominant host culture, our adoptive families. For those of us who were able to meet and get to know our biological families, some chose to repudiate our adoptive families completely, embracing instead the native culture from whence we had come, struggling to straddle the two worlds as integration would demand. And at times, the "betwixt and between" liminality and tensions of expectations from both—yet belonging in neither—have led some of us to a place of marginalisation where we come to feel that we have rejected or been rejected by both our families of origin and our adopting families.
	NO	Separation	Marginalization	

Table 2
Berry's Model of Acculturation (1992)

adoption, assimilation has been the blueprint for our lives. As Maxwell-McCaw et al. (2019) have noted, assimilation has always been considered the most "adaptive" acculturation style (p.3). Everything about our "native" culture—our biological families and our birth identity—has been erased, and we were required to live always within the cultural norms of the dominant host culture, our adoptive families. For those of us who were able to meet and get to know our biological families, some chose to repudiate our adoptive families completely, embracing instead the native culture from whence we had come, struggling to straddle the two worlds as integration would demand. And at times, the "betwixt and between" liminality and tensions of expectations from both—yet belonging in neither—have led some of us to a place of marginalisation where we come to feel that we have rejected or been rejected by both our families of origin and our adopting families.

Autoethnography

Definition

As a social scientist performing a narrative enquiry into experiences of being adopted and being a parent, I have been a subject of the study. That is, as researcher,

I am what is being investigated and researched as a contribution to knowledge (Cho, 2023). Breaking *autoethnography* into its three component parts (Hogue, 2016) defines it usefully and efficiently: foregrounding my personal experience (*auto*) as it is embedded within, and informed by, a specific cultural context (*ethno*), expressed in a written form (*graphy*). This tripartite nature has also prompted reflection as to whether I have privileged any of the different phases—the auto, the ethno, and the graphy—over another (Adams & Manning, 2015). Using autoethnography has aimed to recreate my experience as researcher in a reflexive way, enabling me to make meaning of my own and others' lived experiences, and to construct an understanding of a phenomenon within a social context, whilst also aiming to make a connection to the reader which may facilitate their thinking and reflection about their own experiences (Ellis, 2004; Ellis et al., 2011).

Auto—from the ancient Greek *autós*, meaning “self”. This was the self-reflective component of my research. I started with the research question, “To what extent, and in what ways, might being adopted have affected the complex developmental processes of parenting across the lifespan?”. This was a really broad question, and I found that I was especially interested in understanding the deeper meanings sitting beneath participants' stories and reflections of what was going on for them as adopted persons. In looking at my own journey, I was more able to reflect on how parenting my own biological children had caused me to develop more insight into the lived experience of adoption and what the parameters were within the culture of closed stranger adoption. The privileging of the auto was easy to see because I had come to believe that my story mattered. It was also axiomatic that I was an “expert” in the “auto, since nobody else could tell my story from an insider's perspective, it was something that only I could do.

Ethno—this was where I took my own “knowing” and looked at other people's experiences. I was interested specifically in the extent to which other adopted people felt that their adoptive status had affected, and continued to affect, their parenting journey. The ethno also contained the insider perspective. This was different than the auto wherein I was looking at myself from the inside; the ethno was looking outwards but with an insider knowledge of the adoptee community. This meant that I was positioned in a better place to hear and understand what others in the community had to say. This insider positionality is explored in more detail in the next section.

Graphy—the Greek “*graphein*” meaning to write, included writing up my results. Bochner and Ellis (2016) have emphasised, however, that this process is far more than reporting: the act of writing itself was a form of inquiry. I agree completely. The act of writing the research up changed my perspective as I reflected and learned as I was

writing. On many occasions an epiphany occurred to me only when I began to capture my thinking on the laptop. My aim has been to create an evocative body of text that incorporates a range of language and visual forms—two-person dialogue, photograph, poetry, direct quotations, discursive analysis, reflexive memoing—that are familiar to me but are also scholarly, and academically robust.

Rationale for Using Autoethnography

My decision to incorporate aspects of an autoethnographic approach in my dissertation had multiple rationales.

Traditional Approaches Were Inadequate. First, I considered that the use of realist and logical positivist research methodologies would fail to offer in-depth understanding of such a nuanced and complex social phenomenon as adoption. While still considered a relatively new methodology since its emergence in the late 1970s, autoethnography has been found to be invaluable as a vehicle by which knowledge and data can be acquired to answer research questions that might not be adequately addressed using traditional research approaches. Adams et al. (2015) stated that “autoethnographers speak against, or provide alternatives to, dominant, taken for granted, and harmful cultural scripts, stories and stereotypes” (p. 3). As such, autoethnography has been an advantageous methodology for this research because I have sought to turn a lens on hidden aspects of parenting my biological children as an adult adoptee; a narrative that has interrupted or “troubled” current discourses on the lifelong effects of closed stranger adoption. In my focus upon interpretation and the social construction of meaning, autoethnography has enabled me to provide what Geertz (1973) terms a “thick description” of my personal experiences as a basis for the research, foregrounding the use of my lifetime’s experiences to contribute to knowledge that may not comprise the dominant discourse.

A Legitimate Place Within Academia. Second, I have sought to contribute to a scholarly conversation. Four decades on since it emerged out of anthropological studies, autoethnography is now recognised as a legitimate and important method in many research contexts and disciplines (Hayano, 1979). As such, I can contribute to, extend and critique existing research and knowledge regarding the adoptee experience. My intention has been to incorporate conventions of language and formatting employed by both traditional social-scientific forms and this more recent methodology. Formatting my writing using literature review, research questions, methods, data, and findings, ensures that this discourse is recognisable within many different disciplines and by many scholars. However, my main reason for the choice of autoethnography as a methodological research tool and powerful lens in data gathering and analysis has been for its ability to be “rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and

emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena” (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 283).

What is Profoundly Personal is Honoured. Third, by its very nature, autoethnography is highly personal work. Romanyshyn’s (2007) book, *The Wounded Researcher*, resonated with me, illuminating a philosophical and personal meaning to my research as something propelled me towards the expansion of this topic, bringing myself as researcher and adult adoptee firmly into the text. Sacks (1985) noted that it is precisely the emotional experiences of vulnerability in our lives that are complex and painful that tend to stimulate one’s narrative need. Adams et al. (2015) acknowledged that autoethnographers often began a project with a personal experience; something that had significantly shaped or altered the course of their lives that they wished to understand more fully and meaningfully. By positioning myself within the research, I have used personal experience to provide an “insider” account (Adams & Manning, 2015) of being adopted and being a biological parent across my lifespan. From this positional lens I have also been an observer of the extant literature on this important topic, and of other people’s stories. By turning the lens towards self, I have embarked upon a journey of discovery. Autoethnography also recognises the influence that my personal experience has had on the entire research process itself. Rather than denying self, autoethnography embraces subjectivity, emotions, and the influences of the researcher on research (Ellis et al., 2011). In making visible and explicit what is usually considered to be bias, and thus excluded from research, autoethnography exposes the researcher’s involvement in the research: that is, the influence and role of their subjectivity in their research projects (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

A Methodology that Embraces Vulnerability. Fourth, in addition to the highly personal nature of this project, I sought to privilege a paradigm wherein vulnerability could be embraced as a conduit to better understand social phenomena and explore questions regarding adoptee experiences. My intention was that my work would not only help me as researcher work through my own experience, confusion and understanding; it would offer other individuals some possibilities of working through challenging aspects of their own adoptee experience. In addition, those in relationship with an adopted person, or who work therapeutically with adopted adults, might have their understanding enriched. Adams et al. (2015) denoted this “vulnerability with a purpose” (p. 40).

This Methodology Incorporates and Elevates Hitherto Neglected Stigma and Taboo. Fifth, an autoethnographic methodology afforded me an opportunity to fill an experiential gap in existing research by disrupting the silences around the topic of adoption. Autoethnography is unique in its embracing what is hidden, sensitive, and

hitherto under-studied or disregarded. My research has sought to “talk back” and “bear witness” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 41) to neglected and frequently disenfranchised adult adoptee cultural experiences. Contrary to normative societal discourses, I have written against the assumption that being an adoptee is a discrete and one-off experience—the notion that struggles and complexities in “being adopted” should or do end at some point. My lived experience is that the nuances and permutations of adoption are lifelong, and that they are not necessarily understood at a distinct moment in time. Navigating my way through the labyrinth of adoptee experience has enabled me to deconstruct, critique and transmute the experiences. An empirically derived experiential lens of autoethnography can reclaim a voice in the context of scholarly conversations that ignore, silence, or omit these voices.

Research that is Accessible and Available. Sixth, this methodology has been demonstrated to render research more accessible and available. A critique of traditional esoteric academic research has been that it can be closeted behind locked doors of obfuscating inaccessible discourse, languishing forever in an archive or on a shelf. As such, it fails the core purposes of research: to disseminate insight, sharpen reflection, and broaden understanding. This research seeks to be accessible to adopted people, offering insight and strategies that are beneficial to us and to those who love and engage with us.

Polyvocal—Blurring and Weaving. Finally, my decision to inhabit this potentially blurred and symbiotic line by weaving the participants’ voices together with my own as researcher was designed to ensure that they held an equal footing in the research. Relocating herself from ethnographer to being a subject of her own research after multiple and nuanced shared subjective experiences with her research subjects brought a new lens to Aitemad Muhanna’s (2014) own epistemological knowledge. As she found, the symbiotic line between ethnography and autoethnography is blurred (Deck, 1990). The polyvocal nature of my braided ethnography/autoethnography has enabled all participants to sit side-by-side without bending conclusions towards a singular truth.

Potential Pitfalls of Autoethnography

It is important to note that critiques have been made regarding the strong emphasis on self within autoethnographic research. Some writers have variously described such work as “me-search”, characterised by a self-indulgent and introspective approach that is lacking in objectivity and rigour and therefore less than academically robust (Méndez-López, 2013). Devendorf (2020) privileged a more descriptive and less disparaging term than “me-search” in coining the phrase “self-relevant research” (p. 49). This author’s argument was that the pursuit of self-relevant

topics might obscure a researcher's objectivity and jeopardise their ability to remain "neutral" or impartial. To this end I have followed and applied specific methodological strategies in my work to demonstrate rigour and trustworthiness, which are addressed in the section "Rigour and quality assurance".

However, it is noted that proponents of autoethnography not only defend but foreground the subjectivity of the researcher, regarding this as central and the locus of value for the methodology. Bochner and Ellis (1996) considered that the centrality of personal narratives "is to allow another person's world of experience to inspire critical reflection on your own" (p. 22). Writing about her lived experiences in an oncology ward and their intersection with her research on the same topic, Laura Ellingson (1998) reflected on how thoroughly "contaminated" her two perspectives were. She considered that, rather than calling into question the scientific validity of her findings, it was indeed the presence of such "contamination" that would reassure readers that the findings offered a richly complex understanding of the clinical experience. Further, it has been argued (Devendorf, 2020) that researchers' interpretations are always influenced by their experiences, identities, intentions, and values. Thus, the value of autoethnography is in the alchemy of what emerges from the interaction between the writer/self and their experiences set within their cultural and social milieu. It is through this representation that an authentic and multifaceted understanding of a particular phenomenon can be accomplished.

Ellis (2004) has asserted that a good autoethnographic narrative will do many things. It will simultaneously engage emotional and cognitive capacities in the reader, whilst also eliciting a breadth and depth of questions regarding the nature of the experience itself, the author's position and perceptions, how the reader may have experienced the event described, or what the reader may have learned.

Insider Status

This section explores the ontological value of my insider status in this research. The entirety of self I brought to the research—my own subjectivity—was both analytical resource and research instrument; the means by which I absorbed, sifted through and interpreted, and at times set aside expectations of what I was experiencing through observation, participation, and interviewing. This section sets out some of the benefits and risks of inhabiting an insider positionality in research, along with ways in which I mitigated the risks by means of transparency, bracketing, and my processes around reflexivity.

Definition

Insider research refers to the situation when researchers conduct research with populations *of which they are also members* (Kanuha, 2000, emphasis mine), so that



the researcher shares an identity, language, and experiential base with the study participants (Simmons, 2007). Intuitively we accept that people who have lived in a town, city, or country their whole lives will “know” it in a way that visitors can never grasp: the vagaries of climate, cuisine, attitudes; the best places to get coffee, where to avoid on a dark night, how the environs have changed over time, and countless other insights known only to the others who have also lived there. There are both positive and negative aspects to what Adams et al. (2015) have denoted an “epistemology of insiderness” (p. 31) and I was cognisant of these aspects in relation to how I related to the group under study.

Advantages of Insider Positionality

Previous studies (Adams & Manning, 2015; Kanuha, 2000; King et al., 2019; Muhanna, 2014) suggested that as an insider researcher, my depth and breadth of understanding this population would be enhanced. King et al. (2019) reminded researchers that we bring our subjectivity to every stage of our research, inevitably influencing the questions asked and the ways answers are found. *How* I asked what I asked was profoundly affected by my familiarity with the languaging, the nuances, the lived experiences that lie beneath the surface for many adopted people, and my willingness to be vulnerable in our interactions. Accordingly, participants may have been more open, honest and vulnerable with how they responded, thus giving the data gathered a greater depth.

Insider positionality offered me as the researcher essential insights by way of identifying, noticing and describing cultural norms, practices and experiences in ways inaccessible to “visitor” researchers. The simple fact of “knowing where to look” might have served to illuminate areas of original or novel discourse, or gaps in the existing literature. In addition, in approaching the research, I held deep empathy and enthusiasm for a subject that is deeply felt by me, and my shared adoptive status bestowed a certain amount of legitimacy and credibility as an adopted person in the eyes of my participants, giving a platform of common ground from which to begin the research. Moreover, it may have allowed me more rapid and more complete acceptance by participants.

Disadvantages of Insider Positionality

However, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) cautioned that for each of these ways, there were also potential limitations and disadvantages of which a researcher must be mindful. Questions about objectivity of the research project could certainly be raised, and this is fully explored in the audit trail section of this chapter wherein I detail the specific methodological strategies I followed and applied in my work in order to demonstrate rigour and trustworthiness.

Glesne (2016) sounded a note of caution in regard to the centrality of authenticity in such positionality: certainly, it comes with some risk of vulnerability as required in emotionally revealing oneself. I remained reflexively mindful of the Goldilocks phenomenon: saying “too much” and revealing myself might expose me more than I was comfortable with, yet facilitate connection, whereas saying “too little” and concealing certain aspects of my story in order to protect myself or others in my life might act as a barrier and result in more superficial data. Because this particular methodology of qualitative research invited establishing meaningful relationships with participants, there was definitely a depth of personal investment required from me. The extent to which I revealed or concealed “self” in the interviewing and writing is explored in my analytical memoing of methodological reflections.

Further to this, an insider researcher might have difficulty differentiating their own story from that of the participants. They might inadvertently foreground core aspects of their own experience rather than that of the participants, or project their own experiences onto participants in order to seek validation. Robust interpretation and analysis might be weakened by an insider scholar through an emphasis on shared factors and a de-emphasis on factors that are discrepant. The researcher’s perceptions may be clouded by their personal experience, meaning that a participant’s experience may not have been fully explored and understood because of the assumptions made.

Finally, familiarity and “knowing” a place well can paradoxically endow a kind of “not seeing” or “blindness” to what is in front of one. If a researcher knows a great deal about the issue being researched, there is a chance that they might be “too” close, and interviews might be shaped or skewed by “blind spots”. Like David Foster Wallace’s (2009) fish who do not “notice” the water, it is important to remember that the most taken-for-granted and ubiquitous realities can be the ones that are the hardest to see and talk about.

Mitigating the Disadvantages

To acknowledge and mitigate these concerns, I took a number of steps. First, transparency. As with any other minoritised scholar, those with an insider position are ethically obligated to explicitly state our positionality, making transparent the assumptions and biases with which we engage in our work (McGinnis et al., 2019). My shared “insider” status as an adult adoptee was made explicit to participants prior to and throughout the collection, recording and analysis of data. It was frequently referenced by my participants as they sought clarification, validation and shared identification with my own experience. My insider status was central to the project from the outset, and remained a focal point of reference for critical reflection during the study’s design, analysis and discussion.

Second, bracketing. Drawing on its application in interpretative phenomenology, bracketing entails the methods that I as researcher used to consciously use my background as a research tool. Bracketing is used in many types of qualitative research and has a wide range of meanings within different methodologies. Broadly speaking, bracketing acknowledges the researcher's personal history and denotes when the researcher intentionally sets aside or "steps out" of their personal frame of reference, pre-understanding, and assumptions in order to understand someone else's point of view (Sorsa et al., 2015). Since as Fischer (2009) aptly observed, we are unable to view something without viewing it from somewhere, the notion of bracketing can be regarded as mindfulness that is brought to bear regularly, inquiring of oneself what assumptions may have gone into what has been seen, and how this might have been "language'd" and represented. Bracketing by means of ongoing critical examination of my feelings and suppositions enabled the exploration of both explicit and implicit knowledge with participants. In addition, it invited dialogue between us and the cocreation of new understanding and the sharing of knowledge. It was important in the writing process that I was clear with myself—and the reader—when I was researcher and when I was participant, and that I could demonstrate where and how bracketing took place.

Third, having one of my supervisors who was an "outsider" or visitor to the topic of adoption, provided an important naïveté on occasions where my insider positionality had meant that I was foregrounding assumptions in languaging and content of which only an adopted person might be aware. This proved to be an additional and very meaningful reflective lens.

The final and most overarching way in which I mitigated the possible disadvantages of insider positionality was through the process of reflecting deliberately on my own engagement with the collection and analysis of data. Frequently referred to as being self-reflexive, this involves a close and continuous awareness and critical reflection on my own personal biases and perspectives. Simply put, I was intentionally and continuously "looking back and inward in a self-aware manner" (Fischer, 2009, p. 584). I further explore the significance and ramifications of self-reflexivity below.

Being Reflexive

Lincoln et al. (2005) have described reflexivity as the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher, considering one's cultural location and the ways in which one's beliefs, interests and experiences might influence the research. Reflexivity requires:

...a turning of the researcher lens back onto oneself to recognise and take responsibility for one's own situatedness within the research and the effect that

it may have on the setting and the people being studied, the questions being asked, the data being collected and its interpretation. (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 13)

Rather than my being a separate and distant researcher, my situatedness has been as a thoughtful and ever-present subject who has had an impact on the what, why and how throughout the research. I wanted to compare and contrast my own experiences with that of my participants, in part to understand my own better, and also to bring illumination to our journeys. Mirroring the braided nature of my work, I have looked “inward” into myself as well as “outward.”

Looking inward, I was conscious of the plethora of multiple “selves” I brought to my research, endeavouring to remain aware of and to account for each, and to the parts they might each have played in the production of knowledge. I noticed my researcher-based self who exists ontologically in the world as a social constructionist; my brought self (an adopted person, middle class, Cherokee/Pākehā, now 60-year-old woman), and my situationally created self (being a fellow adoptee, being empathetic). To these were added my professional self (counsellor, academic, teacher), my caring self (daughter, mother, friend) and my political agenda (feminist, ecologist, socialist). With this multiplicity, it was as if I wore multiple “hats” or stepped in and out of multiple roles in this production: as playwright (researcher), actor (participant) but also audience to my own experience.

Can a researcher be “too” situated? Ellingson (1998) explored some scholars’ arguments that some degree of critical and dialectical distance should exist between a researcher and the people they are studying, creating a sense of simultaneous proximity and distance and a “partial identification” (p. 502) with their subjects. She maintained that, without experiencing something emotionally, it was unlikely to be understood intellectually. As someone who had a lived experience of suffering and surviving cancer, Ellingson (1998) saw that she was being more easily trusted and afforded greater credibility by her study participants since she was a member of a shared community built on the experience of suffering and surviving. People who had experienced deeply traumatic and painful life experiences needed empathetic listeners to hear their stories in order to heal, and she noted that holding that space of the blurred role of researcher and researched was a weighty responsibility. The emotional connection between my participants and myself was, to an important extent, due to our comembership in the adoptee community, and this is documented in my post-research methodological reflections.

Ellis et al. (2011) described self-reflection as an “interrogation” of my own experience in a way that would honour my values as well as being productive,

transformational, and useful to others. The ongoing navigation of this space required me as researcher to engage in a disciplined and critical process in documenting then deciding how much of myself to reveal and which (if any) parts of my story to conceal. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) asserted that feminist and postmodern scholars advocate for bringing their personal role into the research relationship, removing the separation between the researcher and the researched. In the past, this seemingly impermeable line was never crossed; now scholars such as Jackson (1989) assert that it is the blurring of boundaries between researcher and researched and consequent interplay between them that is the epicentre of most interest. In this context I held up a mirror to myself for detailed reflection on the subjective research process as I considered how my experiences, identities and relationships might have been influencing my work.

In addition to the duality of adopted person and researcher, I added a third aspect: that of professional counsellor. As noted by Yow (1997), biographers in the 1970s had begun to acknowledge their lack of detachment and objectivity in their writings. They referenced how psychoanalytic theory—such as Erikson’s psychosocial model of stages of development, and Freud’s notion of transference—had influenced their work. These perspectives are familiar to therapists who are trained and required to ask themselves such questions as “What feelings is this client bringing up in me? Does this client remind me of someone or something in my life?” In a similar way, researchers writing from a biographical, life history and sociological perspective were also beginning to use the concept of transference to analyse their work. Yow (1997) describes how Erikson’s model prompted questions such as “What are the issues I’m confronting in my own life now? How does this research relate to these questions I have now about how to live a life?” (p. 65). Parkes & Mintz’s (2021) study into adoptees’ experiences of their own adoption and how these influenced their experience of person-centred counselling training has resonated profoundly. Their deeply mined research encapsulated how my experience training then working as a person-centred counsellor for the past seven years has influenced the thinking behind, and the execution of this dissertation. Self-reflection is a regular and embedded component of my professional practice as a counsellor and I extended this naturally into my research in coconstructing the interviews, reflection, analysis and writing of my project.

In order to make my reflexivity visible and keep me accountable vis-à-vis the research process, King et al. (2019) state that it is good research practice to consistently document and make retrievable my processes of exploration and reflection, capturing candid, personal and impromptu insights. Further, I was mindful that what I had recorded in my research memoing might be utilised as data and analysed at a future date and that contemporaneous observations, reflections, and

thoughts might provide me with methodological insights which could deepen my analysis. For example, underlying expectations I had regarding how other adopted people experience, understand, and operate in their parenting might be challenged and extended. More detail regarding my memoing process, as well as the selection of my own autobiographical material across my life, is contained later in this chapter.

Liminality—the “Hyphenic” Space of Betwixt and Between

Paradoxically, I have lived within an insider position vis-à-vis adoption for my entire life, and yet I do not fully occupy it. My perspective has been influenced by the literature I have read, and my position as a researcher. Yet, as a qualitative researcher in this situation, I was not separate and could not retreat from the study; rather, I was embedded within it, and integral to it. My participants’ narratives were heavy, haunting and raw to me, and I carried them with me, able to immediately summon their voices, faces and homes as I worked with the transcripts. Their words, capturing and exposing their lived experiences, were clear and lasting. This intimacy within qualitative research did not allow me as researcher to remain an outsider to the experience under study. I occupied the space between, moving in a liminal space (Cook-Sather, 2006) between insider and outsider positioning, as well as adoptee/researcher, with the costs and benefits this status afforded. These tensions powerfully echoed the liminality of my in-betweenness of my birth and adoptive families, a foot in both yet at different times identifying more with one or the other, never quite belonging in either. Feeling in between and positioned between two cultures has been described as

a space of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction [...] The space between two cultural identities is a tensioned space.

When a person is positioned between two cultures, this tensioned space can be interpreted as a lonely existence. (Dwyer & Gidluck, 2005, p. 67)

Conducting her research from an insider position, Kanuha (2000) became aware of inherent tensions within the cultural context of her own Hawaiian people. Suggesting that those who are insider researchers are both the subject of their own study and also the participant object being studied, she reminded me that at all moments I have been grounded in a dual and mutual status of subject-object. Kanuha sought to expand the definitions of the relationship between the researcher and researched, developing the useful metaphor of a hyphenic space which can bridge the insider-outsider binary. “The hyphen acts as a third space, a space between, a space of paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence, as well as conjunction and disjunction” (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 60).

Although all qualitative researchers reflect on their relationship to the research project, and what they see is always based on their positionality, Kanuha’s notion of a



hyphenic space between, afforded a useful multi-layered complexity to the dichotomy of my insider versus outsider status. Presenting these concepts in a dualistic manner felt overly simplistic for such fluid and multi-layered complexities. It seemed restrictively narrow to lock into a notion that emphasised either/or, one or the other—you are “in” or you are “out.” Embracing a dialectical approach (discovering what is true by considering opposite theories) allowed the preservation of the complexity of similarities and differences.

The irony of this insider/outsider debate with an adoptee was not lost on me. I first learned of the notion of liminality in my master’s of counselling post graduate study in 2016. A liminal space—liminal from the Latin word *līmen* meaning “a threshold”—has been described as a place of transition and “not knowing”: standing on the threshold between a previous way of being or doing, and a new way. In this place of ambiguity there may be uncertainty and doubt around the continuity of tradition and future outcomes which were once taken for granted (Cook-Sather, 2006). A liminal space can exist in any context: political, social, philosophical, cultural, relational (Lang & Gardiner, 2014). It marks a transition point—for example the liminal space between childhood and adolescence. This time of transition can be turbulent and unsettling, often necessitating a rebalancing of power between the parties involved but also the possibility of transformational change.

The congruence of this image to adoption was elegant and I could not stop thinking about how perfect the word “liminality” was. Our tenuous positioning as adopted persons in the liminal space of “in-betweenness” is explored extensively by Ahuriri-Driscoll (2020) who emphasised the considerable tension and discomfort faced by adoptees and the multiple influences acting upon and outside them in the nature/nurture divide, perpetually between the worlds of birth and adoptive families. Some adopted people spurn both their adoptive and their biological families; others retain connection to both. Others who may feel in perpetual limbo remain trapped, inhabiting the hyphen of liminality between the two, feeling “like a guest in my adoptive family and a latecomer to my biological family” (Corsentino, 2021, p.3).

Ongoing self-reflection regarding the nature of the liminal space as I wove between the two perspectives of liminality as adoptee/researcher was explored in my memoiring. Blake (2013) developed this notion eloquently as she reflected on the liminality of her “dual citizenship” (p. 252) of being both researcher and adopted person. Describing the discomfort she experienced in this dual role in “making visible the invisible” she realised that one of her participant’s uses of the metaphor of no-man’s land:



[It] resonated with my own embodied knowing. It enabled me to access that which has always been out of reach. It explained the 'essence' of living life on the outer boundaries, fitting but never fitting, belonging but never belonging, knowing oneself but never quite.... the 'truth' of who I am forever positioned as belonging to no-one and belonging no-where. (Blake, 2013, p. 252)

Conclusion: The Dualistic Concepts of Insider Versus Outsider

Perhaps the insider-outsider question cannot be fully resolved and instead we can work creatively within the tensions created by the debate, finding a way to be fluidly both, inhabiting the hyphen. As humans we have a reductionist propensity to frame complex issues as a binary struggle between two contradictory sides, and the adoption experience and literature is no exception. Binary tensions are rife in our worlds—unwanted/chosen, illegitimate/legitimate, discarded/kept, secret/transparent, blood/not blood, real/fictive, chosen/not chosen, mother/not mother, denial/honesty, private/public, severed/grafted, having two mothers yet feeling unmothered and a 'mother hunger'—and these cannot help but shape our experience of the world.

Perhaps in the qualitative research space it is possible to bracket these constructed dichotomies and focus instead on the complexity and richness of the hyphenic liminal space between. In summary, perhaps at the heart of the matter is not insider or outsider status but rather, the ability to be open, authentic, honest, deeply interested in the experience of one's research participants, and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience.

Ethics

It is my social and ethical responsibility to undertake my research in an ethical manner, and present my work in ways that are useful, understandable, and accountable. Through its ethics application process, the university promotes working under the three principles of partnership, participation and protection which are foundational within *Te Tiriti o Waitangi*. This section seeks to address how I have explored and "re-presented" versions of reality that are peoples' lives under this ethical framework and sought to bring these to a wider audience.

Ethical approval was obtained from the AUT University Ethics Committee (AUTEC) (21/65) on 31 March 2021.

Partnership, Participation and Protection

Partnership. The principle of partnership was fundamental in the design and implementation of this research as it pertained to the interaction between me as researcher and study participants. I regarded the subjects in this research as "participants"; as a researcher, I was studying with, not "on" (Tracy, 2013) them. They held a similar subject position to me, with life experiences that attended to my research

goals. They spoke primarily of and for themselves, encouraged to tell stories *in their own words* relating to themselves and their cultural experience of being an adoptee parent. Our conversations took place in an open-ended, relatively unstructured manner as a socially and relationally conscious act for participants and readers, a “collaborative witnessing” (Adams et al., 2015, p. 35).

My partnership with participants was evidenced through the interdependent nature of interaction between us; rather than treating them simply as experimental subjects or repositories of knowledge to be extracted, I regarded our relationship as collaborative, acknowledging their autonomy and their role in contributing to the existing knowledge base through my study. I demonstrated respect for participants by providing them with clear and comprehensive information regarding the aims and methods of the research, and by seeking their informed consent for participation in the study and use of the data collected. Prior to commencing, participants had time to provide informed consent, the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification at any point. In addition, they knew that they were able to withdraw from the research at any time prior to the completion of data collection if they wished. As I am a professional counsellor, from the outset my knowledge and expertise in empathy and relating, gentleness, open-mindedness and an absence of judgement have underpinned the partnership relationship throughout all interactions. As I am an adoptee parent, this partnership in the journey of knowledge-making has been made explicit from the outset. Given the personal significance to participants of the issues under investigation, and their role as potential beneficiaries of the research, participants have been offered a summary of findings on completion of the study.

Participation. Participants in this research were encouraged to engage in personal relationships with the researcher, thinking of themselves and denoted in the work as collaborators in the research journey (Bochner & Ellis, 2002). Their life stories *were* the resource, and the participants played an active role in shaping the research outcomes. While I used a set of questions (Appendix C-iv) to guide the interviews, participants had the freedom to take the discussions in any directions they felt were relevant. In order to avoid making assumptions and to prevent the misrepresentation of data, I consciously checked, clarified, and rechecked with participants throughout the research process, that I was representing their stories as faithfully as possible. I sent each participant's interview transcript to them for review and amendment (Long & Johnson, 2000) should my transcribed information have failed to capture the content and meaning of their interview accurately.

Participation in the study was voluntary; as previously noted, potential participants were informed of this fact and their right to withdraw at any time prior to

completion of data collection, on the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C-ii), and again during the interviews. Similarly, participants were also repeatedly advised of their rights to decline to answer any questions posed during the interview.

Protection. The Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C-ii) supplied comprehensive details of the research, thus providing transparency as to the nature of the study, and protecting participants from deceit. It detailed the entirely voluntary nature of the research in that individuals had the right to choose whether or not they wished to participate, how much information they wished to share, and their freedom to voluntarily withdraw from the study,

Consent forms (Appendix C-iii) were provided to participants, which detailed aspects of their privacy and confidentiality. All data gathered during the course of the research was kept confidential and stored securely. Confidentiality was further ensured through the use of pseudonyms in transcripts and all written reports, and the alteration of any details that could potentially identify the participants. Given that participants' children and families were referred to during the study, privacy and confidentiality protocols were also applied to their information, to ensure that no harm was done to individuals either directly or indirectly involved in the research.

Social and Cultural Sensitivity

As primary researcher, I am an adult adoptee with adult biological children, and was therefore keenly familiar with many aspects of participants' social and cultural contexts, and sensitive to the associated issues. I was the Chairperson of the Canterbury Adoption Awareness and Education Trust, a registered charitable not-for-profit organisation, between 1997 and 2007, editing a nationally distributed newsletter throughout that period. I also ran two international adoption conferences (in 1998 and 2005) and was an invited speaker at the *Shedding Light on the Adoption Experience* conference at Fordham University in New York in September 2006. I was also extremely familiar with the academic literature on adoption, having had my critical systematic literature review into the effects of adoption on intimate relationships published in the *New Zealand Journal of Counselling* following my completion of a master's in counselling through Massey University in 2018. This further enhanced my familiarity with the broad and nuanced features of this particular sociocultural context.

As there were no specific organisations involved in the study, no formal external consultation was undertaken for this study. The personal, professional, and theoretical knowledge and connection that both I as researcher and my primary supervisor had with the subject matter—being members of the population under investigation—further negated the need for external consultation.

Psychological Harm

Bochner and Ellis (2016) stated that doing ethical research into intimate and/or traumatic events likely to engender strong feelings required the researcher to honour the relationship with each participant and to make wise decisions about fulfilling responsibilities toward them. Given that I was asking participants to share their personal experiences and memories on a topic that might hold some sensitivities (past or present) or emotional intensity, I was mindful that participants might experience a mild degree of psychological discomfort or stress given the sensitive and highly personal nature of the topic. Prior to interviews commencing, I conveyed (in writing and verbally) that I was a trained and experienced counsellor and, that as such, I would be mindful of any signs of emotional distress that they might experience. I also emphasised that they were not obliged to answer any questions that might cause them discomfort, and that if they felt uncomfortable or distressed for any reason during the interview, they were able to pause or stop the process at any point. Details of free counselling support in their local community or via phone/online counselling providers were described on the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C-ii), and at the start of the interview they were reminded of follow-up therapeutic support, to ensure any emotional distress was addressed appropriately. The interview pace itself was set collaboratively by me as researcher, and each participant, progressing at a speed comfortable for both. My counselling experience meant that I was highly attuned to participants' reactions, so was well placed to respond immediately and gently when signs of discomfort or distress arose. I was not concerned when participants did become emotional, seeing this as an indication of authentic engagement with the material, a deep level of trust in me, and knowing I had the requisite experience to know how to navigate this situation calmly and respectfully. Afterwards, several participants thanked me for the interview, expressing how "helpful" and "therapeutic" it had been to tell their story.

Putting oneself thus in another's place is at the heart of the person-centred counselling relationship (McLeod, 2013). As a former speech and language therapist and now a professional counsellor, I brought these attributes to my social scientific ethnographic position, noting and examining small verbal and non-verbal cues in order to decide how to respond, and how to make sense of what I was hearing and seeing. "Tuning in" to the interactively produced meanings and emotional dynamics within the interview itself, I remained mindful at all times that what was unspoken carried as much weight as what was spoken. I attended carefully to all of the various suprasegmental aspects of communication (body language, tone of voice, use of pause, emphasis, pace and so on) as these observations were rich in meaning. They served to inform my understanding as well as alerting me to possible participant distress.



Relational Ethics and Narrative Privilege

The general principle of “do no harm” is the overarching maxim relating to the ethic of care necessary to work with human participants in research that is qualitative and narrative in nature. Adams (2008) used the term “narrative privilege” (p. 180) to encompass my role as researcher in conducting the research, writing the subsequent narrative in a suitably literary, academic and interpretive manner, and then disseminating the research to audiences beyond the participants involved. Narrative privilege also encompasses the degree of care necessary when working with intimate others, such as family members.

Over and above the ethical provisions through AUTECH for my study participants, I needed to address the autoethnographic material within my dissertation, which necessarily implicates *others* through the storytelling process. As an autoethnographer, my personal experiences as an adoptee were integral in order to further the research, and in my study I have made specific reference to family members, particularly my four adult children and three infant grandchildren. Bochner and Ellis (2016) have used the term “relational ethics” to describe the ethical considerations relating to the inclusion of special participants (such as family and friends) in written representations and thus how I as author must take care of those who are implicated within the story. My narrative privilege and relational ethics required that I explain to my family, as well as to others implicated throughout the story, the possible implications of sharing this story. They also called me to address the assumption that at some point those implicated might read the story. Addressing these concerns in an ethical manner was achieved through informed consent and by allowing those identified to review and offer feedback on the final written product, the provisions relating to trust, and the consideration of narrative strategies.

The primary means of addressing my narrative privilege and working with the intimate others involved in the story was by gaining consent from those written about to share their involvement in the autoethnographic aspects of my dissertation. Having discussed the nature and content of my research on many occasions with each of my four adult children, I received written consent from each of them by email, and for my grandchildren, their parents’ consent on behalf of their infant children. My sister-in-law and my son’s partner are not mentioned by name, but I also gained their written consent to use the specific conversational material I had covered. At the time of writing, my adoptive parents were unwell, frail and elderly, in their 90s; while aware of the project, I have not sought their written consent. My birth father passed away in mid-2021, and my birth mother has had no contact with me despite my ongoing efforts across thirty-three years. Further, I have limited the inclusion of experiential details

pertaining to family members to the specific scope of my research question (Angell, 2022). My narrative voice consists of my own subjective personal experience, and not that of my family members. Finally, given the sensitive nature of the autoethnographic section, I am comfortable that only my supervisors, proofreaders and examiners will read the text, and potentially also the participants. Narrative strategies such as use of a pseudonym or speaking about family members generically or compositely were not viable options because of their personal connections to me; had they been uncomfortable with the inclusion of particular events, I had the option to omit material within the story as a means of protecting them without losing the meaning of the narrative.

Privacy and Confidentiality. Information about the research was provided to potential participants initially via a Recruitment Flyer (Appendix C-i), followed by the presentation of a Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C-ii), which described the purpose, aims and methods of the project, as well as risks and benefits of participating in the research. It stated that the project would contribute to a qualification, that participation was voluntary, and that participants could withdraw at any time prior to the completion of data collection. The Participant Information Sheet was shared with potential participants following their response to the Recruitment Flyer invitation, using the contact details they had supplied to the primary researcher, and allowing time for potential participants to consider whether or not they wished to take part in the study. Consent of participants was obtained and evidenced through a written Consent Form (Appendix C-iii), which was given to participants to read and sign prior to participating in the study.

Interviews were conducted in private, secure settings, and participants were reminded that privacy and confidentiality would be scrupulously maintained. Interview data was stored securely and separately from consent forms, with access limited to the primary researcher and the supervisor. Resulting data (analyses) have been stored securely on password protected computers, with any identifying details removed, to ensure participant anonymity. Participant privacy and confidentiality was further protected by the use of pseudonyms and mainly aggregated descriptions in all transcripts and in the write-up process, with any potentially identifying details removed.

Minimisation of Risk to Researcher

Covid-19. An additional layer of risk for this project was that interviews were conducted during the coronavirus pandemic of 2020-2022, and for that reason I was constantly alert to the risks of Covid-19 and the changing alert levels as indicated by the government. While my preference was to conduct face-to-face interviews, I was mindful that this might have needed to be curtailed in favour of some form of

videoconferencing, and that additional measures such as social distancing and the wearing of facemasks might be deemed necessary (see Appendix C-v for Researcher Safety Protocol). On one occasion it was necessary to postpone flights in order to conduct interviews in person.

Interrupting the Dominant Narrative. Being a member of the adoption community may, in itself, confer some vulnerability. Choosing to challenge the widely accepted adoption narrative in society of “lucky” and “chosen” by exposing a different adopted experience, risked positioning me in a place of potential vulnerability, “otherness” and rejection by those who might not understand (Blake, 2013). As a “good” adopted person, I also feel a chronic and lifelong burden to shield my adoptive family from any narrative that interrupts or troubles this social discourse. At times I chose to omit personal reflections and interpretations of events in my upbringing that could have been deemed critical or negative.

Psychological Harm. My chosen research process not only exposed the participants to some emotional risk; in working through an autoethnographic lens, I was confronted with the additional vulnerability of writing myself as researcher into the narrative (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009). The psychological, professional and emotional risks of this heuristic have been extensively explored (Ellis et al., 2011; Van Maanen, 1988; Vickers, 2002). Just as there are well documented risks for counsellors in working with trauma clients, including intrusive thoughts, nightmares, psychological numbing, denial and distancing (Dunkley & Whelan, 2006), there are well documented risks for researchers working in sensitive areas, particularly if they have strong feelings or have lived experiences of the phenomena under investigation (Lee, 1995). I was aware of the potential for “vicarious traumatisation” when a researcher engages with a traumatised subject and begins to develop feelings of fear, grief, and intrusive thoughts (Dunkley & Whelan 2006).

Feminists have long argued that a crucial component of feminist research is empathy for the women who participate in their studies. Ellis (1998) argued strongly for empathetic listening, positing that the researcher working from the insider perspective understands participants’ situations better because she has had similar experiences. While no one can ever fully understand another’s experience, I have been reminded of the deep understanding that empathy affords. Staci Zavattaro (2020) noted that, rather than shying away from these emotions and retreating into a persona of passive, “impartial” observer, the autoethnographic researcher is encouraged to “lean into” such emotions. However, she also warned that the emotional labour needed to carry out such interviews, along with the mental, physical, ethical and emotional toll that the research can take on the scholar is often not considered and can be overlooked. I had

considered this in my ethics application, but looking back in hindsight, I see that I had underestimated it. Experiencing this depth of empathy and constantly navigating the delicate and nuanced balance between scholarly rigour and emotional connection was surprisingly draining and exhausting, both physically and emotionally.

Considerations regarding managing such concerns have necessarily formed part of my process, analysis and this final doctoral submission. As an ethical researcher, it was necessary to apply protective concerns around consent, privacy and harm to myself. I identified and managed the ongoing risks of harm to myself by developing a **six-fold framework**.

First, I undertook **ongoing and explicit reflection** (du Preez, 2008). Being a counsellor meant that I had an understanding and experience of engaging in reflexive activity concerning my embodied presence in the work and how this might be impacting on my analysis and the production of knowledge (Woodby et al., 2011). The process of reflective memoing—meticulously documenting my emotional and physical reactions, as well as the discomfort that arose in the course of my reading, interviewing, coding and analysis—was ongoing and profoundly impactful. In addition to structured memos, I kept an ongoing log of reflections and reactions, and also my own personal journal (Dunn, 1991).

Second, I developed intentional **planning, processes and practices**. Limiting myself to no more than one interview every few days (Dunn, 1991) ensured that I had time between interviews to reflect on what had been said and what had occurred, to memo, to sift and sort. Often my interviews were able to be spaced out, allowing plenty of time between them, although I once completed three across a week, and two across a long weekend. On these occasions I definitely noticed the toll it took on me in terms of fatigue, resurfacing memories and concomitant feelings, broken sleep, dreams and intrusive thoughts. I employed a number of additional processes and practices. I incorporated physical and emotional leisure activities into my daily routine. At times I used my phone to record contemporaneous insights or initial reflections immediately after an interview, later transcribing these as memos. I planned ahead regarding other commitments in order to balance cognitive and emotional loading on myself. I had periodic remissions and stretches of time away from the material. I scheduled occasional retreats into film and fiction. I sought out a great deal of solitude.

Third, I continued to **access ongoing therapeutic support** through my existing professional clinical supervision process. I was fortunate to be able to use this fortnightly practice to assist with the processing of my emotions, stresses and responses from such an emotionally laden research topic (Rager, 2005). This enabled

me to think deliberately about my coping mechanisms and strategies, as well as affording perspective and self-compassion.

Fourth, **being a counsellor** I was able to call on metacognitive ideas and strategies to support my process, drawing on the wisdom and perspectives of those who had completed doctoral projects, as well as therapeutic paradigms I use with clients in my counselling practice. Being reminded to detach from the content regularly, and to regard it as an academic journey/marathon certainly was another tool that assisted me to avoid becoming psychologically engulfed in the material.

Fifth, **studying part-time** was a preventative factor. Though at times I felt frustrated and resentful at not being able to focus exclusively on my dissertation, due to having a fulltime and demanding career; paradoxically this served to give me balance, respite and necessary breaks from full immersion in the dissertation.

Finally, I used my own **social support networks** of a supportive husband, work colleague (also a counsellor) and my adult own children with whom I could safely share my experiences, reactions and fatigue. Coming home to my daughter's home after three deeply emotional interviews, where I could just be myself, have silence, and know that I was emotionally held, felt beautifully synchronous for me.

Methods

Recruitment and Sample

In order to set my study up for an in-depth exploration of the parenting experiences of adult adoptees, my recruitment process entailed a continuous evaluation of a range of dimensions, influencing the homogeneity and eventual number of participants I interviewed (Malterud et al., 2015; Mason, 2010). I sought a sample of approximately ten participants (of whom one would be myself as researcher) by means of utilising my contacts and promulgation on social media. Purposeful sampling was used to identify participants based on their ability to contribute depth of information to my study. Recruitment ceased when I deemed my sample to have sufficient "information power" (Malterud et al., 2015, p. 1). The participants selected, needed to have appropriate experiences which matched my research goals. They also needed the courage to explore the depth and breadth of their adoptee experience, to be able to articulate experiences and what they had lived through, and able to describe and explain their embodied experiences (Adams et al., 2015; Liamputtong, 2013; Malterud et al., 2015). Ascertaining the adequacy of information power was influenced by such factors as the aims of my study, the number of participants selected who possessed characteristics and who had had experiences that were highly specific to these aims, the quality of the interview dialogue I elicited and my intention to perform in-depth

analysis of the elicited narratives. The interplay of all of these factors was revisited throughout the interview and analysis stages of the research process.

I collected the details of potential participants after they had seen the Recruitment Flyer (Appendix C-i) and contacted me; storing their information securely in order to ensure their privacy. Each potential participant had 4 weeks to consider the invitation once they had received the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C-ii) and responded by contacting me to arrange an interview. The Participant Information Sheet detailed the specific inclusion criteria participants would need to fulfil in order to be eligible to participate. These inclusion and exclusion criteria were also discussed at the time of initial contact between participants and myself, at which point I was able to confirm that all eligibility criteria were met. Participants were asked to sign a consent form (Appendix C-iii) prior to the commencement of the interview to signal their willingness to participate.

Key Inclusion Criteria

My criteria for inclusion in the study were adult adoptees who:

- had been raised in a “closed stranger” adoption (i.e., with a family that was not genetically related to them, and they had had no contact with their birth family while they were growing up);
- identified as New Zealand European/Pākehā (the study of the adoption of Māori children into non-Māori families, and the customary practice of whāngai was outside of the scope of my project);
- had been born and adopted in New Zealand between 1950 and 1970;
- had their own biological child/ren with whom they had been in a day-to-day parenting relationship while they were growing up, and of whom at least one was now an adult (20 years old)

My decision to focus on participants who were adopted under a “closed” system related to my own involvement as a participant. Although this was in part speculative, I surmised that people who had been adopted post-infancy and/or had knowledge of their biological families (for example through an open adoption) may well have been shaped by other discourses, with different memories and responses to my questions than those of us who had no conscious memories of “belonging” elsewhere.

Exclusion Criteria

The intention in my proposed research was to focus on the parenting relationship across the lifespan between adoptees and their biological child/ren, using a framework of Erikson’s (1963) developmental stage theory. With concepts like race and ethnicity absent from the theory, this necessitated the exclusion of any participants who



were transracially or internationally adopted, thus excluding Māori whose adoptions into Aotearoa New Zealand's closed adoption system were transracial. Moreover, the consequences of the traumatic loss of whakapapa for Māori children adopted into non-Māori/European homes, along with the associated issues of colonisation and forced assimilation (Haenga-Collins & Gibbs, 2015), would have required far more consideration and investigation than the scope of this study could have offered. This by no means implied or suggested that racial identity was not a factor in the lived experience of all adoptees; it is an enormously significant factor. However as it was outside the developmental theories underpinning the study, racial identity was beyond the scope of the study.

The nine participants (including myself) all identified as New Zealand European, and all were born and adopted between 1950 and 1970. To protect participants' identities, a global description is provided here.

Table 3

Key Demographic Details for Participants

Pseudonym	Year born/adopted Age at time of interview	Number & ages of biological children at time of interview
Cassie	Born 1965, fostered then legally adopted at 5. Age 55.	Twin daughters (30s), son (20s), 5 grandchildren.
Debra	Born and adopted in 1950. Age 71.	Two sons and a daughter (30s), 7 grandchildren.
Rowena	Born and adopted in 1965. Age 56.	Two daughters (30s), three sons (20s), 5 grandchildren.
Bridget	Born and adopted in 1960. Age 61.	Four daughters (30s and 40s), 6 grandchildren.
Juliet	Born and adopted in 1960. Age 62.	Son and daughter (30s), 4 grandchildren.
Kenneth	Born and adopted in 1967. Age 54.	Three daughters (20s and 30s), son (20s), 1 grandchild.
Kate	Born and adopted in 1954. Age 67.	One daughter (40s).
Felicity	Born and adopted in 1968. Age 53.	Two daughters (20s).
Julia (researcher)	Born and adopted in 1963. Age 58.	Three sons (20s and 30s) and daughter (20s).

Time Frames

The overall gestation of this project reaches right back to the 1990s. However my initial impetus to explore the topic came following the completion of a critical systematic literature review submitted as a partial requisite for my master's in counselling in November 2017, subsequently accepted for publication in February 2018. I reached out to my primary supervisor (Dr Scherman) in September 2018 to enquire as to her willingness and availability to act as an academic supervisor on this topic.

The acquisition of data was as follows, and is illustrated in Table 4.

- I began memoing shortly before my official start date of 1 September 2019.
- Interviews took place between 14 August 2021 and 25 January 2022 [5 months]
- Transcribing of interviews occurred between 23 August 2021 and 6 February 2022 [5 ½ months]
- Participants returned the transcript between 19 September 2021 and 24 February 2022 [5 months]

- Initial coding took place between 3 January and 5 March 2022 [2 months]
- My own interview (Julia) was predominantly written between 5 and 13 March 2022, after completion of participant interviews.

The process of engagement with the analysis of data began on 22 March 2022, and writing up commenced in September 2022.

Table 4

Acquisition of data

	Aug/ Sep 21	Sept/ Oct 21	Nov/ Dec 21	Jan/ Feb 22	Mar/ Apr 22	May/ Jun 22	Jul/ Aug 22	Sep/ Oct 22	Nov/ Dec 22	Jan/ Feb 23	Mar/ Apr 23
Reflexive memoing (ongoing throughout)											
Interviews conducted	14 Aug			25 Jan							
Transcription of interviews	23 Aug			6 Feb							
Return of transcripts	19 Sep			24 Feb							
Coding in NVivo				3 Jan	5 Mar						
My own interview					5-13 Mar						
Analysis process					22 Mar						
Writing up of participants' stories											
Writing up my autoethnography											

Data Collection

The lens through which I observed myself and my participants was the interview. Data was collected through one-on-one open-ended narrative interviews, which were digitally audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. In order to “prime” the recollection of memories and reflections regarding the experiences of the participants as adoptees across the developmental stages of parenting, a set of indicative open-ended questions that would guide the discussion (Appendix C-vi) was shared prior to their agreement to participate and the commencement of the interview. In addition, in order to support the retrieval of relevant memories and reflections, participants were invited to access a wide spectrum of data and information, artefacts such as personal

journals and diaries, photographs and albums, memorabilia and keepsakes, scrapbooks, and so on. Although participants were invited to draw on such artefacts to aid them in their retrospective memories, this was not a requirement, and artefacts themselves were not part of the analysis. Appendix C-vi sets out the protocols I followed for the handling of such mementoes. Adams et al. (2015) coined the term “auto-archaeology” in the sense of an archaeological dig to excavate the rendering of identity (2015, p. 49). The invitation to participants to bring such artefacts to interviews was an invitation to prompt memories of people, places and times that may have been forgotten. In addition, interviews were supplemented by my field notes, journals, voice memos and emails.

Interviews took place at locations of the participants’ choosing; in all cases they elected their own home setting for reasons of privacy and comfort. To this end, a Researcher Safety Protocol was established (Appendix C-v). The majority of participants did not live in my own city which necessitated travel to other centres in Aotearoa New Zealand. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing need for social distancing, on one occasion a follow-up interview was arranged on a video conferencing platform, based on the government’s alert levels at that time.

Interviewing Participants

Uncovering in-depth information from my respondents necessitated careful rapport building, especially as the phenomenon being studied was likely to touch on sensitive matters. As interviewer, I required a range of skills and attributes (Van Maanen, 2010). Essential qualities included knowledge and expertise in empathy and relating, gentleness, openness, open-mindedness and an absence of judgement, not taking things at “face value” but gently probing, and being prepared to ask critical questions regarding inconsistencies. I was mindful of the need to be attentive, able to stimulate and extend discussion, and provide space for further clarification, reflection and rewording of the material, tapping content and emotional levels (Heyl, 2001). Taking the necessary time with sensitivity to pace and transitions allowed for emergent topics, complex viewpoints and understanding to blossom safely, fruitfully, and authentically (Tracy, 2013).

Participants were encouraged to tell stories relating to themselves and their cultural experience of being an adoptee parent in their own words, in an open-ended, relatively unstructured manner, detailing behaviours, motivations, reflections and experiences, rather than just answering questions. My primary purpose in face-to-face interviewing was to reach tacit knowledge—the body of implicit meaning usually located below the surface which is typically omitted from formal documents and sanitised histories (Langellier & Peterson, 2006). Heyl (2001) described tacit

knowledge as often unarticulated, unless by silence, nods, and pauses, and notes that such aspects of language can be indicative of complex reactions or self-censorship. Predominantly contextual, it requires the interviewer to listen and observe respectfully and carefully, endeavouring to grasp the importance of what is not said, noting the absence of something, and ascertaining whether, when, and how, to probe. As interviewer, I became a vital part of the narrative, trying to “tune in” to the interactively produced meanings and emotional dynamics within the interview itself, and always self-aware of my role in the coconstruction of meaning (Heyl, 2001).

My status as an adoptee who is also a parent had been made explicit from the outset of the project and was stated clearly on all communications (Recruitment Flyer, Participant Information Sheet etc). However, at the outset of each interview I reminded the participant of the fact that I also was adopted, in order to head off any potential disparities in power relations between us and to facilitate trust. The effect of my disclosure varied among participants. Some asked me questions about my own experiences, creating a more interactive dialogue, while others seemed less interested in my narrative. Some commented that they felt more at ease discussing these issues with me because I had experienced something similar, and one (Rowena) sought frequent validation about ways in which her account reflected my own. Nonetheless, my own experiences were largely set to one side during interviews as I sought to take my “view from above” (Conquergood, 2002), endeavouring to hear the participants’ responses and reflections uninfluenced by my own, providing less opportunity for them to be “led” by me in any particular direction. As there were both mirrored and contrasting experiences between myself and my participants, I remained conscious that in listening to the threads and strands of meaning they had made, new connections, associations and memories sometimes emerged for me. The discipline of memoing immediately after the interview ensured I captured these insights for weaving through the fabric of analysis.

Memoing. As already discussed, the need for reflexivity during the entire process has been in the forefront of my planning, implementation, analysis and writing of this research. Braun and Clarke (2022) reminded me that I needed consciously to keep returning to reflexivity in all phases of my research, not merely at the outset. As a therapist, I am experienced in reflexive practice, and asking questions of myself; I have found this to be essential at both the operational and analytical level but also as a necessary outlet for personal and emotional reactions to be expressed and processed. Interviewing participants then immersing myself in coding the data was an intense and prolonged process of examining and questioning things I had taken for granted. Braun and Clarke’s questions, “Why might I be having this particular type of response, and

how might this matter for my research?" (p.19) and "What ideas or values does it rely on? How might I have responded differently?" (p. 18) pushed me deeper into interrogating my responses to things, and the resultant body of reflective journalling and memoing contains both vulnerable insights and rich material which has deepened my analysis. It has also increased the wattage on the intense spotlight of personal exposure:

The irony here is that only when I am with my participants, or in a private social media adoptee-only group, or with other adopted persons do I feel brave enough to speak my truth and be authentic around adoption; producing this research is asking me to step up and state my truth louder than a thought, knowing, or whisper. (Analytic memo, 16 January 2023)

I have documented in detail the reflections embedded in my memoing process, the development of the analytic process and the ways I applied my analytical techniques to the data. These, along with commentary on the way my thematic coding structure developed over the course of my project as my analysis progressed, are contained in my audit trail (Appendix D).

Interviewing Myself

Autoethnographic data was retrieved from six sources that have been braided into my narrative and analysis throughout. Three were sourced from before the formal PhD journey commenced on 1 September 2019, and three occurred contemporaneously with the development of the project. It was an important feature of my autoethnographic focus that I was able to differentiate between my pre-research thinking and experiences, how I felt and what I believed prior to the research, with what I had come to feel and believe by the close of the project.

Pre-Research Data Set. My reflections pertaining to how being adopted has affected my experience of being a parent spanned many decades. It was documented explicitly in a paper delivered at a 1998 adoption conference, as well as in articles and poetry penned for an adoption newsletter that I edited in the 1990s. I have named these three sources accordingly.

- ♦ **Pre-PhD material:** an assortment of journalling, writing, and reflective memos until the formal commencement of this PhD on 1 September 2019.
- ♦ Julia's conference paper: a pre-research transcript from 1998 (**Cantrell, 1998**).
- ♦ Academic research (**Field & Pond, 2018**) completed as part of my master's in counselling in November 2017, which was subsequently accepted for publication in February 2019.

Research Data Set.

- ♦ **Julia:** original autoethnographic data when I interviewed myself between 5 and 13 March, 2022. This took place after I had interviewed the other participants.
- ♦ **The Story of Snail:** a personal journal written for my granddaughter from the day her mother informed me she was pregnant until her first birthday (10 December 2021 to 17 August 2023).
- ♦ **Memos** recorded during the research, analysis and writing-up processes (September 2019 to March 2024). Some were a response to reading literature that provoked strong emotions in me, while others were prompted from something that emerged during an interview, or my own reflecting and emotional processing. There were three types of memo: analytic, process, and reflective.

The memos consisted of just over 37,000 words of writing over a 4 ½ -year period (work paused from 1 June to 1 December 2023). From this rich data collection, I identified the aspects that I considered most salient.

Data Analysis—Thematic Analysis Theory & Steps

The data from the interviews was analysed using a qualitative descriptive approach, which was well-suited to the study's focus on a niche population that has not been the subject of widespread research to date (Neergaard et al., 2009). In using qualitative descriptive analysis, my intention was to provide a rich, clear description with minimal, low-inference interpretation of adoptee parents' lived experiences, to produce insights and new understandings on the topic (Magilvy & Thomas, 2009; Neergaard et al., 2009; Sandelowski, 2000).

I sought a deep, interpretative engagement with the data that was also systematic and academically robust. To this end, I utilised Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of reflexive Thematic Analysis, beginning with an iterative and recursive familiarisation with the data. From here, the software package NVivo was employed to support the coding process, as I had a large amount of interview data. Time spent coding was integral to the development of my themes. It afforded the opportunity to explore a range of meanings, from the superficial and obvious to that lying more latent and hidden. My themes were developed by, and were an outcome of the coding process.

Subsequent steps entailed generating initial themes, then developing, reviewing, refining, defining and naming them. This analytic process involved what Braun and Clarke refer to as "dwelling with" (p. 332) the data, with ongoing, fluid and flexible engagement with and immersion in the entire dataset,

[...] reflecting, questioning, imagining, wondering, writing, retreating, returning. [The analytic process] is far from mechanical and is a process that requires ‘headspace’ and time for inspiration to strike and insight to develop [...] It is neither a quick nor an easy process. Time and space (with the data) help develop the nuanced analyses that reflexive Thematic Analysis can deliver, producing rich, complex, non-obvious themes *that could never have been anticipated in advance* of analysis. (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 332, *emphasis mine*)

Although I was aware of the themes signposted in my earlier literature review (Field & Pond, 2018), I sought to put these to one side, “bracketing” them, in order to regard other possible interpretations from the data inductively, seeking to generate new analytical themes and interpretive insights. As the interviews progressed and I transcribed and reflected on transcripts, I compared my story with participants’, employing the richness of multiple, different voices and then turning the lens back again on my own self-reflection and understanding of meaning. This continued throughout the research journey, my autoethnography evolving in tandem with the progression of the project as I examined, compared, and revisited difference and contrast, impacting the meanings given to the experiences (Sawyer & Norris, 2015). Further analysis and reflection ensued as I interwove the autoethnographic writing I had undertaken at the outset of my research journey with my participants’ stories and a reworking of my narrative as I juxtaposed my story with participants’ experiences and the extant literature. The nature of the braiding, the design, structure, pattern and colours of the “threads,” illustrated visually in Figure 5, emerged as the analysis progressed, in the same way that a weaver’s design emerges as they weave.



Figure 5
*Interweaving of
Different Coloured
Strands*

My findings have been presented in the form of a descriptive summary, using language similar to participants’ own (Neergaard et al., 2009). Writing up this research as the phenomenological text it is—concerned fundamentally with the meaning of lived experience—has involved my entire self, a process which, as Van Maanen (2010) cautioned, has changed and deepened me. Unapologetic that ethnography as a mode of enquiry is an iteration of scholarship that should not only make us think, but also feel, Ellis and Bochner (2000) have noted that health communication literature is still largely written with the authorial, distanced voice of a

researcher attempting to be unbiased and objective. Further, they have suggested that the creativity of the researcher in this paradigm might need to be constrained, in order to fulfil others' expectations of what a study should look like and to conform to social science publishing conventions.

My intention throughout has been to capture and convey meaning convincingly and evocatively in order to produce a nuanced, comprehensively layered text (Ellis, 2004). I have endeavoured to encourage the reader to think about taken-for-granted norms, practices and experiences in unique, fresh and challenging ways; for example, addressing the ways in which the adoption discourse has obscured, omitted or denied alternative adoptee experiences (Holman Jones, 2005).

Appendix D comprises an audit trail of my data analysis, a running record of my process and thinking as to how I developed my themes and arrived at my final thematic structure.

Rigour and Quality Assurance

From the outset it has been critical that I ensure that my research process is legitimate and not merely "fictional journalism" (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 390) or self-indulgent "me-search" (Devendorf, 2020). Underpinning qualitative research is the premise that reality is socially constructed, thus unable to be measured or rigidly replicated (Liamputtong, 2013); however, this does not exempt it from undergoing its own auditable process to ensure it has been conducted in a competent, valid, and reliable manner (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Magilvy & Thomas, 2009; Whitemore et al., 2001). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested alternative evaluation criteria for qualitative research to replace the quantitative concepts of reliability and validity with a parallel one of trustworthiness (comprising credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability). Within each of these, specific methodological strategies were followed and applied to demonstrate rigour and trustworthiness.

Credibility

First, credibility. Qualitative research must be as accurate and as truthful to participants' descriptions as possible (Magilvy & Thomas, 2009; Whitemore et al., 2001). I needed to ensure a "fit" between what participants said, and how this was represented in the data gathered. It was essential that the multiple realities that participants revealed were descriptively valid, and accurately and truthfully reported. My intention was to ensure that a feeling of verisimilitude was evoked in readers in order that participants' experiences would be believable and lifelike (Ellis, 2004) and that there was neither invention nor distortion of what had been seen and heard (Maxwell, 1992; Langelier & Peterson, 2006).



To this end, I consciously checked, clarified, and rechecked with participants throughout the interview and transcription process, that their descriptions were being represented as faithfully as possible. I took extensive field notes and memos, chose to transcribe the audio recordings personally, and sent each participant's interview transcript to them for review (Long & Johnson, 2000). As credibility is also a reflexive process (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011), I prioritised remaining continually, systematically, and explicitly self-reflexive in my memoing, from both the "insider" and "outsider" position (Long & Johnson, 2000).

Transferability

Second, transferability. This denotes the extent to which my findings could be applied to other relevant individuals, groups, settings and contexts in which the research was not conducted. Transferability would invite someone to act safely upon the implications of my findings, ensuring that insights from qualitative inquiry are recognised as important sources of evidence for practice (Lincoln & Guba, 2000; Treharne & Riggs, 2015). Thomas and Magilvy (2011) suggested that a useful strategy for ensuring transferability involves providing detailed "thick" descriptions of the demographic and geographical confines of participants. The reader of the analysis will of course bring their own interpretation as to the applicability and transferability of the research. Sawyer and Norris (2015) have reminded that conclusions reached in this methodology are not a one-size-fits-all objective truth, but rather can be personally and socially transformative and are certainly able to be widely interpreted by the reader (Farquhar & Kilpatrick, 2016). Guba and Lincoln's (2005, p. 207) notion of "catalytic authenticity" (how the research process stimulates and facilitates the participants' behaviour) resonated as a further marker of validity in my work; this research has been an agent for change in myself, and feedback from participants indicates it had been valuable for them, too:

Thank you for giving me the unexpected opportunity to discover more goodness in my life. It was such a lovely moment to look outside and see my favourite tree coming into leaf and truly know that [my daughter] has been the single most important gift in my life. The spiral turns and unexpected truth is revealed. How awesome is that...Really happy to talk more if and when it is needed. (Kate)

Having turned the lens upon myself, signposting my openness about my own lived experiences and then revealing this with honesty, vulnerability, and rigour through autoethnography for the potential benefit of my wider professional counselling community is another demonstration of Lincoln and Guba's (2000) concept of transferability, and an important element of being trustworthy in this research.



Dependability

Third, dependability. This is achieved through scrupulous process: an exact account of methods employed, thick description of data gathered, interviews and memos recorded and transcribed, and coherent, logical, and transparent linkages between data and reported findings. My provision of complete transparency in my audit trail leaves no room for distortion or obfuscation of the research findings (Long & Johnson, 2000; Mays & Pope, 1995). My findings (descriptions, theories, and interpretations) can thus be seen to “fit” the data from which they have been derived, ensuring the research is auditable, traceable, logical and clearly documented so others can make sense of it.

Confirmability

The final criteria for trustworthiness, confirmability, concerns the degree to which my findings and interpretations can be clearly linked to the data and determined by the participants’ responses, rather than being derived from my own imagination, biases, perspectives, motivations, and interests (Treharne & Riggs, 2015). To this end, I have consciously engaged in self-scrutiny and awareness of my research process, including decisions made at every stage (Long & Johnson, 2000; Mays & Pope, 1995). This has been accompanied by comprehensive memo writing, confirmation with participants to ensure their meaning has been captured and expressed, and an audit trail to ensure I can illustrate my processes for ascribing meaning (Liamputtong, 2013). While I have explicitly embedded my continuous self-reflexive process, I am also mindful that it is unlikely that I will have “seen” everything. As Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) cautioned, being “researcher-and-researched” requires a balancing between how much of my “self” (auto) to include or leave out.

The final evaluation of this dissertation will of course be left to the reader who may be guided by the several criteria for evaluating ethnography and its variant, autoethnography, suggested by Ellis (2000), Richardson (2000), Treharne and Riggs (2015) and extended by Le Roux (2017). Thus, has my work made a substantive contribution to understanding the lifespan perspective of the impact of adoption on the lives of adopted persons? Has it articulated an expression of a reality, and has it resonated with the reader on an intellectual and an emotional level? Does it possess aesthetic merit? Have I as researcher exemplified self-reflexivity? Has there been evidence of honesty, verisimilitude, and trustworthiness in the research, evoking in the reader the feeling that the experiences described are plausible and true to life (Ellis, 2004)? Has it offered a way to improve the life of the reader, my participants and myself as researcher? Have my findings resonated with those readers who are adopted adults? Their partners and children? Those who engage therapeutically with



them? Those who are not involved with adoption at all? And finally, has it engaged, instructed, informed, and impacted upon the reader?

Summary

This research design chapter has presented the fundamental methodological paradigms underpinning my framework and procedures, providing my rationale for a design of braided ethnography/autoethnography using narrative interview and interpretive thematic analysis (Adams et al., 2015). In addition, I have described the methods and techniques I employed in data analysis, along with the elements of rigour that have been incorporated into my research.

I have described my orientation and chosen tools in order to gain insight into the phenomenon I sought to investigate but also to reflect my values. What motivated me personally in these choices was the desire to combine and braid together three aspects of “knowing” in a deeply respectful, authentic, and rigorous way. These three components—empirical knowledge, a researcher’s ethnographic representation of adopted peoples’ cultural, social, and psychological realities, and an insider lens on my lived autoethnographic insight—highlighted the principle that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences (Pilarska, 2021) and this assumption was foundational to my research design and methodology. Through this project, I have come to comprehend how qualitative research can “delve beneath the surface to explore issues that are assumed, implicit, and have become part of participants’ common sense” (Tracy, 2010, p. 843).



CHAPTER 3: TRUSTING—BUILDING ON A CRACKED FOUNDATION

Personal Salience

The notion of a cracked foundation has particular personal salience. In the Canterbury earthquakes of 2010 and 2011, our beautiful wooden villa, built in 1930, withstood the more than ten thousand tremors and aftershocks that our city experienced. It rolled, it twisted, it trembled, but it did not fall down. However, there were cracks in every wall and ceiling, the floor levels were all askew, nothing opened or closed properly anymore, tiles on the floor were cracked, the ceiling flexed in aftershocks, and whenever it rained heavily, the garage flooded. On closer examination by the insurance company, it transpired that the reason for all of this was a cracked ring foundation. Designed to function as a single continuous concrete beam, a ring foundation spreads the load across the whole footprint of a house; most pre-1970s Christchurch homes were built on piles with a ring foundation (McCrone, 2019). Logically, the proper way to assess earthquake damage is “ground up,” since if the land has moved, it follows that drains and foundations ought to be checked first. There is little point in worrying about cosmetic cracking in the house above if the damage below is not addressed by excavating right down to the sub-base. Widely reported in the media at the time, EQC assessors did not make a habit of lifting carpets or crawling about under houses; instead, foundations were presumed sound *unless the damage was too obvious to ignore*. And although Greater Christchurch is thirteen years on from the Canterbury earthquake, it is widely believed that many homes may still rest on unacknowledged foundation damage. While it may take time, eventually—and expensively—buried trouble finds its way to the surface.

In our case, we chose to “Botox” our rimu-floored villa, plastering and painting over the cracks, getting new carpet and curtains, sprucing the house up to draw attention away from the undulating floors and multiple flaws. A visitor to the house would not have known. Deeper problems can remain completely hidden, and frequently do.

This is not a research study about earthquakes, or botched repairs. However, the notion of unseen and unacknowledged damage lying beneath the surface resonates throughout my own adoption experiences and reflections, along with those of my participants.

Erikson’s Eight Stages—Stage 1: Trust vs Mistrust

Although Erikson’s eight stages commenced at birth, there is a growing body of evidence from pre- and peri-natal research as summarised in my Literature Review (Bergman, 2019; Cao-Lei et al., 2020; Farr & Grotevant, 2019; King & LaPlante, 2005; McGinn, 2000; Provencal & Binder, 2014; Van Der Kolk, 2014) that we are all impacted



by—and perhaps even conscious of—certain experiences and emotions in utero. Certainly, an infant is impacted by and adjusts to the schedule of the birth mother, the sound of her voice, the rhythm of her life, her stress level, what she eats, the state of her emotional and physical wellbeing. It is noted that pre-adoption adversity such as in utero deprivation, a stressed pregnancy or exposure to substances (Farr & Grotevant, 2019; McGinn, 2000) has been demonstrated to have an adverse effect on the individual's subsequent development. Bergman (2019) noted that maternal neonate separation prevented critical neural process taking place, permanently elevating stress systems and negatively impacting mental and physical health in the long term. Nancy Verrier (1993) described that, during gestation, a mother becomes uniquely sensitised to her baby, a phenomenon that paediatrician, Donald Winnicott, had earlier termed primary maternal preoccupation (1956). He believed that toward the end of pregnancy, the mother develops a state of heightened sensitivity, stressing that the mother alone knows what the baby could be feeling and needing, because everyone else is outside the baby's experience.

Erikson's first psychosocial stage *Trust versus mistrust* unfolds during infancy, typically from birth to 18 months. Central to this stage is the establishment of a secure and trusting relationship between the infant and their primary caregiver, laying the foundation for the infant's sense of safety and trust, and future social and emotional development: "Can I trust the world?". Erikson (1980) posited that if the care they receive is consistent, predictable and reliable, they will be able to develop a sense of trust and security which will be able to be carried with them into other relationships, forming the basis for adaptive functioning in future developmental challenges. Conversely, if the care has been inconsistent, unpredictable and unreliable, then the infant will develop a sense of mistrust which will be carried with them to other relationships, resulting in anxiety, heightened insecurities, and a feeling of mistrust in the world around them. Failure to successfully complete a stage can result in a reduced ability to complete the subsequent psychosocial stages, impacting personality development and sense of self (McLeod, 2013).

Trust and the Adopted Person

Even as early as 1939, Clothier had posited that the adopted infant who is placed with adoptive parents at or soon after birth would suffer from the interruption of the biologically sequenced post-partum period. Verrier (1993) maintained that, for adopted babies and their mothers, relinquishment and adoption were far from "concepts"; they were lived experiences from which they can never fully recover. Birth itself is a profoundly terrifying process for an infant. With the maternal cues that she had adjusted to in utero removed and changed, where is the comfort that she needs?



The adopted infant must learn not only to adjust to the world, to breathing, sucking, digesting, eliminating, but also learn to find comfort, familiarity and safety, in a stranger, with cues that are neither familiar nor comforting, making an extra adjustment that kept infants do not experience. With the loss of the mutual and deeply satisfying mother and child relationship, the infant must adjust at a preverbal level, unable to articulate her experience. The roots of this loss lie deeply and invisibly buried in the foundations of the psyche where the *psychological* and *physiological* merge.

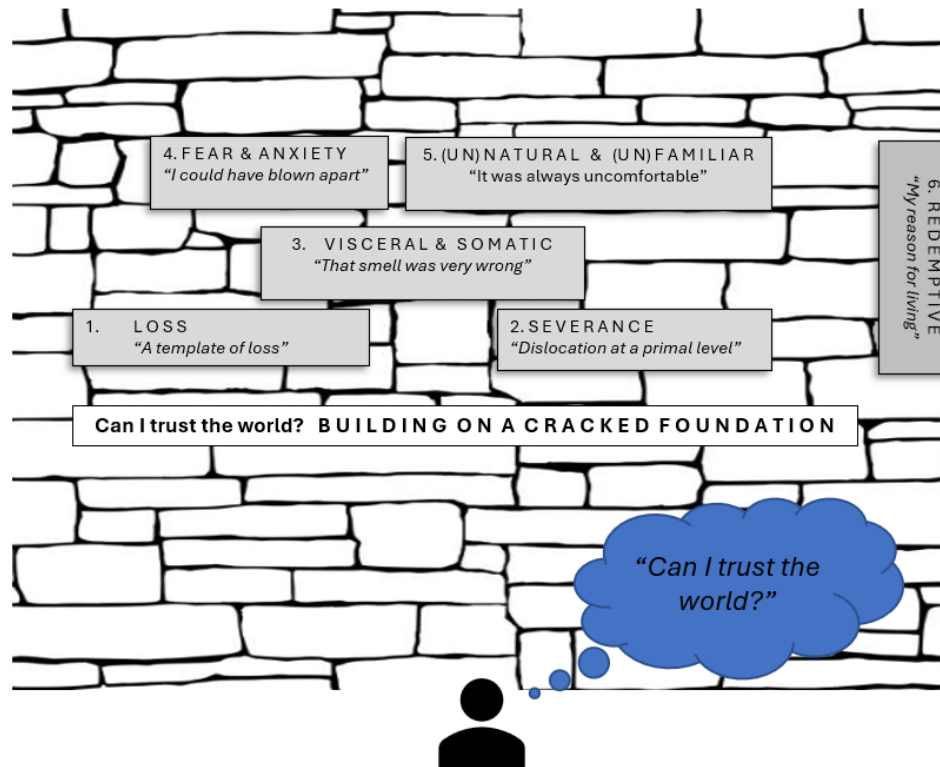
Themes in Building on a Cracked Foundation: Overview

This foundational theme of “Building on a cracked foundation” explores a core idea expressed in various ways throughout the dataset: that the life and relationships of the adopted person are constructed upon a foundation that has been cracked and damaged through loss and severance from their origins (i.e., mother, family, and lineage). This foundational developmental platform on which any person, adopted or kept, starts to construct a life, is experienced at a primal, sensory level from pre and peri-natal times. It sits at their core, and is their lived somatic experience, yet hides “in plain sight” from self and others, being disregarded in the societal discourse around being “chosen” and “lucky”.

For the participants in my research, the foundational damage on which they constructed their lives and in particular how they parented revealed itself in myriad ways, across six themes. Figure 6 illustrates these themes located above the overarching theme of the cracked foundation. Each theme builds upwards, demonstrating the cumulative impact of these on the overall experience. The final theme of redemption is located at the side as the experience of parenthood became a means by which the structure of the participants’ lives was supported and strengthened.

Figure 6

Schematic Summary of Trusting Themes



Viewing from the first theme, “Loss” and “Severance” were the foundation on which the adopted life was constructed, with the adopted person’s lived experience of loss felt in a “Visceral, somatic” way, even if not consciously grasped or understood at the time. The fundamental dislocation for the adoptee immersed them in a continuous marinade of “Fear and Anxiety”. That which felt natural and familiar for kept people was experienced as *unnatural* and *unfamiliar* by adopted people, for example, thinking about becoming pregnant, being able to become pregnant, the nine-month journey, resembling their own relatives. Moreover, the idea of *not* trusting the world because it is unsafe and fearful due to severance and loss felt “natural” and “familiar” to them, so the theme *(Un)natural and (un)familiar* was another facet of this overarching theme/central organising concept. Finally, “Redemptive” spoke of how having a child or children became, for some, a means to “brace” the entire structure of their lives, a mechanism by which they had created and built trust, wholeness and safety in their lives—despite their default template of being incomplete and “less than”.

Each theme will be defined, then, following my structural template (explained on p. xvi), will be illustrated using extracts from participants’ stories, and discussed in relation to the literature. My braided autoethnography will be presented as my narrative voice in two parts: my story before the study and then elements of the study that



caused me to revisit, rework, and reweave my understanding of my story as I juxtaposed it with the participants' experiences and literature. As previously noted, I have deliberately made unconventional formatting choices to highlight words and emphasise the structure of my findings for the reader, creating a structured narrative.

Theme 1: A Template of Loss

Theme Definition

Loss and grief are woven through the fabric of the adopted person's life (Meyer et al., 2023). Their placement in their adoptive family is in the **shadow** of all of the losses that adoption entails, in addition to the loss of the symbiotic connection to Mother and the compounded losses of ancestry and genealogy. These losses remain in the **shadows**, being neither recognised nor acknowledged. Loss **shows up** at times throughout the parenting journey, often being activated as their children pass through developmental stages, and it **shapes** their parenting practices.

The adopted person's birthright (having a relationship with their biological relatives) is cluttered and complicated by loss, which is frequently activated and perpetuated in the upheaval of searching for these relatives. This search and reunion process often occurs concurrently while the adoptees are parenting their own children, **shaking up** further layers of loss in reunion as they see their own children having an easier and more positive relationship with their birth family than they do themselves. Some attempt to **shield** their children from the pain and hurt they experience through this journey. Some **clarity** can be reached with new insights and understandings into the presence and nature of the shadow, or the adopted person can loop back into experiencing its disruptive or influential imprints.

Their Stories

The foundational and pervasive nature of loss in adoption was returned to repeatedly by my participants as they reflected on the impact of adoption in their lives and how they considered it had impacted their parenting journey. Their experiences aligned with the template of loss. That loss is a fundamental issue for adoptees (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991) is undisputed. Unlike other losses which are expected in a lifetime, for example, death or divorce, adoption has been described as more pervasive and profound, and less socially recognised (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). The literature acknowledges that adoptees may struggle to exist in the space between two family systems, attempting to learn to integrate a place for both, not fully comprehending the effect of loss, leaving complicated feelings to aggregate, which may need to be processed later in life. Now in his mid-50s, Kenneth linked the centrality of being adopted as the source of much pain, reflecting that adoption had



cast a **shadow** over his entire parenting journey, **showing up** inadvertently in his emotional state:

I think adoption has had a negative impact on me, and on how I parented our kids. I was angry lots, and could never put my finger on why. I think I was angry because of the fact that I was given away, discarded. I felt worthless. Here were our kids, who I loved with all my heart, and yet I had not been loved in the same way. My natural family rejected me, and my adoptive family accepted me as second best—what they got when they couldn't get what they really wanted.

(Kenneth)

Juliet reflected on the ways in which loss **showed up** repeatedly through the developmental stages of her parenting journey, from activating her desire to connect with her own mother when she gave birth—

I guess what started to surface in all my work, in my journaling, what was starting to seep through was [that] the birth of my daughter had actually woken up in me my longing for a mother-daughter connection with my birth mother.

(Juliet)

—right through to the intensity of emotions she experienced as her son “left the nest” in late teenage years:

When we got back [from taking son to university], I went into his room and bawled my eyes out and lay on the bed and cried and cried. I was probably in there every day for about a month. And then worried sick about him all the time, worried a lot about him. So I really struggled with the loss, and the not knowing where he was, and whether he was safe or not. (Juliet)

Juliet's interview emphasised that, from the outset, she was particularly attuned to and affected by her fear of loss, vividly describing how it profoundly **shaped** her parenting:

I had a big fear of cot death, it was a fear of loss played out. That issue of loss really started from the moment I left the hospital. I had this fear of mother loss. That my children—some other woman or some other person would not “get” them, would not understand them, and that they would experience the same things as me [...] I had this total obsession with making sure they didn't lose me before they grew up [...] I was really aware of my fear of loss. Whenever I read or heard about anyone losing their children, just the thought of it, I stopped breathing almost. I thought, “I would die” if I lost my children. (Juliet)

Penny et al. (2007) suggested that the ways in which the distinctive loss(es) incurred by adopted persons impacted their lives might not be well understood until middle adulthood. In contrast to Juliet who had a level of cognisant awareness



throughout her parenting years, it took Kate many decades before she could look back with self-compassionate **clarity** and understand what had been going on for her as she raised her child: “[pause] With everything that I know now, and with 10 or 12 years of pastoral care under my belt...[long pause] Grief. Loss.”

Navigating the upheaval of meeting their birth families in reunion, learning more about the circumstances of their adoptions, and confronting the losses sustained by their mothers, was frequently painful and harrowing, leaving Debra feeling **shaken**:

She [birth mother] would stand at the top of the steps and think about throwing herself down. That would have been in the last trimester...They [birth mothers] were told what terrible people they were, and they had no rights. She talked to me about the day that she was leaving, and she pleaded with the nurse to see me. She described the little room, tucked under the stairs. That’s where I had a lot of feelings for her, as life must have been tough. It took me a long, long time, and I still haven’t got my head around it completely. (Debra)

As discussed in Chapter 1, the research literature acknowledges that separation of an infant from her mother in the first moments of life is traumatic, and an adverse childhood experience (Bergman, 2014, 2019; Császár-Nagy & Bókkon, 2018; McGinn, 2000). This trauma echoes and shapes adopted people in myriad ways across their lifespans. That “adoption is trauma” is a confronting statement to many. Ironically, it is deeply validating and reassuring to those of us who have known this on some level, for our entire lives. It was expressed powerfully by Cassie:

But really unsettled, lack of attachment, total feeling of rejection. All those things have resonated, all my life. That’s what I’ve battled with all my life. ‘Cause there’s no attachment. That abandonment stuff...The stuff that always sits there for me, that I struggle with, is the stuff that is in here [gestures to heart] So that’s where I work on myself and that—I’m sure—is a direct correlation of all the abandonment issues and all of that. So I never feel good enough. Or worthy. (Cassie)

Despite the centrality of loss in her adoption experience, Cassie endeavoured to **shield** its effects from her children: “I have some really dark times, which I don’t share with my kids”.

The unjust loss of a biological birth history (Blake, 2013) is intergenerationally felt. As the experience of reunion often occurred in tandem with the parenting journey, participants found themselves confronting the story of their relinquishment. Kenneth describes this as overwhelming: “I can’t remember much of it [reunion] because it was much too emotional”. In addition to trying to process and absorb the enormity of reunion, Felicity endeavoured to explain it to her own children: “I remember turning



around in the car trying to find the words to explain who she [birth mother] actually was—and they didn't get it at all. But I remember Chloe, who was age 6 at the time, saying, "Mummies don't give away babies". Ah, Chloe, but some mummies do.

Motherhood has long been a favourite target with the good/bad mother dichotomy a key feature of maternal discourses. Mothers who fail to meet normative expectations of the role of mothering inevitably are positioned as the deviant 'other' and considered to be unfit to parent. These perceptions are historically and culturally specific...(Wilson & Huntington, 2005, p. 61)

The experience of attempting to explain the fundamental paradox with which we as adoptees grapple, has not gone unnoticed. "Your mother loved you so much she gave you away" was juxtaposed with the prevailing discourses around unmarried motherhood in the 1950s—1970s in the Western world (Else, 1991). The confluence of conservative ideologies and traditional social expectations that often dictated a rigid framework for women's roles certainly emphasised the sanctity of the nuclear family and placed a premium on conformity to traditional gender roles, idealising motherhood and emphasising the notion of the "perfect" family unit. Thus prevalent discourse surrounding women who chose or were forced to relinquish their babies during this era was typically characterised by stigma and judgement. Those women who deviated from these expectations were cast as deviant, contributing to their marginalisation and the shrouding of their decisions in a veil of stigma and secrecy. Adoptees could view their dichotomised mothers as "good" (selflessly relinquishing us) or "bad" (Mummies don't give away babies). It was a lot for a six-year-old—or a 60 year old—to get their head around. Attempts to explain relinquishment and reunion forced adoptees to confront what we 'knew' consciously or unconsciously—that our mothers were being discursively positioned as good *and* bad, natural *and* unnatural (McDermott & Graham, 2005). Being given away by one's mother did not make sense because babies belong with their mothers. However, this "knowing" had to be suppressed, right from the start.

For adoptees, loss and grief can be regarded as a private, continual process without resolve. "This unresolved grief can either remain a conscious fixation or be driven into the unconscious only to be triggered and readdressed with every subsequent loss" (Dalton et al., 2022, p.8). Juliet's own lack of a sense of trust and safety as she was growing up, **shaped** her **clarity** and determination that this would not be her children's legacy:

I see their [children's] strong sense of self, and as a parent parenting my children, I did not emerge out of childhood with that. Mine was fragmented, it was weak, it was riddled with emotional unresolved stuff, and I feel that I've had to work very, very hard to do—the one thing I was doing to do, that my kids



were going to feel and know that they were loved, and they were going to have a strong sense of mirroring back that they were okay. (Juliet)

Many authors have noted that midlife is typically associated with milestone life events or transitions, which might trigger an individual to reflect on their attachment relationships and experiences, such as engaging in romantic relationships, marriage, the loss of parents, having children or breakdown of relationships. Several researchers have signalled that feelings of loss for an adopted person may be more prevalent and intensify during such times (Bertocci & Schechter, 1991; Borders et al., 2000; Penny et al., 2007; Powell & Afifi, 2005; Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982).

To this I would add two additional aspects. First, the compounding nature of loss and grief when it arrives in a home that is already undermined with loss and grief. In my sample, seven of the nine participants' adoptive mothers had either lost a child before they were adopted (two to stillbirth) or had been infertile (five), and consequently this was their motivation for adoption. Adopting a child did not solve/resolve infertility. Schechter writing from a psychoanalytical perspective, proposed that the adoptee is "a constant reminder of the adoptive mother's barrenness" (1960, p. 48, cited in Dalton et al. 2022). We were compensatory children, daily reminders of their infertility. Just as we were being triggered, our adoptive parents' feelings of loss related to infertility were also being triggered by specific events such as our different developmental stages, our contact with birth parents, or when we ourselves had children or grandchildren.

Second, it is unresolved, one of the three themes arising from Dalton et al.'s 2022 study. The struggle facing adoptees, specifically those who were adopted as very young babies, is that our grief for the genetic, familial, cultural and connectional losses is unnamed and unacknowledged by our families and society across our lifetimes (Parkes & Mintz, 2021). Doka (2002) suggests this grief can become disenfranchised if the adoptee lacks support and acknowledgement to name, process and mourn.

Accordingly, the metaphor of foundational damage is most poignant. If you truly want to understand from whence the cracks and undulating floors originate, and you are willing to risk what you may find, *and* you understand that it will take time, buried trouble will eventually find its way to the surface. Little wonder that Guittard (2022) described "the overwhelming loss embedded in that moment [of relinquishment] has been at the centre of psychoanalytic discourse on adoption for the last four decades" (p. 44).

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

Prior to my research, I had recognised that loss was a strong theme in my experience. From as far back as I could remember, I had felt the constant **shadow** of being adopted. Hyper aware of my adoptive mother's infertility and brittleness around



adoption, I thought incessantly about my “real” (birth) mother, fantasising about her, telling myself stories that she would one day come and find me, looking for her in buses and crowded places. Though I had guiltily applied for my original birth certificate when the law changed in 1985 (and I no longer lived under my adoptive parents’ roof), I had not yet traced her. Loss was always there; I just hadn’t recognised it.

Until it **showed up** when I had children. At age twenty-three, holding my first child, I began to uncover and understand the depth of my loss. From the first pregnancy test through the process of 9 months’ gestation, labour and delivery, and every minute spent loving them, I grasped and grieved over and over again the enormity of what I had lost. This grief and loss **shaped** my parenting as it wove itself in and out of my children’s lives:

On the day of their births, after all that time of waiting and nurturing and loving in utero, I finally got to meet them face to face, gaze on them, and know that I was connected to them for the rest of our lives across time and space. It is a sharp contrast to the way I feel about my own birthday every year, no cause for celebration. I imagined my birth mother’s relief as she finally got rid of “it” (the pregnancy), when the umbilical cord was severed, I was alone in the universe. Bye bye, baby have a nice life. I’ve bent over backwards and done triple somersaults to try to ensure my children had the perfect birthday. I didn’t want them to feel as wretched on the day of birth as I do. (Cantrell, 1998, p.63)

Another way adoption **showed up** was that becoming a parent in 1987 somehow imbued me with a tiny kernel of courage to reach out to reunite with my mother in England, despite the shrieking discourse of disloyalty in my head. Her guarded response was dismissive; I kept my compliant adoptee mask firmly in place, and my yearning under wraps. Randomly winning return airline tickets to London when my boys were preschoolers was an unwelcome shock. Only something as momentous as a reunion with my mother would have wrenched me away from them. The entire experience was a profound **shake up** and I endured waves of churning nausea before, during and after our meeting. The few hours spent with her released a pulsating inner pain which was increasingly difficult to ignore, and her continued silence after that meeting was a second profound rejection. *She didn’t want me then, and she doesn’t want me now.* Two years on, it was the birth of my third child—a daughter—that prompted me to tentatively reach out again to her, yearning for a connection as her daughter. A cursory note and acknowledgement of the birth, then dismissive silence again. This time my loss of hope felt visceral, though still intangibly subterranean. Assailed with constant nausea and deep sadness—only much later naming this as grief—I tumbled down a vortex of slow suicide via anorexia and emotional chaos, with



no one (least of all me) making the connection. Loss had always lurked in the shadow, my cracked ring foundation hidden from all as I immersed myself in raising my children, determined to be the perfect parent and **shield** them from my deep despair... but now the cracks were well and truly showing and my house was teetering. It took a marriage therapist signposting me to the concept of abandonment in Verrier's 1993 *The Primal Wound* that propelled me towards the beginning of **clarity**: an initial insight of understanding my experience through a lens of loss.

My poem written in 1998 encapsulates the essence of the losses:

The Loss

*To never see pure adoration
shining from a mother's eyes
To never see a future
reflected in a mother's face
To never hear unconditional reassurance
spoken by a mother's lips
To never drink in the fragrance,
touch, heartbeat through a mother's skin...*



*To never know your mother.
Carried unwillingly under her heart nine long months,
A budding girl-child.
Genetically, emotionally, physically, mystically,
The mother-daughter connection reaches back through generations
Yet it was severed with you.*



*How can she not want to gather you back?
Blow away the years wandering in the desert of separation
With a single breath...
Become one again...
Two fractured halves whole
The way it was intended?*



*Yes, you can miss what you've never had.
Yes, you can mourn someone you've never known.
No, Mummy's never going to come and make it better.
No plasters for your grazed knee*



*No sweet treats smuggled into your pocket
No rocking rhythmically against her breast
No licking salty tears away with her Mother Cat tongue
No intuiting you with maternal knowing
No balm on your broken heart
She will never see you*

Anna

["Anna" was the name my mother had given me at birth]

Recovering across 1994, it was the encouragement of an adoption support group which gently nudged me to search for my birth father. Despite his living in the United States, he was to become an integral part of my and my children's lives. The **shadow** of loss showed up and clouded this reunion, too. At times I felt jealous of how absolutely my children were folded into the extended family, their intergenerational losses largely assuaged, whereas I remained in a liminal space of betwixt-and-between, since what I had lost could never be regained:

My birth father belonged to my four children just as he belonged to me, only this was an easier relationship of affection, addition, and gain, unlike his relationship with me which was cluttered and complicated by baggage, grief and loss.

(Cantrell, 1998, p. 63)

The **shadow** of loss continued to **shape** my parenting whenever I was forced to be apart from my children. Unwilling to separate from them for even healthy periods of time, the normal developmental transitions to kindergarten and school felt excruciating, and were tremendously difficult for me. I found it almost impossible to leave them, and felt like they sensed this, often reacting by being clingy and whining when I went to leave, making it even harder. When their father and I separated in 1998, I was forced to separate from them each week as they moved between our respective houses. The very first time this happened (ages 11, 8, 5 and 3), I completely collapsed at a psychic level. I vividly remember the intense excruciating pain, as if I was dying. Being so regressed made no intellectual sense, but my gut was ripped out. It felt like I wouldn't survive them being taken from me, even though rationally I knew it was only from a Friday to a Sunday. I really felt like I was being annihilated at a core level. The relentless repetition of losing them paradoxically helped inure me to the somatic collapse as I had to practise bracing myself for the dropping away inside that I experienced each time.

Were these experiences part of the template of loss that was being reenacted over and over as some kind of psychic echo due to my cracked ring foundation? I had



no way to comprehend what I was experiencing. Years later in the months leading up to my oldest son leaving home for the first time in 2004, I remember my sense of dread and heaviness, and the tears that would flood me out of the blue. I was supportive of him going, and excited for this new chapter with his band in Melbourne, yet my sense of devastation felt primal—like a grief, a death. Of course, many parents take time to adapt to their children leaving home. The so-called “empty nest” can elicit a wide range of “informal feelings and psychological fears ranging across a spectrum from sorrow to depression” (Piper & Jackson, 2017, p. 4). Piper and Jackson found that becoming an empty-nester was associated with a considerable reduction in life satisfaction, though they acknowledged that this had different impacts for certain groups as it appears to be affected by levels of income, as well as marital, employment and health status. In the context of adopted people, it could well be viewed through a lens of heightened sense of loss of a relationship that holds significant salience and symbiotic closeness. This will be explored further in Chapter 6 “Joining”. My reading and journaling and therapy as I sought to make sense of what I was experiencing taught me about developmental stages, so I felt this was normal to grieve the different “endings”, the developmental stages through which my children passed, from leaving preschool to leaving home, the loss of symbiotic closeness and being their “one and only”.

Hearing the depth and profundity of loss Juliet described when her son had left home, I asked her, “We all know about empty nest syndrome; as you looked at friends and other families going through that developmental stage, did you think, “This is bigger—deeper—wider because of being adopted?” Did you link it to that, do you remember?”

Juliet’s response was perspicacious:

Yeah, I do. Absolutely. And it was very clear. Some of our friends couldn’t wait—and I couldn’t understand that, couldn’t relate to it at all! I mean, I always wanted—and this is an important thing that I knew was different—when I would speak to him or her on the phone, wherever they were, whether it was at uni, or in London, wherever they were, I would be sanguine and happy for them in the conversation, bubbly and chatty—and then, the minute the phone went down, I was a mess. I’d always have a big cry—and it was the loss. I felt like, there was a sense of being bereft that they were so far away that I couldn’t see them or hold them or touch them when I wanted to. And I didn’t have other friends like that. None of my friends ever talked about being like that. Yes, they had a tear, and they were sad when they went, but then they just bounced straight back.

(Juliet)



I asked her what it felt like in the present, when there was radio silence from one of her adult children (now in their mid-30s).

It actually feels traumatic, I know it sounds ridiculous when I say it out loud, but there's an element of trauma [...] The ache was worse as I got older, I had this kind of void. I find that that is like a gaping needy wound that I've had to be mindful doesn't impact. It has affected them, for sure. No question they would both say, "Mum's been needy". (Juliet)

Reworking and reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

Hearing my extreme empty nest reaction mirrored by Juliet as our experiences were juxtaposed in the interview gave me fresh clarity, and felt like the lifting of a weight. Similarly, I experienced a huge sense of connection with participants as they described the surreal back-to-front experience of introducing their child(ren) to their biological parent(s). These insights reflected and validated the strangeness of my own lived experience, triggering another layer of **clarity** in my perspective and understanding, especially where it pertained to something that was unable to be grasped by those in my own world.

It is an aggregation of factors that has enabled the foundational and pervasive damage of loss and grief to be brought to the surface for **clarity**, understanding and addressing through the vehicle of this dissertation. The profundity of the grief which seemed to cast its **shadow** over everything never truly made sense to me, and it has been the voices of other adoptees, across the academic literature and searingly in this study, who have echoed and validated its presence. Participants' willingness to process these complicated feelings later in life was evident, though the relatively brief interview with each one did not afford an opportunity to explore as deeply as I did with myself. Journeying alongside my daughter's first pregnancy which coincided with the gestation of this research project, has elicited deep reactions, comparisons and vivid memories. My immersion in the academic literature, conducting interviews and personal reflections in thought and memo form have intertwined my participants' and my own experiences. In addition, being far enough back in time and space from the initial experience of being a parent and now grandparent, bringing a researcher lens, and my own maturity with professional and personal growth have also contributed.

Hearing participants' stories, I have reflected on the pre-natal environment in which we were bathed as infants in utero, with mothers who did not wish to be pregnant. This validates and gives an alternative explanation for the belief that we were flawed, broken, to be discarded, than the one we laboured under for many years.

I knew that the template of loss fitted my experience before I did this study. Reflecting now as I braid together my original story with the reworking of it in light of my



interviews, I see how participants' voices have lent strength and ballast to my own. We mirror each other in a way similar to the way our children and grandchildren, and biological relatives mirror us. Having been mirrored so many times by other adoptee experiences, I no longer doubt my own truth.

The following reflections are based on a content memo written in April 2022:

For me as an adoptee, having children has brought the losses and the complexities into sharper relief. Being adopted and being a parent also made adoption's effects not just about me, it made them about four other humans, which gave it an additional starkness and urgency and import—and in many cases was what brought all of the subterranean stuff up to the surface. I feel the echoes continuing throughout the lifespan, and now at 58 [weeps again] here is my girl child having a girl child—and up it all comes again, my mother didn't want her girl child, "She doesn't want me still. I am unwanted, discarded. Lost". Back cycling through the grief and the loss even after six decades in this world. And the spectre always of infertility and grief and loss in that space, which muted it and spiralled me down more into secrecy and disenfranchised stuff and gaslighting myself. And so now as I get to experience Rebecca, who knows who she is and whose she is, and has a qualitatively different experience to becoming a parent than I did, I get to journey this new chapter of pregnancy alongside, which will bring my stuff up. And the timing in terms of this dissertation is phenomenal because it helps me see...from inside the experience but also from outside the experience.

Becoming a grandparent for me has been one hundred percent joyous, the antithesis of loss—except when I think about my adoptive parents—now great-grandparents to my daughter's child. All my old feelings of guilt, embarrassment and shame bubble up inside me due to their chronic loss—but I have decided it is time to shake off those old shrouds of guilt, and exult in my joy instead. I cannot fix my 91-year-old adoptive mother's lifelong longing for her own child. (Reflective memo, April 2022)

In my nuclear adoptive family, I see that all of us were responding to and **shaped** by the **shadow** of loss. My adoptive mother's father had died when she was two years old, so she had grown up with a widowed mother during the Great Depression of the 1930s. My mother came to adoption through eight years of infertility and thus experienced the loss of her biological "fantasy" children; weekends in my home were marked by sounds of her sobbing emerging from behind her locked bedroom door. The death of her mother, my beloved grandmother, when I was fifteen



provoked in me extreme levels of grief and distress. My mother's response as I lay sobbing on my bed was to slap me across the face to stop me crying. It worked. It was another two decades before I was able to cry again, my grief and loss silenced and buried deep. In hindsight, I can infer that her own flooding experience of multiple, compounded losses crippled her inability to comfort me. By not working through her own losses, she always saw (sees) my developmentally appropriate separation from her, and later my straining towards reunion, as a threat triggering her fears that she was not my "real" parent.

Literature pertaining to this issue of adoptive mothers' infertility described how this became problematic for some adopted women during pregnancy (Groncki, 2010), perhaps stemming from their unresolved thoughts and feelings triggered about infertility. Like me, both Horowitz's (2011) and Hampton's (1997) adoptee participants spoke of having assumed they too would be infertile, experiencing guilt towards their adoptive parents when they were not. Of the nine adoptees in this research, five had adoptive mothers who were infertile. Four had experienced pregnancies, two of which had ended with the baby being stillborn. However, in my interviews, the subject of infertility was not often raised by participants, in contrast to my experience of its having been a very significant **shadow**. Hendry and Netherwood (2010), cited in Dalton et al (2022, p. 5) have proposed that different life events can prompt the psychological impact of infertility to *resurface* and that *feelings of loss associated with infertility* are triggered and **shaken up** by specific occurrences (e.g. during different developmental stages of the child's life such as the adopted child reaching adolescence or the adoptee having their own children). To this I must now add the adoptee having grandchildren. The discomfort I had experienced as my adoptive mother longed for the experience of pregnancy and her own biological child had faded over time, but **showed up** again, reemerging with a new generation.

My daughter read *Tree of Strangers* (a book about an adopted person's experience; Sumner, 2020) recently and found it mesmerising. She commented to me afterwards that it was what I'd always talked about, but reading it written by someone else made it more real, more believable. She also asked how she should tell her grandmother about the fact that she was pregnant, not wanting to cause her distress... picking up on my own sense of discomfort. Her and my joy and excitement at the news of her and her partner's news had that little cloud of awkwardness drift across, reminding me of how I used to feel. (Process memo, 6 October 2022)

Looking back with the **clarity** of distance and time, I see how loss and grief were constant for me, my adoptive mother's anguish still remaining a shadow in my



background, dark even on the sunniest of days, such as then breastfeeding my babies in her presence, or now my joy in my daughter’s pregnancy and every photo and video of her baby she gifts me every day.

Theme 2: Severance: “Dislocation at a Primal Level”

Theme Definition

The language of severance, a traumatic cut-off and dislocation from one’s biological and ancestral origins, lineage and people, was felt as an underpinning wounding, **showing up** as feelings of aloneness, dislocation, being “untethered”, and “other”. Also located in the **shadows**, these feelings were woven throughout their parenting experience with their children. If lineage is severed by adoption and ends with the adoptee as he/she is relinquished under the “complete break” policy, then what happens for their children, and their children’s children? This wondering gave many **clarity** about their own severance. Some spoke of their relief that their own children were **shielded** from the full effects of severance, since they would have a lineage that had been denied to their adoptee parent.

Their Stories

The totality of having been severed from her lineage and origins in closed stranger adoption was described by Kate as “dislocation”, a one-off moment in time, yet lasting a lifetime.

Somehow all of that dislocation that you don’t even KNOW is dislocation is at a primal level [...] You think it will somehow be resolved. But it isn’t. And what you don’t know is that this is your Life Story, and this is what your job is in your life, and coming to terms with that is part of the process. (Kate)

Similarly, the theme of permanent severance of connections to her biological family was implicit in Bridget’s reflections upon having been placed into a “stranger” (genetically unrelated) family. Her acquired family did not guarantee her any sense of authentic lineage, leaving her feeling extremely alone: “Adopted people frequently don’t fit in the culture of their acquired family, their fictive family; and they don’t have another family to go into. So there is that absolute utter aloneness”.

Once her daughters started to have children of their own, it **showed up** by bringing into painful **clarity** how severed from her lineage she was:

I have no elders. Therefore this idea that you sit at the apex, like an apex predator, but once the grandchildren came it was a burden that I wasn’t really ready for, I had no elder to share that burden with. So when your first grandchild comes, you’ve often got your mother or you’re in relationship with her, there’s a lineage. But adopted people, we’re not part of a lineage. (Bridget)



Bridget acknowledged the profound difference she had observed that had **shown up** in her daughters’ experience of being connected to their family tree and lineage, compared to her own. She commented that “I’m conscious that they see themselves in each other and they’re able to have those relationships that I can’t have”. This is another instance of **clarity** wherein the adopted person is able to see that their children have *that which you have been denied*. Intergenerationally, an adopted person’s biological children are also severed from their roots, albeit indirectly. Juliet spoke of the relief she felt as she sat in the hospital cuddling her new-born baby boy, knowing that he was not severed from his origins and lineage in the same way that she had been. This **shaped** her decision to name him with her husband’s “family name” as it represented

...a lineage that went back generations—he [husband] KNEW who he was, he was so comfortable in himself... I chose to do that [use the family name], to please, and to keep it going. And I thought afterwards, “It’s actually okay that my son has a lineage now, I don’t really have one. Even though I’ve met my birth family, I didn’t really feel it. So I felt like he was getting something. (Juliet)

Looking back, she considered that the trauma she had experienced due to the primal severance from her birth mother had been an ongoing significant **shaping** influence on her parenting: “My emotional, unresolved issues and trauma from my adoption experience was something that definitely influenced—as much as I didn’t want it to—it shaped the way I parented”.

Under the 1955 New Zealand Adoption Act, it is clear that the law’s intention was to permanently sever. Any possibility of ongoing blood-kin relationship between the adopted person and his/her blood relatives was forever closed. Academic adoption literature has been largely silent regarding the lifelong effects of the wall of secrecy that was constructed by this violent severing of foundational birth relationships and the permanent sealing of birth records (Griffith, 1998). While acknowledging that the majority of adult adoptees were well-adjusted, Feeney et al. (2007) certainly supported the notion that adoption is a lifelong and far-reaching process for a subset of adoptees. Their findings emphasised the centrality of relational losses for an adoptee, including this foundational severance from one’s birth family and fundamental genetic and biological origins, surmising that this created a vulnerability in the adopted person’s relational experiences going forward. In the natural world it is widely accepted that when plants are uprooted and relocated, or cut off and grafted on to a different plant, or newborn animals are removed from their mothers, *things may not go well*. Yet hiding in plain sight are generations of adopted people with the foundational origin story of severance.



Hofer (2006), a professor in the area of psychobiology and psychiatry, emphasised that there are numerous physiological and behavioural regulatory processes “hidden” (p. 86) within the mother-infant relationship. If maternal regulators are withdrawn early, as they are with severance, the paths of these developmental processes are altered, creating “a complex, changing pattern of vulnerability over the life span” (p. 86). Hofer went on to warn that interruptions and damage to the mother-infant relationship not only **shapes** a child’s psychosocial and biological development, but that these effects also appear to “extend into adulthood” (p. 87).

Severance for an adopted person means the relinquishment of all claims to one’s birth identity (Blake & Coombes, 2015), resulting in the ensuing adaptive and fictitious life of being grafted on to another’s tree. Adopted people know our birth certificates are fictitious, even if we would never dare to speak that truth. Kept people do not share these experiences, no matter how different or estranged they feel from their kin.

Corsentino (2021) writes of the harms of severance not only to adopted people but also intergenerationally to their biological children, since all the generations preceding their parents’ are, for the grandchild, a blank. He denotes both the loss of mirroring, but also the loss of family medical history as two of the broader sets of harms caused by genealogical severance, suggesting that the children of adoptees grieve the severance, perhaps for the suffering they see it causing their parents. Participants in my study had all searched for and located their biological families, filling in the blanks for their own children at a surface level, but their own sense of perpetual severance remained. Future research into the children of adoptees may further illuminate the extent to which they are impacted by intergenerational severance.

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

Shortly after I was born, my mother formally relinquished me, severing her legal parental rights, and I entered into the care of the Department of Social Welfare, which placed me with a previously vetted married couple in the city of my birth. That couple acquired legal rights over, and raised, my mother’s child. The law then severed me permanently from my original family, shrouding my parents and lineage in secrecy. This—a simple statement of fact that follows naturally from my birth story—still feels confronting. Yet within the culture of closed adoption, adopted people are subliminally programmed not to speak of adoption in this way, not to speak of our “severed family” or our “parents and other parents”. Instead, the language of ownership and possession is co-opted into the space, with the message “*You are our child now. You belong to us*”. This legalised and languaged assimilation was executed by way of two brief clauses in the 1955 New Zealand Adoption Act. Section 16 (2)(a) declared that “*the adopted child*



shall be deemed to become the child of the adoptive parent, and the adoptive parent shall be deemed to become the parent of the child, as if the child had been born to that parent in lawful wedlock.” [emphasis mine]. Section (2)(b) was the severance clause, declaring that “*the adopted child shall be deemed to cease to be the child of his existing parents and the existing parents of the adopted child shall be deemed to cease to be his parents...*” [emphasis mine] (p. 18).

Living in the **shadow** of severance—without “genetic mirroring”—underpins and **shapes** so much of one’s identity formation. Growing up, I stared with loathing at my reflection in the mirror, seeing a stranger, no one I recognised. Lacking a sense of intuitive kinship with my family, shy and uncertain, I spent much of my childhood in solitary worlds of my imagination. I now think it is unsurprising that my favourite stories were *No Flying in the House* (wherein Annabel, who doesn’t remember her “real parents”, discovers she is half fairy, and the beautiful denouement is when her fairy mother and mortal father come to reclaim her; Brock, 1970) and *When Marnie was There* (wherein Anna—a lonely outcast adoptee—develops a mysterious and spiritual connection with Marnie, who turns out to be her maternal grandmother; Robinson, 1967). Both of these books spoke to me about my origin story—they were comfortable and reassuring, and I reread them hundreds of times in my childhood and adolescence. In 1987, 4 weeks after giving birth to my first son, I learned my mother had named me *Anna Mary*. Yet it remains difficult to explain to the “kept” why genealogical severance is so difficult, in the myriad ways it pervades and shapes our lives.

Severance **showed up** and became viscerally real for me in reunion with my birth father. Suddenly, I saw myself and my children mirrored and echoed in aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins...and saw, too, that the resemblances were not simply physical: they were emotional, psychological, intellectual, temperamental. I envied my children their rootedness. All of my life I had lived at a disadvantage, never knowing who my biological parents were, what they looked like, what they were good at, what skills and talents they possessed, what shortcomings they had. My children did not grow up in that vacuum of ignorance and I had an enormous sense of reassurance and relief knowing that. As an adopted person having children, the empty places in my own past are no longer mine alone, they also become my children’s legacy. If I am severed from and ignorant of my origins, so are my children. But the opposite is also true: that once the void begins to be filled, the richness that can result becomes their legacy.

The irony of my First Nations Cherokee whakapapa on my father’s side was not lost on me. “Native Americans understand intuitively that all children deserve a symbolically crafted life story that includes origins; that if you don’t know who you are, you don’t know where anything else fits” (Lifton, 1994, p. 43). In reconnection with my



father and his people, I saw how much my children benefitted from being kept. From NOT being severed from their biological roots. From knowing who they are and whose they are (a phrase I used frequently), for generations back. Like Bridget, I look wistfully at the natural way in which they interact with their siblings, seeing themselves in each other. I envied them that.

I’m still working on all the ramifications of severance versus interconnectedness for me and my children. This is captured poignantly in a late-night conversation in 2019 with my youngest son, just prior to my starting this research, and autoethnographically recorded with his consent. A plant breeding technician with a fascination for genetics, he was visiting for a weekend, and over a bottle of wine we were talking about global warming, climate change, and how the world is a very different place for him and his three siblings than it was when his grandparents were their age. From here we started talking about his six grandparents:

Me: So you were kind of an amalgam of your genetic but your psychosocial stuff. Because I can see [my birth father’s side] in you, but I can see [your father’s side] in you as well, and I’m sure that your reading and learning about genetics must pique a little bit of curiosity around who you are.

Mark: This is why I love it—because it’s not pure, hard science. It is—but it’s also got huge cultural connotations. Let me tell you about my new tattoo....

Me: Whaaaaat?!

Mark: I’m planning it, I haven’t fully decided where I’m going to get it. It’s an equation, a formula. You know $E = MC^2$? It’s basically the equivalent for genetics, and it’s a really important equation. The more I think about it, the more important this seems. $P = G \times E$. What that stands for is, Phenotype equals Genotype by Environment.

Me: Oooohhhh..... Nature/nurture. Either/or. Both.

Mark: Exactly. So there is the “nature versus nurture” debate, but from a genetic point of view, the two are linked. So, phenotype is what you “get”...

Me: The hand you’re dealt? Genetics is the hand you’re dealt; environment is how you play it...?

Mark: Yeah, you’re close. I wouldn’t say environment is how you “play it”, let me give you an example. Take height. There are genes controlling how tall you grow, but it’s also a product of your environment, like if you’re malnourished as a child. So, this is really important for breeding purposes in that you can have the best genotype out there, but if you grow it in a shit environment, the plant’s not going to be any good. So the more I think about it, the more important it



becomes. I am the product of my genotype and the environment in which I was raised.

Me: And that's why adoptees have been the subjects of so many scientific studies, for ever. Well, for the longest time in the social sciences, but also in a whole range of negative social statistics. Because, you don't choose your genes, but the environment is malleable, changeable. And particularly twin studies—I don't know if in the physical sciences you look at twin studies?—in the social sciences absolutely you do. So if you have identical twins and you put Twin A in Environment X and Twin B in Environment Y, guess what? You get different outcomes?! But you also find extraordinary similarities. So adoptees are a population that is of enormous interest to science, because say, when you look at Julia's biological family and you find morbid obesity, insulin dependent diabetes, mental health issues, the whole phenotype in that environment...And then when you look at her, severed from that family tree and put into a completely foreign environment, grafted on and raised by biological strangers, and she becomes something different to what you would have expected had she been raised in her biological family. You graft the apple on to a pear tree. She's still going to be an apple. And if you put it into human terms, she's always going to feel liked a 'failed' pear. She doesn't look like a pear, she doesn't taste like a pear. She hangs from the tree with the other pears, but she's a fucken dreadful pear. Because she's an apple. She was always an apple.

Mark: Yeah. [pause]. That is a good metaphor.

Me: It's a really sad metaphor. Because she grew up her whole life thinking, Man, I suck as a pear. Actually she was always going to suck as a pear. Because she's an apple. Anyway, that's probably not where you were going with that. I diverged. All I'm trying to say, son, is that out of the four of you, given your area of academic interest, it maybe makes the most sense to you...that adoption has been the single most formative aspect of my life to date, and I haven't adapted very well to being a pear.

Mark: You've done pretty fucken well. You have.

Me: So the reason I've been wanting to study how has it been for other people like me who've gone on to have children? The things that I've struggled with in trying to be a better pear, which was probably always doomed in hindsight because I was actually not a pear, I was an apple trying to be the best pear she could be, is that I've actually produced a whole bunch of little apples who are comfortable with being apples, because they know that they're apples. Because their mum's an apple. And they didn't have that burden of thinking, I have to be



a pear, I have to be a pear, oohhh I suck as a pear! And that's what I want my PhD to be about, how being an adopted person affects the children that we have. Maybe it does, maybe it doesn't. Maybe I'm an outlier. I'm not sure yet. I'm going to study that.

Mark: Well, when you encounter epigenetics, let me know.

Me: Does my thesis topic make sense to you?

Mark: Yeah—and I think it'd be a fascinating area to study. Epigenetics is a field I think you should have some understanding of because you are genetically different, having been raised by Granny and Grandad, than you would have been were you raised by Jerry and Lindy. Genetically.

Me: Environment affects genes?

Mark: Yes. So phenotype is not just the interaction between genotype and environment, it's genotype, environment AND the interaction between the two...it's heritable. So your dietary choices affect my physiology. I remember a particular lecturer in genetics who went through a list of different traits and how heritable they are, so how often they're passed on to offspring. So height is highly heritable, eye colour, IQ is highly heritable, depression is highly heritable. My theory is that's an epigenetic thing. But it's incredible how much your decisions affect your offspring.

Me: That's so interesting! And so relevant!

Mark: Are you aware that high birth weight correlates strongly with lifelong good health?

Me: If Jerry was sitting here, he'd be cackling, slapping his thigh, taking the credit! If you'd met me as a 24-year-old young woman, you'd have had no clue. Because I was a consummate actress as well. And I don't know if you've known anyone well out of all the people you've met and gotten to know in your life so far, around mental health, around self-loathing, around eating disorders, around I don't deserve to be here—you know, quite suicidal, quite fucked in the head. That the four of you saved my life and forced me to—like, there was no way I was going to leave you. What I'm feeling at the moment is kind of overwhelm with the enormity of the subject because we started talking about climate change and global warming and now we're talking about genetics, and who you are, whose you are. You're your father's and you're mine. And your parents cast a long shadow over your life. And your parents' parents.

This discussion epitomises the *opposite* of severance for me as an adopted person, expressed through both the content but also the connection. The content sees me thrilled that Mark understands this notion of severance



and grafting, grasps as a geneticist what I am trying to say in the amalgam of who and whose they are, my children, their grandparents' grandchildren. Further, for me there was connection and comfortable safety in that vulnerable space, experienced through the intimacy of opening myself up to him regarding the lifelong effects of my being severed from my genetic roots.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

Sitting in the interviews as participants spoke to their severance and dislocation in the space of being parented and their own parenting, I shared what Blake (2013) described as “a broad palette of emotional colour: anger, deep-seated grief, a sense of missing” (p. 84). What does it mean for those of us who were not kept, to start off in life with the ultimate birth “cut”?

My poem referenced under the earlier theme of “Loss” described being *Carried unwillingly under her heart nine long months/A budding girl-child/Genetically, emotionally, physically, mystically/The mother-daughter connection reaches back through generations/Yet it was severed with you*. In the nine months of waiting for the daughter of my daughter to be born, I observed the effects of severance, and its absence, even more clearly from the distance of another generation. In the living room at my daughter's home, about three months before the baby was born, I described the scene to my as-yet-unborn granddaughter:

Saturday night Michael came over, and Becca cooked an amazing roast chicken dinner. We were all talking and laughing together: she was in the kitchen, Luke was playing chess, and Michael and I were in the living room...I was flooded with the realisation of how very loved and wanted you were, and how all the voices around you would be—on some level—familiar to you when you arrived in mid-August. We are all so excited to meet you, and yet *you're here with us now*. This is so incredibly triggering for me!! Imagine being welcomed into the extended whānau, little one, and knowing you belong, seeing yourself reflected, refracted in all of us...I realise in hindsight that when I was carrying my four babies, I had very little sense of their connection to their ancestors and extended family, it was all about ME, I felt so unbelievably proprietorial about them. With YOU I am conscious how much you ‘belong’ to me, to your uncles, to all those who have come before. (*The Story of Snail*, Saturday 7 May 2022)

Severance from my people is just one part of the existential situation in which I and many adopted people live. But a wave of poignant joy intermingled with sadness washed over me as I pictured my own grandparents and extended whānau, from and by whom I was severed.



Blake (2013) wrote powerfully against the notion that removing a child through closed stranger adoption from the “stem” of one family and “grafting” it onto another family would remove the child’s *embodied knowing* [emphasis mine], since the original genes were still housed in the adopted child’s body, though this might be barely perceivable to the adoptee themselves. She posited that living as an adopted person involves “felt, embodied experiences that are difficult to express” (p. 255), offering a metaphor of a ‘phantom limb’, or amputation, representing the severing and sense of longing for or missing the birth mother. For some who have undergone an amputation, the limb is experienced as still being present. In the same way, Blake argued that the body of the adopted person yearns for the relationship that was “torn away” (p. 238), and this somatic knowing was strongly signalled by participants, as seen in the next theme.

Theme 3: The Visceral and Somatic: “That Smell was Very Wrong”

Theme Definition

For many participants, growing up in their adoptive family had not felt right at a skin/smell/tactile level—and this **showed up** in *the experience of having children*. This awakened them to an entirely new phenomenon, a level of foundational and visceral connection to their children that was experienced powerfully. Core adoption issues were triggered in a tactile felt sense from an imprinted primal, preverbal level, **showing up** and experienced as embodied trauma somatically in the adopted person. For some it was manifested as they experienced the “rightness” of the smell of their children, the visceral nature of breastfeeding, awkward sensations felt around their adoptive mothers. Trusting one’s lived experience as “known” through the bodily senses and intuitive gut was referenced frequently, and that it was only brought out of the **shadow** into the **clarity** of awareness once they became parents themselves. All participants (eight of the nine) who had met their birth mothers referenced the “primal churning” of that experience; even during the interviews, the memories and conversations about birth families and adoptive families elicited internal (“churning inwardly”) and external (weeping) somatic reactions.

Their stories

One of the themes emerging from my critical systematic review of the literature pertaining to intimate relationships with children (Field & Pond, 2018) was the visceral dimension of physically carrying and delivering a child. Hampton (1997) and Pinkerton’s (2010) subjects emphasised that it was the *act of giving birth* that brought their own birth mothers’ experiences (and the primal separation) into their conscious awareness. Pinkerton’s (2010) participants experienced pregnancy as a time during which old issues relating to adoption were triggered for them, significantly affecting



their birthing experiences, and in some instances providing a sense of healing.

Hampton (1997) concurred that being adopted, and the act of giving birth, were indeed psychologically related: “Seeing their babies emerge from their own bodies healed this construction of themselves as not belonging in this world, not being a real person” (p. 100).

This visceral dimension formed part of several participants’ reflections. The sensory component of someone’s smell, something that is taken-for-granted by kept people, was raised by Bridget:

Thinking back to childhood, and I mean, the idea of her [adoptive mother’s] smell, if I actually try and think of her smell, I feel a bit unwell. She smells wrong, unpleasant. And of course she doesn’t smell bad, she smells like a normal person. But to me that smell is very wrong. (Bridget).

Bridget contrasted this smell that had been so distasteful, with that of her own children: “They smelled perfect. I can still smell that...”

The sense of smell is powerfully primal. As already discussed in the literature review, odour has a powerful effect on mother-infant bonding and is a strong memory cue that induces vivid and emotional memories. How this might manifest in the realm of adoption has been suggested by the work of Császár-Nagy and Bókkon (2018). They described the dyadic connection between a mother and her unborn child as being essentially that of a “single organism” (p. 345), suggesting that the process of birth with the physical and psychic separations that are suffered at birth can be traumatic, and that they can affect us throughout our lives:

High concentrations of noradrenalin activate the lungs and ensure early bonding with the mother. At birth, a newborn arrives in a cold world, perceiving alien sounds and smells. The mother’s smells, touch and voice may naturally reduce and control birth stress. (Császár-Nagy & Bókkon, 2018, p. 345)

Hypothesising that early maternal separation is one of the possible risk factors promoting the formation of neurodevelopmental disorders, they posited that epigenetic information (inherited and acquired) in pre-, peri-, and early postnatal periods plays an essential role in unconscious processes and numerous brain functions of the *mature organism* (emphasis mine). Making an intuitive connection, Rowena reflected on how long she had spent in hospital as a newborn, and what she has come to believe about her “insecurities” and “neediness”, the felt sense from the loss of that early imprinting, having been removed from everything that has been primed within the growing baby:

[There was] a whole 3 weeks that I didn’t have anybody loving me, in the hospital. And so when I think about that, I think—‘cause I don’t really believe in this attachment theory or whatever—but the older I get, the more I think about



those 3 weeks. And I was the baby that cried. And I was the baby that was born to an 18-year-old solo mother. So, how was I treated? I don't know. I don't think I would have been a priority. [pause] So I do think, I do believe that my insecurities and neediness might have been formed in those 3 weeks. Because then I think, how could I be needy? Because Mum and Dad were such great parents. [pause] And yet my sister, she's never had any of these issues like what I've had, because her birth mother, who was 35, was allowed to brush her hair and nurture her before Mum and Dad got her. (Rowena)

Siegel's (2001) research found not only that newborns are capable of recognising the physical separation from the woman who brought them into the world, but also that the sudden change in sensory stimuli brought about by the separation is stored as a memory in the body. This links to Nancy Verrier's (1993) assertion that the somatic impact of early trauma—which is separation from mother—leaves within them a psychic scar which she called a “primal wound”. In this way, Verrier articulated for adopted people the essence of their experience, since the sensations and neurological connections are all preverbal. As early traumatic memories lack verbal narrative and context, they encode themselves by way of vivid sensation and images. Verrier's work legitimated for many adopted people the fundamental importance and deep knowing of this “felt sense” of being with the right person, the right mother. As can be seen on any episode of Animal Planet, the baby does not want to be connected to anybody else. Verrier suggested that for adoptees who do not see ourselves reflected in our families due to the lack of mirroring, sensory orientation may to be “learned” rather than being absorbed instinctively.

Bridget reflected on the absence of physical connection and touch as she had been growing up, and how deeply it had affected and **shaped** her: “I started thinking about the fact that [as a child] I'd never been held or touched, and that touch was... that I'm quite touch-averse—except for my children. And my husband. Apart from that, I'm quite touch-averse”. Kate extended the new sensations of connection she experienced with her newborn baby to the entirety of the adoption experience: “The whole thing [adoption] is visceral”. Juliet described how this **showed up** for her as a viscerally felt connection to her first-born child:

I remember sitting there [after giving birth] just watching and watching, and looking for [pause, cries] likeness. I'd never—and the somatic experience, the visceral—that somatic experience of—“He's mine”, and it just being quite surreal that for the first time in my life I sort of felt like, some healing, in a way? I



can't articulate that healing, but it felt, there was a connection there that I hadn't had. (Juliet)

She struggled with the accompanying hypervigilance that was experienced at a physical level as well as a psychological level:

Every time I went into his room to check his crib, every time I tried not to listen... but this previous entity, I couldn't lose, I simply couldn't lose, and I couldn't have put into words what that meant but I just knew that inner body feeling, I just couldn't lose this little being. (Juliet)

The notion of being awakened to “trusting one's gut” was experienced and expressed by Juliet in a bodily, felt way as she gained some **clarity** and understanding regarding the effects of adoption:

I think I danced in and out of that [aloneness in the adoption experience] for a lot of years, holding that tension between the dominant narrative of what the social cultural attitudes [are], and what they [adoptive parents] had been told and the dissonance it was creating in my gut, my intuition and my knowingness. (Juliet)

The neuroscientist Van der Kolk's (2014) treatise on the impact of trauma on the mind, brain and body *The Body Keeps the Score* explains and explores how trauma is not just the historical event that has taken place; rather, it is the *imprint* that has been left by the experience on mind, brain and body. His assertion that “all trauma is preverbal” (p. 51) acknowledges that although the body of a traumatised person reexperiences helplessness, terror and rage, along with the impulse to fight or flee, the sensations are virtually impossible to articulate. Our limbic systems, located deep within our central nervous system in what van der Kolk terms “the emotional survival brain” are shaped in response to experience, alongside the infant's inborn temperament and own genetic makeup. Whatever happens to a baby shapes the emotional and perceptual mapping of her world that her developing brain is creating. For a prelinguistic infant only a few minutes, days or weeks old; abruptly losing her mother, without language to console, or any self-soothing mechanisms in place, no concept that the trauma is temporary and will be ameliorated by new caregivers, is pure, embodied terror. As Merritt (2022) rightly noted: for very young children, trauma is experienced differently, and caregiver loss is now considered a primary source of trauma in the DSM-V.

Hence, if she is frightened and unwanted, the infant's brain will specialise in managing feelings of fear and abandonment, and it will do so by releasing hormones with resulting “visceral sensations” (Merritt, 2022, p. 66). These might **show up** in a subtle way as a sense of mild queasiness, a grip of panic in the chest, low grade



feelings of dread, feeling unsafe within one’s own body, a “gnawing interior discomfort” (p. 113). It makes sense that the lived experience of relinquishment and abandonment would be noticed *in the body*; adoptees were present when this was happening. It happened to us as preverbal infants.

Merritt (2022) presented her perspectives on the phenomenology of embodied trauma and latent traumatic memories to draw attention and critical reflection to the connection between adoption and trauma and how it is conceptualised. An adoptee herself, Merritt acknowledged that she was always curious about her origin story. As with the adoptees in this study, it was during pregnancy that her desire to know **showed up** and became inescapable. She explained that her children’s births were catalysts for me making this connection between adoption and trauma that I had failed to see for so long. [...] After bonding with my children in those first 6 weeks, the illusion that this time in my own life didn’t matter was impossible to uphold. (Merritt, 2022, p. 3)

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

Until I became pregnant, the reality of adoption was entirely theoretical. It was akin to intellectually understanding the notion of the flight-fight-freeze response to trauma: not until it is experienced in the *body*—clammy skin, quickening heartbeat, churning stomach—does it **show up**, becoming real and truly grasped. Similarly to Merritt (2022), it was the visceral nature of pregnancy and the somatic experience of childbirth that started my awakening to really “grasp” what adoption was:

As my first pregnancy progressed, as all first-time mothers experience, I became more and more conscious that this was my baby, not simply a physical state, particularly once I began to feel his movements, and my stomach began to grow. I began to grasp that this must have been how it was physically for my birth mother and began to at last begin to think of her as a real person. I was 22, the same age that she had been when having me... Each pregnancy was a time of connecting with my unborn child, conscious of every bump in the road, every kick, even worrying about how my emotional state might affect my unborn child if I was weeping, tired, frightened. I eventually came to understand that my birth mother must have made a strenuous effort all those months not to connect, in fact to emotionally detach from the growing child within. To survive, she had in effect performed an emotional abortion. (Cantrell, 1998, p. 59)

The somatic experiences during my pregnancy were the nascent beginnings of my awakening, though at the time I did not explore what the effects on severance from my mother at birth might have been, having been neither seen nor held by her. Having



children was my first experience of meaningful physical closeness with another human being.

My experience of love started with having a child. It was an entirely new experience, being so tightly connected and infatuated and bonded to another human being. From Bob’s journal at nine months: ‘You are so precious and unique to me—very much a part of me. I went to wean you at 9 months 1 week but discovered it was too soon—for both of us. You demand so little, but give so much—smiles, smiles that take my breath away and make my heart skip a beat, little shy ones and huge, ecstatic ones; your cuddling into me, relaxing against my body; you’re just the sweetest little poppet!’ When you were 4 ½ years old I wrote: ‘Most hours of the day you would come up to me and say, “Guess what I’m thinking...?” and the answer: “I love you!” or “I adore you!” An immensely affectionate, cuddly, and physically demonstrative wee soul, you could never get enough cuddles and kisses, and at times clearly found it difficult sharing Mummy with Michael, Rebecca and Daddy. (Julia)

Like Bridget, I revelled in the physicality of the four of them, drinking in the smell of their skin, the sounds of their voices, the way they fitted against my body, the “fit” of them to me. Whilst undoubtedly all biological parents soak up the smells, feel, warmth of this new life they have created, the physicality of this imprinting was completely novel for me, and I exulted in it. It truly **shook up** my old internal scripts; four pregnancies and deliveries and breastfeeding my children were the only times in my life that I truly trusted my own body, which had always felt alien and somehow wrong at a cellular level to me, something shameful to be shunned and punished.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

Interviewing Bridget brought into my conscious awareness the jarring “wrongness” of the smell of my adoptive mother. Smell had been a silent but potent signal of which I was unconscious growing up. It was not until the powerful felt sensory connection to my children that I realised someone COULD smell ‘right’:

The bigger boys were primary school age, and I’m lying on the ground, and they’re lying all over me, and I’m smelling them and I’m tickling them and I’m cuddling them—so tactile. And they just smelled completely delicious to me.
(Pre-PhD material)

As I pondered this notion of embodied knowing alongside the scientific signposting that supports it, I was also exploring Van der Kolk’s assertion that human beings have two internal “systems” (2014). The first is rooted in autobiographical language that is assembled in a coherent ‘story’. All adoptees have a version of our adoption story, that has been narrated to us from earliest remembering, usually



involving some variation on “lucky,” “grateful,” and “your mother loved you *so she gave you away*”. This adoption narrative is constructed for public consumption, and we grow up believing it contains our full truth. However, the second internal system is primarily *somatically* based in our physical bodies, and registers a different truth of how we experience a situation, deep inside. Van der Kolk (2014) encourages us to “access, befriend and reconcile this inner system” (p. 282) and, I would add, trust it—because this “gut knowing” is part of our truth. This insight struck home for me, pointing me to a realisation that I am coming to trust my intuition at a body level, tuning in to my “gut”. Van der Kolk (2014) also reassured me that scientists study what puzzles them most, providing further validation for this autoethnographic exploration. Acknowledgement that all of my own adaptive reactions, dysfunctional patterns towards self and partners, profound sense of dislocation, self-abandoning and self-hatred *made sense* was a freeing insight, after its having puzzled and bewildered me my entire life. His further assertion that therapy often starts with “some inexplicable behaviour” (p. 148) resonated deeply; up until this point, so much of my life had not “made sense” to me at a fundamental level.

Van der Kolk (2014) states that “Learning to become attuned provides parents (and their kids) with the visceral experience of reciprocity” (p. 257). How this attunement **showed up** for me as an adopted person was that visceral reciprocity happened *first* with my own biological children. In my experience it did not happen with my adoptive parents, nor for many decades in intimate relationships with partners. Where children or adults are too shut down through trauma to receive comfort from human beings, Van der Kolk (2014) suggests that relationships with other mammals can help; the central role of a loved pet was echoed anecdotally by my participants and resonated deeply for me, in particular the sensory and tactile nature of this.

Theme 4: Fear and Anxiety: “I Could Have Blown Apart”

Theme Definition

While most new parents feel doubt and uncertainty when they hold this tiny dependent human who has been entrusted into their care, most participants in this study reported chronic fear and heightened anxiety far beyond that experienced by other parents. Worrying for the duration of the pregnancy, fearing loss, being constantly hypervigilant and overprotective (and judging themselves for being thus), there was a pervasive underlay of fear, hypervigilance and anxiety **shadowing** them from the beginning of the parenting journey to the present day.

In addition, some also navigated the fear and anxiety that the worlds of their birth and adoptive families would intersect, attempting to keep the two separate.

Their Stories



As previously described, Field and Pond's (2018) review of the literature enumerated the significant range of negative feelings that **showed up** for adopted people as they anticipated parenthood: anxiety, fear, rumination, pessimism, concern regarding possible childlessness and infertility, and the recurrent anxiety of abandoning their child by forgetting or deserting it, or the child being orphaned or stolen (Hampton, 1997; Horowitz, 2011; Lutz, 2011; Nowlan, 2016; Pérez et al. 2016; Pinkerton, 2010; Verzulli, 2000). Blake (2013) and Despax, Bouteyre and Halidi (2021) described participants living with fear about the unknown if it pertained to their children's lives, for instance where a health history was lacking.

These findings were echoed and extended in this study. For some, this **showed up** at the outset, with participants in the **shadow** of fear and anxiety for the duration of the pregnancy, due to the “blank slate” and ignorance of their own origins (see Theme 3). Kenneth “spent 9 months in hell, worrying about what was going to be born, because I had no connection to anything genetic”. Cassie had met her birth family and described that “My biggest fear was schizophrenia, passing on mental health issues to my kids...”

Once the child was born, the fear continued. The story that Juliet provided emphasised how completely pervasive it was.

I had a big fear of cot death, it was a fear of loss played out. That issue of loss really started from the moment I left the hospital and felt solely responsible for his survival. Anxiety was always in there. Again, fear of loss. And the annihilation—at some level, I must have been thinking that it would be activated, at an unconscious level. I see that now. I can articulate that now, but I wouldn't have been able to then. I just used to beat myself up for being so over the top, so oversensitive and so needy. (Juliet)

She has since reflected on the enormity of a fear that was so extreme, it threatened to annihilate her:

There was a strong, strong feeling of anxiety and of “What if I lose him?” It was palpable, it was constantly with me, it was a felt sense of [pause] every time I went into his room to check his crib, every time I tried not to listen... but I simply couldn't lose... and I couldn't have put into words what that meant but... I just couldn't lose this little being. And what I know now is that would have just ripped the top of the [adoption] wound off, and I would have been [pause] I could have blown apart. The theme of fear of loss—and still is, to a lesser degree—profoundly shaped my parenting practices, as well as insecurities and neediness definitely influenced. (Juliet)



Kenneth described his anxiety in getting close to his children “I struggle to have emotional connections with anyone. And that’s because it’s too scary.” Poignantly, he went on to articulate his persistent fear that expressing love to his children will not be reciprocated by them:

I can make sense of it (love) academically, but when it comes to the emotional... [pauses, voice trails off]. Even now when I tell my kids profoundly that I love them, it’s always a scary thing because I don’t know if they love me back. (Kenneth)

A fear of being abandoned through emotional rupture in her relationship with both her son and her daughter as they grew up was an ever-present fear for Juliet, manifesting itself in myriad ways including **shaping** her parenting practices in the setting of boundaries:

Juliet: I wasn’t very strong or staunch with the children around boundaries or discipline. I might have been a bit tough on [my son], which was unusual for me, I might’ve been a bit harsh. Not physically, but emotionally. And I do remember that night him saying he wanted to run away. And me being devastated—“Oh my gosh, he wants to leave me”. And that really rocked me emotionally that my son felt that way about me.

Me: How did that feel for you when [your daughter] would—developmentally appropriately—push you away?

Juliet: I couldn’t tolerate it. I didn’t know how to manage it or tolerate it, that’s the honest truth. I scrambled. I hid. At that stage, I would get [my husband]. I would ask if he would go and spend some time and talk with her, because I felt I was at the end of what I could offer. I didn’t know what to say.

Despax et al. (2021) hypothesised that a fear of abandonment in their adoptee participants could infuse the parenting relationship, with difficulty holding boundaries and tolerating conflict. This study confirmed that the fear of relationship rupture with one’s children **shows up** perpetually for adoptees (to be further explored in Chapter Six). Bridget articulated that her fear of being “boundaried” around her adult children **shapes** her parenting even now, lest they abandon her:

I can’t or don’t want to say no. I love us being part of each other’s lives. I’m really good at saying “No” to people, except my children. I can NOT say no. For instance I cannot say “Would you mind not coming for a week because I’m working” because my inner voice says, “If you say that, then they won’t love you anymore”. So I have no boundary with my children. (Bridget)

An additional layer of anxiety not seen across the literature was that experienced by Kenneth as he described the chronic fear of his relationship with his



birth family being inadvertently disclosed to his adoptive family by his children: “When they [my children] were growing up there was a fear that they might have ‘blurted’ something out to their grandparents, my adoptive parents, and hurt them or just cause a ‘thing’ to happen.” He continues to walk a tightrope due to his need to keep the two or three families completely separate, to avoid hurt or discomfort.

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

A predominant fear for me was that of infertility. Although probably an unusual fear for a healthy young woman, I had grown up with constant tacit reminders of its reality, and I was terrified it would be my fate. Infertility had cast such a spectre over my adoptive mother’s life and seemed to always be the elephant in the room, casting its **shadow** of fear for as long as I could remember. I had often heard her recount how she and my father had tried for eight years to have a baby, and never succeeded, as part of the narrative of how they came to adopt us. I was acutely aware, due to the pain of her experience, that for some women, pregnancy doesn’t just “happen”, and I worried constantly that I would be one of those women. It didn’t occur to me until much, much later that I probably carried a gene for “extremely high fertility”, or “falling pregnant too easily”, as my birth mother apparently had.

Like Kenneth, I vividly recall the fear **showing up** during each of my pregnancies about what unknown genes I might be carrying or passing on, overhearing people of my parents’ generation casually referring to the “bad blood” of adoption. I had a predominant fear of losing my child through illness or death, which was manifested by vivid dreams in the first few months after Michael’s birth, terrible images of losing him, leaving him behind in a shop, forgetting him, finding him dead in a coal scuttle.

Further, this **shadow** of fear **showed up** in the chronic drive to over attach to my children, feeling untethered, incomplete, tense and anxious when separated from them, and only able to truly relax when they were all safely gathered around me. Like Juliet, I struggled to say “No” to them as they pushed against boundaries in ways that were entirely normal developmentally. I was always, always terrified that if I said “No” then that might rupture our relationship, and they might leave me. It scared me if I felt angry with my children or if they were angry with me, although I eventually gained some clarity that when that happened, they didn’t stop loving me or abandon me. It was quite a lesson to learn, and it is ongoing. In addition, it had never felt safe for me to be angry when I was growing up; I had never been brave enough to push the boundaries out of compliance and test the love my adoptive parents professed; being the compliant “perfect” child meant that they had never had a chance to prove they *would* love me no matter what.



So I was afraid of my children’s rejection—and I was also afraid of “smothering” them. I knew inside myself how deeply needy I was, and how crippling it would be if they sensed that, so this shaped my parenting practices as I intentionally endeavoured to strive for a moderated closeness.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

The findings of my literature review (Field & Pond, 2018) came as no surprise to me— that for a significant number of adoptees, negative feelings of anxiety and fear characterised their attitudes to becoming a parent.

Even two decades before interviewing Juliet, I had realised that my meticulous keeping of journals for each of my children had in fact come from a place of fear, that I would be taken from my children before they could know who and whose they were.

I charted everything. I pored over every pregnancy book I could find. This is how my baby looks at this stage... and now this stage. I recorded everything. I wrote copiously. I wanted to give my children at beginning, a history, a life story that no one could ever take away from them. I wanted them to know everything, in case I was not there to tell them. Because my mother was not there to tell me. This gift of a life story, which non-adopted people seem to treat so casually, has been an ongoing preoccupation of mine. Each of my children has their life described in minute detail in their respective journals (that I gifted to them when they left home in their teens), day by day, week by week, month by month. It took me a long time to realise that I was trying to ensure that they would never felt as I did—untethered, without a past, without a story. Trying to give my children a sense of rootedness I had never had (Cantrell, 1998, p. 58).

Identifying closely with many of my participants, and immersed in the literature, it became **clear** to me that I did a lot of fear-based parenting. Fear and anxiety have been and remain deeply rooted in my relationship with my children.

I remain terrified of my children’s rejection, despite 36 years together. Their disapproval (imagined and real) crushes me, and I see how hard I have had to try to be differentiated from them. It was always hard to say “No”, even though my brain was clear that boundaries were needed and were required to be a “good parent”. I still fear loss, being disconnected from them—a frown, a pushing away feels akin to a severance and inside myself I feel like I am falling from a great height. I remain terrified of their rejection (Reflective memo, March 2021).

Gaining this **clarity** and understanding why I have always felt this way has mitigated it somewhat, though it still amazes me how quickly triggered I can be even in



this most permanent of relationships, and how anxious I am to seek reassurance that I have a place in their worlds. It does not take much to trigger an all-or-nothing gut reaction, and I struggle not to lurch from extremes of feeling amputated to being cloyingly close.

Theme 5: (Un)Natural and (Un)Familiar: “It was Always Uncomfortable”

Theme Definition

Another **shadow** in the adoption experience is learning how to trust what feels *unnatural* for an adopted person but is entirely “natural” for others. The adopted experience is quintessentially *unnatural*—not knowing your own birth story, not having anyone else with whom there is connection, recognition, familiarity. In the new landscape of becoming a biological parent, it could be difficult for adoptees to trust their instincts. This realisation showed up for participants because something utterly “natural”—becoming a parent—**showed** them the *unnaturalness* of the closed adoption system and culture, and brought it into sharp relief. Their own experiences of pregnancy, breastfeeding, and seeing themselves reflected and mirrored in their children, were all experienced as *unnatural* and *unfamiliar* within their adoptive families. Some participants felt this had **shaped** a level of uncertainty around their own agency as a parent, perhaps having unconsciously picked up on their adoptive parents’ uncertainty.

Their Stories

Being the adopted daughter of a woman who had not herself been a biological mother meant that pregnancy was experienced as “unnatural”. As noted in Theme 1, seven of the nine participants in this study had adoptive mothers who had been unable to conceive or carry their own child to term, meaning that they had no biological connection to their adopted child or grandchild. Thus for them the experience of pregnancy and childbirth may have felt completely foreign and unnatural. A study by Farber (1977) found that adopted girls expressed more adoption-related concerns than did adopted boys. He suggested that “*an adopted girl’s identification with her infertile adoptive mother creates conflict on an emotional level*” as the adoptee’s awareness of her own capacity to conceive, emerges (Farber, 1977; as cited in Vaccaro (2012, p. 34, emphasis mine). Moskowitz (2011) referred to the naturalness of pregnancy activating a “deepened need for their own mothers” (p. 232) yet how could an adopted daughter’s fecundity not feel profoundly *unnatural* within her relationship to her infertile adoptive mother? Bridget recalled that her adoptive mother “has never felt motherly or grandmotherly. I picture her always holding [my baby] stiffly, never natural”. Bridget’s adoptive parents came to stay to look after her children one occasion, and she recalled that:



I think that’s when they realised how uncomfortable it was. It was always uncomfortable. And going back to when [daughter] was born, when she was only a few weeks old and my adoptive parents came and stayed, and I remember looking at my adoptive mother, and she was holding [daughter] like this [gestures], out from her body, kind of trying to cradle her, but out here, not in here, and I thought it was very odd. (Bridget)

Bridget recollected that her adoptive mother seemed uneasy around her:

I remember my adoptive mother being incredibly embarrassed by the size of my body, the way my body was—she was uncomfortable around me anyway, but she was acutely uncomfortable when I was having children. She would leave the room if she was in there when I was breast feeding. (Bridget)

For Juliet this **showed up** as a lack of trust in herself since the experience of becoming a mother felt so unnatural. She described an absence of layers of mirroring in the pregnancy, birthing and postpartum stages, perhaps as this foundation to parenting was a void for her adoptive mother.

I was also very, very aware and scared that I didn’t know how to parent. And I don’t know how much of that initial phase was adoption related, because I didn’t have a natural attachment [...] I lacked trust in myself. I didn’t trust that I had any wisdom around [parenting]. I felt like I hadn’t had an experience that had nourished me and therefore I wouldn’t trust my “natural” instincts some of the time. I was aware of that (Juliet).

Adopted participants had grown up in families where they were not mirrored, having no one who resembled them physically and temperamentally. The paradox was that *it felt familiar to them to be unfamiliar*, and it was only on meeting birth relatives in reunion that the naturalness of connection and sense of recognition that kept people take for granted **showed up** for them and became apparent. Debra clearly remembered “Once I met her [birth mother] it just felt right [pause]. It was just as if I’d always known her”.

A further example of this inherently ironic natural/unnatural paradox is exemplified in the fact that as an adopted person I possess two birth certificates. The original one that records the actual facts of my birth is legally null, yet the one that trumpets fictitious facts is the legally binding one that I must use to assert my “identity”.

It can feel “unfamiliar” to an adopted person to experience “familiarity”, and an ongoing “novelty” for many adopted people is to know someone who resembles you—“normal” and “familiar” in biological families but not for us. This continues to **show up** and remains a preoccupation for Juliet, who admitted that



I was obsessed when [children] were growing up with seeing similarities... and I still do, I say it all the time, and there's more and more with [adult daughter and birth mother], the way that they think and the similar behaviours (Juliet).

In contrast to this, Kenneth worries about never having seen a resemblance to himself in his children, wondering if this is unnatural and if there is something “wrong” with him:

We were taking photographs at the hospital. You know, I don't have photographs of me as a child. Everyone was trying to see me in the child. And I couldn't see me in the child. And even now, all these years later, I still cannot recognise myself in my children. People say things like, “Gosh, your grandson looks like you!” and I go, “Does he?” Because I can't see it. That's not something I am able to do very easily. I feel a failure because I don't see it. They're seeing something that I'm blind to and it feels like, is there something wrong with me? Are people normally able to do these things? But, because, growing up that wasn't something that happened. I didn't look like anybody (Kenneth).

Similarly, when people would exclaim to Felicity how much her daughters resembled her, she experienced this differently, lamenting “I couldn't see it. And I still can't. People when they see us in person will still say, ‘Oh my God, you can see whose daughters they are’ but I can't see it at all”. It **shaped** her interactions with her baby, which she described as neither easy nor natural. She experienced feelings that she considered unnatural, despite having expected to feel deeply connected to her newborn: “I wasn't connecting with the baby at all. I wasn't that interested. It was an out of body experience, I felt like I was hovering above watching”.

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

In my lived experience, it was adoption that felt “normal”, whereas giving birth felt unnatural and unknown. My adoptive mother was anxious and on edge for each nine-month period that my adopted sister and I were pregnant, heaving a huge sigh of relief when healthy babies were delivered. It felt to me like she pathologised being pregnant, and I would outwardly pretend valiantly to be nonchalant, reminding myself that I was healthy, not sick, and it was “business as usual”. Knowing that pregnancy and birth were experiences she had been denied really muted my happiness and natural desire to talk of little else. Like Bridget's experience, breastfeeding my babies in the presence of my adoptive mother felt excruciatingly uncomfortable, despite being the most natural thing in the world. My adoptive mother's niece (i.e. my cousin), who, ten years older than me, was also infertile, adopted a baby girl around the time I had my first son in 1987. Meeting her and the baby felt excruciatingly awkward and



unnatural to me, but I observed my adoptive mother’s sense of solidarity and “naturalness” with my cousin— she could really relate to her. I wondered how on earth my cousin could take this baby home and “pretend” it was hers. I felt enormous guilt having these thoughts, and told no one. Shortly after that, in early 1988, I began my search for my birth mother, yet did not consciously connect the two events.

How profoundly unnatural it is for us as adopted persons to have no knowledge of the early days and weeks of our lives. It took applying to a government department to be permitted a glimpse into the first 2 weeks of my own life, something that the kept take completely for granted:

Perhaps it was due to the tumultuous nature of this last pregnancy that I plucked up the courage to apply for my birth records. Towards the end of my final pregnancy I received copies of them. Poring over the unredacted parts of them, now for the first time in my 32 years, I knew what time of day I had been born, how long my mother had laboured with me, what her blood pressure had been, even the fact that she had a second-degree tear and required stitches. Only an adopted person would understand how wonderful this knowledge was to me, even though it was ‘just’ technical data. I existed. I had been born. (Cantrell, 1998, p. 59)

Our birth stories were unnaturally shrouded in mystery and taboo and replaced with a carefully curated but familiar narrative of unnatural and prescient selection.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

Reflecting on this, I confronted this internal conflict regarding my adoptive mother many, many times in our relationship and around my pregnancies and parenting. Hertz (1998) noted that rather than an adoptive mother and her adopted child being able to enjoy the innate experience of natural reciprocity, they have to intentionally create it. However, across the months *my* daughter was pregnant and when her daughter was born, I realised how much this experience has felt like the most natural and familiar thing in the world to me. I trust my daughter’s body to know what to do, I trust her instinct, I also notice myself trusting MY instinct to gravitate towards her and her daughter. I do not question my belonging here in this space. Partway through her pregnancy, I reflected:

Observing one’s own children—knowing who they are and whose they are, and witnessing their taken-for-granted natural belonging which you never had or were able to take for granted!—and their ease and synchronicity with yourself as their parent. They never question. They are not in a void, they are not in a vacuum, they are not in a blank. So, by seeing what is, up comes seeing in stark relief what is not. And so, in having a biological child [weeps] you



experience, minute by minute, hour by hour, week by month by year as your children traverse the developmental life stages, everything that YOU did not have as an adopted person. And so they are the walking, talking, laughing breathing manifestation of what you lost. What you lacked. What you didn't have. Which is paradoxically wonderful and painful, and brings adoption into the room, over and over again.

For my daughter, how natural it all is. And for me with her, how natural and “normal” and familiar it feels. Wanting to talk about it endlessly. She's so comfortable and natural with “nesting,” it's nesting. She googles everything (who knew “round ligament pain” was a thing?) She feels the baby quickening in her belly, and she tells me. And it's everything that I wasn't [weeps]. But I was! I was so wanting to nest, and so excited... but it was taboo, it was not okay, it was so infused and infected and contaminated by being adopted. And the spectre always of infertility and grief and loss in that space, which muted it and spiralled me down more into secrecy and disenfranchised stuff and gaslighting myself. And so now as I get to experience Rebecca, who knows who she is and whose she is, and has a qualitatively different experience to coming a parent than I did, I get to journey that next chapter, which will bring my stuff up. And the timing in terms of my PhD is phenomenal because it helps me see... from inside the experience but also from outside the experience.

(Reflective memo, April 2022)

I recall my great-grandmother Winnie's comments thirty years ago when she first met me, “You look jest [sic] like I spit you outta my mouth... girl, you're marked up bad”. I could not see that I was “marked up” clearly then, but now I see it **showing up** extraordinarily strongly in my granddaughter. When we received the first photo of her moments after her birth, my oldest son's immediate response was, “She's so beautiful—and she looks just like the rest of us!”. I wept when he said this, as it was so completely true, a newborn who looked like a carbon copy of all of my four babies, for me it feels uncannily so. Yet, how NATURAL it is to see resemblance, and each time anyone comments on my resemblance to my children, and now to my grandchild—how much I feel—like Anne Heffron (2016)—like I have won the lottery.

Theme 6: Redemptive: “My Reason for Living”

Theme Definition

Having constructed a life on a cracked foundation, the adoptees in this study lived in a **shadowy** world. This had **shaped** within them a deficit sense of being “not enough”, incomplete, less than, flawed and self-abandoning. Present in many interviews were instances of adopted participants struggling through their lives



perceiving that they were damaged, with multiple manifestations of self-abandonment **showing up**: negative self-image and self-blame, anger turned inwards by means of self-harm, and other mental health challenges. For each one of them, having a child represented a type of “brace” to hold them together, an opportunity to be “saved”, to become whole and “real”. *It was their relationship with their child/ren that was redemptive*, giving them the strength and **clarity** they needed to keep going, even in the darkest of times. Having their own biological child represented a route towards finally feeling “enough”, becoming whole; the child ameliorating or healing their sense of being flawed or incomplete, which potentially placed great responsibility on the child or children.

Their Stories

Being pathologised by health professionals—or by themselves—was a common theme throughout the interviews. Reflecting on her parenting journey, Juliet stated: “I would abandon myself... I was hugely self-deprecating and self-critical and self-abandoning”. Participants courageously disclosed to me a range of mental health diagnoses that they had been given, ranging from postnatal depression, anxiety and panic attacks, to diagnoses of borderline personality, eating disorders and suicidal thinking and behaviours. Disclosures emerged unprompted and organically in interviews, with participants gaining **clarity** and connecting them to their adoptive status. (It is of note that on no occasion did they recall any of the medical personnel at the time making any connection to their adoptive status). Cassie described herself as “That little girl, who felt like nothing, felt like nobody wanted her, and [who] was so desperate to be loved” and that episodically in her life these **shadows** would overwhelm her and she “would go into the deepest of sadnesses and depression”. Cassie’s description of these dark times was mentioned off recording and therefore will not be reported here. Reflecting on these patterns, she noted

The stuff that always sits there for me is the stuff that is in here [gestures to heart] and the stuff that I struggle with [suicidal thinking]. So that’s where I work on myself and that—I’m sure—is a direct correlation of all the abandonment issues and all of that. So I never feel good enough. Or worthy. (Cassie)

Yet despite this, Cassie expressed powerfully her determination that it would be different for her own created family. The theme of redemption can be seen in her recalling her intention to **shape** a new narrative for her offspring: “When I had my children, I remember saying, “It’s all been such a mess, I’m starting again. Starting my family off”.



Kate seemed matter of fact that as an adoptee, she “ended up with all sorts of diagnoses, I ended up with a diagnosis of sexual dysfunction, borderline personality disorder diagnosis...” whereas Kenneth lamented:

I think there is something deeply flawed in me that I can’t have those connections [with my children]. I don’t know if I’m broken in some way, if it’s part of the trauma of adoption, if it’s just the fact that I’m screwed up as an individual. (Kenneth)

He described that “all our children have mental health issues of one shape or another” and “As each child struggled with their own mental health issues I wondered if it was my fault, because of how broken I feel, and how disconnected I am”.

Despite these powerful inner narratives, what emerged for several participants was that becoming a parent had a definite redemptive aspect, giving them a route towards being “enough”, a reason to continue through the darkest times, a means of becoming whole. The notion of a life raft or “salvation” conferred by some of my participants on their children is consistent with Despax et al.’s (2021) research suggesting that adoptee parents perceived that their children helped them to overcome past suffering. Experiencing a biological link and physically resembling someone for the very first time, and being able to give their child what they themselves never had, served a powerfully reparatory function (Sherr et al., 2019).

Juliet recalls feeling that “I would find my way through, because my children, they were my reason for living”, and Bridget asserted “I had my children because I needed a reason to live. They really kept me alive. I would not have stayed alive without them. My children were my life raft”.

This is consistent with the 2018 literature review (Field & Pond) which identified parenting as having provided the adoptee parents with a sense of novel relational and emotional security (Hampton, 1997; Jordan & Dempsey, 2013; Vaccaro, 2012). For many of my participants, parenting was framed as a portal towards being functional and whole, a conduit to find some healing and wholeness, and for this to continue throughout the parenting journey and across their lifespan. Juliet recalled her time in hospital after giving birth:

[It was] a bit blurry, but it was more feelings of [pause] “happiness” isn’t the right word, it doesn’t even touch it, but a sense of wholeness was something I experienced for the first time. [I was] constantly trying to show up as a parent that was not as fragmented, and not as damaged as what I truly was. Because I knew then that I had shitloads of stuff to do, to clean that inside act up, but I wasn’t going to let them [her children] down, either. (Juliet)



Later in the interview Juliet reflected on how the fact of having her children was the absolute impetus within her to overcome the mental health challenges she had faced:

My commitment to my children was that they were my primary driver. I would get well—and there was no “if” or “but”. I would not go on medication—and I would find my way through, because my children, they were my reason for living. (Juliet)

This redemptive aspect of being a parent was evident as Cassie reflected on the way her children brought her towards wholeness and completeness:

Adoption is ever-present, and I don’t think it’s ever, ever going to disappear for me. I love the fact that my children have their own children, and I see that love and connection and similarity, and all those things. They’ve got a lot going for them, and I’ve been a big part of being able to make that happen for them, and pull them back together when things fell to bits. So for me—I’ve never really reflected on it—but I think I can be proud of that stuff? And overcoming my own issues which are ever present. So I don’t think that’s ever going to go. Ever. But I was able to build something out of it. (Juliet)

In a similar way, Kate had come to view her adoption journey—though fraught—as akin to a spiritual one, perhaps transmuting some of the negative effects of adoption in the transformative and healing light of understanding where it had taught her so much about who she truly was:

How blessed I’ve been, really. To have had Janet and John as the people who adopted me, to go through that hugely deeply spiritual upbringing which, you know, I wanted to dump because, you know, it was so tight and fundamentalist. The gift that I was given was to be taken away from my mother and to be placed in another place, and the circle of my life has been the spiritual journey. And if I said, what was the best thing that ever happened to me? It was [my daughter]. (Kate)

Braided autoethnography: my narrative voice

Long before this project was conceived, from a nameless and unformed place, an inner yearning ostinato somewhere along the way, I realised that being a parent was *what was making the difference* to me, moreover it was anchoring me and “growing me up”. Reflecting on this for my interview, I wrote:

I learned everything I know through my relationships with them. I learned what it was to be real and authentic. I learned I felt grounded and settled with them, and across the years, gradually I have learned that I can exist in their absence. (Julia)



I already knew back in 1998 that being in relationship with my children was helping me to make sense of my own story and nascent sense of identity:

It has been humbling and healing to tell each of my children as they have passed through each of their developmental stages and their comprehension has developed and deepened, the story of how I came to be, who Lindy [my birth mother] was, why Jerry was their grandfather, and how come you can have three grandmothers, and that I felt sad sometimes when I thought about Lindy. On some level I realised this aspect of who I was, my identity and “self” mattered profoundly to them, as they were connected to me. (Cantrell, 1998, p. 62)

While I know that kept people who are parents also struggle with their mental health and suicidal thinking, for me I was always very clear that the pain of being left by my mother was so raw, so devastating, so constant, that it was simply unthinkable that I would ever put my children through that. Having children gave me a reason to keep living (when I really didn’t want to). Despax et al. (2021) raised the question of how children who are given this redemptive role might be affected, since the role of enabling a parent to mend his or her past may be a heavy burden to bear. I was always mindful that this was a heavy burden for them, and every day I consciously reminded myself that I needed to give them “*roots and wings*” (Mark, 1959, p. 299). I was aware enough to know how desperately needy I felt, and determined not to let that stunt their independence and development, their desire to spread their wings, travel, and to be their own best selves.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

I know that I have experienced my journey of parenting as a highly protective and healing factor. Parenting’s redemptive aspect is one of the key drivers of this research, an opportunity to turn and face what has occupied my psyche for almost thirty-eight years.

It is not only adopted people who look to their children for a sense of meaning and purpose in their lives. Lifton (1994), however, considered that we adoptees look to our children to make up for all of the blood relatives who are lost to us. For me, it has been even more far-reaching than that. Journeying with my children through their developmental stages has turned a mirror on myself, which with the clarity of distance, I see more clearly the farther I get from it. The literature also suggests that adoptees appear to be “strongly embedded in families *that they have established themselves*” (Carlsten, 2007, p. 98, emphasis mine), signposting its primacy of effect.

I have looked through the liminal lens of the adopted experience for long enough to recognise that it shows up everywhere. It has deepened and



enriched my relationship with my children, given it a subterranean level of connection that feels incredibly visceral even though they are now well into adulthood. I feel they are the only humans with whom I am able to be fully myself, flawed yet enough. (Reflective memo, October 2022)

As with Juliet's experience, becoming a parent was a portal through which I could exit the fog and start to deconstruct my experience. Reflecting on the notion of psychological growth for an adopted person, and the extent to which one can make peace with the experience and integrate it somewhat into one's life, I noted:

A way through—"redemption" if you will—can only occur if someone is willing to exit the fog and do the work. Intimate relationships—and my relationship with my children through parenting particularly—presented a doorway through to that place for me where I had to start that work, for the sake of my children and, eventually, for myself. Looking back on my relationship with them over the years, I see that they have tethered me: to sanity, to enduring, to attaching, to belonging, to life itself. The relationship is redemptive. Visceral, cellular, spiritual, soul. (Julia)

My birth father frequently quoted Richard Eyre (1993) to me: "Our parents cast long shadows over our lives" (p. 1) and this applies to the kept as well as to the relinquished. This theme of the redemptive role of a biological child in the life of an adopted person may signal an invitation. We the adopted may yet be able to do the work of excavation and discarding of our default template, that unacknowledged but viscerally experienced foundational damage of loss, severance, fear, being incomplete and "less than". We may yet be able to construct a stronger foundation and thus have opportunities to respond to Erikson's *"Can I trust the world?"* (Table 1) by intentionally creating and building connection, safety, and trust in our lives.

Conclusion

The ambiguous losses caused by adoption (Powell & Afifi, 2005) are a vast topic within adoption literature and research. If reunion with biological relatives is possible or desired, there exist new losses, new adjustments, and new aspects of self to grieve. Loss of this magnitude and with this kind of complexity and ambiguity usually does not simply resolve itself, and while the sense of loss can and does change shape over time, it is lifelong. Adoptees must learn how to live with it over time, yet we must do so in the face of a society insisting we exude joy and gratitude. Imagine for a moment, if we treated other losses this way. We will explore this dynamic in the Chapter 4 as adoptee parents grapple with being themselves within the person and societal legacy of adoption.



Early adversity—building on a cracked foundation—can lead to a negative perception of oneself and of others, according to Waikamp et al. (2021). The individual may be ill-equipped to cope adaptively with conflicts, and may possess predominantly immature defences. Infancy is an intense, concentrated period of development that can—and does—have a disproportionate impact on our lives, especially such traumatic experiences as rejection, abandonment, neglect and dysfunctional parenting (Slater, 2007). Yet one must not lose sight of recoverability, and the potentiality of development over the lifespan—and there is *always* opportunity for change. This is borne out in my own experiences and reflection and that of several of my participants; it was becoming a parent that awakened us to this possibility of emerging from the “fog”, to which we will now turn our attention.

CHAPTER 4: BEING—THE APPLE ON THE PEAR TREE

Personal salience

The Apple on the Pear Tree—A Parable

Do you know how it felt, that not-belonging?

Can I paint a picture to make you understand?

Listen, and I will show you.

There was a pear tree which could not bear fruit. Its trunk was tall and sturdy, its branches were covered with healthy leaves, but seasons came and went with no new pears at all. The pear tree was very sad.

In another part of the orchard, there was an apple tree on which a tiny apple began to grow. The apple tree did not want to produce fruit, it had other plans. What to do? The apple tree was very worried.

The orchardist noticed the sadness of the pear tree and the anxiety of the apple tree, and devised a plan. Why not solve the two problems with one solution? And he cut the tiny apple off the apple tree and grafted it on as best he could to the pear tree.

The tiny apple grew and grew. She knew she was a little different, but she did her best to be the best pear she could possibly be. She knew she didn't really look like the other pears. They were green all over, but as she ripened, her skin developed a rosy glow in places. She kept those parts hidden as best she could, and usually no one noticed. Her shape was harder to conceal. Every other pear on the trees was shaped like a pear, narrow at the top, with gentle curves outward to a rounded base. She simply didn't have a narrow top, she was just as round as could be, no matter how much she held her breath and tried to diet her roundness away.

And inside, she knew that once the pears were ripe, they oozed sweet juice from soft, fibrous flesh. She knew (though she never told a soul) that she wasn't like that on the inside at all. Her flesh was firm, not soft, and crisp, not fibrous. She was even quite sharp to the taste, though she wondered if that might change when she was fully ripened. But she didn't really know what to expect.

But she kept these concerns to herself, because she didn't want the orchardist to think her ungrateful, and the pear tree was the only tree she had known. From a distance, you might never even have noticed she wasn't a pear, unless you looked closely.

But some days she felt unutterably alone, and the very core of her being seemed to yearn for—what? She didn't know. How could she know that the branches from which she had been plucked whispered familiar songs she had never heard, and the breeze carried those whispers to her on windy days...How could she miss something she had never known? How indeed. How could she feel this vague

unsettled discontent when she was growing on such a tall, prosperous tree? Why couldn't she feel more grateful?

Poor apple. They raised her the only way they knew how, to be the best pear she could possibly be, and they came to love her as much as if she had been their very own pear. And yet she was not a pear. She was an apple. Different. Different from the inside out. The vague and nameless feelings that floated in and out of her consciousness, that made her feel like she had no roots (even though the pear tree was rooted firmly in the soil) were there for a reason, though for a long, long time she denied these feelings that felt to her like betrayal.

Poor apple. Perhaps it would have been better if the orchardist had grafted her on to a banana tree to ripen¹. There would have been no question that she could have developed into a lookalike banana...she would have been different enough to be herself, an apple, and different enough to risk finding out everything an apple could be.

But, the orchardist had wanted a good match, and the pear tree was the closest he could get. And the lesson she is learning now after all this time, is that she is not a second-rate pear. She does not have to berate herself for her un-pear-like qualities, nor try to be something she is not. She is an apple, plain and simple. Had necessity not demanded that she be plucked from that apple tree all those years ago, she would have ripened, taking her appleness for granted, surrounded by her history and family tree, always knowing before the words formed themselves to be asked, that she belonged.

Now it feels as though she has been cut loose from the pear tree (or perhaps she has allowed herself to fall at last) and where she has landed is a new place to be, somewhere between the pear tree and the apple tree, somewhere lonely and uncharted, entirely separate and new. From her pain, and death of a sort, a new tree has begun to grow, and she knows that when her branches can gently brush those of the apple tree, or those of the pear tree, then she feels safe. Connected and complete. But she does not need that to grow. She is herself. No more. No less. (Pre-PhD material)

Figure 7

Apples on a Pear Tree

Source: OpenArt.ai, 29th April 2024



¹ Note that I wrote this 'parable' in the 1990s and as such it fails to contextualise the matching policy of that era, and different challenges experienced by adoptees who are markedly physically different

Erikson's Eight Stages—Stage 2: Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt

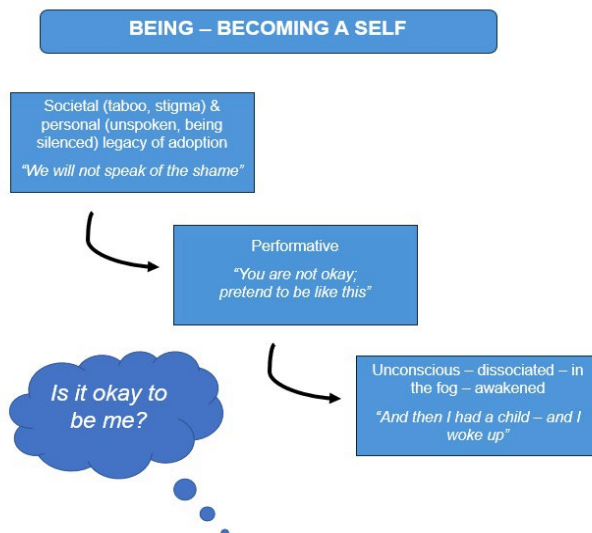
Erikson's second stage of psychosocial development unfolds during early childhood, typically from ages 18 months to 3 years. This stage centres on the child's developing sense of autonomy as they assert their will and independence, beginning to exercise control over their actions and decisions, while confronting societal expectations and boundaries (Erikson, 1980). They learn to do things for themselves, gaining some basic confidence in their own ability. Autonomy allows children to feel comfortable in their bodies and gain a greater sense of their identity, rather than being consistently blocked from having their own experiences or silencing their own thoughts due to shame and doubt. In becoming a self, the key psychosocial question to be addressed is: "Is it okay to be me?"

Formation of an Autonomous Self and the Adopted Person

Figure 8 is a reminder of this stage and here it is used to illustrate how this stage can progress within the context of the adopted person.

Figure 8

Schematic Summary of Being Themes



As Oneal (2021) has asserted, developing a positive and established self-identity is a significant issue that faces adopted persons, impacting their overall adjustment. Adopted children may grapple with feelings of insecurity and doubt, impacting their ability to confidently assert independence. The shadowy feelings of shame or doubt may continue to surface throughout childhood and adolescence and beyond if adoption is perceived to be a source of stigma, or if they struggle with questions about their origins, identity, and belonging (Colaner et al., 2014; Grotevant et al., 2017; Kalus, 2016; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011).

The personal and societal legacy of closed adoption created an environment wherein the adopted person was required to “be” someone they were not. This ground level formation of self was, in essence, performative, the construction of a “false” adaptive chameleonic self, grafted on to a different family tree. This is about the sense of “I am not okay” as a self both inside oneself as well as in relation to society. The roots of personhood lie in a shadowy space: the legacy of adoption being the unspoken, the taboo, the stigmatised, wherein the adopted person has assumed a performative adaptive self to please others and in order to navigate their world. Silenced and blocked from authenticity, the adopted person remains unconscious, dissociated, in the fog. For some adoptees, it is becoming a parent that begins to awaken them, or it happens during the process of parenting

Themes in The Apple on the Pear Tree: Overview

After immersion in the data from my interviews with participants, their reflections on the ongoing personal and societal legacy of adoption as they became parents told me something important and relevant in relation to my research question. Four subthemes were identified within participants’ reflection on the personal and societal legacy of closed adoption in their lives. The first subtheme was how adoption continuously “leaked” into everything; something of which they were very cognisant but which was frequently unnoticed or unacknowledged by others. The second theme was the shame and stigma around adoption, which had silenced them. Thirdly, participants described having lived with the gaslighting discourses of society and of their adoptive families, regarding adoption. The fourth subtheme concerned the overall message of badness conveyed by those around them, and internalised into their own narrative, that it was not “okay to be me”.

Being immersed in this cultural context had produced a performative adaptive self, of which many had been largely unaware. It had lasted until the gradual (or sudden) awakening to this legacy through parenting. I clustered these three themes together: *How the societal and personal legacy of adoption has shown up in my parenting, Performative, and Unconscious—dissociated—in the FOG—awakening*. These three cluster together because the interplay of these multiple facets contributed the central organising concept of Being—Becoming a self.

Each theme will be defined, then, following my structural template, each will be illustrated using extracts from participants’ stories, and discussed in relation to the literature. My braided autoethnography will be presented as my narrative voice in two parts: my story before the study and then elements of the study that caused me to revisit, rework, and reweave my understanding of my story as I juxtaposed it with the participants’ experiences and literature.

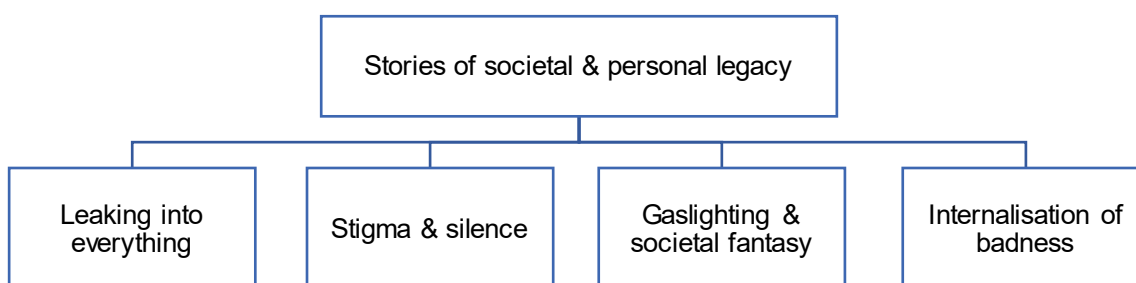
Theme 1: The Societal and Personal Legacy of Adoption: “I Look at it Like Tentacles—It’s Like These ‘Evil Tendrils’ That Just Pollute”

Theme Definition

The sub-culture of closed stranger adoption showed up by “leaking” into multiple aspects of the adoptees’ lives throughout their developmental stages, including parenting. Growing up in the shadow of the pervasive societal stigma and taboo of adoption during these decades meant that those in their lives showed little understanding, and rarely was any aspect of adoption mentioned. The resultant gaslighting they experienced became an internalised narrative of “badness”, creating unresolved issues that lingered in their lives. These subthemes (“It’s leaked into everything”, stigma/silence/not to be spoken of, gaslighting/societal fantasy, and internalisation of badness) will be used to present the findings from participants’ narratives and my discussion of the relevant literature.

Figure 9

Participants’ Stories of the Societal and Personal Legacy



Their Stories of Societal and Personal Legacy

All participants situated their experience of parenting within the pervasive shadow of the societal and personal legacy of adoption in their own lives, with four powerful sub-themes identified (Figure 9).

It’s Leaked into Everything. Reflecting across time, all participants in this research considered that adoption had “leaked into everything”, referring to the shadowy and pervasive effects of adoption weaving like “evil tendrils” through their lives. Being adopted was a sub-culture into which adoptees were assimilated. As Barry’s (1992) model of acculturation describes (Worthy et al., 2020; see Table 2), adoptees were immersed in the “host” culture, yet always “other”. In the same way that fish do not notice the water, and grafted fruit appears to conform to the host tree, the rules of this subculture were invisible to others but “known” by the adopted person; for example, the mores against talking or asking about adoption in adoptive families. Being adopted particularly affected and infected their core relationships, with self, with intimate others, and especially with their own children.

In response to the question, “Do you think adoption has gotten bigger—or smaller—in your life?”, Cassie responded that it was pervasive and ever present for her: “Oh... I think adoption—is it bigger? It’s ever present. It’s certainly not diminished. It’s certainly not diminished [participant’s emphasis]. Adoption is ever-present, and I don’t think it’s ever, ever going to disappear for me”. Juliet saw it as “the underneath, multitudes of layers of unprocessed material” that she carried around with her constantly.

Participants’ interest in and willingness to be interviewed for this study suggested to me that they already had a nascent sense of how being adopted had specifically shaped their parenting, and wanted to explore its effects further. This notion was echoed by many participants in Neil et al.’s (2023) study, who reflected on how adoption-related loss had “contaminated” their lives (p. 6), showing up as a major source of adversity to overcome. Kenneth reflected that being adopted had affected and shaped almost everything in his life, including his parenting:

I see our children and I go, “How much of that is me, how much of that is the fact that I was emotionally distant, shut off, guarded, spent my life trying to manage the secrets, and also trying to keep everybody happy because I can’t talk with [my adoptive parents] about my other life?” (Kenneth).

Having reflected deeply on the pervasive effects of adoption across her life, Juliet was clear that it had been influential in how she showed up as a parent to her children: “My emotional, unresolved issues and trauma from my adoption experience was something that definitely influenced—as much as I didn’t want it to—it shaped the way I parented”. These discourses are echoed by Baird-Hepworth (2021) in her qualitative investigation of adoptees’ experiences in intimate relationships. Her participants also identified that their adoption played a “continuous role in their lives” (p. ii).

Silencing, Stigma, and Metashame. Being born to an unwed young solo mother in the 1950 and 60s and subsequently placed for adoption, the legacy of stigma and social shame was experienced and expressed by participants as having “endless complicated layers of suffering” (Juliet), complexity and inherent trauma. Kenneth spoke of explicit silencing growing up. He recalled being instructed and trained to manage the secrets and keep silent, explaining that the secrecy and lying that took place was purported to be “protective”, with adoptive families claiming they “did not want [us] to be hurt”. However most participants recalled implicit silencing, manifested by a tacit acceptance that adoption was not spoken about in their adoptive families when they were growing up, and this continued throughout their adult lives. In Bridget’s family,

[My adoptive parents] refused to speak about adoption. I was told I was adopted—I have no memory of that—so it’s something I always knew but you were not allowed to talk about it. To speak about it was disloyal. It was an absolute no go. (Bridget)

The “no go” was the atmosphere of “unsaid” (Parkes & Mintz, 2021, p. 998) messages received from adoptive parents. A lack of open communication left the participants feeling as if topics of adoption, blood and connection were “forbidden” and “wrong”. It was taboo, and considered utterly disloyal. Felicity remembers that “those conversations about family blood and connection, they just never happened growing up. We were just a unit of five and it wasn’t talked about”. Debra was matter of fact about her perpetual status as a shameful secret in others’ lives: “‘Nobody needs to know [that you’re adopted]’, and so it was always. Life was lived like that, it [adoption] was a secret, and it was kept a secret”.

These findings are strongly echoed in the literature. Docan-Morgan (2021) speculated that “there are many adoptees who have not explored their adoptive and birth family identity due to direct or indirect messages from their adoptive family, community, and sociocultural context...” (p. 557). This silencing—the not speaking of the shame—can and does last a lifetime. Grigoropoulos’ (2022) adoptee participants also described adoption as a “highly forbidden issue” (p. 34) which still carried a tradition of secrecy. Disloyalty runs deep, as noted by Ahuriri-Driscoll (2020) where she highlighted how ingrained loyalty to adoptive parents can orient adoptees towards the status quo acceptance of the dominant cultural narratives within which they were raised, perpetuating their silenced voices.

Stigma—whether explicit or covert—can be so problematic to the bearers, that they will go to great lengths to manage it in some way. It may show up concealed, denied, or in disguise. It may be downplayed or minimised. It could be argued that in many adoptive families, the shame experienced about infertility and subsequent adoption of a child was unconsciously displaced onto the child, mixed up in a concoction of unspeakable things that were internalised—sex, and fertility, and disappointment, and anger. Children sense tension, and with the self-centredness of childhood, can easily assume that they are the cause. It seems plausible that the persistent background presence in the adoptive family of an unarticulated but felt sense of shame and doubt might taint the development of a child’s feeling comfortable and autonomous in their formative experiences of identity. Ellis (1998) coined the term “metashame”—“feeling ashamed for feeling ashamed” (p. 526) wherein she feels embarrassed and ashamed of her minor bodily stigma, and is further ashamed that it troubles her to such an extent. Robertson (2001) suggested that secrecy possesses a

sense of deviancy, which has implications for the adoptee’s identity formation, their ability to “show who they are and find true acceptance” (Robertson, 2001, p. 76). Furthermore, secrecy and lies can compromise adoptees’ ability to trust themselves (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Brodzinsky et al., 1998; Parkes & Mintz, 2021).

It is clear that stigma, secrets and lies surrounding their existence permeated participants’ worlds. Moreover, the stigma and secrets had been perpetuated intergenerationally when adoptees had their own biological children and grandchildren, as described angrily by Kenneth:

It [adoption] permeates the family [...] there is all this secrecy, all this stuff going on, and so my four children are aware of this dynamic and they unfortunately have had to keep all these secrets as well, which has influenced the whole dynamic of our family. [...] and even with raising children there’s been this whole thing where my kids have had to—in a sense—live the secrets and lies as well, because we can’t talk about adoption. It’s only since they’ve been adults that it’s been a topic with them because when they were growing up there was a fear that they might have “blurted” something out to their grandparents, my adoptive parents, and hurt them or just cause a “thing” to happen. [...] He [grandson] couldn’t know these things. So we have to perpetuate the secrets in the next generation because we’re protecting the emotions of people who are not ourselves. And it’s just a crap existence.
(Kenneth)

This account highlights the intergenerational nature of being silenced by shame and stigma, in addition to having shaped his parenting by way of an enduring narrative of silence in his created family. Cassie remains partially silenced even now, her parenting still being shaped by how she feels constrained from being completely honest with her children as to how deeply scarred and wounded she feels by adoption. She feels that her children would not understand, and, like Juliet, she is desperate to shield them from the pain she experiences:

I think the long-term effects of those first years is huge. And I don’t know how other adoptees find that. But I do struggle. I don’t actually think they [her children] get it. I think I’ve told them the story in a factual way, a narrative. But no, they don’t get the effect on me. I’ve protected them from that. I think they would be shocked from [sic] the hurt and the harm that I feel. The effect it’s had on me, and the effect it continues to have. I don’t think they get that. And I wouldn’t want them to get that. I think it’s part of my protection. That’s my struggle. And I think my kids would be shocked, I think if I did something stupid—which has been my default thought for years, that I move away from all

the time and tell myself, “Don’t be so stupid”—but my default thought [suicide] is there, and I think they would just be shocked and horrified. (Cassie)

On reaching adulthood, all of the participants in my study had chosen to search for and attempt to connect with their biological parents, considering reunion to be a vital legacy of openness and honesty for themselves and for their children. For some, their ongoing relationships with their birth families are an integral and positive aspect of their and their children’s lives. Despite this, they remain perpetually in the shadow of the closed adoption era of stigma, a shameful taboo, about which they are still unable to speak, except with their own children. For some, metashame means that even the topic of adoption remains taboo and unspoken in their adoptive families. Debra admitted that, even after all this time and her adoptive parents both having passed away, talking to me about the fact that she was adopted “[...] still fills me with that feeling of guilt, because it was supposed to be so secretive...both from Mum and Dad’s perspective, but also from my birth mother’s perspective”. Yet, she has been able to speak with her children about her adoption, and the complexities therein.

The lifelong presence of silencing, stigma, and metashame for the adoptee appears to have interrupted the healthy development of autonomy, replacing it with shame, doubt, denial and dissembling. Erikson (1980) was clear that mastery of a given stage was not required to advance to the next stage; however, he considered that the challenges of stages not successfully completed might be expected to return as problems in the future. In this study, shame and stigma can be seen to have shaped participants’ parenting by way of an enduring narrative of silence or “spin” in their created families. Do adopted people have the clarity to move beyond the self-consciousness and shameful associations with which we were raised, or do we marinate in a continual shadowy default core belief of our own wrongness, thus answering the question, “Is it okay to be me?” with a resounding “No!”

Gaslighting—Societal Fantasy/Not Understood. Gaslighting, a secondary microaggression (Johnson et al., 2021) is a type of psychological or emotional abuse which can be intentional or unconscious, wherein a person is manipulated to doubt themselves or question their own sanity, perceptions, or grasp of reality. Different forms of gaslighting include reality manipulation or questioning (“Everyone is telling me I should be grateful to be adopted—am I lucky to have lost my parents at birth? I don’t feel grateful or lucky”), outright lies (“Your mother was a prostitute”), trivialising (“It’s no big deal”), scapegoating (“I’m the one to blame for my adoptive parents’ unhappy marriage”).

Having lived their entire lives in the shadow of adoption, participants considered that the multiple challenges they had navigated were largely invisible to their own

families, and to society at large. The taken-for-grantedness and accepted discourses regarding adoption in New Zealand society continue to be pervasive (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2023). Some participants felt gaslighted by others in their lives, the “kept” who failed to understand the legacy of adoption or acknowledge their lived experience. This showed up for other adopted persons as a gaslighting of themselves, finding it difficult to trust their own reality against the societal narrative, coping by means of repressing or masking their deeper pain and confusion (“Why is this still an issue for me? I should be able to just get over it”). “Evil tendrils” may well be invisible to others, but the adoptee knows full well that they remain.

Juliet reflected on the chronic internal conflict she experienced between the narrative of what was promulgated in wider society and her adoptive family, versus her own somatic knowing:

I think I danced in and out of that for a lot of years, holding that tension between the dominant narrative of what the social cultural attitudes [were] and what they’d [adoptive parents] been told and the dissonance it was creating in my gut, my intuition and my knowingness. (Juliet)

Participants were clear that the social and personal legacy of adoption had shaped their parenting. Despite their belief that wider society had no understanding of their adoption experience, all of the participants in this study expressed how important it was to them that their own children understood what adoption was, why it mattered, and that to them it was neither taboo nor shameful. Further, Debra was adamant that the legacy of secrecy would not be perpetuated in the family that she and her partner created. She intended to shape “a very different sort of family, that didn’t have secrets, and [I was] going to be transparent about whatever it was [I was] navigating and grappling with”. Like Debra, Juliet also wanted the ability to have honest dialogue with her children, though acknowledged her own desire to shield them by filtering what she shared:

That was something that I think is just surfacing for me now, that I think that I wanted to acknowledge difference for my children, and I didn’t want denial all the time about everything. I also didn’t want them to feel burdened with my stuff [adoption]. I so didn’t want them to have that on their shoulders. (Juliet)

Internalisation of Badness. What one participant described as the “amputation” of adoption showed up for participants as a feeling of being flawed, unwanted, and discarded. They described a sense of always being on the “outside” looking in, some dissociating or numbing from their pain, others self-harming or having periods of time where they contemplated ending their lives.

Having been relinquished by their own mothers, some participants had internalised a notion of being a “bad seed” (Kirschner & Nagel, 1988), sensing that something must be wrong with them, that they were flawed and “like a freak”. A sense and expectation of rejection felt like their hard-wired “default”. Kenneth struggled to articulate this:

Ummm [long pause], to be honest with you, I think there is something deeply flawed in me... I don’t know if I’m broken in some way, if it’s part of the trauma of adoption, [or] if it’s just the fact that I’m screwed up as an individual.

(Kenneth)

Hertz (1998) described an adopted person who was receiving psychoanalysis who, “rather than blaming her [birth mother] for the relinquishment, she [the adoptee] blamed herself for “not being perfect,” and, therefore, not worth keeping. This defective self-image was at the core of how she defined herself throughout her life...” (p. 107). Guittard (2022) explored the notion of “adoption-specific shame” (p. 57), suggesting that within the adopted person is “an internal representation of ‘badness’ directed toward the self, a ‘badness’ so profound it fears exposure of any kind” (p. 57). Such a perception was shared by several of my participants.

Many had blamed themselves for the fact that they felt never whole, or good enough, or truly “themselves”. Ever. These findings were also replicated by several participants in Grigoropoulos’ (2022) study. He concluded that society projects stigma onto the adopted individual based on negative discourses such as that an adopted child will never be the family’s real child, or that adopted children are “unwanted” or “rejected”. Such societal beliefs may well be internalised, shaping adoptees’ self-esteem as they consider themselves as somehow defective. For Cassie, adoption’s legacy remained a continual internalisation of her “badness” using up psychological space, leaving her feeling raw, vulnerable, and readily triggered, something that she continues to conceal in order to shield her adult children from “all the abandonment issues and all of that. So I never feel good enough. Or worthy. I have some really dark times, which I don’t share with my kids”. Becoming a parent meant an opportunity to shape their script differently, to see their child/ren having a profoundly different legacy than their own, growing up in a completely different family culture.

This threw their own legacy into sharp relief as they gained clarity regarding their thoughts and feelings, shaping their aspirations as a parent and the kind of parenting atmosphere they wanted for their children. For most, a tighter bond was forged with their own children due to a determination that their children and grandchildren would experience what the adopted person had not: a birth story, being wanted, validation, mirroring, connection, freedom to be authentic.

These insights were echoed by adopted people in Blake and Coombes’ 2015 study, who spoke of their positioning in the “no-man’s land” of inhabiting a liminal space between illegitimacy, secrecy, and a sense of themselves as “not good enough” (p. 53). Their pain was compounded by the difficulty in expressing what felt inexpressible. Blake (2013) eloquently explained that “Stepping outside of those taken-for-granted discourses is precarious and adoptees must attempt to speak a subjectivity beyond that which is spoken. [...] Trying to enunciate a particular space for adoptees is fraught when there is no language for those experiences” (p.66). How do we begin to name that which is nameless and disembodied? Blake (2013) had a similar experience:

With the dual citizenship of being an adoptee and a researcher I have existed in a liminal state. It has been both emotional and uncomfortable as I go between the interpretation and representation of the participants’ experiences (and mine), and realise that through making visible the invisible it enables the place of no-man’s land to be “claimed.” [The] metaphor of no-man’s land resonated with my own embodied knowing. It enabled me to access that which has always been out of reach. It explained the “essence” of living life on the outer boundaries, fitting but never fitting, belonging but never belonging, knowing oneself but never quite. The embodiment of nullius filius is taken up as the “truth” of who I am forever positioned as belonging to no-one and belonging nowhere. Living in no-man’s land is only ever a moment away. Through the inter-subjective spaces, and in relationship with others, I/we can be returned there, forever triggered into abandonment, rejection and ‘other’. Ambivalence informs the landscape of no-man’s land. It is inherent and unspeakable. (Blake, 2013, p. 252)

Is it any wonder that, in this perpetual tension of fitting/not fitting, belonging/not belonging, an inner discourse is shaped? That being “wrong”, “bad”, and “flawed” is internalised and hardwired as a core belief, from which we will reference ourselves in perpetuity? As described by Carlini (1997),

Separation from their biological parent has caused them [adoptees] intense emotional pain which tends to show up in extremes of self-doubt in adoptees. They believe that if their biological parents could abandon them, they must be defective human beings; otherwise, how could a parent put a child up for adoption, unless that child was unlovable, worthless, or deficient in some manner. No amount of reassurance or explanation will completely convince the adoptee that he was not at fault. (Carlini, 1997; quoted in Verzulli, 2000, p. 67)

All of this makes far more sense when the notion of the shadow is regarded through a lens of trauma—returning to the writing of Van der Kolk (2014) who describes

that a person’s spirit is killed when their distress is “met by silence and incomprehension” (p. 278), which has been the experience for myself and so many adopted people. Van der Kolk articulates with poignancy that the experiences of not having been wanted, not having been seen, and not having been allowed to speak the truth shows up as an inner void within the person, and as “holes in the soul” (p. 355). Juliet had reflected deeply on her realisation that there had been so much going on unconsciously inside her pertaining to adoption, yet on a surface level she had felt she had handled it. Yet it was becoming a parent that propelled her to really address what was at her core:

I suppose that, cycling back to the birth of [my daughter], that’s really where the whole personal, spiritual, real adoption work began. Because even though I had everything locked in my unconscious up until then, I thought I’d dealt with everything, I thought I’d coped. I mean, how lucky was I? I had both birth parents in my life, I knew all of the answers, I knew what blood ran through my veins, I knew...So what did I have to be worried about? What was I upset about? Why was this happening to me? But it was the underneath, multitudes of layers of unprocessed material, and continual internalisation of the badness. (Juliet)

Juliet’s perspicacity and ability to be so self-aware was startling; she gave so much rich, insightful material, and it took me some time to process and digest it. In comparing my pre-study reflections and understandings, Juliet’s accumulated personal and professional wisdom was so valuable as I braided my own recollections pertaining to the social and personal legacy of adoption in my own life, with new insights and where I now locate myself. I have set the stage with an autobiographical vignette, then move through the same headings that were identified as subthemes for my participants that caused me to revisit, rework, and reweave my understanding of my story.

Braided autoethnography: my narrative voice:

It is a blisteringly hot summer’s afternoon in 1972, and I am about nine years old. My school friend has come to stay with us and has been asking me questions about adoption. I have decided that THIS is the day I am finally going to ask my mother if she knows anything about my real mother. She is preparing a roast dinner for nine people in the tiny, airless kitchen space of our holiday house, and stress and resentment are emanating off her like waves. Even before I open my mouth to frame the question, a part of me cautions myself, “This is a bad idea”.

I hover in the doorway, hesitantly.

“What is it?” she snaps. Many years later when I am the mother in the long hot summer, I think back to how irritated she must have felt, with her husband and friends

down at the beach while she thanklessly peeled and prepped and martyred herself in that tiny kitchen. However it is 1972, and I know nothing of this.

“Who is my real mother?” I murmur.

Her eyes narrow. She is exasperated. Perhaps she is thinking, “Why now?” Or “What a ridiculous question!”. Or simply, “I don’t want to talk about it”. She doesn’t stop her angry chopping of vegetables, and her body is tense.

“They didn’t tell us much. [chop chop] The doctor who examined you said you had a ‘blue chip pedigree,’ it was a wealthy family. [chop chop chop] Your father was American. Now go away!”

Holding these fragile and precious nuggets of information, I scuttle off and hide from her anger and what feels like hatred.

Wealthy? But I thought she was poor, and that was why she couldn’t look after me. Wasn’t that why mothers gave their babies away? What’s a pedigree? I thought it was something our Siamese cat had. American? Did that make me half American? How did she know these things? (Reflective memo, May 2023)

Rather than settle my obstinate questionings, these tiny seeds of information grew into a climbing vine that continued to grow relentlessly inside myself. In my child’s brain, it felt unsafe to go back to my adoptive mother for more information, since—in my mind—I had clearly enraged her. But now I knew my real mother wasn’t living in poverty, in the state housing area we drove through on my way to music lessons. I had placed her there in my mind’s eye, yet apparently she hadn’t given me away because she couldn’t afford to keep me. It must mean that I was defective in some way, not good enough to keep.

My adoptive mother’s anger and brittleness certainly silenced me. A quiet, bookish child, I lacked confidence and was certainly not going to risk her ire again. The topic was never revisited with her, but internally I was weaving shards of information, fantasies, and relentless questions. I don’t recall how I knew two of my friends at secondary school were adopted, too. At some point in my teenage years I asked them about their birth mothers. The boy, a Bible Class friend, said, “I wouldn’t want to know her, she gave me away” and changed the subject. The girl, “My parents told me she was a prostitute, so no, I wouldn’t ever want to find her”. This was almost impossible for me to process. The conversation ended abruptly and was never revisited. Even my sister, two years older than me and also adopted, told me “We have two parents—why would you want any more?” and the silencing was complete. Clearly there was something very wrong with me that I DID want to know, but I had learned to be silent.

Throughout the remainder of childhood and for the entirety of my adolescence, I was searching for my mother, scanning faces in the bus, sidling up within earshot of

anyone with an American accent (“Perhaps it’s my father”), nursing these priceless jewels of knowing, and falling asleep at night telling myself bedtime stories about her and how she was yearning for me just as I yearned for her. It was to be a further two decades before I began to interrupt the silent taboo with truth, another secretive, silent process of trying to find her.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

Throughout the course of this PhD, I have come to acknowledge that the choice of this topic is a further step for me into interrupting the silence and stigma around adoption. My exploration of the literature from during the closed adoption era from the 1950s through to the 80s has woven through my understanding and helped to make sense of my lived experience of the stigma-producing dominant discourse around adoption. Unmarried motherhood and children conceived out-of-wedlock exacted a significant toll of stigma and condemnation for women in postwar Western society. The aggressively natalist and heteronormative culture, combined with the absence of financial and moral support, resulted in thousands of young mothers relinquishing their babies (Else, 1991). Severance, combined with the secrecy of sealing birth records, was pitched as a means to give stigmatised unmarried women a “fresh start”. Further, it furnished childless adoptive parents with a facsimile of “natural”, “as if born to” parenthood, since they too operated under a layer of stigma that was such a feature of the natalist culture (Blake & Coombes, 2015).

I know from my own experience and that of my participants, that loyalty to and collusion with the dominant narratives of “chosen” and “lucky” in adoptive families felt hard-wired. Yet it has been a revelation to me that writing as early as 1988, therapist Kirschner (who had been working with adopted children and their families for the previous twenty years) noted that adoptive parents believed that they had handled the entire topic of adoption openly and honestly, by providing a stereotyped version of the facts and telling the child they were “special” or “chosen”, as instructed by the agency. Kirschner and Nagel (1988) formed an opinion that the entire topic of adoption was taboo in the adoptive family, opining that adoptive parents were often psychologically unavailable to the child who was understandably attempting to grasp the meaning and implications of having been adopted but, sensing the parents’ insecurity and tension, would be left to imagine what “terrible truths” (p. 305) they might be hiding. Within this atmosphere, adoptive parents conveyed a tacit message that the entire topic of adoption was dangerous and taboo. They were likely to have felt continued pain over their own infertility, in addition to anxiety that the birth parents or state might intervene, and some might have harboured the widely held, often unconscious belief at the time that the genetic influence of the birth parents would manifest itself in antisocial

behaviour, known as the “bad seed theory” (Kirschner & Nagel, 1988, p. 307). Bad seeds have a habit of growing into bad apples, a fear that must have been harboured by many adoptive parents once their adopted young person started attempting to healthily individuate and develop their own emerging sense of self.

Infertility was often on my mind. It had cast such a spectre over my adoptive mother’s life and seemed to always be the elephant in the room. I remember sitting beside her in church and feeling acutely uncomfortable and embarrassed when a passage from the Bible was read out that mentioned someone being “barren”. That word “barren” was the ugliest I knew. The religion of my youth treated infertility as a curse, “The Lord closed her womb” type of stuff. (Julia)

I have revisited nine-year old Julia in that hot, airless kitchen, and my adoptive mother’s angrily pressed together lips many times over the ensuing years. I have thought of my school friends who had, like me, been silenced in a range of ways. Hearing the myriad ways my participants and I were silenced when we asked developmentally understandable questions about our identities, how we learned to adapt and blend in, I have been able to rework my own personal narratives into a larger context of insight and compassion. Rather than being able to acknowledge and claim our differences and uniqueness (as discussed by Kirk, 1964), we adoptees were apples that had been grafted on to a tree of another fruit. Little wonder we learned to deny and obscure the differences, attempting silently to blend in and belong to the pears around us. As I have juxtaposed my story with those of my participants, I have written honestly of how pervasively adoption has woven itself through my life; yet notice that I still press my “mute” button, and tie my own gag tightly around my mouth on the subject of adoption when around my adoptive family.

It’s Leaked Into Everything for Me Too. Adoption is never “not there”. Before I started this project, I was aware that the paucity of information and discomfort in the narrative surrounding my adoptive status had fostered an enduring lack of authentic dialogue with my adoptive parents. If adoption was mentioned at all, it was with positivity and nostalgia. When I decided to inform them of my birth father’s death (during the gestation of this project), their response was blank incomprehension and an immediate change of subject. In comparing my pre-study reflections, I was struck by the similarity of these with my participants’ experiences. I heard that I was not alone in this discomfort, and Kenneth’s distress about the need to curate and filter what he would tell his own children that could not be relayed to his parents made me realise how we still exist in the shadow. The tentacles and tendrils still wind their way invisibly through adoptee lives, leaking into everything.

The social and personal legacy of adoption shows up for my adult children to a far lesser extent than it showed up for me, despite their awareness of how deeply it has permeated my life. Certainly they grew up in a vastly different social culture: people are no longer put in prison for being in a same-sex relationship; it is no longer shameful and stigmatising to live with your partner before you are married; no one speaks of being born “out of wedlock” or being a “bastard” anymore. Seismic social changes in the last fifty years make for a cultural dissonance when trying to explain “how it was”. I have found myself struggling to explain it, and at times I have again felt “silenced” and invalidated when my adult children cannot grasp just how the cloak of shame and stigma enshrouded everything for me. In a similar way, the current generation of teenagers cannot comprehend a world before WiFi, and those of us who lived it remonstrate, “You don’t understand, it was different then” and the sociocultural chasm remains.

Being infertile, however, carries as much turmoil and sadness in 2024 as it did in 1962, albeit spoken about more openly. Like Kenneth, I can see that because I have talked with my children about my adoption, that has at times shaped how they relate to their adoptive grandparents. I observed my newly pregnant daughter sensitively acknowledging the perpetual fact of her grandmother’s infertility, and her wanting to shield her grandmother from distress. Until then, the infertility had never directly impacted my daughter (though it was perpetually present in my consciousness):

[My daughter] asked how she should tell her grandmother about the fact that she was pregnant, not wanting to cause her distress...picking up on my own sense of discomfort. A cloud of awkwardness drifted across our shared joy and excitement at the news of her pregnancy, reminding me of how I used to feel. I saw that my own “natural” secrecy regarding my pregnancies been passed down to my pregnant daughter, and she was hesitant to show her grandmother her ultrasound scan pictures. Despite our joy and excitement at this very natural part of pregnancy, the stigma and discomfort of her grandmother’s infertility still felt palpable, transporting me back to the embarrassment at my fecundity each time I had to tell her I was pregnant. Reverberating back through the generations, this muted our understandable excitement.

Becca has taken her lead from me in not wanting to “rub it in Granny’s face” and I too feel embarrassed and guilty by Becca’s fecundity—for my mother’s sake. Not for my sake, because it is the most natural and wonderful thing in the world! I ask myself, “Why on earth did I feel guilty about my mother’s infertility? It’s not my fault—it was never my fault. It was not mine to carry”. But I feel that heaviness still, like it IS my burden, it is such a deep, cellular, excruciating thing

that it could not be spoken about, and that is 60 years of training. Every passing reference to adoption in my life has been like a landmine in the landscape. I have been well trained to step carefully and gingerly, you never know when it could detonate and destroy everything. Every trip to my father in the USA, every mention of my birth mother or birth father’s name, every time I spoke in the media about adoption, now this damn piece of research, the temperature plummets, my adoptive mother’s unspoken message is “Why are you still making me look at that?” With her, I mute my excitement about Becca, and yet even mentioning her, the recent scan that shows it’s a daughter, her swelling belly, the baby moving in utero, feels forbidden, cruel, drawing attention to an old, still festering sore. (Reflective memo, April 2022)

This “damn piece of research” has functioned to shine a spotlight on realities from which I have tried to turn my face away. The demands it has made on my time, mental and emotional energy and even physical health accentuate how important and deeply felt it is to me. Chapter 2 has outlined the six-fold framework by which I have endeavoured to care for myself ethically throughout the process, managing and mitigating risks of emotional harm to myself. Yet I am compelled to write, and am reassured by the knowledge that my elderly adoptive parents will not hear my truth. Even after all of these decades, the topic of adoption feels too contaminated, too explosive. When I explained to them that my PhD topic was about being adopted and being a parent, my mother turned to my father and said with exasperation, “But why does it [adoption] still matter?” We no longer speak of it, and I know in large part this is due to my cowardice, my loyalty, and the lifelong legacy of shame.

Stigma—Silenced—Not to be Spoken of. This entrenched and intergenerational legacy of silence and avoiding of taboo and difficult topics in my adoptive family was reinforced powerfully to me during my daughter’s pregnancy. As described in Chapter 3, I compared her natural instinct to talk incessantly about it with my own lived experience of embarrassment and guilt around my adoptive mother during my own pregnancies.

Of course, the topic of adoption was likely to elicit threatening feelings within my adoptive parents, for multiple reasons. My adoptive parents’ inability or unwillingness to speak about important topics was conveyed through silence and tension, and occasionally evasive or dismissive answers. This served to push my questions underground while simultaneously implying that the truth was too dangerous to be faced, and my yearnings did not matter, essentially gaslighting my somatic reality. It also denied me reassurance and acceptance of the relentless wonderings I had about my own history. The lack of communicative openness within the adoptive family

described by Henze-Pedersen (2019) was my experience. My adaptive chameleon façade was reinforced, alongside the construction of an alienating wall of silence between my adoptive parents and myself. As a result, I was determined that my relationship with my children would be one of communicative openness, and there would be nothing about which we could not speak. Immersion in the shadowy legacy of secrets and lies gave me a powerful motivation to shape my parenting of my children in a different way: risking honesty and vulnerability with my children. This has been hard won, since it did not come naturally.

Interrupting the silence and stigma with my children pertaining to adoption has been another type of braided reality, as there are multiple strands to consider here, too. One strand is their non-adoptee status: they are kept. Their experiences are not my experiences. They cannot be expected to grasp my reality, although in past decades I rather naively assumed that they might.

A second strand is my chronic fear of their disapproval. Whilst there is a deep desperation to use my voice in this space, I simultaneously fear their disapproval, and being invalidated by them. I cling to a hope that they will see my life as they experienced me as their mother through fresh eyes of insight. Like Cassie, the protective part of me has sought to shield them from the darker parts, in as much as I have strived to be completely authentic with them, but I hope there will be aspects that will have been illuminated for them in the light of understanding.

Third, I am reminded that they have all had their own experiences of Mum being adopted. They all have their own partial piece of what is a puzzle that even I do not fully understand. Each time we travelled as a family to the USA to visit my birth father and the extended family, they were all at very different ages and developmental stages; consequently they have disparate memories and recollections. My agonies were not theirs. My perspective was clouded with baggage that was not theirs to carry. Similarly, their relationships with my adoptive family are different and separate to my own; they have their own memories and loyalties, and we see through different lenses. Truly I have had to learn to individuate in this area across my life and theirs. I still do.

Over the years as I came to know other adopted people authentically, I saw that most of us are frequently silent about our internal experience of adoption. This is for many reasons: because of a fear of rejection, gaslighting, and misunderstanding; because we lack the language to articulate what is felt but intangible; and because of a lifetime’s training in not breaking our silences. The losses of adoption are real, and they are ambiguous. Adopted people learn to live with them, yet are forced to do so with the societal expectation that if we do speak of adoption, then we do so with a “grateful” and “lucky” spin, perhaps employing Positive Adoption Language (Branco et al., 2023). An

expectation that usually means that the kind of understanding, validation and support we need to manage our grief is either non-existent or unavailable to us. Imagine if society treated other losses this way. Imagine losing a loved one—tragically, unexpectedly—and then being forbidden to ever speak of the loss, while behaving as though it was the best thing that had ever happened to you, and you were grateful! Participants in my research all thanked me for having been able to talk at this deeper level and consider aspects of how their being adopted had affected their parenting; they unanimously valued the safety and acceptance of no longer being silenced, and feeling free to speak.

Hearing their stories was deeply validating for me. Kenneth’s articulating his concomitant guilt intermingled with resentment resonated, highlighting my perpetual child status and my persistent inability to step forward into naming my truth. The hard-wired gratitude discourse always trumps the truth of my lived experience. Even now in conversations with those who lack curiosity or gentleness around this topic, I feel gagged. Cancelled. I feel guilty since I have veered off my gratitude script. My sense of validation during the interview process went both ways. Debra wrote to me following our interview to reiterate the clarity she had gained:

Since we met, I have been thinking of my thoughts at different times and I can remember saying at several times, especially after the birth of each of our children, “I don’t know how my mother gave me away...I could never give away my baby”. I didn’t know the meaning of this [adoption] until later in life. (Debra)

Participants’ appreciative comments give a small window into the significance of adopted persons feeling safe to hear others’ stories and understandings, which validates and illuminates what was going on for them, even if they did not “see” it at the time. Adopted people have seldom had a forum in which they can safely and honestly explore their range of feelings, and for many it has taken decades to begin to unpack and deconstruct adoption’s ongoing effects in their lives. Their reticence suggests alignment to the dominant gratitude narrative, or concern with opening a Pandora’s Box, or ambivalence and loyalty about protecting others’ feelings. In recent years, adoptees in peer support groups emerging throughout Aotearoa (Adoption Support Groups for Adopted People, n.d.) report that the most important aspect of attending is finally having a forum where they feel safe to speak their truth about adoption (regardless of how contradictory, ugly, confusing or unpalatable it may be). The validation inherent in speaking your truth and knowing it will land with others who see and hear and accept the authenticity of your story, is immeasurable.

Gaslighting—Societal Fantasy/Not Understood. Over the course of this research, in my interviews with participants, their stories and honesty have opened my

eyes to the extent to which the silencing surrounding being adopted served to isolate me, leading me to question myself and my own grasp of reality. Since everyone around me had been behaving as if nothing was wrong and trivialising what for me deep down inside was anything BUT trivial, I repeatedly repressed or masked my pain and confusion. I wanted and needed to talk about what I was feeling, in order to process it, to feel seen and validated for what was real and distressing. Yet when I did talk about it, I was met with a range of responses and microaggressions. Often a blank incomprehension (“What difference does it make, I’ve never even thought about that”), sometimes a polite curiosity about my “reunion story”; at times the “envy” of those who had grown up with their “real” family (“My family are so dysfunctional, I wish I was adopted), and at times dismissal (“You’re not still going on about that adoption thing, are you?”) or shaming (“Well you should be grateful, at least you weren’t raised in an orphanage”). Exploring the work of Johnson et al. (2021) as they illuminate the many ways gaslighting is used on members of marginalised groups, has been illuminating. It has enabled me to rework my own experience from constructing myself and being constructed as “oversensitive” or “overly focused on the negatives” to understanding the gaslighting as a method of positioning me within cultural norms and expectations.

The Aotearoa New Zealand adoption scholar and activist, Reverend Keith C. Griffith (1998) asserted that adoption loss is the only trauma in the world where the victims are expected by the whole of society to be grateful. Most people in society still appear to have a belief and a need to valiantly defend a singular, reductive, and uncomplicated truth about adoption. This narrative reminds adopted people that if we were given to a loving home, we were “saved”. We were lucky. We shouldn’t feel this pain, this severance, this loss. Our parents must be such wonderful people. We should feel so grateful. How lucky. How special. The gaslighting exists in the gulf between these misconceptions, misrepresentations, and misalignments—and our actual lived experiences as adopted people, who have experienced the interior of an adopted life. Little wonder that the gaslighting we receive from others (and ourselves) leaves us feeling completely erased and utterly silenced.

While it is beyond the scope of this research, I believe that further exploration of this area in the realm of adoption would be valuable, due to its many impacts, such as perpetuating stigma and trauma, and deleterious effects on mental health and self-efficacy.

Internalisation of Badness. The prevailing stigmatising societal context of the closed adoption era, combined with adoptive parents being unwilling or ill equipped (then and now) to have conversations about challenging topics with their adopted sons and daughters, the severance from biological mother and kin, and the internalisation of

all this in the psyche, created a “perfect storm” of badness for those of us who were—and are—adopted. As described earlier, my experience as a nine-year-old was the legacy of closed adoption. On all fronts—personal, physical, psychological, relational, societal—I sensed a wrong-footedness, but internalised this as somehow of my own doing, believing it was something inherent that had rendered me unwanted and discarded. It is difficult to overstate the profound darkness and shadowy depth of this core belief that has been my internal narrative for six decades. Prior to this research, through therapy, reading, journalling and connecting with other adopted persons, I was already becoming better able to navigate adoption’s legacy. Conducting this piece of research and comparing my story with the participants’ was an influential factor that opened my mind to critiquing my own flawed thinking. Hearing the raw and honest stories of other adopted people from the closed stranger adoption era as they too spoke of believing that they were fundamentally flawed (“Why else would I have been discarded?”) made me realise that I certainly did not believe this to be true about them. Intellectual honesty forced me to self-critically appraise why I had a different paradigm for myself than I had for them. SHE is adopted but she is not fundamentally bad and flawed. I too am adopted—but I AM fundamentally bad and flawed. The logical part of myself kept pushing back against my glaring irrationality and inconsistency.

The second factor that provoked a growing realisation that perhaps my thinking had been flawed all of this time was the births of my three grandchildren. These births have had a deeply profound impact on how I see my unborn and baby self, in a way that did not happen when I had my own children. Being pregnant, birthing, and parenting my four children did not interrupt my internal dialogue of being flawed and worthless, discarded and unlovable; those beliefs remained as deeply entrenched as ever. As I reflect on those four relationships I can see with the clarity of distance, that my children were my sole source of nurture. They also gave me a meaning to my life that I desperately craved. Yet I was so symbiotically attached to them, in a sense I did not exist as separate from them. In those years I was unable to think of them objectively, and unable to view myself as whole without them. Parenting was so totally consuming that I was largely able to bracket how flawed and “bad” I was.

However, the distance afforded by being a generation removed, meant that I could see my baby granddaughter and grandsons from a completely different perspective. Far enough removed (“It’s not my pregnancy, not my baby”) to be reasonably objective about it. I could see myself through them. Their conception, gestation, delivery, their very existence showed up for me with shining clarity that the baby is perfect. The baby is absolutely who he or she is supposed to be. One year ago, I stood in a tiny hospital cubicle watching through my joyful tears as my grandson’s

mother gazed at him in awe and reverence. I imagined someone coming into the cubicle and taking him away—never to be seen by her again—and given to another random mother. Or imagining that she (like my own mother) had decided voluntarily that she didn’t want him. In the midst of this ghastly mental scenario I realised that none of these scenarios would have rendered him, the newborn infant, bad. Or flawed. Or unworthy. This may seem completely obvious to an observer, but it had never been real to me before this. As I watch my three grandchildren grow and develop, I see the rightness of them being exactly who they are. And their parents and those of us who love them wanting them to be themselves in a way I never was.

When my children were growing up, I was struck by how very different from one another they all were. I would use the metaphor of seeds to remind myself that they all needed different things and would bloom in different ways. The seed might grow to be a sturdy oak tree, a delicate orchid, a cheerful sunflower, a graceful kowhai; my role was to nurture and encourage them to be the best oak, orchid, sunflower or kowhai they could be. Not to expect the oak tree to fit into an orchid’s pot or expect each to thrive in the same conditions and so on. So I know that I realised this—but had been blind to it in myself. Having lived my life trying desperately to be a pear yet forever grappling with my “appleness.”

Theme 2: The Performative “Adaptee”: “Pretending as if Life Depended on it”

Theme definition

Many adoptees are enculturated into adaptively playing a role, to ensure they are what the adopting family need and want them to be. However, the experience of becoming a parent to one’s own biological children afforded the adopted person their first opportunity to experience another way of being, an opportunity to experience NOT being performative, a first taste of being truly themselves, showing up and being real, and exactly who and what their children needed and wanted, no longer second-best. Thus, there could exist a completely different atmosphere in the family created by the adoptee, no longer acting and dissembling, and letting go of the need to be perfect.

Their Stories

When McWhinnie (1967) examined married couples’ reasons for adopting a child, she found on occasion that the child was not accepted for itself, but rather insofar as it met the adopters’ needs. Examples of the rationale for adopting a child were described as the desire to have someone who belonged to the adopters, or who would offer the adopters company, or to have someone to look after them in their old age. Bridget reflected on the shadowy performative nature of adoption and the notion of colluding, being who the adoptive family needed her to be:

My whole childhood was performative. Because as a baby removed from your source of life, you go into survival mode. And that includes pretending to be their child, as much as they are pretending, you’re pretending. And you’re pretending as if your life depends upon it. Because it does. [...] It’s a survival relationship. And you have to adapt to that environment. But you never, I don’t think you’re particularly real, because you need to be what they need you to be. (Bridget)

Holman Jones (2005) reminded adoptees that if we “look and act the part” (p. 119) then there is a “seamlessness to incorporation and identification” which in turn influences decisions made about who to tell and what to say; as Bridget had noted, the adoptive family were also pretending.

The literature describes the performative self in a range of ways. Verrier (1993) had described how adopted persons develop an artificial or “false self” (p. 33), a defensive coping mechanism by which they adjust to their environment to protect themselves from further rejection and abandonment. Adoptee participants in Parkes and Mintz’s (2021) qualitative study spoke about “hiding” and “pretending” (p. 999) in an attempt to avoid being “found out”. As with the participants in my study, they had an implicit sense that adoption must be hidden, and that it was essential to assimilate, to be as similar to the adoptive family as possible. Endeavouring to fit in with the adoptive family, being entirely adaptive and not grounded in themselves, they relied on others, viewing them as “right”, and themselves as “wrong”. Also termed the “as-if” personality, Hertz (1998) regarded this as the way that adoptees “assimilate [...] compromising themselves in order to fit in with a biologically alien family” (p. 103).

This performative way of being also became second nature to Juliet, having its origins in pleasing her adoptive family but then generalised beyond, to everyone:

But we’re so well trained, growing up, that we’re so able to do that [navigate the complexities of reunion], because that’s what we’ve known. We know how to keep everyone happy, do the right thing by everybody, and we just tag along, last. And get very little of what’s left, and make sure that everybody else is fine and we’re actually not that fine. But we get by because we’re good strategists and ...chameleons. And we know what to do. (Juliet)

Lifton (1994), herself adopted, described the adoptee’s “artificial self” as “canny” (p. 52) since it could always sense what would be acceptable; it would avoid confrontation at all costs, and in order to fit in, it would deny its own needs for others’ sake. Acting became second nature for Bridget (“You needed to pretend to be The Child That They Would Have Had”) and for Cassie, who spoke of how she “learned so

well to dissemble and act, again, bust on that smile and be what you needed to be. You just needed to be the ‘right’ person in the ‘right’ setting. The chameleon”.

Juliet explored this notion of being performative, and acting, due to wanting to please others, musing upon how it had manifested in her relationships and shaped her parenting:

When have I ever been myself, I’ve never felt truly...well, I’d had moments of feeling myself—but often I’d feel overwhelmed by being a “pleaser” and all those things that go along with being adoption-related, dance in relationships, and all that kind of thing. (Juliet)

She went on to articulate how she felt her daughter perceived her, that perhaps even she did not see the “authentic” Juliet who was buried underneath being “the perfect adoptee”: “I think she [my daughter] saw me as a high performing perfectionist. And these are coming out now; she’ll say to me, ‘Well Mum, you always had the perfect house...’”. In a life that was entirely predicated on being perfect, the notion of being real and authentic, what Juliet describes as “natural” and instinctive, was foreign to her. This showed up as a lack of intuitive sense of trust in herself as a parent:

[Parenting was] very challenging [because] I lacked trust in myself. I didn’t trust that I had any wisdom around it. I felt like I hadn’t had an experience that had nourished me and therefore I wouldn’t trust my “natural” instincts some of the time. I was aware of that. (Juliet)

Braided autoethnography: my narrative voice:

As I was raising my children, I was becoming increasingly aware of how adoption affected me, especially around how “performative” and inauthentic I was in my life. I recall the realisation that I had no sense of an authentic self until I had my children, frequently turning to poetry as a vehicle by which I could articulate the duality of my lived experience: feeling defective but dancing the “right steps”:

The Gift Is Me.

You gave me away.

“Like a present”, my five-year-old daughter brightly says,

And oh, what a heart-stopping life-changing gift

To two empty-handed barren lives

Lucky Them

(ha)

Only you and I knew myself to be

flawed

fundamentally

*So a lifetime’s charade to keep the truth
from them
Dance always the Right Steps.
Their choreography.*

*Give them the Gift they signed up for.
Don’t wrinkle the tissue paper.
Keep the ribbon satin-smooth.
Perfect.
Flawless.
Yeah, right.
You don’t give people away.
(Pre-PhD material)*

“The Gift Is Me” spoke of the dissembling and pretending that was my moment-by-moment reality throughout my life, holding myself to what I deemed that a perfect person might do (a completely impossible standard) all the while believing myself to be utterly broken and flawed (the internalisation of badness as described in the previous section). A lifetime’s charade. My life was built around playing pretend. I pretended that my parents and family members were my blood, that their religion and family history were mine, while my biological family was kept a secret from me. I pretended I was happy to be adopted, that I didn’t yearn for my real family, who were unknown and unknowable to me. I pretended to belong, though nothing ever felt right. I always felt like the square peg trying to fit into a round hole. I felt I had to contort myself emotionally, physically, behaviourally to make myself fit, lest I be returned; abandoned again. I lived my life feeling alone, different, unworthy of love, and deeply inauthentic. Pretending as if life depended on it. In a very real way, it did.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

Growing up in a context of stigma and illegitimacy, adoption literature is rife with references to adopted people acting, dissembling, playing a role in order to belong (Corsentino, 2021), since adoptees have been given an identity which is shaped by the expectations, hopes and demands of others. Out of a duty of gratitude and loyalty, we frequently refrain from taking actions that might upset our adoptive parents, for example acknowledging birth family as family or even mentioning adoption at all, or seeking the approbation of our adoptive parents regarding our desire to search for our biological relatives.

Ironically, as Juliet has described, even the reunion with biological family can require the adoptee to perform more, as we seek to adaptively navigate between the

expectations, duties and obligations of the adopted position and the birth position within each family system. Extending our people-pleasing and the responsibility of care for all family members—to the “born to” family in addition to the “as if born to” family—becomes an added burden, since the biological family are typically ignorant of the emotional and psychological needs of the adoptee (Blake, 2013).

In memoing around this issue of how hard it had been to let go of being always perfect and performative, I gained clarity into the fact that it was parenting that had opened my eyes to this. Parenting was the first domain in my life wherein I felt able to expose self rather than donning my daily mask. In my relationship with my children, I could be fully myself. I did not need to be anyone else; my children accepted me as exactly who I was because I belonged to them and they to me. It was not questioned. There was no way I could be “not enough” to them. Despite the fact that I was still performing with everyone else in my life, I was not performing with them. Seeing with the clarity of perspective how perfectly my daughter is enough (i.e. everything) for her baby daughter—she is her whole universe!—I came to realise that sense of “I am everything they need” with my four children was what enabled me to first experience being “myself”. Only with them was I free from acting, dissembling, pretending, as described in this reflective memo:

When an adopted person has their own biological child, that child looks at them with the absolute unconditional adoration and symbiosis that they lacked. The symbiosis was snatched/stolen from them; the dyad that is the mother/baby (I need to do some more reading around that). But for our biological children, we are just everything that they need and want, simply because of who we are. We don’t have to do, or be, anything other than ourselves, there is nothing performative for our children. On some level I always “knew” that I was not performative with my children. They are the only ones with whom I can be authentic. But from the earliest moments, from the beginnings of consciousness around who we adoptees were, we weren’t enough. We certainly weren’t enough or desired by our first families, and for the families who adopted us—much as we would have loved them to have said, “YOU are everything that I want and need”, we knew that we weren’t. A baby was. Any baby would do! Take your pick, get in line. But their own baby was what they REALLY wanted. So as Kenneth said, we were second-best, so constantly “reading the room,” trying to work out how to be, how to be perfect, how to be compliant, how to not upset them, how to make them happy, how to make them glad that they’d adopted us. Always that quiet inner voice: maybe if they weren’t happy, they would give us back. (Reflective memo, January 2023)

This profoundly shaped how I viewed my role as parent to my children, and my aspirations for them. As I watched them develop, I knew that what I wanted most was for them to be authentically themselves. Who they were, whatever or whomever they might become, growing into whatever they were supposed to be. I refused to try to mould them to be some constructed paradigm of how I might wish them to be. I knew I wanted to give them roots—a solid foundation—and wings, even if that meant them going away from me (which it has).

I was determined that my relationship with my children would be Real [sic] in a way that I was never real with my adoptive parents. A relationship that was authentic and honest across ALL of their ages (developmentally appropriate) and that required me to be completely honest with them about all the choices I had made in my life. Adoption made me determined to ensure they become their own selves and not beholden or “grateful” or indebted. It made me determined to “see” my children in a way that I had never, ever experienced being “seen” in my adoptive family. (Julia).

In 1995 when my birth father came to visit me in New Zealand after we met, I was still largely a hollow and false self to everyone in my life except for my children. Insipid and scared of my own shadow, I was scared to take up space in the world. My father saw that, and was disappointed. He wanted me to be like his sisters, my paternal aunties—strong, authentic, “bolshy” women—in whom I eventually was able to see glimpses, shards of myself mirrored. One of my first feelings of authenticity occurred when I met my aunties for the first time and discovered that I, in fact, did actually look like someone else in this world. I struggled to be performative around my father, because he detested performative people, and he saw through my adaptive self. Over the ensuing twenty-six years that I knew him, he witnessed the gradual and hard-won shedding of that adaptive veneer, until I was fully authentic with him, too. From having been an empty space on my birth certificate, my father became a mirror in which I could locate and re-construct myself.

This PhD research is part of my interrupting my own adaptive discourse—from a legacy of trying to be adaptively in a particular way—and become authentically real.

“[Becoming real] isn’t how you are made, it’s a thing that happens to you.... It doesn’t happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time. That’s why it doesn’t happen often to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t

understand...once you are Real you can't become unreal again. It lasts for always". (Williams, 1922/1990)

Theme 3: From Unconsciousness and Dissociation in the “Fog” to Awakening: “It was a Shocking and Confronting Realisation”

Theme Definition

As signposted by the Skin Horse in the quote above, once you become “real” you can't become unreal again. “The fog”, a phrase employed frequently by adoptees, is sometimes explained as the acronym of “fear, obligation and guilt” around the subject of their adoption. “Exiting the fog” is a phrase typically used to capture the awakening adoptees experience when they start to acknowledge how the shadow of adoption has been a constant presence throughout their lives, they just did not “see” it until now. As this process begins, they start to reflect on how various personal and interpersonal struggles can be directly and indirectly related to adoption. They grasp that adoption was not simply a one-off event but is an ongoing and cumulative lived experience. Becoming a parent to one's own biological children is a powerful force propelling an adopted person to confront physically and psychologically, the reality of their adopted experience and thus be awakened from their original state of being an adoptive self—unconscious, dissociated, in the adoption “fog”. This theme was shared and strongly emphasised by all of my participants.

Their Stories

Some participants described themselves as being “numbed” and “dissociative” around their adoption prior to parenthood—as focusing on other things, not thinking or talking about it and remaining in a floating “untethered” space. Kate could not even remember her daughter's pregnancy and birth—the 9 months passed in a self-protective haze:

It [giving birth] is a bit of a haze, to be honest. So I think that's partly why I can't remember. What I [think] is that I probably developed some very good techniques in ensuring that I didn't know what I thought. (Kate)

Kenneth described how he had experienced the 9 months of his partner's pregnancy in a cerebral way, emotionally disconnected from the experience:

[My daughter] was born on [a] Saturday morning. It was a surreal experience because I was watching something happen that I had no emotional connection to, it wasn't until I held our daughter for the first time [pause, wave of emotion] that it made sense. Because up until that moment, it was an academic exercise in the sense that I was processing it in my head, but there was no heart connection until for the first time in my life I was holding someone who was related to me. [pause] The hard thing I think was, how could anyone give this

[child] away? How could anyone in their right mind be not prepared to hold—and keep—their own child? Now at that point I wasn’t aware of my own story and at that point I also wasn’t aware... [trails off]. (Kenneth)

Kenneth’s lack of awareness has been described by many writers as “being in the fog”, a term frequently used to describe how adopted persons “feel, think, operate and relate before they come out of the denial, conditioning and ignorance that cloaks the impacts of adoption” (Bruce, 2021, p. 1). Merritt (2022) explicitly used the term “coming out of the fog”, directly connecting it to the experience of giving birth to her children. In becoming parents to their own biological children, participants were propelled out of the “fog” of denial, sometimes exiting gradually and sometimes abruptly. Branco et al. (2023) have usefully outlined the process of adopted persons as a “marginalised group” (p. 53) developing consciousness regarding the impact of adoption. They note that the notion of adoption being “enshrouded in a ‘veil’ of opaque silence and secrecy” (p. 55) has been widely echoed. Richardson et al. (2013) described how becoming a parent seemed to have a “significant effect” (p. 365) on participants’ decisions to search for their biological mothers. This was certainly the case for Felicity and Kate. In Felicity’s case it showed up as a gradual process—but she realised it had started bubbling inside her at her first antenatal visit:

I didn’t wake up or even start waking up, “coming out of the fog” or whatever terminology you want to use, until I gave birth to [my daughter]. That was my undoing. [...] There was definitely that, “How could someone give a baby away?” I knew in my head why, I knew the societal context and all of that, but how could they? It was starting to bubble. It was starting to bubble. It started bubbling the moment I was asked [the] first question about what my mother’s experience of pregnancy was, and I couldn’t answer it. So it was bubbling...(Felicity)

Reflecting on her awakening process, Kate came to see that her process of exiting the fog of denial and starting the process of searching for her birth family had been shaken up and triggered by her daughter’s arrival.

So the birth, well the whole thing, activated it for me, but I don’t remember what I thought about it, I just know that I wanted to find out. It must’ve been really soon after [daughter] was born that I started looking [for birth family]. I suppose, I haven’t really thought about it till now, but probably it was very good for both of us [Kate and her daughter] that I did all of that. (Kate)

Regardless of adoptive status, it is axiomatic that pregnancy is a transformational period of a person’s life. It marks a time of enormous maturational upheaval and crisis, reminiscent of the developmental alterations that accompany

adolescence and menopause. Trad (1990) described that the profoundly external transformation of pregnancy was mirrored by an equally profound psychological one, as the new mother undergoes emotional preparation for motherhood, increased hormonal levels, and a concomitant increase of nurturance skills.

As foreshadowed in my critical systematic literature review (Field & Pond, 2018), there is much literature to support the notion that experiences of pregnancy, labour and delivery propel adopted people out of the “fog” in a range of ways.

Throughout the course of this research I have reflected on what it is about becoming a parent that seems to make this happen, and brings them into an awakening of how being adopted has affected so much in their lives.

1. It appears that the nine-month period of pregnancy is frequently the trigger for adoptees from a closed adoption to commence their search for their biological parents, a key component of awakening from the “fog” (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Carlsten, 2007; Howe & Feast, 2000; Vaccaro, 2012).

2. Becoming a parent brings a conscious awareness to the adopted person of what their own birth mother’s experience of relinquishment was, and the actual event of the separation (Hampton, 1997; Pinkerton, 2010).

3. Parenthood ignites the relationship between being adopted and the trauma of abandonment, which has led to the creation of an adaptive self. Conrick’s (2020) participants reported that thoughts and feelings about their early years surfaced unbidden during pregnancy and birth, propelling them toward a painful reexamination of their own sense of abandonment, in addition to the losses experienced by both their birth and their adoptive mothers.

4. The adopted person may unconsciously be identifying with an earlier developmental stage. Parens (1974) suggested that parenthood has a developmental alignment with earlier developmental stages in one’s life, citing that “each critical period of a child’s development revives in the parent his related developmental conflicts” (p. 155). Could it be possible that having a baby can revive “being” a baby? Axness (1994) referenced Erikson’s concept that when one spends a lot of time with a child of any particular age, unresolved issues from one’s own childhood at that age tend to be awakened:

After having nudged and prodded and stirred up the soup of my psyche with the trials of motherhood, and my year’s work with a therapist, this foetus I’d invited to grow under my heart—a budding girl-child—had secretly continued the unearthing process (Axness, 1994, p. 3).

If the connection with one’s mother in the initial preverbal part of one’s life is severed, then perhaps as the adopted person reaches each of the developmental

stages, it shows up with us becoming mired or stuck in that stage. Then, perhaps, as we go on to have children and THEY reach those developmental stages, then it shows up again, reactivated. This was Kenneth’s observation when his daughters were the age that his birth mother had been:

The big thing for me was when my daughters turned thirteen or fourteen and I thought of them going through the trauma of pregnancy and birth and then having to give up a child [pause] This did cause me to reflect on my own adoption, which I have struggled with, on and off, all of my life. (Kenneth)

Similarly, it was echoed in Cassie’s description of her daughters being the age she had been when she was finally legally adopted:

The challenging time for ME for adoption [was when] I had two and a half/three-year-old little girls. And that nearly did me in. Because those little girls knew their place, they knew their family. They had this huge sense of belonging and security, and they knew that Mum would do anything for them, and Daddy loved them, and that is when I broke. That is when it really hit me hard. I just thought “Oh, my God, that poor little girl...” [referring to self]. (Cassie)

My study’s results were in line with Conrick’s primary finding from her qualitative study (2020). Namely, becoming a parent was viewed by participants through the lens of adoption. Some adoptees in Conrick’s study reported that becoming a parent changed everything about the way they had previously viewed their adoptive status—truly an awakening.

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

The “fog” was present every day of my childhood and adolescence. Adoption was the archetypal elephant in the living room that was skirted around, but a continual fixation which I thought about daily. Guilty fantasies of my mother looking for me, coming to claim me, were echoed in the fiction I devoured, but never voiced. The story I told myself was that my real mother lived in the neighbouring state housing area, since she must have been too poor to be able to keep me. How it stung many years later when I learned in fact she came from a very wealthy family, and money had nothing to do with her disinterest in me, then or later. I kept my fantasies about and yearnings for her completely secret from my adoptive family. When the law was amended in 1985 to allow adopted adults to obtain their Original Birth Certificate, the fog of fear and guilt meant that I even kept the fact of my application from my husband, going to the extent of having the document posted to my workplace rather than my home address, so that even he wouldn’t learn of my obsession to know.

In the early 1980s I threw myself into involvement in an anti-abortion group, going to secondary schools educating teenagers about the development of the unborn

child, passionately arguing for the rights of the unborn. The fog kept me from consciously connecting these activities to my being adopted. Similarly, I had a vague awareness that my deep yearning to have a child of my own and anxiety about infertility were related to being adopted. And there was certainly no one in my life to whom I could share these subterranean speculations. Becoming a parent woke me up.

Until you give birth to a child, until you realise not just with your intellect, but with your body, and soul, and every emotion you possess that you have grown this child in your body and laboured him or her into the world, I don't believe that the concept of relinquishment can really be grasped. Whilst I had always understood intellectually that my mother had given me away, it was still a shocking and confronting realisation to learn for myself that she had given me away. (Julia)

This was, indeed, shattering. It was visceral and incontrovertible. For the first time, I “got” it. I saw—and could not “un-see”—what adoption truly meant.

The fog continued to lift on the arrival of my third baby, a daughter, Rebecca Mary. This felt particularly special, the only granddaughter for my adoptive parents. I gave her the same second name that my birth mother had given me (she had named me Anna Mary on my Original Birth Certificate). I sensed that there was a particular salience to having had a daughter, as my birth mother had. Coming home from the hospital with my perfect baby girl, I wrote to my birth mother to tell her. She replied enthusiastically, even though two previous years of letters to her had been met with complete silence. In that one and only letter, she even greeted my daughter by name, unwittingly pulling a long-entrenched scab off a deep wound.

Many, many months of intense emotional pain ensued, spiralling down into anorexia, and the closest I came to ending my life. The only thing stopping me from doing this was the determination that I would NOT leave my children. It was in a counsellor's office that I first received the vehicle that would support me to identify, name and address issues of rejection and abandonment. The marriage therapist gave me a chapter of Verrier's *The Primal Wound* (1993) to read. I recall feeling affronted that he believed my being adopted had anything to do with the train wreck of my relationship and health, but dutifully took it home and started reading. The word “abandoned” ricocheted off the page like a punch in my stomach. Verrier was a beacon helping me to finally progress through that adoption fog, a guide towards naming, feeling, and finally owning the pain and the truth of my adoptive experience, and beginning to create an authentic self. With many years of hindsight, I realise how, like Juliet, “the birth of my daughter had taken the lid off my adoption stuff”.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

For the adopted person, parenting sits somewhere between an invitation and an imperative. It forces many of us to face the effects of adoption in our lives, revisiting them and being invited to deconstruct and reconstruct our lives and identities. Growing up, we peered through the blindfold of closed adoption, grateful for the merest crumbs about who we were and from whence we came. Now we are parents, our lens is still opaque and cloudy, and we squint to see... What do we see? Wrongfooted, we stumble.

We didn't know we couldn't see.

Listening to my participants' stories, I am flooded with a long-forgotten memory. As a little girl, I am told, I squinted at the television set, I fell asleep on the briefest of car journeys, I always had my head in a book, I was solitary and shy. Sitting in the front row of the classroom, I had to peer at others' work to know what the teacher had written on the blackboard.

I am in Standard 4, the youngest in the class, just 9 years old. Today the hearing/vision tester ladies are visiting school. My whole class has been lined up alphabetically, girls first. I am about halfway along the line since my surname starts with “L.” One by one we traipse into the room to have our hearing and vision screened. One girl (surname “B”) comes out crying! Oh no—what horror, what could possibly have happened to her? Curious and apprehensive, the Cs onwards cluster around her to find out.

“I couldn't read the bottom two lines on the chart,” she manages, in between sobs. “And they said I might have to have—glasses!”

Sharp intakes of breath all round. We tut-tut sympathetically.

My turn comes and I wander in, dutifully covering my right eye to have my left eye tested.

“Can you read the letters, please dear?” says the lady.

I squint. I pause.

“What's the top letter?” she prompts.

Okay, this should be easy. Is it an F? An E? An H? or perhaps an L? It doesn't seem to have any round bits on it, but I'm not entirely certain, so I guess. I guess wrong.

It transpires that I can't read the top letter with my left eye, and with my right eye I can only get as far as the third line. My next recollection is my adoptive father going with me to the optometrist in the city and being tested and fitted with my first of many pairs of glasses, for myopia and an astigmatism.

Figure 10
Sight Chart



I’m wearing really ugly thick plastic glasses. I can’t really tell how very ugly they are, because the man made me try on empty frames and I couldn’t see them clearly. My father is with me as we leave the optometrist on Hereford Street.

“Mind the step!” the receptionist warns him. “You need to hold her hand, the lenses will take some getting used to”.

He dutifully takes my hand, and we step down onto the footpath.

There is a peacock blue canopy across the road, with patterns on it. It hurts my eyes! The lines are so sharp and clear, painfully so. I want to close my eyes to protect them from this harshly garish world. Everything has edges! Street signs and billboards have words on them! Trees have individual leaves. It is absolutely amazing, and very, very shocking.

Because, until that moment, I was completely and utterly oblivious. *I didn’t know I couldn’t see.*

Before this project commenced, like Felicity, I had observed in my own children the developmental differences (a 5-year-old compared to a 12-year-old) of their comprehension of what adoption is. I knew, too, that as a child, I thought about my adoption differently from when I was a teenager, and later, as a young adult, and now an older adult. As my children each turned twenty-seven, I remembered that was the age I had been when I first met my biological mother for the very first time. The thought of my children growing into adulthood *if they had never even met me*, never known me, is shattering. Our awareness and understanding grows as we grow.

I observe my own children knowing who they are and whose they are, and witness their ease and synchronicity with me as their parent, their taken-for-grantedness which I never had... They never question. They are not in a void, they are not in a vacuum, they are not in a blank. So, by seeing what is, up comes seeing in stark relief what is not. And so, in having a biological child [weeps] I experience, minute by minute, hour by hour, week by week by month by year as my children traverse those developmental stages—they are the un-lived life that I did not have as an adopted person. They are the walking, talking, laughing breathing manifestation of what I lost, what I lacked, what I didn’t have. Which is paradoxically wonderful and painful, and brings adoption into the room, over and over again (Reflective memo, April 2022).

Intergenerationally, it happens all over again with even more clarity of distance. When my granddaughter was 11 days old, I messaged her mother: “Today is the day (Evie’s Day 11) that I was brought home from the hospital... A long time for a wee person to be in isolation, fed four hourly by whichever nurse was on duty at the time. Crazy, huh?” My daughter responded: “Yep, that is crazy!”. Later, I memoed:

I don't recall thinking about this when my own children were 11 days old, but oh! how it hurt having seen how completely immersed Evie's parents had been in her since her very first breath. So attuned, so responsive, holding her so she could feel their heartbeats, hear their voices, never being separated from her. Winnicott's assertion that the mother alone knows what the baby could be feeling and what he needs, because everyone else is outside his experience, both thrilled and saddened me deeply. I could witness first hand that my daughter's hormonal, physiological, constitutional and emotional preparation were providing my granddaughter with a security which no one else could, that there was a natural flow from Evie's in utero experience safely confined in the womb to now being secure within her mother's arms—and that this security was the solid foundation for providing her with a sense of rightness and wholeness of self (Reflective memo, September 2022).

Conclusion

More than any other, this chapter has focused on the persistent and pervasive effects of adoption on the adopted person. These effects had their roots in the soil of stigma and secrecy, and have woven like tendrils through the adopted person's life, affecting their fundamental sense of self and "okayness".

Reflecting as I have on trees, I have learned that some are more sensitive to root damage than others. Species such as red maple, magnolias, and dogwoods are particularly sensitive to root disturbances, since their "plumbing system" forms a direct connection between roots and branches. Thus, if a root is killed, the corresponding branch will also die. In a similar way, I believe some adoptees may be more sensitive to root damage—the persistent and pervasive effects of adoption—than others.

As I came to the end of my interview with Cassie, I spontaneously asked her:

Me: If it was a tree, Cassie...your life, and your children, and your ancestors. Your whakapapa going back, including your adoptive family in which you were placed. What does that tree look like, in your mind?

Cassie: It's a weeping willow. I've always loved weeping willows. It's a tree that's growing, and it grows easily—because we're certainly reproducing—but it certainly does weep, a lot. There's a lot of hurt and harm. It's kind of that beauty and that sadness, but at the same time. Weeping willows are totally beautiful, just a beautiful structure of a tree. I see us as still growing, but there's a lot of bending.

Me: That's very beautiful. They also have a very strong central trunk and I'm wondering if that's the strength you've had to—you were probably innately strong, but you've had to become very strong. And also people can take shelter

under a weeping willow, as well. They look delicate, don't they—are they also quite robust?

Cassie: Yes. You can see them out in paddocks where the stock eat them, and they can eat them up to a certain height, so they just grow beautifully and strongly to that point. (Interview with Cassie).

Adoption's ongoing social and personal legacy is that it continues to leak into my life, though through the process of self-exploration and research, I am far more aware of its tentacles now. Society still gaslights my and other adoptees' lived experiences, through ignorance or disbelief, and for some of us, so do our adoptive families. The stigmatising and silencing discourse that has subjugated me all my life is being interrupted and resisted as I join with other adopted people in stating our reality, questioning our internalised narrative of having to act and perform, rather than being ourselves.

It appears that the lifting of the "fog" is not a one-off event, on the day of childbirth, or the first contact with our real families. It lifts a little more each time we catch echoes in our children of a biological relative, or we see ourselves reflected or refracted in them, and remember again that we were denied this most natural experience of being mirrored. It can be a cumulative process that gradually unfolds over time, beyond babyhood into toddler, preschooler and school age, when our children reach different developmental stages that trigger something within us. Axness (1994) described it as a cumulative process chipping away at her "as if", adaptive self:

Mothering broke me open... the experience of mothering relentlessly chipped away at the artificial self I had presented to the world—and myself—for 30 years, under the pumice of my son's raw, baby neediness, his control shattering toddler defiance, and the terrifying demands of intimacy that children innocently exert. Becoming a parent meant being dragged out of the long sleep of denial (Axness, 1994, p. 1).

Becoming a parent helped propel many of us—gradually or suddenly—into finally feeling that it WAS "okay to be me".

CHAPTER 5: KNOWING—NO MAP TO FOLLOW

“All men by nature desire to know”

~ Aristotle

“In all of us there is a hunger, marrow-deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are, and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge there is a hollow yearning. No matter what our attainments in life, there is a vacuum, an emptiness, and the most disquieting loneliness”

~ Alex Haley

Personal salience

The Ugly Duckling came upon a pond and as he swam there it became colder and colder. A flock of creatures flew overhead, the most beautiful he had ever seen. They cried down to him, and hearing their sounds made his heart leap and break at the same time. He cried back in a sound he had never before made. He had never seen creatures more beautiful, and he had never felt more bereft [...] He felt a desperate love for those great white birds, a love he could not understand. (Estés, 1992, p. 169)

It's 1996, and I have just landed at Charlotte International Airport, on a blisteringly hot June afternoon. There are about twenty-five people there waiting for me—my father, my grandmother, four aunts, two uncles, and countless cousins. Some of them are crying. Greeted by homemade placards and deep bosomy hugs, I am triumphantly brought to my aunt's house. I kick off my shoes, and know I am home. In a place I've never been before.

My aunts are funny and sassy and strong and attractive and confident. They see me. They claim me as their own. They can see parts of me that I can't. Yet. My aunts apologise for not knowing about me. “We didn't know”, they say to me. “If we'd known, we would have come for you”. In that moment, I feel wanted, I feel precious, I feel loved beyond measure, *just for being myself*. And at the exact same time, in a parallel universe, another girl is born. A girl who grows up seeing herself reflected in those around her. Who knows where she belongs. Who trusts the knowledge that—on the other side of the agonising short, plump, shyness of her teens—she will be funny and sassy and strong and attractive and confident. I watch that parallel girl's whole life unfold in that moment. I yearn for her. I tell no one, and smile nervously.

The following year I bring my four children over to the USA, to meet their people. Again, I am enveloped into the unconditional acceptance, mirroring, and claiming, of all of us. My relatives look at us, and see our cheekbones, our eyes, our mannerisms, our music. I look around their loving excited faces and see a thousand

fragments of myself and my children, shards of mirroring, like hearing snatches of a familiar song, or phrases from a much-loved storybook. It feels familiar. It feels foreign. I belong. I don't belong. It is overwhelming, and I have no words.

Internally collapsing, I run and lock myself in my aunt's bathroom, barefoot on the cold, tiled floor while my body is wracked by deep, gulping, silent sobs. The internal dissonance is so painful, so primal. I think I am losing my mind. Only when I finally regain control do I venture out again, and paste my smiling mask back in place. It is years before I finally understand that I hadn't been losing my mind. I was just like the Ugly Duckling on sighting those beautiful swans. My heart was leaping with thrilled recognition to be with my own—and breaking at the same time.

Erikson's Eight Stages—Stage 5 Identity Versus Role Confusion

In the fifth stage, Erikson identifies the primary psychosocial task to be the development of a sense of identity, or conversely role confusion, during a time of heightened idealism and the growing ability to think more abstractly. This revolves around the individual's quest for a stable, coherent sense of self and the ability to establish a clear, consistent, and integrated image of oneself as a unique person (Sneed et al., 2006). It occurs during adolescence, typically spanning from ages twelve to eighteen, although Erikson signalled that psychosocial issues continue to be revisited and reworked throughout life. The process of forming a strong identity (*"Who am I?"*) involves the experiences, relationships, beliefs, values, and memories constituting a person's subjective sense of self. This helps to create a continuous self-image that remains fairly constant even as new aspects of the self are developed or strengthened over time (*"Who can I be?"*). It is a daunting task indeed to integrate these various aspects of our identity into a cohesive whole. Unresolved issues may result in a state of role confusion, hindering the individual's ability to establish a clear sense of self and impeding healthy social and emotional development.

Interestingly, Erikson was raised by his mother and by his stepfather, whom he believed to be his biological father until told otherwise in late childhood. He never did learn who his biological father was, and was said to have remained bitter about the deception for the rest of his life (Stevens, 2008). The development of identity was one of Erikson's greatest concerns in his own life as well as being central to his theoretical work, exploring how adolescents formulated their sense of who and what they were, and how they felt about themselves and others (Herbert, 1993).

Adoptees may encounter unique challenges in navigating this stage (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). For those of us relinquished in the closed adoption era, identity formation is complicated by the dearth of any information about our inherited physical and other characteristics, our origins, cultural identity, and forebears. The

search for identity may involve a complex navigation of adoptive family dynamics, societal perceptions, as well as our own subjective experiences and perceptions. For those of us who are searching for, reuniting with, or who have an ongoing connection with biological relatives, our adoptive identity may change again in order to meet these new demands in the biopsychosociocultural aspects of our world (Angell, 2022).

Themes in No Map to Follow: Overview

The duality for an adopted person of knowing—or not knowing—who one is genetically, appeared to be a powerfully influential and deeply felt aspect of the adopted person's relationship with their child/ren, and formed the central organising concept of "knowing". Participants spoke of growing up in the **shadow** of ignorance of their genetic origins and ancestry, due to the "blank slate" of the cultural mores of the time under closed adoption practice. This **showed up** in identity formation and in parenting their own biological children. The codes of "*ignorance*", "*blindness*" and "*not knowing*" were included in this theme, "*It's just a total blank*".

Conversely, its antithesis. As had been clearly foreshadowed in the literature, being genetically related to one's children and grandchildren was referenced and returned to repeatedly by all participants. Thus the codes "*being mirrored*", "*likeness*", and "*genetic linking*" were clustered together as the theme "*We both have the same smile*".

As in previous chapters, each theme will be defined, then, following my structural template, will be illustrated using extracts from participants' stories, and discussed in relation to the literature. My braided autoethnography will be presented as my narrative voice in two parts: my story before the study and then elements of the study that caused me to revisit, rework, and reweave my understanding of my story as I juxtaposed it with the participants' experiences and the literature.

Figure 11

Schematic Summary of Knowing Themes

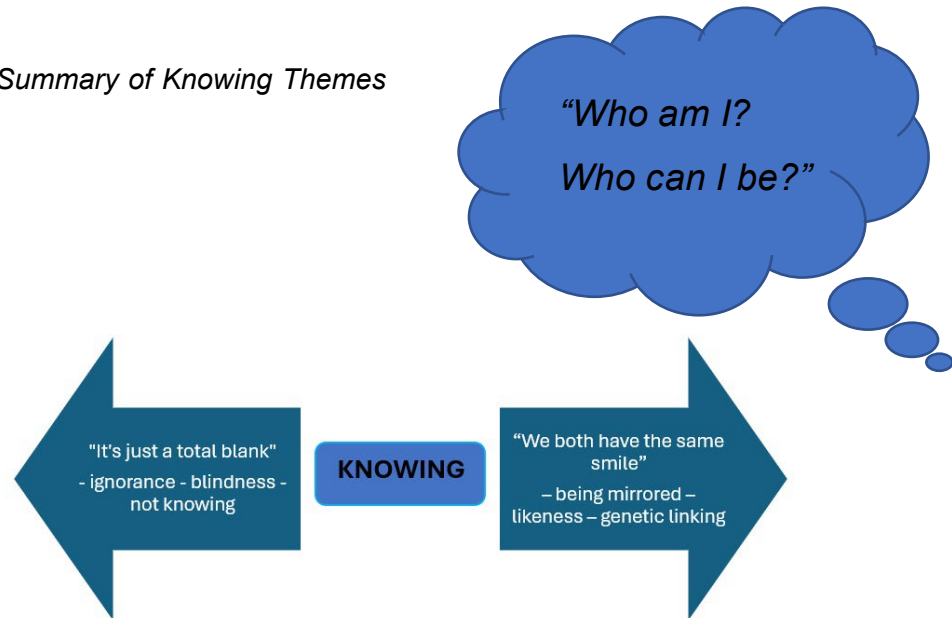


Figure 11 is a reminder of this stage and here it is used to illustrate how this stage can progress within the context of the adopted person.

Theme 1: Ignorance, Blindness, and Not Knowing. “It’s Just a Total Blank”

Theme Definition

Having no ancestral genetic map to orient oneself, meant walking blindfolded into an uncertain and **shadowy** future for ourselves and our offspring. The knowledge vacuum inherent in Aotearoa’s closed adoption system extended to our medical history and in utero experience, as well as what happened to us in our first days, weeks and months of life, and what unknown genetic timebombs we might unwittingly be carrying. This **showed up** for some participants in their descriptions of fearful preoccupation prior to giving birth, with anxieties about possible genetic disorders. It seems unlikely that social workers in the closed adoption period gave thought to medical conditions arising over time in adopted people or their children. Where biological kin have been unwilling to reconnect, or have proven unable to be found, the blank spaces are perpetuated for us and our children’s children. Erikson’s “Who am I?” becomes amplified into “Who are my children?”.

Despite being adults, adopted people are regarded as perpetual children in the eyes of New Zealand social policy and law, beholden to contracts made on our behalf as infants, still unable to access medical history or context. This is passed on intergenerationally to our children, something from which we are unable to **shield** them, that becomes *their* knowledge vacuum. Sharing and perpetuating this vacuum of ignorance, secrecy and “blank spaces” with their children, many participants expressed anger or frustration that they are denied the right to know who they and their people

are, the story of their conception and birth, and their medical and ancestral history, all key aspects of identity formation. This frustration has led me and some participants to apply to the court for their birth records and information more easily available to the kept, and to continue to agitate for political change.

Their Stories

Bridget’s frustration was palpable as she described her attempts to fill in some of the blanks of her origin story: “We have no birth story. And when the organisation where you’re born has ‘lost’ all your files, then you don’t even have a way of figuring out what kind of birth it was”.

Why do these blanks and not-knowing matter so much? As humans, we are proactively oriented to seek a meaningful understanding our world, and our place in it (Angell, 2022). In pursuit of meaning, we constantly pattern life events by similarity and difference, being influenced by what we learn *in relation to others*. These influences become an internal discursive narrative—our voice—and our identity is constructed from this self-narrative. A comprehensive discussion on the formation of identity is beyond the scope of this project. Suffice to say it is at the core of being human (Price, 2016), it is the understanding of who we are and who we are becoming, and a developmental task *that lasts a lifetime*. Since identity plays such a key role in “how we perceive ourselves in the broader experience of self with others” (Price, 2016, p. 44), it is crucial to build an understanding of how adoptees’ personal identities have been **shaped** and impacted by the experiences of being adopted and then parenting their own children.

As previously noted, the literature has been clear for decades that the establishment of a sense of identity is fraught for adopted persons (Brinich, 1980; Brodzinsky et al., 1998; Winnicott, 1956). The adoptee’s task of integration has been discussed by Grotevant et al. (2017) who delineated the three aspects of identity: self-definition (how we feel and are recognised by others), sense of coherence (how we integrate various aspects of our identity together), and sense of continuity (how we link our past, present and future across multiple contexts). Being adopted has to be integrated into the sense of self, starting at adolescence but also across different phases as we move through adulthood. Grotevant et al. (2017) have emphasised that adoptees face special challenges in their identity construction due to the knowledge vacuum in the closed adoption system. This not-knowing complicates our ability to construct a coherent narrative linking our past, present, and future. An adopted person’s lack of knowledge of their birth family frequently means that their life stories may feel incoherent, that there is a “rupture” (Koskinen & Böök, 2019, p. 221) in their narrative, which can result in psychological distress.

Sants (1964) explored the phrase “genealogical bewilderment” (p. 133); a lack of or uncertain knowledge of one’s natural parents and ancestors, wherein a person does not know who they resemble or who resembles them, nor whose interests and talents and personalities they may share. He posited that knowledge and connection to one’s genealogy is an inalienable right, and fundamental for a child to build up his complete body image and world picture. As adopted persons set about formulating their own narrative identity, they lack “the language of blood, biology, roots, heritability and other sociocultural markers that connect people to their genealogy in meaningful ways” (Blake & Coombes, 2015, p. 53).

The fundamental question, “Who am I?”, is inordinately more complex for adopted persons, given that our genetic, cultural and family histories are shrouded in mystery. Lifton (1994) described an adopted woman who gazed into a mirror and was met with no reflection, later asserting that “Families are a hall of mirrors” (1994, p. 68). Everyone other than adopted people can look effortlessly—in photos, in Grandma’s albums, around the dinner table—and see themselves reflected. Velleman (2015), not an adoptee, linked this absence of mirrors to the adoptee need to search for biological relatives:

When adoptees go in search of their biological parents and siblings, there is a literal sense in which they are searching for themselves. They are searching for the closest thing to a mirror in which to catch an external and candid view of what they are like in more than mere appearance (Velleman, 2015, p. 70).

All of the participants in my research recounted that the information void that they had known all their lives was **shaken up**, taking on additional salience because they were having a child. Twenty-four hours into a complex labour with her first child, Debra was asked if there were any medical conditions in her family. The reaction she received to her classic adoptee response (*“I don’t know because I’m adopted”*) left her feeling as though she was some kind of “mutant” with two heads. This spurred her determination to rectify this and have the blanks filled in by searching for her birth family:

I said, “I don’t know, because I’m adopted”. I really felt like [the midwife] looked at me as if I had two heads, and then went flick, flick, flick, flick, through about five pages, because I couldn’t answer them. Possibly that gave me the initial push, “I’ve got to do something about this”, because it had made me feel really, I don’t know, different! It took some time before I was actually ready to research, but that determination began with that experience, I feel sure. Also, I didn’t want my kids going through that. I wanted to be able to answer their questions (Debra).

In Conrick’s (2018) research, study participants reported that becoming a parent had reactivated awareness of the gaps in their knowledge about their own origins. They found that it freshened a desire to obtain further information and to start or restart a search for birth family members for their own sake, as well as for their children. “Having your own children is a trigger to searching; it triggers a need to learn things” (Conrick, 2018, p. 68). This was the case for Felicity, who described multiple levels of not-knowing: first, her inability to ask for information during her pregnancy from her adoptive mother; second, being confronted by her own ignorance at her first antenatal visit, and third, her partner’s discomfort about Felicity’s lack of knowledge:

I couldn’t ask [adoptive mother] any questions about her experience that was relevant to my experience, so that was the beginning. That first doctor’s visit where they ask that question, “What’s your family history, what sort of pregnancy did your mother have?” and I just went, “I don’t know, I don’t know, I don’t know” and it was the first time I had really been in that situation and been asked those questions that I didn’t have answers for. It felt like a waking up. It felt like a ‘Hahhhhh... maybe there IS some value in knowing this stuff’. And [partner] was a little bit nervous about the genetic stuff. I remember having a couple of conversations during the pregnancy about not knowing any of those things, and he had some family stuff. His grandmother had very bad arthritis and there were a couple of things that we were wondering whether they were going to show up for our children. But I just didn’t know. I had no answers.
(Felicity)

The blank not-knowing of the genetic legacy started for Kenneth at the start of his partner’s first pregnancy. He described how he “spent 9 months in hell, worrying about what was going to be born, because I had no connection to anything genetic”. As his children have struggled with mental health issues, he is still uncertain if he has unknowingly carried this predisposition, confessing, “As each child struggled with their own mental health issues I wondered if it was my fault”. Cassie knew a little about her genetic inheritance to tell doctors, but admitted,

I just said, “I don’t know”. Some of the time I’d say, “My mum had schizophrenia” but most of the time I’d say that I didn’t know. I didn’t know about hearts, and cancers and all that sort of stuff. (Cassie)

In Henze-Pedersen’s (2019) qualitative study of openness and identity amongst adult adoptees, participants conveyed feelings of internal anxiety and stress due to their lack of access to information regarding their births. They described the not-knowing as an “inner void” or a “missing piece” inside themselves (p. 143). This is echoed by the participants in research by May et al. (2018) who experienced feelings

of worry and anxiety which they attributed to the unknown health factors they described as “lurking” (p. 105) in their inherited genetic make-up.

By contrast, Rowena did not ruminate over the blank slate of her first pregnancy. Looking back with the **clarity** of distance, she acknowledges she was still in the **shadow** of the fog, admitting “I didn’t think about that [if the baby would be healthy, normal]. I was just expecting a perfect little baby. I think, back then, I was so young and naïve”. Despite now being in reunion with her birth mother, she has been unable to trace her biological father. She spoke at length in the interview about her own feelings as well as her adult daughters’ frustration with this:

The whole other 50% of me is just a total blank, [my father] was always a bit of a blank, I’ve never really gone there. I was always resigned to the fact that I’m not going to find out. [My daughter] has gone through an angry phase, angry at [birth mother] for not remembering, or not knowing, or not telling my father’s name [pause] and it’s like, “How can you not know?!” I think that for me, what I think about my birth dad, I’d love to see some photos of him when he was about my boys’ ages. I’d love to see. Because [son]? I don’t know who [my son] looks like. (Rowena)

It is of note that Rowena’s daughter appears to be more frustrated than Rowena herself. Whereas Rowena had seemed to be resigned to having to accept the blankness of her genetic past, her daughter’s anger at the not-knowing and ignorance of the family genetic history appears to have galvanised her. Rowena’s anxiety regarding the lack of genetic information she has about herself has been exacerbated since she knows nothing about what she may be passing on to her grandchildren.

What we unwittingly pass on to our children and grandchildren by way of inherited disease dispositions was discussed by May et al. (2018). These authors describe how solicitation of family health history has now been incorporated into population screening guidelines, since such data can lead to high-risk individuals who may benefit from life-saving interventions being identified. Genetic diseases that can be inherited include some cancers, cystic fibrosis, fragile X syndrome, Huntingdon’s disease, and others (Pasternack, 2005). In addition, certain mental health disorders—bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and depression—and many behavioural traits are associated with some genetic input. Knowing a person’s genetic-relative family health history has been recognised by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as an integral part of health maintenance. For adopted people, research suggests that the legacy of what is being passed on to their children is considered more important than wanting to know it for themselves. May et al. (2018) cite a study wherein adoptee clients stated that their motivations for seeking genetic testing were two-fold: first, a

desire for inherited health information for their own healthcare; second, to gain information pertinent for their offspring, that they could pass on to their own children. This latter was deemed more important by a significant margin. Rowena’s narrative conveyed poignantly that the core question of identity “Who am I?” includes “Who are my children?” How is the unknown part of us going to affect our babies? And their babies into the future? She expressed ambivalence regarding finding out more information for herself, but the sense of responsibility for her children was strong:

Part of you is super curious and keen to connect, for yourself and for your kids’ sake and for your grandchildren... but part of you is “Hmm, do I really want to open up another Pandora’s Box?” It does affect the next generation, because when they go to have a family it’s like, “Oh, what’s your mother’s history?” and—“I don’t know...” (Rowena)

Corsentino (2021) builds on the implications of this intergenerational blankness, the not-knowing of those who have come before us, but particularly who will follow:

Loss of mirroring, then, places the adoptee at a disadvantage in the all-important project of discovering who they are and might become. Anyone who has been struck by revelatory similarities between a grandparent and a grandchild can understand that it means something to lose that connection. All the generations preceding the parents are, for the grandchild, a blank. (p. 5)

This not-knowing blankness of biological recognition that had haunted Erik Erikson all his life (Stevens, 2008), haunted me, too. I now turn to my own narrative in order to weave and compare my lived experience with those of my participants.

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

My fears and not-knowing what might be lurking within my genes did not dissuade me from my desperation to have a child, someone in the world who was like me. Like Felicity—despite my ignorance, worries, and questions about being pregnant, I felt utterly unable to talk or ask about pregnancy with my adoptive mother. I felt acutely uncomfortable due to her infertility, turning instead to library books to pore over for information. *This* is how my baby looks at this stage and now *this*. I recall asking my then mother-in-law countless questions about her pregnancies. “I had no story to relate to, no record of how my mother had felt when she was pregnant with me, no mirror in which to reflect my own subjective and objective experiences of pregnancy” (Julia Cantrell, 1998, p. 58).

In my final pregnancy, I plucked up the courage to apply for my birth records and eventually received redacted copies of them. Now, for the first time, I knew what

time of day I had been born (8.23 pm), how long the labour had been (23 hours), what my mother’s blood pressure had been (130/90), even the fact that she had had a second-degree tear and required stitches. Only another adoptee would understand how wonderful this knowledge was to me. Knowledge of my past meant that I now had an “origin story” based on my biological mother’s choices, which in turn contributed to the creation of an unbroken life story and a coherent identity. Despite the information being clipped and clinical data, on some level it said I existed. I had irrefutable evidence that I had been born.

For my children to know who and whose they were, what Bridget had referred to as “a birth story”, was overwhelmingly important to me, becoming a matter of some obsession. I charted everything. I recorded everything. I wrote copiously. I wanted to give my children a beginning, a history, a life story that no one could ever take away from them. *I wanted them to know everything in case I was not there to tell them. Because my mother was not there to tell me.* This gift of their life story, which kept people seem to treat so casually, has been an ongoing preoccupation of mine. Each of my children has their life described in minute detail day by day, week by week, month by month, in their respective journals, gifted to them when they left home in their late teens. It took me a long time to realise that I was trying to ensure that they would never feel as I did: blank. Untethered. Without a past. Without a story. I was trying to give my children a sense of rootedness I had never had.

My children did not grow up in that vacuum of ignorance and I had an enormous sense of reassurance and relief knowing that. I went to the other extreme, referencing and stressing their resemblance to family members in ways big and small (Cantrell, 1998, p. 61).

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

My process of reworking and reweaving my knowing and identity incorporates both what I have read in the literature, and reflecting on the stories shared with me by participants during this project. As adopted persons, we knew neither our genetic predispositions, nor even if anyone in our biological families even knew of or cared about our existence. Thus, starting life cut off from my past with the loss of my real family, I was a total blank, a condition which Dalton et al. (2022) denote as “unknowing of the self” (p. 9).

In searching for information about my biological families, my birth mother’s pregnancy, and the time after I was born but before my adoption took place, Henze-Pedersen (2019) asserts that I was also searching for myself, enhancing my understanding of who I am in the present. A map of my past, to inform my future



trajectory. Eventually finding and—over many years—developing authentic relationships with some members of my birth families, has emphatically and positively impacted my identity formation and sense of self, as Carsten (2007) has signalled.

The blank not-knowing of a person raised in the closed adoption system is a characteristic part of living in the liminal space of “in-between” or “no-man’s land” (Blake & Coombes, 2015). Despite it being lived and embodied; on the surface it is barely perceivable even to other adoptees. And it is invisible to the kept. I have certainly experienced how difficult it is to express, even to my own children. Like David Foster Wallace’s (2009) infamous fish that is oblivious to the water that surrounds it, the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about. I have wondered over the past two years, how it would have been for my daughter experiencing pregnancy and childbirth, if I had never searched for my real parents and the missing pieces of my biographical information. Would *she* have been conscious of an inner void similar to my own? (Henze-Pederson, 2019). Would she have seen having a child in the face of a blank past, as I did, as a courageous “act of faith”? (Verzulli, 2000, p. 13).

During the New Year holidays at the start of 2023, I shared the Velleman quote “I would not want to have raised my son without having known my maternal grandfather, with whom he has so much in common” (2015, p. 72) with my oldest son. We remembered, and smiled. As a child, he had a ferocious and incandescent temper. I vividly recall my early realisation that this part of his temperament was inherited from his paternal line. I remember thinking that I was unlikely to be able to change it—or him—but I *could* teach him how to look inwards, self-reflect, become more self-aware and learn how to harness his intensity without it hurting others or himself. Had I not known his father, his uncle, his grandfather, how would I have made sense of his irrational rages? Truly I would have been raising him without a map, with one eye closed.

Theme 2: Being Mirrored, Likeness, and Genetic Linking “We Both Have the Same Smile”

Theme Definition

As humans, our sense of identity is rooted in our forebears, our genes, those people related to us who surround us as we grow, an amalgam of physical, psychological and idiosyncratic aspects of self. Having a child was the very first time most participants had experienced being mirrored in another human being, and all underscored the significance of the genetic connection to their children (and for some, the next generation of their children’s children). What the kept seem largely to take for granted and to see as commonplace, was regarded by participants with awe, as almost



bordering on the miraculous. When interviews touched on these topics, weeping was typically elicited from participants, evidencing that emotions were deeply felt. Pain, disappointment and grief were expressed by those who experienced an ongoing absence of genetic mirroring.

The experience of having one's own genetically related child was a catalyst for many participants to deepen their understanding of adoption's “reach”, and of all of the things they didn't “know” at one level that they were missing.

Their Stories

The theme of genetic mirroring in their children and grandchildren was expressed powerfully and poignantly by all participants. Kate, who had spoken of a certain distance and complexity in her relationship with her only daughter, said,

We both have the same smile. Absolutely. As soon as we smile, rooms light up. And we look like each other. Others remark on that as well. So people who have no idea we are mother and daughter suddenly see it in that moment. It makes us laugh! (Kate)

For Felicity, the realisation that there was another person who resembled her, **showed up** first in the delivery room: “It [childbirth] was the first... I can't think of another word than ‘awakening,’ the first time I realised I actually had something that was ‘of me’ and looked like me”.

Juliet also started looking for the mirroring immediately after she had given birth:

I remember sitting there [pause] just watching and watching, and looking for [pause, cries] likeness. I'd never... and the somatic experience, the visceral—that somatic experience of—“He's mine” [pause] It felt, there was a connection there that I hadn't had. (Juliet)

She went on to describe how she would continue doing this throughout her children's childhood and adolescence, and even now that they are forty and thirty-seven, this preoccupation is no less strong:

I was obsessed when they were growing up with seeing similarities. And I still do, I say it all the time, and there's more and more with [adult daughter and birth mother], the way that they think, and the similar behaviours. Now I can see more genetics there, and definitely can see genetics with my birth father's side of the family with our son. More and more as we all get older. (Juliet)

Such family resemblances becoming stronger over time was also noted by Bridget as she reflected “I certainly look like my father, particularly look like my father, as I've gotten older”. She also celebrated this intergenerational mirroring, the criss-crossing and overlapping of likenesses and resemblances

(Corsentino, 2021) in the family across ages and continents, laughing as she exclaimed “Oh, it’s fantastic! I love it. And [daughter] looks like one of my sisters in [country] and [daughter] looks like the other one—but their personalities are swapped as well. So it’s all very complicated but it’s quite wonderful!”. Echoing Bridget’s description of watching her biological daughters’ easy energy together, Corsentino (2021) reflected on:

...those subtle relational affinities—of “getting” each other, of feeling a kind of natural, spontaneous sympathy, of being “simpatico”—that can make the family relationships easier to navigate, and that can be of aid in the hard task of raising a child. (p. 4)

Bridget went on to wistfully comment on the mirroring her daughters and siblings have that had been denied her: “I’m conscious that they [siblings] see themselves in each other and they’re able to have those relationships that I can’t have” (Bridget).

Most participants expressed how much it meant to them that these genetic resemblances continued across their lives, and brought them pleasure, positivity, and sometimes downright glee. Rowena explained how “It makes me feel good, the genes are quite strong. It makes me feel like a part of me is being repeated in looks or personality”. Cassie spoke of her joy in the permanence of the genetic recognition: “Adoption is ever-present, and I don’t think it’s ever, ever going to disappear for me. I love the fact that my children have their own children, and I see that love and connection and similarity, and all those things...” These findings echo the plethora of evidence in the literature that the experience of sharing a genetic connection for the first time is one of thrill and gratitude (Conrick, 2018; Hampton, 1997; O’Kelly, 2018; Phillips, 2010).

In describing how it felt for them seeing themselves mirrored in their children and grandchildren, superlatives used included “amazed”, “weird”, “special”, “interesting”, “incredible”, “blown away”, “overwhelming” and “fantastic”. Debra’s persistence in searching for her birth family was a source of pride to her as, in the face of many obstacles, she had prevailed, seeing it as a priceless gift to her three adult children “They [my children] have got their history, from my blood lines now, because I’ve been able to give it to them.” She referred frequently to the physical likenesses to herself “When our first grandchild was born, and when he was little, I just couldn’t believe my eyes! I looked at him stating, “Oh my God, that’s me!”, the likenesses between her children and grandchildren “When I look at all our grandchildren, I see a lot of our children in them”, and also the temperamental and more nuanced likenesses:



When our second son was a toddler, Mum said to me one day, “Oh, he’s so like you...determined!” and just recently there was just some way that [granddaughter] turned, and I thought “Ooh, I’ve seen that look! Little things like that just take you by surprise sometimes. (Debra)

Growing up, Felicity’s adoptive family narrative had included “curly hair like my adoptive parents”. On the birth of her children, she awakened to a “growing consciousness [that] the whole ‘curly hair like my adoptive parents’ was just fake. This was real. This actually was ‘of me’. And belonged to me”.

In contrast to most other participants, Felicity expressed an inability to see herself mirrored in her daughters, despite others noticing and commenting on the presence of similarities: “I couldn’t see it. And I still can’t. People when they see us in person will still say, ‘Oh my God, you can see whose daughters they are’ but I can’t see it at all”. This was Kenneth’s experience too, a source of great anguish and self-recrimination for him, and one to which he attributes having grown up without any mirroring, so having no template on which to base genetic comparison:

There was no mirroring—and so suddenly now I’m supposed to see something that I haven’t had a lifetime of experience with. I feel a failure because I don’t see it. [Others are] seeing something that I’m blind to and it feels like, is there something wrong with me? Are people normally able to do these things? But, because, growing up that wasn’t something that happened. I didn’t look like anybody. I had no emotional connection because I think part of my experience growing up was that it was not okay to have emotions and also because I wasn’t related to anything or anyone in my world, I couldn’t make the cognitive leap to say “This is part of who I am” because it just didn’t make sense to me. Even now, all these years later, I still cannot recognise myself in my children. People say things like, “Gosh, your grandson looks like you!” and I go, “Does he?” Because I can’t see it. (Kenneth)

Thus, adopted people can seek the genetic mirroring that has been denied us and that hampered our identity formation, either by searching and being in reunion with our biological relatives, or through having our own biological children, or both. March and Miall (2005) emphasised the salience of searching, stating that in searching for biological kin, adoptees have illuminated how identity is socially constructed, “altering our view of the significance of genetic and genealogical background for the perception of self” (p. 134).

Angell (2022) referred to the natural formation of new narratives after an adoptee reunites with a biological parent, since fantasies of the unknown now have to be reconciled with reality. He describes what can follow as a “period of



unintelligibility” and potentially a loss of agency as a new kind of reality is created (p. 39). Furthermore, as the adopted person develops a narrative connecting themselves to their ancestors, homeland, or spiritual practices, this can support the repair of the rupture in their adoptive identity. This suggests that as adoptees gain knowledge pertaining to adoptive identity, our narratives are not fixed, but revisable, and this can in part be achieved when we are biological parents and grandparents ourselves.

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

The profound weight and salience of the biological mirroring with my children that I experienced in parenting was rooted in my childhood. I had always felt different. Deep in my bones. Long before I knew anything about how I resembled (or didn't resemble) my birth family, I experienced myself as *other*, as though I was alien to everyone else and to myself. In my adoptive family we had played a game of “We all look like each other because Julia has glasses like Daddy”, yet hidden inside, I felt deeply unattractive, a genetic mistake, since both my adoptive parents were attractive, and I was very plain.

I vividly recall poring over an old science textbook from the 1950s in our bookcase, that contained line drawings of how dominant and recessive genes are inherited, demonstrating genetically how “attractive” parents could produce a “plain” child. “I tortured myself with imagining that if they'd been able to have their own daughter, she would have been pretty and attractive, nothing at all like ugly me” (Reflective memo, December 2021).

Like Felicity and her adoptive family's curly hair, the collusion of pretence tacitly reinforced that we were all acting. At some fundamental level, as a family we were fake. I was like no one, nowhere, an astronaut adrift in a black cosmos. I vividly remember feeling intense jealousy that my husband and his siblings resembled my parents-in-laws. They were like carbon copies of one another.

Also like Felicity, my very first experience of being mirrored in another person was in the delivery room. My first child, Michael, was born after I received my original birth certificate but before I had searched for biological kin or been in reunion with them. Thus, he was the only human being in the entire world to whom I felt truly connected, flesh of my flesh. I cannot overstate how incredible it felt to finally belong to someone in the universe, finally feel as though I was part of the human race. I fitted.

Who does the baby look like?” is a game played in maternity hospitals the world over, but believe me if you're adopted, the correct and only answer is ME. My



adoptive mother brought a black and white photograph of me as a baby into Christchurch Women's Hospital when Michael was born. It was the best gift anyone gave me. There for the world to see was a black and white photo of Michael—at least that was what visitors and hospitals believed. He looked like me! He looked like me! (Cantrell, 1998, p.60).

Looking at my own children, I could see me in them. I was always hungry for comments of similarity and likeness, the key ingredient that my children looked like me. It still is, after all these years.

The biological mirroring that I was experiencing for the first time with my children became intergenerational, since it coincided with my experience of searching for and reunion with my natural parents, and the likenesses that quickly became apparent were not only in myself, but in my four children. I met my mother for about an hour in 1991, and then four years later, around the time that my fourth child was born, I managed to locate my father in North Carolina. Immediately we were folded into a large extended family: my father's grandmother, his mother and father, his six siblings, innumerable cousins. Over the following twenty years, my children and I travelled to the USA on seven occasions to stay with my father. A deeply significant part of what these pilgrimages meant to me was having my children alongside. I wrote in my second-born son Bob's journal, September 1997:

You were welcomed by our people with open arms and loving hearts; they instantly identified you as one of “theirs” both physically and emotionally. You resembled [Aunt] Ellen's son so much, and all the aunties and uncles' warmth to you made you blossom and come out of yourself hugely. You belonged. Utterly. (Pre PhD material)

This deep sense of belonging and “fit” cannot be overstated. I belonged, and they belonged. It felt easy and it felt like home. My great-grandmother looked at my two oldest sons and thought they were my father and his younger brother. Everyone exclaimed that Mark “was” Damien (my brother, Mark's uncle) and to this day, the likeness remains striking. I suppose in hindsight we were all quite a novelty, but it was not a novelty for me. It was profoundly life-altering. The experience of seeing myself and my children reflected and refracted in person after person—accompanied by unconditional acceptance—made me settle inside myself. The blood tie and recognition worked both ways. My children and I were welcomed with open arms into my father's extended family, because we were, quite simply, kin. They claimed us, because (in my great-grandmother's Southern drawl), “You're marked up bad.... you look like I jest spit you outta ma mouth”...! And we did.



Reunion forced me to confront the biological tie. Re-connecting with my birth family meant that I had access to photographs of extended family: I pored over photographs of my children and my extended birth families looking for resemblances, which were strongly there. I could clearly see pieces of myself and my children mirrored and echoed in aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins...and the resemblances were not simply physical: they were emotional, psychological, intellectual, temperamental. I envied my children their rootedness. (Cantrell, 1998, p. 63).

I was naturally musical, singing from the time I could talk, playing piano and teaching myself guitar. Growing up, my adoptive mother had played the piano, so I was fortunate to be placed in an environment that supported my musicality, with piano lessons and being taught to read music when I was young. The little information I had learned about my natural mother in my thirties included that she had sung

in the church choir; on meeting my American side, I learned that my father was a fifth-generation guitar player. This became another

aspect of what felt like tribe recognition and being claimed by the family; visits centred around my father's table where he would sit and play guitar, banjo, and dobro, and we would sing and harmonise together. My father told me that people who are genetically related have voices that blend and harmonise most perfectly. Is this true? I have no idea, but I drank it in, remembering it every time my daughter and I sang together, and continue to believe it to this day. My eldest son especially was mesmerised by my father's guitar playing, and at age eleven took up guitar himself. Twenty-six years later, guitar is his passion, his career, the seventh-generation guitar player.

To help myself with the task of integration of who I was, and to remind my children, I hung family photographs all the way down the staircase at our home (Figure 12). Parents, grandparents and great-grandparents dating back at least one hundred years from both my birth and adoptive families looked down on us as we came down to breakfast each morning. I came to understand it as a tangible reminder of our whakapapa *"This is who you are. This is where you come from"*.

Connecting to our American family seemed effortless to my children, who were second generation adoptees. I envied them their rootedness, and the fact that they merged and blended effortlessly into my birth family while I was still wondering, "Do I



Figure 12

Ancestor photos in stairwell



really belong?”—and fearing that I didn’t. I still felt like an outsider. Paradoxically, in many ways my reunion with my biological family helped to fill my internal void, but in other ways it made the void bigger than ever. Being in reunion and having a child were twin earthquakes that exposed my foundational damage.

Once an adoptee has children, the void in his own past is no longer his alone—it becomes his children’s legacy. If we are ignorant of our origins, so are our children. But the opposite is also true, that once the void begins to be filled, the richness that can result becomes their legacy. I have come to see that my birth family don’t just “belong” to me, but to my children. My birth father belongs to my four children just as he belongs to me, only theirs is an easier relationship of affection, addition and “gain”, unlike his relationship with me which is cluttered and complicated by baggage, grief and loss. (Cantrell, 1998, p. 63)

Now when I took my children to medical appointments, I could respond to the inevitable family history questions with delighted information:

That buzz about finally knowing your genetic history doesn’t wear off, by the way: I took Mark [son] to the ophthalmologist last week, who asked me if there was any family history of glaucoma or diabetes. “Not glaucoma!” I replied gleefully, “but my father has had cataract surgery, and he is an insulin dependent diabetic!” The poor guy must have wondered why I seemed so thrilled to tell him! (Cantrell, 1998, p. 63)

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

My learning across the duration of this research project has held up a mirror of validation and understanding to my understanding of how my sense of identity and sense of self were disoriented and distorted by adoption.

With delicious synchronicity, deep in the analysis stage of the PhD, my oldest son and I are out walking the hills of Wellington when the news pings onto my phone that my long awaited and well overdue granddaughter (his niece) has finally been born. We pore over the photograph of her covered in vernix, bathing in her mother’s besotted gaze. “She’s beautiful,” my son exclaims. “And she looks like all of us!” Oh, my heart. (Reflective memo, August 2022)

As fellow adoptee Anne Heffron (2016) also describes—in my life, when people have pointed out my children’s similarities to me, it is always like receiving an expected, marvellous gift. “I’d try to breathe and not act too excited or show that I was surprised, but it was a wonderful feeling”, says this author (p. 65). To have this experience mirrored into the next generation of *someone who looks like me*—and that my son saw it too!—feels like Christmas and winning the lottery and all things glorious combined.



At Christmas, I am chatting with my youngest son's partner. She shows me impressive photos of her father's tattoos on Instagram, casually adding, “You see, I have my father's eyes”. And she does. And she is kept. For the millionth time, I am reminded of the lifelong legacy of adoptees who grew up with no map to follow, without genetic mirroring. It's like trying to assemble a jigsaw without the box. You can do it, but its way, way more difficult, takes longer, and you're definitely at a disadvantage. Of course, none of this dawned on us as children; we tried to mimic the people we called our parents, because we were programmed to do so. After all, there was no other pattern to mimic, no auntie whose nose was squishy like mine, no genetic imperative to follow or reassuring mirror in which to gaze. As an adopted person I spent a lifetime consciously and unconsciously scanning for anything that might resemble the natural imprinting that most kept people take completely for granted. Growing up, I stared at my reflection in the mirror and did not see my adoptive father's eyes, my adoptive mother's hair, my grandparents' mannerisms and quirks. My reflection was mysterious to me. And, as discussed in Chapter 4, resemblance encompasses more than superficial appearance. Mirroring also resides in nuances that can immediately be recognised, but not necessarily readily defined or analysed. The pitch of our voices, gait, mannerisms of how we talk, who is laid-back and relaxed and who is more highly strung and prone to perfectionism; what makes us laugh, how do we respond to stressful things? We know it when we see it, but as Velleman (2015) has suggested, we may not be able to say how we know it.

So then, can this deeply private experience, this sense of self-alienation that came from loss of mirroring, this “fit”, ever be conveyed to other people who have never known a day without it? “Kept” people, my own children included, do not share these experiences. It is completely ordinary to them that they have my hair, their father's knuckles, their grandfather's colour-blindness and their grandmother's flair for words, and it never occurs to them how their existence might have been if they were genealogically blind. It is almost impossible to explain to them why living without genetic mirroring is a disadvantage, pervading and **shaping** one's life, and how I live things they cannot see. It is an experientially distinctive mode of being in the world. Hearing other adopted persons putting language to these foundational aspects of identity has been profoundly helpful in reworking the way I have seen myself in the world.

By way of clarification—until I had my children, I did not truly know what I had been missing, even though I had been scanning for it all of my life. I now understand that being genetically mirrored informs and infuses my sense of identity. I catch myself staring at my infant granddaughter and grandsons, poring over precious photos of their

faces—using them as my genetic GPS; a mirror from which I can drink in every detail. Seeing their little faces stirs in me a deeper love, an acceptance of and connection to *my roots, my mannerisms, my perceived flaws*. I fall in love with them again every day. And I sense that I have tentatively started accepting and loving myself more, too.

It has always been important to me that my children resemble me and their father. My children and grandchildren sharing some of my physical features has profoundly affected me; I think they are beautiful—and they look like me—so why haven't I ever considered myself beautiful? And I need to love myself, or perhaps they won't love themselves. My sense of self has changed after becoming a mother and grandmother.

The nose that I hated for being too wide and too flat is now the beautiful, adorable nose, cute as a button, of my granddaughter. The round head that I thought was too big is similar to her head, my siblings' heads, my father's head—we all have big heads. It's okay! The round, chubby face I loathed is now the exquisite healthy smiling cheeks of my precious grandson. Through this examination of old punitive feelings and new insights, I notice how harshly insensitive I was with my inner self. Rather than feel the overwhelming undertow of loss, I distracted and numbed myself, pushing others away as a means to self-protect and avoid rejection. I am practising being gently curious with myself internally when feeling emotional or triggered. The higher I climb, the more clearly I can see where I've been.

Conclusion

Genetic mirroring is like GPS, a subtle but advantageous road map to chart our own identity, our persona, our future selves. Its absence puts adopted people at a disadvantage in the all-important task of discovering who we are and who we might become, “like wandering in a world without reflective surfaces, permanently self-blind” (Velleman, 2015, p. 70).

Velleman (2015), who was himself kept rather than adopted, went on to suggest that a further disadvantage for those without biological mirroring is that parenting becomes more opaque. He reflected that had he not known his genetic legacy, the lack would have had a significant effect on how he understood and interacted with his children:

I would not want to have raised my son without having known my maternal grandfather, with whom he has so much in common. I would never have understood my daughter if I hadn't known her uncles, on both sides. And raising my children without knowing their mother—that would have been like raising them with one eye closed. (Velleman, 2015, p. 72)

Similarly, Verrier (1993) suggested that when less appealing traits arise in a child, a biological parent may be more accepting, seeing traits of him or herself in the child. Conversely, in adoptive families where there is often little commonality between parent and child from genetic and historic standpoints, there are no such echoes. My childish quirks, introversion and fantasy worlds seemed to irritate my adoptive mother enormously, but when my birth father described my birth mother to me, his phrase “She lived in her head, and ventured out for brief excursions” resonated like a clarion. When in 1985 I had begun my long search for my biological parents, I now understand that I was searching for the closest thing to a mirror in which to find myself. Once I had my own children I was constantly reminded of what they had that I had missed out on, most importantly knowing whose they were and from whom they came. I now know that my son’s exceptional guitar playing came through my father, and that my three boys’ colour blindness came from him too. What drew me to the French language was likely to be that my mother had completed her undergraduate degree in French while carrying me in utero. And when I look at my uncle’s seven-year-old self in a sepia photograph, my second son’s limp brown eyes gaze back at me.

And now there is the next generation, and I see with even more acuity my granddaughter and grandsons surrounded by their people. These precious little people will never once have to wonder about their forebears, their ancestors. For me, the fundamental importance of this can never, ever be overstated. I close this chapter as I began, with a brief vignette to invite the reader to a glimpse of my world.

It is New Year’s Eve, and I am sitting on the deck outside, a glass of wine in my hand, chatting with my sister-in-law. I am feeling relaxed and safe with her, and she is curious about my research. Since she has just become a grandmother for the first time, I mention that when my first son was born, because I was adopted, he was the very first person in my entire life who looked like me, in whom I could see myself. There is a long silence.

“Do you know”, she eventually responds, somewhat sheepishly. “I’ve never ever thought about that”.

I want to quickly reassure her, to remove the seedling of awkwardness that has sprung up between us.

“Well, there’s never been a reason for you to think about that”, I say. “You all grew up surrounded by people who looked like you, who you belonged to, who you could see mirrored in your extended whānau, and so on... but I didn’t”.

She slowly nods and her face lights up, and I feel like a chink of light has entered a dark room, showing her a glimpse of something of which she had hitherto been completely unaware. I am reminded again that adoption culture is hiding in plain

sight in Aotearoa New Zealand; those who are not a member of the culture are completely oblivious, blind to its effects, ignorant of the multiple ways in which it weaves in and out of our lives. Every. Single. Day.

Later the next day, my husband and I are out walking, and I am telling him about this interchange with his sister.

“It still surprises me that an adopted person not looking like anyone else in their family had never crossed her mind”.

He reminds me that, prior to meeting me, it would never have crossed his mind, either.

I mention her two younger children, who are part New Zealand European like their mother and part Samoan like their father.

“Do you think they look like their mother?”, I say.

He furrows his brow, like he has never given it any thought.

“I guess not...?”, he ventures.

I don’t even think that it has ever occurred to him. Yet from the first time I met her, I remember thinking how she could be walking along in the mall with her daughter, and no one would have any clue that they were related. Her children don’t physically resemble her at all, as they look strongly like their dad. The thought of not resembling my children was anathema to me. I wonder if my adoptee reactivity sees me overemphasising the significance of biological connections?

But it is a paradox to me: my husband and his sister have been mirrored in their family their whole lives. That they look and sound and feel like the people from whom they came is completely taken-for-granted. As kept people, they are nonchalant about it, often they seem to regard it as immaterial, almost to be dismissed. Whereas I see nothing BUT their resemblance, and still crave that, my Ugly Duckling former self still marvelling at the invisible rhizomes connecting them all. I was so fortunate to find my “swanness” in my birth father’s people. But most importantly, I have it in MY four children and now in the gifts of a granddaughter and grandsons. Indisputably, they know me as a swan. And they are as “marked up bad” as my great-grandmother once pronounced me to be (Reflective memo, January 2022).

The woman who was adopted has five mirrors in her bedroom

Penny Callan Partridge (pp. 505-524)

She can't recall
seeing her face
in a mirror
as a child.

She can't recall
finding her face
in her mind
as a child

She can't recall
her parents
mentioning
her appearance.

A roommate
in college
saw how she
stared into mirrors.

A man she married
would scare her
with how
he saw her.

Another man
she married
barely saw her
would walk into her.

She knows now
her birthmother
couldn't bear to see
what she looked like.

She knows now
her parents
couldn't bear to see
whom she looked like.

She knows now
any sibling
would have told her
what she looked like.

She knows now
that photographs
on the wall
would have helped.

She doesn't mind
looking older now
so much like
her birthfather.

She doesn't mind
looking older now
so much like
one grandmother.

The woman
who was adopted
has five mirrors
in her bedroom

and sometimes
whispers
into one of them
/ see you.

CHAPTER 6: JOINING—THE TREASURE YOU SEEK

So you are afraid to love, afraid to get too close.

Or you love so hard that you are unable to be yourself, to let go and be a person, to be on your own. You are terrorized by the thought of being abandoned again.

You fight your demons on the battleground of relationship. You frighten people away.

Or you cling like a child.

You cannot find the happy medium, the middle road.

You swing from being a totally independent self-sufficient adult to a needy baby who craves satisfaction and is insatiable.

Benavides (1996, p. 13).

Personal Salience

All families have stories that they tell, some arc so far back that it is hard to know whether they actually happened, or you just *believe* that they happened because the story has been told so many times. One of the stories told in my adoptive family about me is that of three-year-old Julia who, when instructed by my aunty to “Hold my hand to cross the busy road”, responded with quiet defiance, “I can hold my own hand, thank you”, and did precisely that. This narrative was recounted repeatedly, in part as it was cute and precocious, but in part because the underlying narrative was to say without saying, “Julia is apart from us. Julia distances. Julia doesn’t want to get close.”

Another clear memory from early days of childhood is of the space under the stairs. At our weekend beach house, which was old and wooden, there was a creaky staircase up to the living area, and under that staircase was a space that was small, dusty, cramped, and incredibly dark, even on the sunniest of days. When upset, sad, feeling blue, I would retreat there and sit as still and quiet as a mouse, scarcely breathing, sometimes silently sobbing. Sometimes I would just sit and blend in with the blackness. It felt safe and anonymous and comforting to know I couldn’t be seen, and no one could reach me. I have no memory of ever going to my parents in childhood or adolescence for emotional comfort, a hug, a hand holding, a cuddle, or ever being emotionally vulnerable around them. My pattern was to distance, to dissemble, to close down, to act.

I share these two vignettes as they foreshadowed a core aspect of my identity as a knower and a Self and are foundational to my way of being and knowing in the world, the culmination of what I have come to regard as a stunted path through trusting, being, and knowing. Holding my own hand and hiding under the stairs were the twin

blessing and curse of solitude and isolation for me. And despite being adaptive, they were never going to serve me well in relationship.

This theme of “joining,” similar to Erikson’s sixth stage of Intimacy versus Isolation, has been the easiest and hardest to write. Easiest, because I know deep in my core, from my own knowing and from the literature I have traversed, that it is in the realm of intimate relationships that adoption shows up most, where many of us adoptees flounder. Hardest, because it has entailed reaching deep into my Self, my psyche, my vulnerability. It represents decades of dogged self-exploration as an epistemic isolate, and a rigorous deconstruction and examination of my internal monologue and identity work.

Foundational to the process of becoming a “knower” and the journey I took to grow myself was my connected relationship with my children. This was a part of my life where relational Joining was sought and achieved, unlike the other intimate relationships in my life that were terrifying, triggering, or detached. The title of this chapter captures the inherent paradox; what I feared and avoided actually contained what I wanted more than anything—relational connection. The following section briefly recapitulates the literature on the centrality of attachment needs in relationships, setting the context for the joint challenges of *belonging* and *bonding and connecting in relationships* for adopted persons.

Erikson’s Eight Stages—Stage 6: Intimacy Versus Isolation

Erikson (1980) identified the sixth stage, intimacy versus isolation, as occurring during young adulthood, typically from ages 18 to 40. It revolves around the individual’s capacity to form meaningful and intimate relationships balanced with a sense of self. Hamachek (1990) emphasised that Erikson’s notion of “intimacy” encompassed much more than “intimacies,” (i.e., sexual relationships); rather, it is characterised by closeness, honesty, and love, and concentrated on the interpersonal aspects of people fusing, bonding, coming together, and forming relationships. Erikson acknowledged that people could be sexually intimate yet have no experience of intimacy since they lacked a deeper, mutual involvement, for example, having a highly active sex life yet at the same time feeling a deep sense of isolation from the partner.

As already noted in the Literature Review, it is important to remember that although Erikson’s developmental stages are laid out sequentially, psychosocial “outcomes” are not fixed, nor must they be achieved before the progression to the next stage. In addition, the process of identity formation (emphasised in the preceding stage) is ever evolving and can be reactivated at various times depending on life events. One advances epigenetically to a new stage; as individuals mature and move upward through the stages, they may find themselves questioning, reexamining, and

potentially revising as they grapple with aspects of previous stages. It has been noted (Orenstein & Lewis, 2022) that to a certain extent, the latter four stages could be regarded as a repetition of previous stages. For example, Stage 6 (intimacy) could be considered a combination of Stages 1 (trust) and 2 (autonomy). Erikson described how each stage a person moves through is built on previous stages, adding something specific to the later stages, influencing the outcomes and creating a “new ensemble” out of all the earlier ones rather than arriving at a particular set of qualities (Hamachek, 1990, p. 678). The basic conflicts inherent in each stage would remain to an extent throughout the lifespan, for example, an adult who had trouble developing intimacy in Stage 6 might still be troubled by unresolved identity issues associated with Stage 5. Erikson emphasised that an individual is perpetually revisiting each of the conflicts, but that at each stage they achieve a particular balance, ideally towards the positive end of the poles in order to facilitate successful navigation of later crises (Hamachek, 1990). Thus, it seems plausible that the earlier stages of trusting (“Can I trust the world?”), being (“Is it okay to be me?”) and knowing (“Who am I?”) would be woven in and out as precursors influencing the culmination in healthy joining with others in intimate relationships.

The plethora of evidence in the research literature indicating the correlation between early attachment experience and later satisfaction in intimate relationships (Kirkpatrick & Hazan, 1994; Mikulincer et al., 2002) has been outlined in Chapter 1. There is also a range of studies suggesting that the adoptee’s capacity to trust may be adversely affected due to the trauma of separation from the birth mother (Brodzinsky et al., 1998; Foulstone et al., 2005; Jones, 1997; Robert, 2020). Adopted people are more likely to experience entrenched and long-lasting difficulties in relationships, due in part to the break in attachment at birth which has impaired or disrupted the development of healthy, trusting, secure, intimate relationships, leading to a sense that they do not belong (Groncki, 2010; McGinn, 2000; Topfer, 2012). Baird-Hepworth’s 2021 qualitative study explored eight adoptees’ experiences in intimate relationships, with results revealing that they all struggled with trusting others (including their families), and experienced insecurity and anxiety about being abandoned in relationships. All considered that their adoption played a continuous role in their lives, and that it may have had something to do with their issues in relationships—a belief also held by most of my participants. As such, it is certainly reasonable to expect that aspects of these complex relational challenges might persist into adulthood and across the lifespan (Bork et al., 2022; Penny et al., 2007).

In brief, the literature overall signals that some adopted people experience considerable challenges developing a sense of belonging and connection in

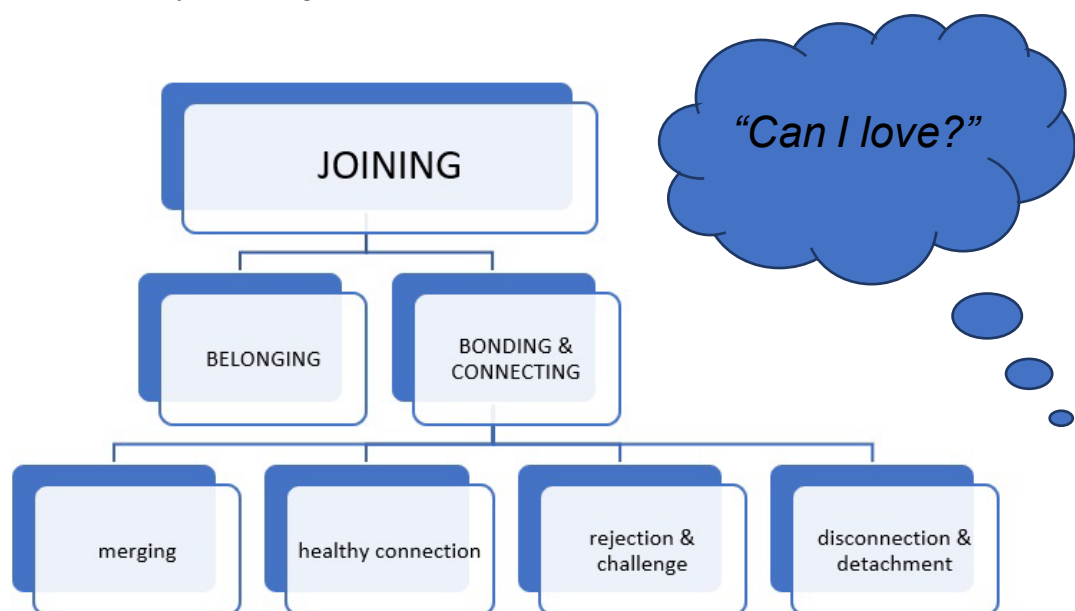
relationships, with the disruption of adoption potentially affecting their lives in an ongoing way. It seems plausible that the physical and emotional intensity and intimacy of the parenting relationship would be similarly affected. The relational bond a person builds with their child becomes a reflection of their own internal working model; in the case of an adoptee, it must include meanings related to adoption. “Given the evidence of attachment difficulties in many adopted children...it is relevant to ask what type of caregiving environment they are likely to create when they become parents” (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010, p. 279).

Themes in The Treasure You Seek

All participants in my study had clearly reflected upon their own experiences of intimacy across their lives, and as interviews delved into this relational area, the theme developed a unique intensity and heft. The participants’ vulnerability and honesty were powerfully experienced. They spoke candidly of their feelings and experiences clustered around their relations with others in their lives, viewing parenting as the conduit to finally experiencing a sense of relational authenticity, connectedness, and completeness. From the interviews, clusters of codes emerged around their relationships with others (in particular, their children), on a continuum from healthy to dysfunctional. These were encompassed by the main themes of “belonging” and “connecting to others.” “Connecting to others” comprised a continuum of subthemes: moving from “merging” to “connection & attachment”, through to “rejection and challenge in relationship” and finally, “disconnection & detachment”.

Figure 13

Schematic Summary of Joining Themes



Theme 1: Belonging: “Wanting Always to Have a Sense of Belonging”

Theme Definition

Participants reflected at length on the concept of belonging. Many spoke poignantly of their sense that they had not really belonged in their adoptive families and had experienced an additional layer of “not belonging” in the world. They felt themselves somehow apart from others, having a sense of “otherness,” and not “fitting in,” something they had felt their entire lives.

This strongly felt sense of not belonging was, for some, the motivation to have a child. For others, it was the birth of their child that awakened a new lived experience of belonging in the world, and signalled to them that they could join the rest of humanity and finally “belong.”

Participants described how their sole place of belonging was within their own created families. For some adopted people it was bittersweet to observe how their own children fitted and belonged with them, and with their biological families, as they started to truly grasp the belonging that they had been missing all their lives. This notion of belonging with one’s children would be lifelong and was expressed emphatically.

Their Stories

Linking to Chapter 4: “Being”, Kenneth spoke of “not belonging” being a theme from his childhood and throughout his entire life, along with a need to somehow performatively demonstrate that he did fit in and was who he was “supposed” to be: “Throughout my entire growing up, I felt that I was not worth anything, that I always had to prove that I belonged, that I had to be the perfect child”. Other participants used words like “always”, “my whole life”, and “as long as I can remember” to emphasise that this had always been the way they had been in the world. For example, Kate was “wanting always to have a sense of belonging”, and Debra “didn’t ever feel like I belonged anywhere”.

These findings are congruent with Benson (2019), who explored the notion of “one’s own kind” (p. 141): a phrase encapsulating the recognition of belonging and inclusion into a group. Lifton (1994) proposed this could become problematic in adoptive families where there may be a poor “fit,” with little commonality between parent and child. As noted in Chapter 5, raising children with no knowledge of their genetic legacy (Velleman, 2015) and who were nothing like you, not of your own kind, must at times feel akin to raising an alien creature. A sense of “recognition” of one’s own child is a level of familiarity that engenders belonging. Irvin (2015) recalled how her adoptive parents had “misunderstood who I was because they hadn’t experienced somebody with a genetic predisposition to certain kinds of behavior” (p. 64). She only

came to this understanding as she became a parent, observing similar behaviours that she possessed in her daughter.

The theme of belonging and fitting in was also congruent with four of the five participants in Benson’s qualitative exploration of adoption’s significance in parenthood ideation and motherhood (2019). Similarly, in a study conducted by Meyer et al. (2023), one participant (Carla) expressed difficulties with connection and relationships that had persisted for most of her life, speaking poignantly of her difficulties with “attaching” to anyone or anything, except for her own biological children. Carla’s experiences were echoed by all participants in my study, who spoke spontaneously of their senses of belonging and not belonging in the world. As signposted in Chapter 1, there is a range of possible explanations for the lack of “fit” in adoptive families including delayed/disrupted progress through earlier psychosocial stages, feeling “othered,” complications with identity formation, alterations in the central nervous system, and unresolved feelings of uncertainty and rejection. Bridget felt it stemmed from her feeling like an alien in her adoptive family:

You don’t belong in the family you’re delivered into, acquired by—and you don’t belong in the family that IS your family...Adopted people frequently don’t fit in the culture of their acquired family, their fictive family; and they don’t have another family to go into. So there is that absolute utter aloneness. (Bridget)

She continued by explicitly linking this not-belonging in her adoptive family to the polar opposite in the family she created for herself; “So we do forge what I think is probably a tighter bond than many. [There was] no place I belonged to. No family. No whakapapa. Nothing, except my girls. That was it” (Bridget).

Cassie also expressed that this sense of not belonging had been a lifelong experience for her: “I didn’t ever feel like I belonged. That’s the part that so many adoptees, we don’t feel like we ‘fit’, we’re not ‘part of’”. Cassie recalled her daughter in a developmental stage which had awakened in Cassie an internal identification with her own lived experience. She observed in her little girl the deep sense of belonging she had—but which Cassie herself had been denied, along with everything else she had not experienced:

The challenging time for ME for adoption, the time I went to counselling, that a whole lot of stuff came out [pause]. It started with me having a three-year-old daughter. And that nearly did me in. Because that little girl knew her place, she knew her family. She had this huge sense of belonging and security, and she knew that Mum would do anything for her, and Daddy loved her, and that is when I broke. That is when it really hit me hard. (Cassie)

According to the literature—and my participants—growing up with a perpetual sense of difference, not belonging, feeling alone, and that there was literally no one who was *like* you rendered an adopted person as an “outgroup” with a membership of one (Allen et al., 2021), existing outside “authentic kin membership” (Blake & Coombes, 2015, p. 54). Several participants spoke of their yearning to have children for the explicit reason of *belonging*. Juliet dreamed of “getting married, and settling down, and having my OWN family, something where I could belong”. While she was pregnant, Rowena sensed that she was compelled by a type of dyadic reciprocity.

[It was] all I ever wanted, to have a baby. [I remember feeling] this is MY baby, this is part of me, the first part of me that belongs, or I belong to it. That this baby is going to be all mine. All, you know? It's 100% my blood—and obviously my partner's—but you know, like it was my belonging sort of thing. Mmm. [long pause]. (Rowena)

Having a child opened a door into finally belonging. Bridget saw in hindsight that it was having her children that created this feeling: “And my children had to make me feel—not so much loved—as, um, ‘part of’”. This echoes Pinkerton’s findings that having a baby promoted feelings of belonging and a stronger sense of identity, with one adoptee expressing, “Being a mom is like an entry ticket into a kind of feeling of belongingness I had never felt in my life...It really made me feel complete in all the ways I wished for” (Pinkerton, 2010, p. 79). Irvin (2015) emphasised that for many of her participants, their senses of self, safety, belonging and connection had transformed after having a child. “I feel that we are tethered. I feel that he is the only person that my heart is tethered to. I’ve never felt that before” (p. 69); the connection with her son provided the sense of belonging this participant had always wanted. Other participants in Irvin’s 2015 study reported several positive changes in themselves after having a child, including feeling more grounded, having more acceptance of themselves, and experiencing less judgment and negativity toward their bodies. Some participants who felt they were “not good enough” due to their adoption status or their families’ perception of adoption changed that view after having their own child. Findings in my study strongly corroborate those of Irvin (2015) and Pinkerton (2010) in the notion that for an adopted person, having their own biological child profoundly affects their own sense of belonging in the world in a positive way.

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

Prior to my research, I was very aware that my yearning to have a child was deeply rooted and somehow connected to a sense of wanting to belong.

I had married young (at 20). I had no money, no car, a student husband to support, and had only just graduated with a qualification, but I wanted a child.

Needed a child. Not in the sense of wanting someone to love, but very consciously wanting someone in the universe to whom I would belong. It was more than a desire: it was a deep-seated longing. (Julia)

I did not consciously explore this longing, yet felt it keenly. As described in Chapter 3, the spectre of my adoptive mother’s infertility had haunted me from my earliest remembering; I reasoned that it might take years for us to conceive. The instant my husband graduated, and I knew we could survive on just his income as an intern, I stopped taking contraception. I was 22, and almost exactly 9 months later, we had our first child. I was the one driving the starting our family so young. He had wanted to wait but this was one time in my life that I was 100% clear and determined. Like Rowena, I felt compelled: there was absolutely no way I was going to delay trying for a child.

With the birth of my first child, and the subsequent arrival of his three siblings in coming years, I felt a gradually growing awareness of something deep within me shifting: something real, and relational. “I cannot overstate how incredible it felt to finally belong to someone in the universe” (Cantrell, 1998, p. 60). The sense of being my own “outgroup” and on the “outer” in my own life had been completely entrenched and normal to me. Like the fish not noticing the water, it wasn’t until I belonged to my own children that I awakened to the realisation that I didn’t feel like I belonged with anyone else *except them*. I reflected on how momentous the anniversaries of their births were to me, the marking and commemoration every year that they were connected to me, and I to them. I *belonged*.

My children’s birthdays have always been days of great joy for me as I celebrate inwardly and outwardly the anniversary of their arrival in my life. On the day of their birth, after all that time of waiting and nurturing and loving in utero, I finally got to meet them face to face, gaze on them, and know that *I was connected to them for the rest of our lives across time and space*. It is a sharp contrast to the way I feel about my own birthday every year, no cause for celebration. I imagined my birth mother’s relief as she finally got rid of “it” (the pregnancy), when the umbilical cord was severed, I was alone in the universe. Bye bye baby, have a nice life (Cantrell, 1998, p. 63).

While my birth mother had gotten off the delivery table, leaving me alone seemingly without a backward glance, now that I had children, I was reassured that I would never again be alone in the universe. And I knew I needed more than one child; I longed for a large family, an insurance policy of safety and security. Somehow, I intuited my children would be my ballast, my anchor, my tethering.

The years of becoming a parent coincided with the years I was tracing my birth family and, as such, it is difficult to tease out which strands took precedence as I was

awakening to a nascent and novel sense of belonging. In the year my children’s ages spanned 10 down to 2, we went to the United States so that they could meet my American birth family for the first time. As already described in Chapter 5, there were my grandparents, four aunties and two uncles, numerous cousins, and my then 100-year-old great grandmother. I described it through a lens of belonging:

I felt jealous of how easy it was for my children with their biological family; I don’t fit in either family. My children’s relationship with my birth father was easier than mine with him, this was a relationship of affection, addition, gain. They merged and blended with him while I hung around on the outer. My children merged and blended into their biological family; they probably took their lead from me. My children’s experience of being unconditionally folded into the biological family made something settle inside of me...I wanted my child to feel belonging and rootedness that I never had.

A deeply and significant part of what the trips to the USA was what it meant for ME having my children there with me. I wrote in Bob’s journal, September 1997: “You were welcomed by the Cantrells with open arms and loving hearts; they instantly identified you as one of “theirs” both physically and emotionally. You resembled Ellen’s son so much, and all the aunties and uncles’ warmth to you made you blossom and come out of yourself hugely. You belonged. Utterly.” This deep sense of belonging cannot be overstated. I belonged, and they belonged. It felt easy and it felt like home.

I came to see that my birth family didn’t just belong to me, but to my children. My birth father belonged to my four children just as he belonged to me, only this was an easier relationship of affection, addition, and gain, unlike his relationship with me which was cluttered and complicated by baggage, grief, and loss. Paradoxically it doesn’t always feel good when your children merge and blend into your birth family while you are still wondering, Do I really belong? and fearing that you don’t. (Cantrell, 1998, p. 63)

It is clear from my writing, where I described these experiences, that I was awakening to the *absence* of belonging. I knew too that “fitting in” was a foreign feeling for me. Like many adopted people, growing up I had fantasised about my “real” parents coming to claim me. I had blamed myself for the lack of synchrony and connection in my adoptive family, *but I didn’t know how it could be different*. Not belonging was my daily lived experience, and until I had experienced its antithesis, I remained largely unaware of its centrality.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

Over the course of this research, the triangulation of three factors has

reinforced the primacy of this sense of *belonging* for myself and some adopted persons. These three factors are: (1) the clarity of distance and time as I have witnessed the gestation and births of my first three grandchildren, (2) my participants’ accounts, and (3) the voices and strands of insight emerging from the adoption and scientific literature.

Reflecting on my relationship with my children over the decades, and especially over the duration of weaving this dissertation, “I see that they have tethered me: to sanity, to enduring, to attaching, to belonging, to life itself. The relationship is redemptive. Visceral, cellular, spiritual, soul” (Julia). The passage of time and the attainment of some emotional distance and clearer perspective on my life to date has afforded me a degree of separation from many events. As such, I now have clearer and more insightful understandings of many issues pertaining to my being adopted, and I have seen them even more clearly with my grandchildren than I did with my own children.

Watching—observing one’s own children knowing who they are and whose they are, and witnessing their *taken-for-granted belonging* which you *never* had or were able to take for granted!—ease and synchronicity with yourself as their parent. They never question. They are not in a void, they are not in a vacuum, they are not in a blank. So, by seeing what *is*, up comes seeing in stark relief what is *not*. And so, in having a biological child [weeps] you experience, minute by minute, hour by hour, week by week by month by year as your children traverse those developmental stages—that they are the un-lived life that YOU did not have as an adopted person. And so they are the walking, talking, laughing breathing manifestation of what you lost, what you lacked, what you didn’t have. Which is simultaneously wonderful and painful, and brings adoption into the room, over and over again. (Reflective memo, 15 April, 2023)

This clarity of distance—incorporating both the distance of time and the academic deconstruction of my own experiences—has enabled me to see the multiple connections to belonging and fit as the shadows of adoption weaving through my whole life. In an analytic memo written on 9 October, 2022, I noted that I had “just realised that the notion of liminality—being in the hyphen—betwixt and between—is paralleled in my methodology as well as my experience of being in two families but belonging in neither”. My determination to use a methodological approach that married the ethnographic with the “auto” and the scholarly with the personal was an unconscious manifestation of the hybridity I had always intuited and tried to straddle.

My participants’ accounts served to validate and fill me with a sense of reassurance that I was not alone in these experiences, and the positive impact of this

shared knowing cannot be overstated. In a similar way, the adoption and scientific literature repeated and echoed what I had sensed in myself to be true; authors' writings served as an heuristic mirror into which I could gaze, thus seeing my own experience as valid and real. For example, Guittard's (2022) poignant account of the contrast between her two biological children and her adopted son helped me to pin down something that on some level I had intuited all my life which finally made sense. She had reflected, “I never had to sit my daughter down and *tell* her she was mine. The script of her earthly existence was clear; her innate sense of belonging was her birthright, and it was seamlessly communicated unconsciously” (Guittard, 2022, p. 48). A statement this simple and self-evident—that we do not have to *tell* our children that they are ours—was a truth articulated in plain sight that had eluded me until that moment. As described in Chapter 4, adoptee researcher Blake (2013) had a similar experience when she first heard the metaphor of “no-man's land” expressed by one of her participants. She recognised that this small phrase had powerfully articulated something hitherto inexpressible about belonging.

[The metaphor of no-man's land] explained the “essence” of living life on the outer boundaries, fitting but never fitting, belonging but never belonging, knowing oneself but never quite...I am forever positioned as belonging to no-one and belonging no-where...fitting but never fitting, belonging but never belonging, knowing oneself but never quite...the “truth” of who I am forever positioned as belonging to no-one and belonging no-where. (Blake, 2013, p. 252).

Not-belonging can stare back at you from a mirror; Koskinen and Böök (2019) discussed transracial adoptees whose physical appearances are different from those of the families in which they are raised, with the differences immediately evident. For these adoptees, ethnic identity was likely to form part of the constellation of factors affecting their “fit” in the family, their identity formation, and their sense of belonging. There is a large body of literature (e.g., Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2020; Domyancich-Lee, 2022; Utley, 2020; Zhou et al., 2020) attending to transracially and internationally adopted persons whose experiences of growing up looking very different from their adoptive families gave them a sense of *not fitting* or being othered as an “outgroup” from the first inklings of awareness. In same-race adoptions we can end up in families with similar skin tones and hair colours—making it less obvious that we'd been adopted into the family. The subterfuge was imperceptible, since we blended in; except we knew we didn't.

“Fit” in a family is about so many factors: physical appearance, yes: skin tone; eye colour; hair: wavy, curly, or straight; height; build. But “fit” is also about other subtler

aspects of our bodies: colour blindness, susceptibility to certain physical and mental health conditions and diseases, sensitivities (to gluten, lactose, almonds). Moreover, “fit” extends far beyond our bodies. It is temperament (highly strung, optimistic, broody), intelligence, talent (musical, artistic, sporty), emotionality (easy-going or quick to react), attributes (desire for novelty, secretive, sense of humour), activity levels (high or low energy), attention levels (focused or easily distracted), sociability (outgoing or introverted), and persistence (determined or easily discouraged). An analytic memo written in January 2023 expressed: “My sense of (not) belonging or feeling authentic in either family has not been unduly muddled by hegemonic discourses around skin colour, race or ethnicity; as such, nobody could know I have felt ‘out of place’ all my life, by virtue of being adopted. So, as a same-race adoptee, I am doubly invisible”.

This theme of belonging has resonated deeply for me. I now recognise how much it was woven through my own life journey. Despite a birth certificate assuring us that we were legitimate, some adoptees—myself included—felt our difference as a fundamental *not belonging*; feeling alone, there being no one that is the same. The notion of “fit” which has been a lifelong shadow in my life, became increasingly apparent as I had my children, since until that point I did not know what I had been missing. To this day it is still jarring to be reminded that the “kept” have no inkling of our absence of “fit,” since genetic “fit” is their taken-for-granted lived reality: fish not noticing the water. The “kept” can jokingly refer to something “skipping a generation” when there is something that does not follow from immediate connection; if something novel appears, they can claim it as just part of their individual nature rather than possibly coming from an unknown ancestor and being a constant source of mystery. Only with other adopted people are these conversations safe to have, knowing that I am not alone.

Through my reading, reflecting, and memoing around the notion of belonging and finding one’s “tribe” I have come to understand the importance of connecting with others “like” myself, feeling “seen,” and that I matter. As I noted:

I think about the power of support groups, the strength I derived from them. To no longer feel so unutterably alone. And then what I see is that being an adopted person means I belong as a member of a cultural group, albeit invisible, a secret club, a group I wouldn’t have chosen to belong in at all. Since my very first time at an adoption support group, and latterly since the inception of private FB groups, I have always felt an affinity and kinship with other adoptees, “cribmates,” as if we are bound together by our shared bastard status. (Reflective memo, 16 January, 2023)

During the gestation of this dissertation, the world has seen the rise of the #MeToo movement, a global social media campaign aimed at raising awareness about sexual harassment and assault which rapidly and organically became a “watershed moment in contemporary feminism” (Jaffe, 2018, p. 80). #MeToo encouraged survivors to share their stories and advocated for systemic change to address these issues and promote healing (Jaffe, 2018). I have reflected on the multiple ways in which this movement has played a significant role in facilitating self-efficacy in women, and what has happened as, at last, women young and old have spoken their truth. Over the course of these years, speaking out was encouraged, silence and stigma around sexual assault was broken, and a supportive community was created where knowing others shared similar experiences made individuals feel less alone and isolated. Further, receiving validation and empathy helped survivors of sexual harassment and assault to feel understood and empowered: crucial elements in building self-efficacy, and a critical step towards prompting broader cultural conversations around accountability, justice, and the need for change in societal attitudes.

As signalled in Chapter 4, a forum such as an adoptee-only group where people can feel safe and encouraged to speak their truth about their lived experience of being an adoptee is of paramount importance. Those affected by closed stranger adoption in the 1950s and beyond are still navigating its myriad impacts in their lives. In an area that has been so characterised by secrecy and stigma, those in the world of closed adoption and its aftermath need to be encouraged to safely speak out about their experiences. In addition, in such a forum they can gain a nascent sense of belonging by connecting with others like them who can validate and empathise with their experiences. Groups such as peer support groups could comprise a rich source of qualitative ethnographic research data wherein deeper insights could be gained and potentially contribute to broader cultural and legislative shifts and understandings by the “kept,” thus bringing the marginalised discourses of adoption into the mainstream.

Theme 2: Bonding and Connecting: “I Found it Hard to Connect with Her at the Same Time as Being Very Connected to Her”

Erikson’s sixth psychosocial stage of intimacy versus isolation revolves around the individual’s capacity to connect to others and form meaningful and intimate relationships balanced with a sense of self. At its core, adoption is relational. It appears that adopted people may be predisposed to struggle in relationships. Many lack a template, struggling to attach to their adoptive parents (due to the twin factors of absence of genetic and temperamental “fit” compounded by the trauma of the primal separation from mother) and then go on to struggle in adult intimate relationships. My research illuminated the challenges faced by my participants and myself in navigating

closeness and distance in intimate relationships—from the polar positions of too much (merging) through to too little (detachment and disconnection). Adopted people seemed to find it difficult to find the Goldilocks zone of “just right.” This flowed into *over* or *under* attachment with our own children in how we become their attachment objects, or they became ours.

It is important to note that in this study, participants predominantly used the term “attachment” not in its academic sense, but interchangeably with “bonding.” The two are related concepts but have some nuanced differences. Academically speaking, “attachment” specifically refers to the process by which infants or young children form emotional bonds or attachments to their primary caregivers (Bowlby, 1977). As discussed in Chapter 1, this attachment is critical for the child’s emotional and psychological development and influences the ability to form healthy relationships later in life. “Bonding” is a broader term that encompasses various types of strong emotional connection between individuals. This might occur between parents and children, romantic partners, friends, or even between humans and animals. Since I have sought to convey participant voices faithfully wherever possible, it is acknowledged that their interchangeable use of these terms might result in some ambiguity.

2a: Merging: “I Was Not Able to Individuate From my Children”

Theme Definition

At one end of the continuum is the idea of “too much” connection—merging and being swallowed up in relationship. For some participants, the profoundly symbiotic experience of belonging and connecting to their biological children felt so overwhelming that it became utterly overpowering, with descriptions of infatuation and enmeshment with their children, along with an absence of appropriate parent-child boundaries in this fused, merged place. This connection felt like something they had been starving for, but brought challenges in the parenting journey when their children resisted. Some acknowledged this degree of merging had been unhealthy, and they had found themselves in a place of fearful overprotectiveness and needy possessiveness. For some participants these issues remain to this day. In reflecting on their relationships with their adult children some noticed that it was still hard to see themselves as separate. They described their connection as undifferentiated, unhealthy, intense, overanxious, overprotective, and tightly woven.

Their Stories

Bridget was matter of fact and unequivocal in her description of how she sees herself with her adult daughters: “I don’t differentiate between them and me. There wasn’t a me, they are not separate. We are enmeshed. There is no division, there are no boundaries. My children complete me”. During our interview, Bridget reflected

deeply on this phenomenon of merging with her children, recalling that it had started in the instant she met them:

My first child was the first person I saw that I was related to. It's such a profound thing to understand...The child wasn't "other." She was me. And it was just unthinkable that she would be a separate entity from me [pause]. And I thought that was normal. But it's not...I do remember never letting her out of my sight; she was never away from me. And physically she was on my body all of the time. (Bridget)

Echoing that this experience of merging had commenced with her son's birth, Juliet recalled staring at him in the hospital:

...the visceral, somatic experience of—“He's mine”, and it just being quite surreal that for the first time in my life I sort of felt like there was a connection there that I hadn't had. But then of course, the flip side of that was an overconnection that happened with both of [her children]. But for me, in that moment, he wasn't experiencing that overconnection, and I was feeling it and it was very nourishing, it was disconcerting, it was new [pause]. But I felt like I had what I'd dreamed about for many years. (Juliet)

The overconnection became a cloche of overprotectiveness. Juliet acknowledged that “My parenting was too intense. I never let my child out of my sight, I was hypervigilant and always scanning [for threat/danger]”. She eloquently described this as having been “emotionally activated by [the children]. I could not disentangle what was mine and what was my child's”.

In hindsight, describing her 4-decade-long journey addressing her mental health challenges, reading, studying, and learning about herself and her patterns of coping, Juliet concluded, “I feel like in some ways my parenting has been unhealthy, because it's been to avoid rejection. Far too intense. But of course, you don't know that until after, not while you're going through it”. Despite this, she expressed that she always knew deep down that her resolve was clear: “I would find my way through, because my children, they were my reason for living”.

My findings align with and extend those in a study by Neil et al. (2023) which described how many adoptee parents worried that aspects of their parenting were not optimal, particularly in terms of barriers in getting close to their children, or the opposite—an overinvolved or permissive parenting style. Similarly, Despax, Bouteyre, and Halidi (2021) described how some adopted parents show “massive investment” in their relationships with their children, which could be associated with insecure attachments and heightened parenting stress. That adoptees seemed to be strongly embedded in the families that they had established was noted by Carsten (2007); she

also noted that there was an apparent polarisation as they appeared to be either enmeshed with, or the opposite—detached from—their children.

Juliet reflected that in hindsight, her chronic anxious attachment that enmeshed her with her children was “like a gaping needy wound that I’ve had to be mindful doesn’t impact. It has affected [my children], for sure. No question they would both say, ‘Mum’s been needy’”. The intergenerational legacy of adoption has been preliminarily explored by Chetty (2023) who interviewed a small number of adult offspring of adoptees. All considered that their parents’ early adoption experiences had stayed with them, influencing their parenting styles and behaviours. This finding was echoed by Rowena who shared that her 31-year-old daughter with four young children of her own had recently told Rowena, “I’m sure you’ve parented [us] the way you have in some ways because you’re adopted”. Rowena admitted that she had not pursued this conversation, so did not know in what ways her daughter felt her mother’s parenting had been affected by being adopted. Chetty’s participants also reported experiencing “strained relationship(s)” (p. 46) with their adoptee parents, observing that their parents tended to have difficulties with relationships with those around them (Chetty, 2023). Findings by Bork et al. (2022) aligned with these findings. As a relatively newly explored area, more in-depth research into the impacts of adoption on adoptees’ offspring would be useful.

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

My determination to eschew any enmeshment with my children stemmed from my own dance of distance with my adoptive parents. I struggled for the entirety of my adolescent and adult life with an internal narrative of “grateful” overlaid with implied and overt messages of obligation from my adoptive mother, and what felt like suffocating intrusion. I dreamed of moving to another city, another country. I took steps away and attempted to establish some boundaries. I retreated to an outer place of distance, with guilt my constant companion. My adoptive mother’s desperate clinging horrified me, alerting me to the risk of turning into a “smother” rather than a mother. In addition, long before my first pregnancy, as a young woman of 17 I had watched my boyfriend’s mother (later to be my mother-in-law) break down as all three of her children left home the same week (to jobs, training, and university in other cities). I vowed to myself that would never be me. (17-year-old me had zero insight into the understandable grief and loss my soon-to-be mother-in-law was experiencing). I promised myself I would not burden any future offspring with my neediness; I would ensure I did not rely on them to make my life meaningful; and I would have a fulfilling and worthwhile career, so they never had to feel like they “owed” me anything.

So, from the earliest of moments with my children, even though every cell, every fibre of my being was drawn to them like iron filings to a magnet, I had already commenced an inner dialogue with myself, warning myself against merging: warning myself that I should be always on guard against “needing” them, warning myself they were NOT responsible for my happiness.

Adoption absolutely shaped how I parented, how I craved relationship with them. I was so hyper attuned to whether I would smother, I was determined to give them roots and give them wings. Even now at times I feel a sense of desperation to hear from and be in contact with one or more of my four, and I push back against that inside of myself, reminding myself how utterly claustrophobic that has always felt for me. I have had to work hard—and still do—to see myself as a separate person to them, and vice versa. But I have been determined to let them be themselves, give them roots and give them wings. I hate it, though. (Julia)

When my daughter was pregnant with her first child, I memoed, “I notice now wanting to talk about EVERYTHING [my daughter] is feeling and experiencing in the pregnancy, her first, but needing to remind myself to back off and not “smother” (Reflective memo, February 2022). Even after all this time, my internal warning system still sounds.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

Becca sends me a photo of her friend, who has just given birth to a healthy baby girl with her partner there too, they are gazing at the baby...The photo is taken of them almost immediately after the baby has been born and they’re all in the spa pool where she has delivered her. The alertness of the baby, the dyadic gaze, the beautiful connecting “cradling” I see all well up inside of me as I think of Becca’s baby due to arrive in just over 10 weeks, the absence of cradling and connection with another human that I (and most adoptees) lacked when we arrived, the way that plays out in intimacy with [my husband] (the thing I crave the most, I fear the most—absolute merging and joining with another, as in that birth and postpartum experience). All of this I need to incorporate into my PhD discussion, analysis, findings. I see my journey and my obstinate questionings so much more clearly as I look through the lens of Becca’s experience, watching her go through it. (Reflective memo, June, 2022)

I am struck anew as to how intuitively I knew at such a young age, that my deepest craving was to be utterly enmeshed with my children. Yet knowing how I had struggled with my adoptive mother’s smothering style, and the sense that it would be unhealthy for my children, I am relieved that I intentionally resisted the urge to merge. It

makes sense to me that adopted people are primed to want to merge with these tiny creatures who “fit” us, mirror us, and for whom we are enough *just as we are*. I can also see with the clarity of hindsight and learning about the role attachment patterns have played in my life, that it was always my pattern to become quickly enmeshed in adult relationships also, oversharing and seeking “instant” merging with the other person followed just as rapidly by internal terror, shutting down and detaching, which is explored in an upcoming section.

2b: Healthy Connection: “The Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me”

Theme Definition

My adoptee participants frequently and evocatively expressed, the strength of their connections to their children from the time when they were in utero to the present day, which gave them feelings of finally being tethered to the world. As previously discussed, attachment style refers to the way in which an individual goes about establishing close or intimate relationships with others to gain a sense of emotional security (Ainsworth et al., 1978). A secure attachment style is created through healthy and consistent bonds which lead to a sense of trust, emotional security, and overall comfort in relationships even in the absence of the attachment figure. An insecure attachment style is characterised by relational difficulties as a result of unstable or insecure close relationships during childhood and/or adulthood where the individual lacks the trust needed to form secure attachments. A person with an anxious attachment style will likely be nervous and stressed about their relationships, have trouble being alone, and need constant reassurance and affection. An avoidant style is characterised by the restriction of emotional expression, the use of deactivating strategies creating distance during times of stress and conflict, and an aversion to looking to others for comfort, even when comfort is needed (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Levine & Heller, 2010). *Their Stories*.

Becoming aware of the connection with their biological children at various stages along the parenting journey was a theme that participants returned to frequently. Kate’s experience was one of flipping from a sense of deep connection to the opposite. She recalled, “I felt really connected to her [my baby], and I think (felt?) that kind of tetherness [sic] but also deeply disconnected”. Kenneth recalled an absence of “heart” connection for the duration of his partner’s pregnancy, which was upended when he experienced a deep sense of connection to his daughter at her birth:

[The pregnancy] was a surreal experience because I was watching something happen that I had no emotional connection to. It wasn’t until I held our daughter for the first time [pauses, wave of emotion] that it made sense. Because up until that moment, it was an academic exercise in the sense that I was processing it

in my head, but there was no heart connection until for the first time in my life I was holding someone who was related to me. (Kenneth)

In a similar way, one of Pinkerton’s (2010) participants described how becoming a mother had helped her overcome the lack of connection she had felt as an adoptee:

Like I’m a mother now, I actually count, I’m not just [one of] those floating individual[s], sort of like more rooted and connected to...humankind, yeah. Which I think is something that’s missing a little bit when you’re adopted, that rooted and grounded feeling of being an integral part of things. And then becoming a mother helped that. (Pinkerton, 2010, p. 79)

Adoptee mothers in Bork et al.’s 2022 research echoed these findings, describing how “having a biological connection with their children seemed to fill a void they may not have even realized was missing beforehand” (p. 14). This positive experience was mirrored in Vaccaro’s 2012 study of 84 male adoptees, a statistically significant proportion of whom reported that adoption had a positive impact on their relationships with their children across a wide range of domains including attachment, connection, expectations, loyalty, commitment, openness, communication, honesty, stability, security, and trust. One participant described how he had to confront his own needs in the process of becoming a father, and how he had endeavoured to create a legacy of secure attachment *to make up for what he lost*:

You are never really prepared to be a parent especially when you are adopted because you didn’t get to do it right. You didn’t get to experience it the right way. So, trying to make it right for someone else, for your own child, for your own flesh and blood, literally takes you back. I think both of those factors were there and influencing me. (Vaccaro, 2012, p. 185)

Similarly, several of the participants in my study also referenced their conscious drive and awareness of connection to their own children as direct consequences of *what they themselves had not experienced*. Juliet remembered being in the maternity hospital and thinking that for her and her baby boy, “There was a connection there that I hadn’t had”. Throughout the raising of her children, she explained:

All my behaviours were to *prevent them from having the same disconnection as me*. No one mirroring back themselves, no one letting them express their feelings, feeling free to be themselves, feeling affirmed for being different, whatever it was, they were going to get it, everything that I didn’t get. (Juliet, *emphasis mine*)

The strength of connectedness and bond that Juliet recalled with her son was poignantly described as she mused about their closeness and attunement:

I grew up with my children...and I look back now and see that [my son] was my little companion in a way, because I was connected to him and he meant everything to me. And he was very attuned to me, and that's been a legacy for him, that sensitivity to me, being aware of my sensitivities and vulnerabilities. My love for my son seemed all so encompassing, and my connection with him so strong. (Juliet)

Rowena had outlined several years of turmoil and upheaval in her relationships with her children yet was able to proudly reflect on the continued primacy and strength of their ongoing connection which she felt had been achieved due to her commitment to being authentic. She acknowledged that she had “always been striving to be honest with them”. As a consequence, she felt comfortable with a constancy of connection with them as adults: “I feel very secure with my kids in our relationship”. This was a further demonstration of the importance of exploring the lifespan perspective, since for Rowena there had been periods of time when her relational bonds with her children had been under considerable pressure. As previously noted, the literature indicates that our attachment systems remain active throughout our lifespan from their critical role during our early years of life, and underlie the formation and maintenance of relational bonds in adulthood (Bowlby, 1988).

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

The connectedness I experienced as a mother was visceral, all encompassing, and profound. It felt as though there was never a time that I wasn't thinking about my children, consciously or unconsciously. I related to Elizabeth Stone's statement that “Making the decision to have a child—it is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body” (2004). My children were my universe. They gave me an identity; prior to their arrival I had no idea who I was. Now I was their mother. They completed me. Throughout my parenting years there was a nagging awareness that the only times I felt “right” and “comfortable” in myself was when I was with them. At that time, I did not think deeply about why this might have been.

My family, church community, and society reinforced the total devotion that I gave my children. I read every single book I could find on parenting. I was determined to be the very best mother I could be across all of their developmental stages. Our home was modelled on a traditional structure with me staying at home as a fulltime mother while their father went to work, and this was just how I wanted it. I would never have wanted anyone else looking after my babies; I craved all of them for myself. Some brief forays into part-time work and study for a couple of hours a week left me feeling guilty, anxious, and on edge.

As they matured into adolescents, at times I felt pushed to the limits, but was determined to stay closely connected to them. The upcoming section, “Rejection and Challenge,” describes this, but connection was my north star at all times. With the passage of time, one by one they left home. Different kinds of relationships between us emerged, but my yearning need for a secure connection to each one remained strong despite the distance and separation. I had found so much motivation and strength in my role as a mother to them, gradually understanding that I needed to learn to care for myself in order to be a secure base for them. The combined strands of the clarity of distance and time along with the research, reading, and reflection I have undertaken for this doctoral thesis have given me a far deeper understanding of the impacts of my adoptive status on my parenting and my connections and relationships with my children.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

Comparing my narrative around connection with parallel experiences of some of my participants has given me far deeper insights into what we as adoptee parents may have experienced. Like Juliet and Rowena, I was unconsciously reactive to the absence of connection and authenticity in my family of origin, and this drove and shaped my parenting:

I wanted my relationship with my children to be REAL in a way that I was never real with my adoptive parents. A relationship that was authentic and honest across ALL their ages (developmentally appropriate) and that required me to be completely honest with them about all the choices I had made in my life. It has made me seek connection with them because I experienced such a profound sense of disconnection. It has made me determined to ensure they become their own selves and not beholden or “grateful” or indebted. It made me determined to “see” my children in a way that I had never, ever experienced being “seen” in my adoptive family. (Julia)

In a further insight, I noted in a reflective memo (11 October, 2022) that responding to my children in a comforting and attuned manner in their first years of life had enabled me to envision what my emotional states might have been like as a baby. Another generation on, during the gestation of this project, I have observed my granddaughter and two grandsons being welcomed into the arms of their doting parents, within a wider circle of family to whom they belong and are connected through genes, history, and commitment. This has offered an additional and deeper level of grief but also a healing component to the internalised representation of my infancy.

I sit and sit and sit on the floor at my daughter’s house and just gaze at Evie, her eyes, her face, her bloneness, the sparkle in her eyes...I see her. She

sees me. I *know* her. And I watch her watching me with recognition and am in awe, am humbled with gratitude and a sense of the miraculous, that she will grow up never ONCE wondering. *Who are my people?* Even now I want to shock the “kept,” even those whom I love, into “getting it.” How can they not get it?? (but then I remind myself that I *still* manage to gaslight my own experience, even after all this learning, research, validation). Picture the exquisite waiting expectation and anticipation of newborn Evie and Little Foot’s arrivals...Now picture as s/he slithers into the world, instead of the ecstatic waiting arms, skin, heartbeat, warm and familiar voices, kisses, awe with which s/he is met, there is silence. Disinterest. Clinical cleaning. Being spurned. Being alone in the Universe. Denial. (Reflective memo, 30 September, 2023)

Looking more closely with the clarity afforded by distance, time, and learning, I scan the landscape of my life. The adoption issues never actually went away. At each developmental stage, they surfaced, rearing up and intersecting with the developmental tasks that needed to be accomplished. At times, thwarted and abandoned, I remained stuck in that space. At other times, the adoption issues morphed into my own bespoke vehicle by which I could move forward through reading voraciously, listening to others’ experiences, and learning to become more self-reflective and aware. Attachment was one such manifestation.

Making the Connection: Attachment and Intimacy

When I entered my counselling training in 2016 and was introduced to the study of attachment, I was deeply unsettled. Here was a theory that could explain my whole life, my romantic relationships, and why these had been such an arena for struggle for me. Here was a theory that explained my yearning for connection, yet profound aversion and reluctance to look deeply into a lover’s eyes. I could look back into my childhood, remembering the detachment, the holding of my own hand, the cupboard under the stairs. Attachment theory explained all of these things.

I dug deeper and found that I fitted the profile for fearful avoidant attachment. Avoidant persons tend to restrict their emotional expression, relying on themselves, and do not look to others for comfort, even when they really need it. This powerfully shaped my adult intimate relationships as I consistently distanced myself, afraid of the intensity of the feelings that welled up inside. Despite having several short- and long-term relationships that had mattered to me, in recalling my pre-study reflections, I see that I was never truly present with these partners who professed love and commitment to me. Avoiding closeness, I acted and performed my way through engagements and marriages. Never once did I look deeply into an adult partner’s eyes. I coped in the ways that I had coped as a child, presenting an agreeable, compliant, and functional

facade, but hiding my true self. Feeling comfortable and familiar with emotional distance, I numbed any needs for human closeness and comfort. As a child, I had sobbed into my cat’s fur, but never in my mother’s arms; somehow she always smelled “wrong” to me, and my internal baby self had felt repelled by her. By adulthood, I had completely shut down any need for tears. Ever.

I came late to the party of what could be described as a truly intimate relationship with a partner. It has only been in the last 15 years, in the context of much personal and couples’ therapeutic work, that I have come to experience what being healthily attached to another person is and can be. In my counselling theory and practicum work, I have learned that turning to a romantic partner for secure connection and emotional support is a sign and source of strength (Bowlby, 1988; Hendrix, 1988; Johnson, 2008, 2019; Levine & Heller, 2010). I have learned that becoming attached means that my brain can become wired to seek my partner’s support through their psychological and physical proximity: quite the opposite to my entrenched patterns of always keeping “mental distance and an escape route” (Levine & Heller, 2010, p. 116).

In my pre-study reflections, I found similarity with Rowena; in a paradoxical way, I craved relationship yet would always end up sabotaging it. I would long for closeness with my husband; then, when we were close, bewilderingly I would panic and experience the arising of a very primeval fear. Like Verzulli (2000), “Even when he was the thing I feared, he was also what I craved” (p. 101). Paradoxically, if I sensed my husband distancing himself from me, I could feel the deep, primal fear of that separation surging up inside. For a young infant, that primal separation spells annihilation. I would alternately feel threatened both by the intense closeness with him and by separation from him. Hearing Bridget speak so bluntly of her challenges in romantic relationships—“I struggle with intimacy, especially physical intimacy”—and having learnt that touch avoidance is related to an avoidant attachment style (Verzulli, 2000), I was able to understand how powerfully the visceral and somatic experiences from our childhoods may have affected us (Chapter 3).

Yet attachment was confusing. Despite feeling avoidant in my *adult* intimate relationships and finding it easy to detach from adult intimacy, I paradoxically felt insecurely attached with my children. I yearned for connection. “There was always a drive to overattach to my children, feeling tense and anxious when separated from them and only being able to truly relax when they were all safely gathered around me” (Cantrell, 1998, p. 62). It was always excruciating separating from my own children, as they became more independent and stepped away from me. I felt needy, ruminated about them obsessively, and craved reassurance that I mattered in their

lives (although the protectively avoidant part of me that had the upper hand resolutely forbade me to express any of this).

Prakash (2014) noted that the quality of the relationship between the adult adoptee and his/her child appeared to depend on several factors. One that she considered was the security of the adopted person’s attachment in the spousal relationship. Many early attachment researchers have considered adult love relationships as direct parallels to the infant-primary caregiver relationship (Domyancich-Lee, 2020), and, as discussed in Chapter 1, romantic relationships in adulthood can be conceptualised as involving attachment bonds, with one’s romantic or close relationship partner becoming one’s principal attachment figure in adulthood (Shaver & Mikulincer, 2014). Yet in contrast to Prakash’s findings, the quality of relationship with my children was completely independent to my spousal relationship(s). In hindsight I now see that I was far more attached to my children than I ever was to their father. *My children were always my primary attachment objects.* Until I had children, I had no idea that I longed for touch and connection. Their arrivals in my life were emotionally, somatically, viscerally, and spiritually the most powerful awakenings imaginable. There is no doubt in my mind that I turned to them to fulfil a longing for connection and attachment. It was fortunate that my propensity for “holding my own hand” and denying any emotional neediness meant that I did not lean on them for emotional support as they were growing up; my internal alarm warning me against smothering them was protective in that way.

Feelings of being unwanted, not mattering, and being rejected and abandoned were key. Whenever an event happened in my life to trigger those feelings, I would internally shut down, detach, and distance myself. It was as if a switch was thrown; I felt nothing. Once I could finally get in touch with the feelings, they were so deep, I found them unbearably primitive and infantile: inexpressible. They were not the feelings of a woman in her 50s who had raised four children, obtained a postgraduate degree, and managed a professional career. They were the feelings of a newborn baby whose mother did not want her, did not even look at her, and who discarded her. It is painful and challenging to reexamine these past patterns woven throughout my life.

Whilst I think critically about the range of literature that is neither empirical nor peer reviewed, I wonder, did the detached and rejecting atmosphere of my biological mother’s womb set in train epigenetic changes resulting in a basic absence of feelings of safety? As one of my participants (Rowena) pondered, did our early weeks of being alone in a hospital crib create the template that primed us to see connection as unfamiliar? Did the absence of “fit” and connection in my adoptive family render me

2c: Rejection and Challenge in Relationship: “The Biggest Attachment I Have is to the Dog, Because Every Other Relationship in My Life, I Always Wonder When It’s Going to End”

unseen, reinforcing the way I hid from them both literally and metaphorically? Did it foster a masking and withdrawal from others in order to avoid further rejection, and a fixation on self-reliance rather than risking being left again?

I wanted to be everything for [my children], be enough for them, and I wanted to see them, I wanted to really see them, know them, as no one had seen or known me. And yet still I can experience that fundamental sense of being invisible and that I don’t matter, and that no-one’s coming. That whimpering self, it’s unbelievably triggering. Time after time it gets retriggered in my own home, of being invisible, irrelevant, unheard, unseen. No wonder it pushes my buttons. I kept craving being seen, and I took that hunger into all of my intimate relationships. (Reflective memo, November 2021).

The theory and practice regarding the ability to be healthily attached to oneself and to others is far beyond the scope of this research, but I consider it powerfully influential in the self-reflection that has been and continues to be so critically important to healing.

This PhD is lifting old scabs off. The closer I get to [my husband] emotionally, the more I need to work on my inner baby self, she feels so triggered and so unsafe, feels too needy, too ugly, too dependent. I completely relate to the paradoxes Anne Heffron says so well: “How I can be so independent and so needy is beyond me. Half the time I feel like I will die of loneliness and the other half I feel like I will die if I am not alone. In other words, I’m always on the wrong side of the street”. (Reflective memo, February 2022; Heffron, 2016, p. 8)

2c: Rejection and Challenge in Relationship: “The Biggest Attachment I Have is to the Dog, Because Every Other Relationship in My Life, I Always Wonder When It’s Going to End”

Theme Definition

Participants spoke frequently and unprompted about their challenges in joining and connecting relationally with partners, but also with their children. With each, they struggled with a sense of neediness, and the constant fear of rejection or discord. Some participants experienced—then and now—partings or separation from their children as traumatic. However, the relationships with their child or children gave some an opportunity to relate in a profoundly different way, as if this was a fresh opportunity to learn a new way of joining (coming together) with another person.

Their Stories

Some of my participants specifically linked the impacts of their adoptee status to the challenges they had faced in forming attachments as adults. Deep-seated feelings of being defective and unlovable contributed to the challenges of intimate relationships; participants described beginning to get close to someone, then rejecting them out of fear that they would learn of their weaknesses and be rejected. Since adopted persons have been living “as if born” to their adoptive families, they can feel like imposters from early in life, which in turn can wreak havoc on intimate relationships. As noted in Chapter 4, some participants were so accustomed to hiding behind a performative mask, that the threat of being unmasked left exiting the relationship feeling like the only option. Cassie expressed that rejection in relationship had been a default for her: “I have expected and anticipated rejection, I filter everyone in my life through that lens. You expect the people you care about, to reject you. Just waiting. And when something happens, it proves your narrative, a confirmation bias”. Rowena had reflected deeply about what she termed her “neediness” in intimate relationships and was matter of fact about the ways in which she had sabotaged opportunities for connection. “We want the closeness of a relationship, but when it starts getting close, we start to jeopardise it. And we sabotage it”. She had come to believe that her adoptee status had woven itself through multiple unhappy relationships and was haunted by the possibility that when she had chosen to move away from her children because of a new relationship, perhaps she had unconsciously been playing out her own experience as a newborn: “Am I the mother that abandoned my children, because I was abandoned myself?” This fear was echoed by Verzulli (2000) in her powerful exploration of attachment in romantic partners as she noted “The fear of abandonment can lead one to abandon” (p. 68).

Like me, Juliet had strongly bonded with her children, but had struggled with her ability to bond with their father: “My partner bore the brunt of my pain, my anger, my neediness, my projecting abandonment”.

Becoming a parent can also raise the spectre of being rejected by one’s own children. Lifton describes it thus:

Adoptees...want to be a friend to their child, to be liked, but having been deprived of authority as children themselves, they have a hard time being authoritative. Afraid of alienating their children, they may be too permissive with them. They cannot bear anger, because they have suppressed their own. They want everyone and everything to be happy, just as their parents wanted them to be. (Lifton, 1994, p. 119)

This fear was poignantly described by Kenneth as he acknowledged his lifelong insecurity regarding the love of his children: “The adopted person is hard wired for

rejection...I am still afraid to tell my kids I love them; what if they don’t love me back?” Neil et al. (2023) noted several participants’ fears of rejecting or being rejected by their own children, echoing Kenneth’s experience. Yet most other participants in my study did not refer in any great detail to clashes or discord with their children. This was in contrast to Chetty (2023); all but one of her participants described struggling with, or having strained relationships with, their adoptee-parents. Similarly, several participants in Meyer et al.’s 2023 research recognised they had difficulties connecting with others, attributing these difficulties to being adopted. The challenges for some involved connections with immediate family members, for example, their own biological children. Like Kenneth and Rowena, one male adoptee described the overarching nature of his challenges with being in relationships:

I certainly always have, more often than not, viewed myself negatively...lots of self-doubts in terms of self-worth, very negative feelings, just not good enough. And super-sensitive to the perceptions and judgments of others, and particularly rejection. (Meyer et al., 2023, p. 138)

The authors noted that these feelings led him to let others take advantage of him and allow boundary violations, in order to “please, placate, and satisfy the needs of others” (p. 138).

As previously noted, it is widely accepted that adopted adults have more insecure, disorganised, anxious, and avoidant attachment styles than their nonadopted peers (Borders et al., 2000; Dalton et al., 2023; Despax, Bouteyre, and Pavani, 2021; Domyancich-Lee, 2020; Feeney et al., 2007; Passmore, 2007). This points to potential challenges in adult relationships because of the early attachment disruptions involved in the early separation and eventual adoption process. Despax, Bouteyre, and Halidi (2021) considered that adoptees frequently exhibited insecure attachment to their own child(ren). Juliet recalled how much she struggled when either of her children distanced themselves from her:

I could not tolerate [my children] pushing me away. When she [daughter] pushed me away, I couldn’t tolerate it. I didn’t know how to manage it or tolerate it, that’s the honest truth. I scrambled. I hid. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t have the skills, really, to navigate because I hadn’t separated off from my...unconsciously, it took me years to separate off from the entanglement and enmeshment, phantom birth parents that we don’t even know, and the insecure ambivalent attachment with adoptive parents which I had. (Juliet)

Despax, Bouteyre, and Halidi(2021) noted that some authors have studied the transmission of attachment patterns from parents to their children, suggesting that in cases where parents express insecure attachment to their children, this may put the

child(ren) at risk in the future of developing an insecure attachment style. Difficult though it is to tease out what influences may be linked to adoption rather than parenting style, further research building on this study and that of Chetty (2023) into how the children of adoptees navigate intimate relationships and attachments to others might shed light on this possible intergenerational aspect.

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

There were numerous challenges to the closeness of the relationship I had with my children, in particular, being separated from them, wanting constantly to be in their orbit. Leaving them at kindergarten or for an hour with my adoptive parents felt like a piece of me was being ripped away internally. In 1991 I was shocked to win a British Airways competition prize of two free airline tickets to London. As I had never met my birth mother who lived in the UK, this opportunity to fly to the other side of the world upended my entire universe. Only something as momentous as my first meeting my mother would have taken me away from my boys; Michael was 4 and Bobby was just 18 months old. I left them for 12 days, enduring waves of nausea every moment I was away from them, though in hindsight I believe that the nausea was in part due to the churn of primal emotions about going to meet my mother.

Seven years later, my marriage to their father ended. Due to the custodial arrangements, I was forced to separate from my children several times a week as they moved back and forth from my home to their father’s. They were then aged 11, 8, 5 and 3. The very first time this happened, I completely collapsed at a psychic level. I vividly remember the intense and excruciating pain. It felt as if I was dying, as if my gut was being ripped out, and my heart shattered into a thousand pieces. This regressing made no intellectual sense to me since, rationally, I knew it was only from a Friday to a Sunday. Yet it felt like I wouldn’t survive them being taken from me, even though I really felt like I was being annihilated at a core level. The regular repetition of them going away from me meant that I had to practise bracing myself for the dropping away inside that I experienced each time. Yet, after many years it eventually came to feel “normal.” Paradoxically it helped inure me to it, forcing me to face and learn to tolerate the breaks in connection with them: yet another way my propensity to “smother” was compulsorily reined in.

Along with separating from them, a further challenge was saying “No” to my children. I was determined to set and hold appropriate boundaries in place, and of course they pushed against these boundaries in ways that were entirely normal developmentally. Yet, I was constantly terrified that when I said “No” then *they might leave me*. When they were upset or angry with me, it felt completely out of proportion—catastrophic—as if the world was ending. It was a relief to hear this experience

mirrored and echoed by one of Neil et al.’s (2023) participants who admitted, “When my eldest is grumpy or upset or annoyed at me, I experience it as abandonment. So that leads me to a parenting style of being quite permissive, to bond with the kids” (p. 7). Sometimes, even though they were “like” me in so many ways, I held back from being directive as I was desperate for them NOT to be like me. I viewed them as “becoming” and “works in progress” so was reluctant to “prune” them into a topiarised shape of my design, for fear it might stunt their flowering or growth. I was always very clear inside myself that I wanted them to be *themselves* rather than be who they perceived their father or I “aspired” for them to be. Yet it mattered to me that they were strong people; I wanted them to be the antithesis of how I had seen myself, as weak, insipid, and pallid. This clarity was also a preventative factor against smothering; while part of me ached as they individuated from me, the other part rejoiced. I grieved the “endings” and developmental stages through which the four of them passed—as many parents do—leaving preschool, starting primary school, secondary, loosening the symbiotic closeness and being their “one and only”: especially leaving home as they went off to other countries, other places to live, without me.

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

Interviews with participants have brought back memories of how much I have feared that my adult children would reject me, along with the churning feelings of anxiety I still experience if we are out of synch. Over the course of this research, I have written reflective memos noting my perpetual nervousness about smothering them, while also secretly hungering for their validation. I remain sensitive to nuance, anxious to not be too much, or not enough, testing the waters with them to check that I am getting the balance right. It is still a dance of uncertainty. I do not know if other mothers of adult children are constantly waiting “for the other shoe to drop,” with a sense that their children will inevitably reject and abandon them. Only Juliet spoke directly of how “intolerable” it was for her when her children pushed her away, which was validating for me to hear.

Rejection and challenge with my adult children still happens, though these days I notice that it is less likely to bring me to my knees as it once did. On this occasion, it was a nuanced reminder that we are differentiated in how we see and interpret our worlds:

Becca had been telling me about having some things in her house that had been her paternal grandmother’s. I asked if her partner had any surviving grandparents? She said no, and he had never known his grandparents. I said that was sad, and how strange that she at age 27 still has four grandparents (even though her father’s parents have already passed). She paused and

demurred to the effect that she doesn’t...“I’ve never even spoken to Lindy, and I don’t think of Jerry...” and then her voice trailed off. Yet the meaning was clear—the only grandparents she regarded as “real” were my adoptive parents. My birth parents meant nothing to her. Instantly I felt shocked, a huge part of me invalidated, erased.

Did she read anything into my silence? I said “No, of course...” and quickly dissembled, trying to reframe whatever word I had used as “acknowledge,” as in, a biological condition exists whether or not it’s felt or experienced, and she agreed, and we both veered off the topic. But I was left with a feeling of such aloneness in my experience. Echoes of my sister’s entrenched mantra, “These parents are all I need and want—what’s wrong with you that you seek more?” the perpetual unspoken accusation. I felt Becca should understand more, should “get it” from my perspective. I wanted to say, “I did this [searching] in part for YOU (and your brothers)...all the connection and grief and photos and yearning I did was always about connecting you to your people. Maybe she’ll only start to grasp that if she ever has her own child.

But I said nothing.

Then later that evening, out of the blue, a text.

“How old did Winnie [my biological great grandmother] live to?”

“Two weeks off her 109th birthday”

“Shit. Wow”.

“1899 to 2008”.

“Holy moly”.

“Not a bad effort!”

“I need to get some more hobbies. If I’m going to be around that long”.

“Haha trurat. You’ve got some impressive genes”.

That light-hearted exchange brought me joy—on some level, it mattered to her. Had she raised our earlier conversation with her partner? Or had it just been percolating inside of her? Maybe I’ll ask her. It reminds me that what I feel, remember, see, interpret, and recall is nothing like what she does. All those trips to the USA—what did they mean to her? [My children] cannot grasp the profundity of knowing who and whose they are, where they came from.

And I feel alone in that, because I had them so I would not always be alone. And writing and acknowledging *that* truth, brings up tears. (Reflective memo, July 2020)

Until her curious text arrived, I had experienced this exchange with my daughter as a painful “othering,” and a reminder that unlike me, she and her brothers inhabit the legitimate position with the blood ties of kinship. Blake (2013) described the sense in which our identity as adoptees “is forever compromised in a world that values blood ties as the marker for ‘real’ kinship” (p. 238). Though well-accustomed to the disconnection of being othered by the “kept” people in my life (friends and colleagues), it was a reminder that my experiences in this adoptee outgroup are only mirrored with other adopted people.

Blake (2013) observed that “[Adoptees] live a lifetime swinging between brokenness (as if born to) and joining (born to) and sometimes they hang in-between” (p. 246). I acknowledge that at times I parented in terms of the too close/not close enough, either/or binary tensions that Blake referenced, but remind myself that not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced. In hindsight, with all the learning and insights I have had, and after many long conversations with each of them, I fully own the fact that if I had my time over again, I would have been stronger and clearer and with far more boundaries as a parent. Instead of the incessant terror I felt that they might reject and abandon me if they were upset with me, had I felt secure in their love, I could have risked healthy conflict, and trusted that the permanence of our relationship would be strong enough to welcome individuation and differentiation. Perhaps one day the connection will finally feel immutable.

I understand from Verrier (1993) that the “cave we fear to enter”—anticipating and guarding against abandonment—can impact every relationship in the adoptee’s life. With the clarity of distance and time, I recognise that this motif of fear has played out in my other intimate relationships, as I understand it has for many adopted persons. Conversely, the “treasure we seek”—the promise or sensation of being wanted or desired—has felt as intoxicating and irresistible as a narcotic.

2d: Disconnection and Detachment: “I Struggle with Intimacy”

Theme Definition

The notion of detachment from one’s child, and also from one’s lived experience as an adopted person, came up repeatedly in the data. Whereas the previous theme focused on anticipating and fearing rejection, this was the inverse of connection and attachment: being untethered and unwilling or unable to meaningfully bond with another person, in a troubled paradoxical state.

Their Stories

Hertz (1998) referenced a personal communication with Lifton in 1995 in which she proposed that an adoptee will feel like an imposter with her newborn “expecting the

baby to reject her” (p. 108). This was certainly Kenneth’s experience. He spoke of emotional detachment being his “default,” from lifelong challenges with connecting to others. As previously noted, until his first child was born his experience of connection had been essentially cerebral: “an academic exercise”. His first experience of “heart connection” was when his daughter was born and he first held “someone who was related to me”. Yet he admitted that decades on, he still struggles with relational detachment, being afraid to tell his adult children that he loves them, for fear it is unreciprocated. This detachment extends to Kenneth’s other interpersonal relationships: “I struggle to have emotional connections with anyone. And that’s because it’s too scary”. This echoes Parkes and Mintz (2021) who surmised that distancing techniques in relationships are employed by adoptees to avoid intimacy for fear that if the “true self” is known, rejection is likely to follow. As such, entering into an intimate relationship may be very difficult for an adoptee, since intimacy requires a strong sense of self and identity, and developing these are core challenges for us (Lifton, 1994).

What Cassie described as her intentional emotional distancing from her children was not fear-driven like Kenneth, but protective, for her children and for herself:

[My children] don’t get the effect [of adoption] on me. I’ve protected them from that. I think they would be shocked from the hurt and the harm that I feel. The effect it’s had on me, and the effect it continues to have. I don’t think they get that. And I wouldn’t want them to get that. I think it’s part of my protection.

(Cassie)

This was similar to Chetty’s (2023) participants, the offspring of adoptees, who all reported that their adoptee parents had either downplayed or hidden their emotions regarding their adoption.

Kate’s detachment manifested in her struggle to recall much detail of the years during which she carried and raised her only daughter, which she felt was possibly due to two psychologically traumatic experiences. She characterised their (dis)connection then and now as paradoxical: “I found it hard to connect with her at the same time as being very connected to her, how does that work? I felt really connected to her, and I think (felt?) that kind of tether[ed]ness but also deeply disconnected...”. She does not see her now adult daughter very often, and described their relationship as:

very interesting...we don’t see each other very often. And if I said, what was the best thing that ever happened to me, it was Amber. I suppose every parent carries guilt, don’t they, and I certainly carry plenty [pause]. And I think our relationship is quite difficult, you could say? Quite difficult. But now I’ve learnt to

go, “It is what it is” [and] I feel incredibly connected to Amber, but “let’s not talk about that.” It’s very paradoxical. (Kate)

Carlis (2015) studied birth mother/adult adoptee dyads, looking at birth mothers who reported having attached to their baby in utero, versus those who had not, comparing the adoptees’ anxiety levels, emotional stability, liveliness, vigilance, and apprehension. Her results corroborated Hoopes’ (1990) findings that adopted children internalise a belief that they are not wanted. Further, these early experiences of feeling unwanted and unconnected to others foster a sense of alienation within their adoptive family and in the broader world, creating a broken foundation for future intimate relationships. Carlis is uncompromising in her assertion that adopted people internalise their mothers’ shame and secrecy:

The mother who communicates her love to her unborn child creates a bond that sustains the child in utero and allows the child to attach and bond to subsequent maternal objects. In contrast, the unborn child who experiences maternal rejection in utero will carry these seeds of emotional patterns into extrauterine life; the mother who has shut down emotionally endangers the unborn’s safety and well-being and sets the stage for a lifetime of poor object relations. (Carlis, 2015, p. 257)

Such a notion that a mother’s affective state might influence her unborn child may seem fanciful to some. Nonetheless, as has been described in Chapter 1, emerging neuroscience (Cao-Lei et al., 2020; Chambers, 2017; Morales, 2018) suggests that brain and biochemical alterations do occur in the baby in utero due to the mother’s constant release of corticoid hormones from anger, stress, and persistent rejection and detachment. With this in mind, I turn now to my own narrative of disconnection and detachment, one which pertains to my birth mother’s repudiation of relationship with me and my children, and my inability to be in relationship with her.

Braided Autoethnography: My Narrative Voice

By the time I was pregnant with my third child, I had contacted and briefly met my birth mother, but she had communicated clearly through silence and unresponsiveness, that she did not want to know me. It took many, many months of emotional pain, spiralling down into anorexia, and marriage counselling to finally start to identify, name, and address issues of rejection and abandonment. For me, as noted in Chapter 3, my pregnancies had been times that I connected with my unborn child. Yet not only did my mother disconnect from me in utero and at birth, she was also rejecting me in reunion. This shattered my yearning expectations and also violated what was at the time a social expectation for a joyous mother-child reunion. It felt

intolerable. And I believed it was my fault. It was me. I was fundamentally flawed, and she hated me.

It was not until many years later in a conversation with a social worker who attended the adoption support group, that I came to believe that, in order to survive, my mother had been forced to put a part of herself to death. Erik Erikson described this in a conversation with Betty Jean Lifton, asserting that “[the] birth mother must make the baby into a non-person to give it up. Having done so, she will have a hard time when that non-person comes back looking for her” (Lifton, 1994, p. 181). I eventually came to believe that my birth mother must have made a strenuous effort all those months *not* to connect, in fact to emotionally detach from the growing child within. To survive, she had, in effect, performed an emotional abortion. This painful insight regarding her affective state of detachment as described by Carlis (2015) helped me to start to try to come to terms with her unwillingness to accept me back into her life in the present on any terms.

At the commencement of this thesis, I had formed a belief that my birth mother’s rejection of me in utero and at birth, and then again on meeting her when I was a 28-year-old woman, had in some mysterious way sowed within me toxic seeds of self-rejection and self-destruction. I kept this aberrant belief to myself but was always desperate to understand *why* this constant ostinato thrummed within me: *I am not supposed to be here*. In my interview with myself as participant, I recalled the pathos of a day during my time in treatment for anorexia.

I am empty, I am tired, I am hollowed out. I have nothing left. The only place I can be alone is in the bathroom, and I am taking a shower. The hot water feels strange against my skin. It is hard standing up, I feel so weak and so very, very faint. I have lost all sense of time. I am no longer thinking clearly. I slide down the side of the shower, and crouch huddled in the corner. My only thought is a primal urge to shrink myself down. I want to be smaller. I curl myself into a tighter, smaller ball. I hear whimpering and it takes a moment to realise it is me. I am whispering over and over, “*I don’t want to come out, don’t make me come out*” and from a long way away in my brain I know that if I come out, she will leave me, and then I will be forever alone. It makes no sense. It makes perfect sense. I tell no one. (Julia)

This painful vignette, that even now causes me to ache in the recalling, has not seen the light of day until now. The bizarre irrationality of it, my fear of being regarded as some crazy person who might be seduced by what I deemed to be charlatan practices of rebirthing or recovered memories, my own confusion and discarding of my own experience (Samuels, 2022), all combined to push this experience down and bury

it deep. Rather than an illumination of my relationship with my children, I have come to regard this as a disconnection and detachment from my relationship with myself, an abandonment of connection to myself. It is offered here as another thread of insight to weave into the adopted experience, as a potential mirror for other adopted persons, and a glimmer of perception for the “kept.”

Reworking and Reweaving: Where I Locate Myself Now

My narrative continues to linger in my own lived experience of my birth mother’s rejection. Disconnection and detachment were my first experiences as a human being. As Carlis (2015) proposed, during the 9 months of reluctant gestation, as my mother shut down and anesthetised herself emotionally, did she thus endanger my safety or perhaps create some existential or spiritual ostinato that imprinted itself within me: that I was not supposed to exist? From whence did the primally felt need to shrink myself stem? What was the “knowing” I experienced that day in the shower, that as I became bigger, she would leave me and I would be forever alone (i.e., born)? To what extent have I carried these seeds of emotional patterns from her maternal rejection into my extrauterine life, creating the perpetual unconscious inner conflicts between seeing myself as independent and needy, and strong and weak; wanting to merge with others to assuage my unmet dependency needs, while holding an equally strong urge to distance, avoiding intimacy at all costs, and shutting myself away. This excoriatingly personal autoethnography has forced me to deconstruct the chronic lure of self-harm and self-destruction that has taken a lifetime to bring into the healing light of compassion, therapy, and insight. Even after all these years, its shadow remains:

At my son’s house I watched and listened to the voices surrounding my little grandson who is about to arrive, and—just as with Evie’s birth—reflected on how excited we are for his arrival, and how he belongs with all of us. And I said to [my husband] this morning, what if when he was born they said, “Take him away, he is nothing to us”. Because that is what she did to me. And does every day. “Take her away. She is nothing to me”. And it still makes no sense to me that it manifests as this deep compulsion to end my life. And I know that I will NOT LEAVE MY CHILDREN and now my two grandchildren. I will never leave them. But oh, how hard it is to keep swimming against this undertow, this blackness that beckons always to me. And on this anniversary of my birth, āuē how much it hurts me. (Reflective memo, 24 September, 2023)

A memory surfaces that each time I was pregnant with or breastfeeding one of my children, I managed to take in good healthy nutrition—not for myself, since I believed I did not deserve it—but for them in utero since I wanted them to grow to be strong and healthy. It has taken much of my adult life to unpack such powerfully

internalised narratives of self-harm and punishment under which I laboured. Now I am realising that strength and health might actually be important for me on my own terms, in order to show up meaningfully in the world.

Yet even as I acknowledge this, I admit that, even deeper than this knowing, is the powerfully visceral knowing that my truest motivations to be strong and healthy are actually for my grandchildren, in order to love and know, and be loved and known by them.

Conclusion

The intimacy versus isolation stage of psychosocial development centres around the inherent and lifelong challenges of relating to self and others and describes how adopted persons struggle to be relational with ourselves and others: in particular our romantic partners, but also our children. Relationships were the arena in which “being adopted” showed up most obviously for my participants and myself. Participants in this study moved up and down a continuum from enmeshment and attachment to detachment, in which they were guarded and defended, anxious, or unwilling to join with another (or themselves). Relationships with one’s children were experienced as profound, deep, and lifelong, highlighting that biological children could create a profoundly eye-opening and new experience of loving and being loved in the world for an adopted person. Yet they also brought much about the experience and culture of adoption into sharp relief.

To what extent do the effects of the early trauma of the abandonment experience associated with adoption, along with the complexities of identity formation and “fit” in the adoptive family impact on the quality of our interpersonal attachments in adulthood? If we did not attach well to our adoptive parents, were our very first experiences of positive attachment with our children? Could it be that we found the merging inherent in adult intimate relationships to be too profoundly threatening, but since we regarded our children as part of us and thus less threatening, we struggled to create boundaries for ourselves, ending up merging symbiotically with them?

A theme running through many interviews was how adopted participants struggled throughout their lives with multiple manifestations of the abandonment of self: negative self-image and self-blame, anger turned inwards by means of self-harm, and other mental health challenges. For some, it was the existence of a relationship with their own child(ren) that gave them the strength that they needed to keep going even through the darkest of times. As noted in Chapter 3, the relationship with one’s own biological child can be seen as redemptive, representing an opportunity to heal a sense of incompleteness and being “not enough.” For the first time it is possible to be enough, to

be real and complete. Perhaps this represents a paradoxical inversion of the psychosocial stages, where the profound experience of being a parent and knowing relational intimacy through one's children can back-chain us to an agentic claiming of our identity, autonomy, and eventually even to the newfound and hard-won treasure of self-love, and foundational trust in ourselves.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION

This thesis has explored some of the experiences of nine adopted people as they parented their own biological children across the lifespan, responding to my research question, “To what extent, and in what ways, might being adopted have affected the complex developmental processes of parenting across the lifespan?”

Throughout the gestation of this study, I explored and braided three distinct strands, each with its own voice and unique insight and perspective, into a coherent whole that is held in place by the scholarly structural design. **The first strand** used an ethnographic approach to allow adopted adults a space to tell their narratives in their own voices, giving adoption and its impact differential valency, particularly with regard to sociocultural discourses wherein adoption is generally viewed as trauma-free. To this end, I asked participants to talk to me about how they considered being adopted might have affected their parenting during their lives. The interviews were emotionally demanding but valued experiences for the participants. **The second strand** comprised an autoethnographic articulation of my own lived experience which provided profoundly personal data in addition to insights and meaning making in the process. **The final strand** examined the range and breadth of the extant theory and research into the effects of closed stranger adoption in order to understand more fully its interweaving in each of the topics.

Summary of Findings

The previous four chapters have presented a thorough description and exploration of the four overarching themes which linked powerfully within a developmental psychology framework: specifically, that of Erikson’s eight-stage psychosocial model (see Table 1 in Chapter 1). Since these have already been discussed in detail, here I provide a brief summary of my analyses and comment on what emerges from the major findings—still set within Erikson’s framework. This chapter also reflects on the strengths and limitations of this research and concludes by providing some recommendations for practice and future research.

Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages of Development

Stage 1 (Birth to 18 Months) Trust vs Mistrust. *Can I trust the world?* is the primary question being asked in this first stage. In Chapter 3, participants spoke of how their foundational sense of “**Trust**” in the world had been damaged by the separation at birth from their mothers, the effects of which were strongly corroborated in pre- and peri-natal research literature. A framework of loss and severance became the foundation on which the adoptee’s life was constructed, experienced in a felt sense and manifesting as fear, anxiety, and an experience in the world that was significantly

divergent to that of “kept” people. For some participants, becoming a parent was the first interruption to the narrative of not being able to trust the world.

Stage 2: (18 Months to 3 Years) Autonomy vs Shame/Doubt. The child’s existential question, *Is it okay to be me?* is represented in this stage through the theme of “**Being.**” Participants spoke of the ways in which their basic sense of personhood was contaminated by the persistent and pervasive legacy of closed adoption in society, in their family, and in their psyche. Messages of stigma, shame, and discomfort were conveyed explicitly and implicitly throughout their lives, as the adoptee became enculturated into adaptively playing a role to ensure they were what the adopting family needed and wanted them to be. All participants in my study experienced a time of awakening, frequently triggered by or coinciding with parenthood, when they started to acknowledge how the shadow of adoption had been a continuous backdrop throughout their lives, *they just had not “seen” it until now.*

Stage 5 (13-19 Years) Identity vs Role Confusion. The centrality of identity in the questions, *Who am I? Who can I be?* appeared to be an influential and deeply felt aspect of the adopted person’s relationship, both with themselves and their child/ren. Participants spoke of growing up in the shadow of ignorance of their genetic origins and ancestry, due to the “blank slate” produced by closed adoption practices due to the cultural mores of the time. The polarities of knowing and not knowing who one is genetically showed up in myriad layers influencing identity formation and reformulation across the lifespan and was experienced in relation to their own biological children and grandchildren. Disruption of knowledge around genetic identity affected adopted people deeply, and this thread was woven throughout the adopted person’s lifespan, with intergenerational affects including the (dis)connection with the adoptive parents right down to one’s biological grandchildren.

Stage 6 (20-39 Years) Intimacy vs Isolation. This stage pertains to “**Joining**” in relationships, with Self and others; the primary question is *Can I love?* as it concerns the relational dimension with others in their lives. Some participants shared the issues they had with attachment, anxiety, and trust in intimate relationships. All considered that they had struggled with their relationships with themselves and others, with persistent challenges in attachment and intimacy across their lifespan. In addition, some described strongly conveyed messages that they did not “fit” in their adoptive families, and that this was somehow their fault. These findings were corroborated by existing research literature (Blake, 2013; Hertz, 1998). It was proposed by participants that the subculture of adoption creates an “outgroup” of individuals who feel are “betwixt and between,” belonging in neither the adoptive nor their birth family. Some participants viewed parenting as the conduit for their first experiences of belonging and

a felt sense of fitting in with others. Parenting also provided adoptees with feelings and experiences of relational authenticity, connectedness, and completeness. In this regard, the relationship with one's own biological child could be seen through a redemptive lens as offering an opportunity to heal one's sense of incompleteness and being "not enough." It was further proposed that this insight could serve to paradoxically invert the psychosocial stages, wherein the profound experience and knowledge of relational intimacy through one's children could pull adoptees back towards an agentic claiming of their identity and autonomy, and eventually even to the newfound and hard-won treasure of self-love, and foundational trust in themselves. The study has highlighted the interwoven layers of connectedness between theory (discussed in Chapter 1) and my and other adoptees' experiences. In addition, it adds complexity and nuance to the existing literature, importantly in relation to how adoptees articulated the lifelong and diverse effects of their adoption, providing insight into the pervasiveness of adoption across their—and their children's—lives.

Lifespan Perspective

The study confirmed that being adopted affected individuals in foundational ways. However, it had a far wider reach than I had envisaged at the outset of the project.

In a similar way to how the genetic variants inherited from our biological families assert themselves more strongly as we get older (Zimmer, 2018), participants described the effects of being adopted expressing more strongly for them as they aged. The combination of temporal perspective and the emotional separation of distance from events meant that they saw adoption's powerful shaping effects more clearly *with the benefit of hindsight*. One of the clear strengths of the study was the confirmation of the degree to which adoption continues to have significant reach across a person's lifespan. This extends our understanding of the effects of adoption on older adults, highlighting that the strands of adoption had been weaving their way for a lifetime through their histories with their adoptive and birth families, their relationships with significant others, and—crucially—with themselves.

The strong emphasis that participants placed on the lifelong effects of adoption weaving in and out of their lives was unexpected in the context of the research aims, yet not altogether surprising. Siskind (2006) observed that "adoption is a shadow that never completely goes away" (p. 3). It appears from the extant literature that few researchers have been paying attention to adult adoptees who are now at Stages 7 (Generativity versus Stagnation, ages 40-64 years) and 8 (Integrity versus Despair, ages 65 and older). I believe that further scholarly exploration into how we make meaning of and integrate its far-reaching effects across our lifespan, would be of

enormous value, not just for the adopted, but also for those who seek to alter or maintain existing laws around secrecy and denial of information.

A further finding pointed toward a nascent and somewhat controversial field of thought regarding the notion that separation from a mother is an adverse childhood event (ACE), given recent scientific learning about prenatal knowing (Chambers, 2017; Dalton et al., 2022; Dolfi, 2020; Merritt, 2022; Robert, 2020).

Separation

Mother Nature is emphatic. In the animal kingdom, most would agree, mammals are primed to seek the breast or teat of their mother after birth and suffer when removed from their mothers at birth. For example, if a puppy is removed from its mother prior to 8-10 weeks of age, it is widely accepted that this sets up a range of physical, social, and behavioural challenges in the future animal. These include such disparate outcomes as weight loss, disease susceptibility, mortality up to 6 months of age, destructive behaviour, excessive barking, fearfulness, noise reactivity, possessiveness towards food and toys, and attention-seeking, compared with puppies that remained in maternal care until 12 weeks of age (Kinsman et al., 2020). All human babies suffer similar impacts on their biological systems: their brains; neurological, psychological, and emotional systems; and on their DNA through epigenetic effects. Chapter 1 summarised dozens of research articles confirming that even a blurry eyed newborn is hardwired to look for and know her mother's face, smell her milk, differentiate her voice.

Yet, for decades it was an accepted practice for human infants to be separated from their mothers, wherein thousands of adoptees were removed. In some cases, mothers had desperately longed to keep the infant; in other cases, birth mothers left the infant apparently without a second thought, perhaps relieved to be rid of the burden. For the infant, the rationale and motivation for being left made no difference. What mattered was the being left. Science is increasingly corroborating the centrality of Verrier's (1993) primal wound. The separation IS the wound.

Indisputably what followed for the infant was also extremely influential. The adoptive families into which babies were placed may have been calm and nurturing, providing for physical and emotional needs, or may have been cold, abusive, disinterested, and toxic. Most were somewhere in between. It is clear that environment matters. In Chapter 1 I signposted emerging science suggesting that stress and other negative experiences can trigger epigenetic changes inside the cells of our brains and bodies, leading to long-term harm (Zimmer, 2018). Dekker et al. (2017) have described some of the risk factors that may be present for adopted children, such as inadequate pre- and postnatal care, malnutrition, abuse, and institutional neglect. Significantly, they

also included being separated from the birth parent(s) as an early experience of adversity. Dekker et al. (2017) noted that when adoptees are placed in nurturing adoptive homes, they “catch up”—yet still are seen to lag behind and display more internalising/externalising behaviours than their nonadopted peers. Adoptees are referred to mental health services at higher rates and are four times more likely than their nonadopted peers to attempt suicide (Keyes et al., 2013). Regardless, Dekker et al. (2017) have concluded that most are “well adjusted”. Yet the narratives of participants in this study suggest this apparent “adjustment” could be indicative of their propensity to adapt, act, and dissemble like expert chameleons. Adaptive adoptees such as myself and other participants in this research would never have turned up in the statistics for adverse experiences of childhood and adolescence. We were too busy hiding. To an outsider looking in, adoption seemed to be working.

The narratives of adult adoptees in this study further support the notion that removing an infant from its biological family under Aotearoa New Zealand’s closed stranger adoption system compromised all the psychosocial stages of a child’s development. In so doing, the building materials of trusting, being, knowing, and relational joining were weakened, yet the milieu of stigma, silence, and ignorance of adoption’s effects meant that the cracks were adaptively plastered over. Thus, the effects were largely invisible to scholars and to most of society. As I have grappled with this concept it has prompted further self-reflection, and in my reflexive memos regarding this, I noted parallels to other “hidden” conditions.

I am reminded of two young women I have gotten to know in my counselling practice. The first, at just 15, has had times over the last five years when she has experienced unrelenting abdominal pain. It flares up from time to time, and her pain at these times is crippling. She has been miserable, depressed, brave, anxious. The second, 17 years old, noticed that whenever she ate foods containing gluten or lactose she was miserable—her mood plummeted, she had gastrointestinal distress, she felt nauseated, sluggish, bloated. To anyone looking on, both of these young women appear to be like any other teenage girl. There is nothing untoward to be seen, and they have been doing their best to manage life and study and relationships around these mysterious, worsening symptoms. Imagine if someone were to tell them that they are exaggerating, or malingering, or just lying, that there is nothing wrong. That their self-knowing is wrong.

However, their families have been paying attention to their distress, and batteries of tests, investigations and specialist visits have ensued. Both now have a diagnosis—the first of endometriosis, the second of Coeliac’s Disease—

conditions that were barely understood when I was growing up. And even though they are still suffering, the delight each one has had as she has told me the outcome, has been palpable. The relief and validation and hope that these young people have experienced with finally having a diagnosis, a name for what has been hurting them, is immense.

There is no blood test, no ultrasound scan, no Xray, for souls. (Reflective memo, March 2024)

Research into the interconnection between adoption and trauma is beginning to emerge within empirical scholarship. It is an area of considerable interest in the adoption community, and considered an important area for future scholarly attention. However, this is outside the scope of my research and thus left largely unexplored here. Regardless, this dissertation has brought the ties between my own lived experience of adoption and epistemic trauma into consciousness. Epistemic trauma has been described by Samuels (2022) as a condition in which one's authority to claim harms done, to make meaning from them, and heal through lived experience is undermined. Samuels reminded us that we are meaning-making beings, and thus when a person is harmed in their ability or authority to access information and make meaning of it or is disenfranchised from pathways of self-knowing on their own terms, this is a deeper wound than an injustice. Epistemic trauma harms one's core sense of self.

The Voices of the Adopted: "Languaging" What We Know

Making sense of what we know authentically requires a voice. I suggest that an individual's voice is equipped to capture and express their own experiential truth far more accurately than any academic could hope to. One of the strengths of this dissertation is the powerfully honest discourse of the adopted adults. Narratives such as these may contribute to the ongoing building of this language for others who have struggled to articulate their own experiences.

Stedman (2012) evocatively described how the more a child has access to words, the greater her ability will be to "excavate the world around her, carving out the story of who she was" (p. 197). We know that developmentally speaking, as a child learns language, their ability to comprehend and express their reality evolves as well, and those of us who have had children have seen this playing out with regard to adoption. As described in Chapter 4, my 12-year-old son's indignance, "How could any mother give her own baby away?" contrasted powerfully with the response from his then 5-year-old sister who pictured a baby wrapped up with a bow and happily gifted "like a present" to Granny and Grandad.

Putting language to our experiences is critical to helping us make meaning. Participants repeatedly emphasised how words have helped them in writing, counselling, reading, and journaling. To this I would now add that we need to also pay attention to our bodies, something many adoptees, myself included, have struggled to do. Instead, we have silenced them, punished them, ignored their needs, been troubled by a huge range of somatic distress (gastrointestinal, migraines), numbed them with food, alcohol, or drugs. Again, the work of Van der Kolk (2014) and his work to create a new paradigm for the treatment of traumatic stress resonates deeply. Further research into the range of cognitive, somatic, and alternative modalities that adoptees have found helpful could be an area of rich therapeutic value.

The use of metaphor has been valuable and another strength of this project. Participants spoke of “evil tendrils,” tentacles, masking, having two heads, volcanoes, chameleons, tapestry. This dissertation has taken the reader into a house with cracked foundations and invited them to examine their own understandings more closely with a view to deconstructing their previously assumed notions of adoption. It has used images of pear trees, weaving, fish not noticing the ocean, braiding, GPS, puzzles, and terrifying caves that we are afraid to enter. Metaphor has been my primary vehicle for expression for as long as I can remember, and I have intentionally employed it in order to convey aspects of a complex experience for readers to make it more concrete by relating it to something with which they are familiar, something they will remember.

The House that Adoption Built

In Chapter 3 it was proposed that our adoptee “house” was constructed on unacknowledged damaged foundations; visitors to our house wouldn’t have known, since deeper problems can remain completely hidden. In tying all the themes together, we can circle back to this metaphor.

Concealed and unacknowledged damage lying beneath the surface resonates throughout my own adoption experiences and reflections, along with those of my participants. For some of us it has taken almost a lifetime for “buried trouble” to find its way to the surface, and we worked hard to conceal problems that we started to notice in ourselves. Some of us who were compliant—so-called “well-adjusted”—adoptees may have repressed our preverbal trauma, superficially “plastering over” the damage, becoming consummate people-pleasers and inauthentic chameleons, doing what it took to fit in, be loyal, and gratefully toe the party line. Yet any cosmetic plastering we did was then undone—cracked and “troubled”—by any exploratory internal work we did, or by daring to draw attention to the damage.

This may in part explain why many adopted people choose to turn away from their origin story and look steadfastly in the opposite direction. For other adoptees, the

foundation damage has been too difficult to ignore, perhaps forced into their lives through psychological “aftershocks” such as losing people through infidelity, death or abandonment. It may also partially explain the invisibility of the issue to the “kept.” If my house looks like your house, and the differences are under the floor and out of sight, how would you ever know? It takes an enormous amount of courage and vulnerability to admit to another person that even though the house “looks” great, it is riddled with borer, or none of the doors close, or the whole thing is a complete façade. Further academic exploration of the narratives of adoptees as they reflect on their lives might shed more light on what has hitherto been invisible.

Disrupting the Silence—Autoethnography and How we Come to Know

My choice of reflexive and braided autoethnography was a research method well-suited to exploring the harms done, and disrupting the authority of dominant systems of meaning in adoption. As such, the process was invaluable to me in disrupting my own discourses around knowing. I came to observe that I had lacked a conceptual framework across periods in my life for making sense of my own experience. Embarking on a scholarly appraisal of my and others’ lived experience required an appraisal of these accounts as knowing. In previous times, such firsthand accounts have been sidelined, marginalised, or deemed less than credible by those who may find their conclusions unsettling. Kidd and Carel (2017) referred to this as epistemic testimonial injustice (p. 177) when prejudice on the part of a listener deflates the speaker’s credibility. Frequently the listener is from the epistemically dominant group; in the case of adoption, these are the kept, the adopters, or the social institutions who are responsible for and perpetuate the practices of adoption.

Postmodernism has not eliminated what we knew as the traditional and dominant scientific method (Wall, 2006). Its goal rather has been to challenge its hegemony, opening possibilities to other ways of knowing, emphasising ways in which research can make room for other paradigms and other paths to acquiring, experiencing and sharing knowledge. This autoethnographic-braided-with-ethnographic methodology has invited the reader into a space that privileges the subjective and evocative stories of the adoptee experience that have formerly been silenced. The promise this holds for the taken-for-granted subculture of adoption is that such narratives might contribute to better understanding of the adoptee’s world, by allowing the “kept” to reflect on what they formerly did not know and could not see. The gradual elevation of epistemologies such as autoethnography so that they share the stage with traditional science holds expansive and liberating promise. For me, having the mandate as a researcher to use my lived experience as knowledge and braid it with the experiences of the participants has allowed the creation of new knowing—small-scale

though it may be—because I am uniquely situated within the field of research (Denzin & Lincoln, 1995). Autoethnography says that what I know matters.

Strengths & Limitations

Some of the methodological limitations of this research have already been discussed (see Chapter 2). These pertained to my insider positionality and the possibility of inherent bias in a researcher who is a member of the studied population. Whilst I have endeavoured to mitigate these potential problems by way of rigorous self-reflection and memoing, consulting frequently with my nonadopted supervisor, and providing a detailed audit trail, the possibility of blind spots cannot be discounted. However, my choice of this qualitative methodology as a member of the studied population was intentional in order to illuminate aspects of the adoption experience that might otherwise have been inaccessible. It was also chosen to bring a depth of inquiry, sensitivity, and authenticity to the project, and to enhance understanding of a long-overlooked population. As such, these features have brought considerable strength to the study and had a significant bearing on the findings generated.

The scale of my research was small with specific inclusion criteria to limit the wide range of variables affecting one's adoption and parenting journey across the lifespan and with the expressed intention to gather rich and complex data. In addition, participants were sought and selected based on their ability to contribute a depth of information to the study. The resultant homogeneity of the sample (including a lack of diversity of ages, adoption experiences, culture and race, sexual orientation, gender identity, and religious diversity) means that the results are not generalisable to the population of all adopted adults. However, the study never set out to be generalisable; its purpose has been to present rich and detailed accounts of lived experiences and in-depth analyses of the interpretations and understandings involved. This has been achieved, and is a huge strength of the chosen methodology, producing narratives that are powerfully and evocatively expressed, giving the reader a “a peek into regularly guarded worlds” (Tracy, 2013, p. 7).

Another strength of this research was its powerful emphasis on lifespan. How we as adopted people have made sense of our adoption at 4 years old is very different to how we view it at 9, 15, 22, and in our 50s; and it will continue to evolve as we move through the various developmental stages of our lives. This emphasis on the entire lifespan has also served to illuminate and direct attention to the nuanced and possibly far-reaching effects of the separation of a newborn from its mother, endeavouring to blend emerging science with adoptee narratives in this developing field.

Finally, one of the most important strengths of this research relates to its conduct by an adopted person who brought her own voice, amplifying the voices of the

adopted. My own lived experiences and understandings of closed stranger adoption seemed to allow me to form rapport more easily with participants and know “where to look.” However, there were inherent limitations in being an insider researcher and at times I felt friction and tension. The courage and emotional vulnerability of this work required everything of me. In a real sense, I have been immersed in the research my entire life, seeking to understand my own Self. Once the formal project commenced, I was never not thinking about it, and it percolated relentlessly in my subconscious. My inner dialogue was frequently punctuated by rememberings, clouds of melancholy, and shards of insight, legitimised by the systematic reflection I called “memoing.” Sometimes my participants’ stories were the impetus for me to reexamine my own, and this was part of the value of braiding my narratives and reflections with theirs; frequently I found it challenging to make space for others’ stories when I did not fully understand my own.

The project was deeply felt, and I consider this a strength. Interviews were punctuated by long pauses as the participants remembered, reflected, struggled to express experiences, memories, and deep truths, and at times eyes (theirs and mine) welled up with emotions. My insider status gave me a deep sense of kinship with these people, and this has reminded me of the existential loneliness of the adoptee. Branco et al. (2023) have suggested that those in an adoptee’s life may misunderstand or pathologise them as ungrateful, needy, overly dramatic, strident, or perverse; the adoptees themselves may experience rejection, invalidation, or dismissal by others in their lives. My hope is that this research will resonate for those for whom the topic is important—adoptees themselves, those who love them, and all those who seek to understand their lived experience better.

Recommendations

This section offers some reflections pertaining to the potential usefulness of knowledge gained from this research. The stated intentions of the study were to deepen the understanding of the nuanced lived experiences of those who are adopted, bringing a deeper insight to them, their children and grandchildren, and all those who love them; to equip those professionals who work therapeutically with them; to enlighten the “kept” (those who are not adopted), and to usefully contribute to the body of academic research regarding adult adoptees’ psychological well-being and adjustment as they pass through the developmental life stages described by Erikson. The findings of this research inquiry and their overall implications have prompted some recommendations for practice and research. These recommendations are summarised in Table 5 and discussed in the following section.

Table 5
Summary of Recommendations

For adoptees	Attend to loss and grief
	Start to use your voice
	Tap into the power of language: reading and writing
	Consider counselling
	Connect with other adoptees
For therapists	Deconstruct assumptions
	Gain specialist understanding in this area
	Develop “cultural competency”
	Ensure you are person-centred
	Understand that adoption is complex, multifaceted, and lifelong
	Listen to the narrative voices of the adopted
For researchers	Ensure that adoptee voices are preeminent
	Consider more longitudinal studies
	Research adoptee engagement with therapeutic support
	Listen to a range of voices
	Look at adoption through a trauma lens
	Prioritise qualitative research
	Consider who is asking—and why

For Adopted Persons

I started to piece [the understanding] together as the years unfolded. And [contact with my birth mother] would just plummet me, spiral me down. And that was raw and vulnerable. And it kept being triggered. So that’s when I went to therapy. I was obviously traumatising for her. So I was being traumatised by her and she was being traumatised by me being in her life. (Juliet)

Whilst I hope that the entirety of this thesis would be beneficial for adopted persons to read, I have endeavoured to summarise some key factors that seem particularly salient as, like Juliet’s quote, they start to piece the understanding of themselves together.

Attend to Loss and Grief. As has been discussed throughout this thesis, especially in Chapter 3, the foundational nature and primacy of loss is a core aspect of the adoption experience. The adoption research has explored the topic of loss, but there is a minimal body of literature incorporating our lived experiences as adult adoptees, and how we have progressed from a psychosocial standpoint, over time (Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017). There has also been little exploration of the distinctive loss(es) we have incurred, or qualitative, lived-experience, research data

concerning mental health issues present in adult adoptees, including possible instances of unidentified loss and, in turn, unresolved grief. One study that did address how adult adoptees navigate adulthood's developmental tasks, foregrounded loss as a predominant theme but acknowledged it might not be well understood until middle adulthood (Penny et al., 2007). A clear implication from this research is the need for a more nuanced understanding of the impact of loss and how it manifests across the lifespan.

Loss has been a distinct part of our life stories, from even before we were born, and is woven through the fabric of our lives. In our Western culture, tangible losses, such as death and divorce, are naturally recognised (Brodzinsky, 2011). Intangible unseen losses, however, can go unrecognised or unacknowledged and be discounted (unacknowledged by others due to ignorance), and may manifest as low mood, sadness, anger, denial, depression, and other complex emotions which may result in connection, developmental, and relational issues throughout the lifespan (Field & Pond, 2018). Because loss is such a foundational aspect of adoption, it may be a useful place for an adopted person to start exploring their experience. Loss was my ground zero, and the place from which I began to finally face owning my story.

Start to Use Your Voice. Finally making the decision to stop fleeing and minimising the losses experienced through adoption was where I started. One of the fundamental routes towards self-knowledge and understanding is finally allowing yourself to know what you know. While this requires an enormous amount of courage (Duemer et al., 2016), it is one of the essential foundations of recovery. In the course of this research, I have learned that the telling of one's story can be a highly effective means by which we can construct a "sense of understanding and control" (Kranstuber & Kela, 2011, p. 196). The telling of my story, my voice, had been quashed as a young person, and nothing short of desperation could propel me towards the healing power of speaking my truth—to myself, to a counsellor, to other adopted persons, and to the people in my life whom I trusted. I include the following excerpts as testament to one of my key sources of strength and healing:

For years, classical psychology of all types erroneously thought that grief was a process you did once, preferably over a year's period of time, and then it was done with, and anyone who was unable or unwilling to complete this over this time period had something rather wrong with them. But we know now what humans have instinctively known for centuries: that certain hurts and harms and shames can never be done being grieved: the loss of a child through death or relinquishment being one of the most, if not THE most, enduring.

See what you see. Say it to someone. It is never too late. If you feel you cannot say it aloud, write it down for them. Choose a person whom you instinctively believe to be trustworthy. The can of worms you are worried about opening is far better off being out there than festering inside yourself. If you prefer, seek a therapist, a person of mercy, who knows the difference between guilt and remorse and about the nature of grieving...Whatever the grief is, we understand that it is now part of our work for life. We can grieve and grieve hard, and come out of it tear-stained, rather than shame-stained.

There will be a scar. And with changes of weather in our lives, the scar can and will ache again. That is the nature of a true grief. And it is good to remember that, in tensile strength and ability to absorb pressure, a scar is stronger than skin. (Estés, 1992, pp. 384-385)

Tap into the Power of Language: Reading and Writing Learning to make sense of our adoptive identity has been demonstrated to be beneficial for our health and well-being (Grotevant, 1997). One frequently underutilised learning pathway is bibliotherapy, an adjunct modality wherein specific reading materials relevant to a person's therapeutic needs are selected and used by clinicians or therapists to facilitate the gaining of understanding or problem solving towards a therapeutic outcome (Popa & Porumbu, 2017). Throughout the interviews, participants at times referred to how transformative they had found books they had come across, podcasts to which they had listened, or articles other adopted people had shared with them. I can attest to how influential the gentle recommendations from a marriage counsellor were in my life, directing me to Verrier's *The Primal Wound* (see Chapter 3), as well as the wisdom of writers like Estés (1992), cited in the previous section. Parkes and Mintz (2021) have also noted that specific adoption literature can be validating and reassuring by providing a conceptual framework to help adopted persons understand and articulate their experiences. A list of recommended books, websites, and podcasts which adopted people may find useful is included in Appendix E-i.

Not only reading relevant literature can be a powerful modality for agentic change; writing can also have powerful effects. This stems from the understanding from an increasing number of research studies (e.g., Pennebaker & Chung, 2007), that in times of distress and trauma, people's physical, psychological, social, and biological functioning often improves when they translate their feelings and thoughts about such personally upsetting experiences and upheavals into language. Van der Kolk (2014) has observed that individuals who have experienced trauma gain improvements in their physical and mental health when they process upsetting events by writing about them. Angell, an adoptee, described how he had found a measure of healing in

autobiographical writing, reflecting on the “moments of profound insight that come from writing about the soulful, thoughtful examination of our psychic wounds” (Angell, 2022, p. 35). He articulated how valuable writing had been for him in processing his psychic wound of adoptive identity, giving him a means by which he has been able to author a narrative of meaning and purpose. In the same way that the written word can be examined, revisited, edited and revised with fresh insights and learning, our own individual perspectives and understandings can also be revised through iterative processes of rupture, challenge, repair, and growth (Angell, 2022).

Consider Counselling. Counselling and therapy are not for everyone. Participants in Duemer et al.’s small 2016 study described that they found counselling to be important for supporting them to address identity issues such as fears of rejection and anger. Most of the participants in my study had accessed a therapist at one or more stages along their life journey. Kenneth lamented how he had been unable to find a counsellor who knew anything about core adoption issues and found himself having to “educate” the therapist himself. Juliet spoke eloquently of how her mind had been unable to “make sense of [her] situation, there were no clues on the surface, and no one was mirroring adoption, or post-natal depression, or anything that might be on that landscape”. She acknowledged that it was only much later when she came to understand—through her counselling and therapy—what had been unearthed for her in her own pregnancy and birthing experience, on the birth of her daughter. Later in the interview, she recalled

When I first went into therapy and she said, “What would you like to work on?”, and I said, “Well, right here I’m really, really screwed up. On this shoulder is my adoptive mother and all of her unresolved issues, and on this shoulder is my birth mother and all of her unresolved issues, and how the hell would I know who the hell I am in all this!” And that was the first time I said—out loud—that this might not be all my fault. Which was what I had been indoctrinated in, growing up. (Juliet)

Adoptees do not corner the market on things being difficult in our lives. In addition to normal, expected milestones and life events, all human beings experience what Marcia has referred to as “disequilibrating circumstances” (2022, p. 15) at times. These might be chronic illness, natural disasters, trauma, job loss, retirement, spiritual crises, or the loss of loved ones. But as Marcia (2002) reminds us, “Not all divorces, job promotions, and so forth are disequilibrating for all people...We are thrown back on an individual-by-individual approach” (p. 15). Marcia goes on to describe the cyclical process of how these challenging circumstances can serve to throw us into a period of upheaval wherein our current identity structure is in disequilibrium and turmoil. At such

times some of us may feel such levels of distress that we are propelled towards counselling or psychotherapy. This might be regarded as “regression with a purpose” (Marcia, 2002, p. 15) since the previous structure on which we have relied has now broken down, thus opening a way for a new structure to emerge. These periods in our lives of identity reformulation can be challenging, however can also be viewed as important invitations to deepen our understandings of self and become more and more who we truly are. Whilst it is unclear whether the challenges articulated by my participants are representative of all adopted people, my participants’ narratives do signpost a range of negative psychological outcomes of adoption (Corral et al., 2021; Henze-Pedersen, 2019). They also support the notion that adoption is a traumatic experience, holding adverse consequences for some adopted people throughout our lifespans, especially as we come to different developmental milestones.

Counselling and therapy with a person who is trauma-informed and educated and informed regarding the core issues of adoption, who understands attachment theory, and with whom you feel safe and connected can be tremendous catalysts for individual growth, self-knowledge, and learning about one’s authentic self. As I reflect on periods of my life when I have engaged in therapy, I can see with the clarity of distance and maturity that this was part of what propelled me to move forward from being so “stuck.” The process, the conversations, and the unconditional positive regard in which I was bathed (McLeod, 2013) nurtured the seeds of self-reflection and exploration which I now understand to be foundational for lifelong identity reformulation.

Connect With Other Adoptees. Chapters 4 and 6 have acknowledged the potential power of joining other adopted persons in forums where it feels safe to speak one’s truth, even when this truth runs counter to the societal and family narratives you have heard your entire life. Support groups can assist adopted people with the logistics of search and reunion, but even more critically important, can help us work through the myriad emotions that we can experience, as well as integrating new knowledge and insights into our self-identity (Griffith, 2000). In such a forum, adopted adults meet others:

[who] intuitively understand them. They have a lot in common, for; though they are not from the same family, they are from the same family system. They have experienced the same family dynamics and taboos. They are relieved to know that they are not crazy, that other people think and feel just as they do. Nothing is forbidden. They can express the anger that has been bottled up inside. And the grief. They are validated. (Griffith, 2000, p. 106)

We now understand the immense healing potential of such groups. They exemplify the opposite of being gaslighted, told how “lucky” you are, and having the truth of your lived experience minimised. In speaking one’s truth, owning what is, and having the courage to risk authentic self-disclosure, not just our emotional self is affected, but our very physiology is altered once we feel listened to and understood, as described by Van der Kolk (2014). He has explained how the limbic brain “lights up” once we are able to articulate a complex feeling—and this feeling is recognised by another. He referred to the notion of “resonance” (p. 281), in the discovery, utterance and reception of previously unspoken words, and deemed this to be *fundamental* to the healing of the isolation of trauma. Furthermore, he stated that “people cannot put traumatic events behind until they are able to acknowledge what has happened and start to recognise the invisible demons they’re struggling with” (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 262).

For Therapists

Although some adoptees will neither require nor seek counselling (Baden & O’Leary Wiley, 2007; Vote & Kasket, 2017), given that adoptees are referred for psychological treatment five times more frequently than their nonadopted peers (Nowlan, 2016), I believe that this research holds value in the clinical realm and that attention needs to be given to best possible therapeutic modalities for this particular population.

Often I think that, if I was to go to a counsellor, they wouldn’t be able to deal with me, because I would say, “I’m adopted”, and they’d be like, “Oh, how many hours of counselling are we going to need to get through THAT one” [laughs]. I think if you’re adopted you should be given so many hours of counselling...! (Rowena)

It is more than three decades since Brodzinsky et al. (1992) mapped the possible psychosocial trajectory of an adopted person’s life throughout their lifespan. Five years later, Janus (1997) cautioned therapists who work with adult adoptees not to assume that adoption issues might have been “resolved” by adulthood. She promoted a lifespan perspective, suggesting clinicians should be willing to “probe sensitive adoption questions” (p. 272) with their adoptee clients. Several of the participants in this study lamented how rare it was to be able to locate a therapist with any understanding of adoption; Kenneth told me how he had ended up educating the therapist from whom he had sought support.

Deconstruct Assumptions. In a metaphor I find provocative but useful in the way it illuminates but also “troubles” an adopted person’s experience of loss and severance, Desiree Smolin (quoted in Riben, 2017) noted that society views abduction

and adoption as totally opposite paradigms. It is expected that a child who learns he has been abducted will long for reunification with his “real” family of birth and reject the abductor raising him. Yet an adopted person will be expected to bond gratefully and unquestioningly to nonrelated strangers, and possibly be criticised for or dissuaded from plans to seek out their roots. Their essential position is the same, yet opposite responses are expected. For those therapists who are “kept” or whose narrative around their own adoption differs to the client facing you, you are called upon to do the professional work of deconstruction.

The *Cambridge Dictionary* defines deconstruction as “the act of breaking something down into its separate parts in order to understand its meaning, especially when this is different from how it was previously understood”. In order to see how this might work, let us return to my beautiful wooden villa from Chapter 3, in which the damage sustained by the 2011 earthquakes was unseen and unacknowledged on superficial sighting.

Imagine that your beliefs and assumptions about closed stranger adoption are like this house, one that is familiar to you, that you have known for a long time. Yet at some point you notice that there are hairline leaks in the ceiling. You grab a torch, and on closer inspection you see mould, specks of borer appearing in the woodwork, and signs of rot in the walls. How did you never see these before? You start examining the structure of the house more thoroughly and come to realise that there are major issues with it. The house is not as sound as you once believed it to be. So you deconstruct, perhaps reactively in frustration, or maybe systematically and logically. Some people believe you’re out of your mind—after all, their houses look the same as yours and they’re not concerned—but now that you’ve seen the mould and the cracks, you know you can’t continue to live in an unsafe house. As you go about deconstructing the house, you examine the different pieces, coming to understand it was constructed in a different time, with outdated materials and methods; similarly, closed adoption practices were constructed with no understanding of loss and trauma, and were focused on the needs of infertile couples and desperate women who lacked other options. You see how severance, silencing, dissembling, relational challenges, genealogical bewilderment, and stigma had been festering there all along, only you hadn’t seen them. Eventually you construct a new house, one in which you feel genuinely safe, that authentically reflects who you are and what you have come to believe. This process of critically examining, taking apart and rebuilding is the essence of deconstruction and reconstruction.

Gain Specialist Understanding in This Area. As early as 2003, Grotevant emphasised the need for adoption to become an area of specialisation for therapists.

His vision was of counsellors who possessed specialised knowledge about the wide-ranging complexities of adoption, encompassing the theory and research, and even the politics of adoption that might impact upon an adopted individual (Grotevant, 2003). Similarly, Baden and O’Leary Wiley (2007) stressed the importance of adoption-sensitive therapists acknowledging the diversity and complexity of each adopted person’s story. They cautioned against overgeneralising in such a heterogeneous population, and reminded clinicians to respect adoptees’ individuality.

Corder’s (2012) review contains various resources useful for counsellors working with adult adoptees in their practice. Her introduction invited therapists to imagine a scenario: “Imagine growing up with two entirely separate families...” (p. 448) and addressed some of the “serious emotional and psychological issues” (p. 448) the adult adoptee might bring to the counselling relationship. She included suggestions such as exploring lifespan narratives and timelines to honour and legitimise the adopted person’s story. In addition, she proposed a range of possible modalities that might be beneficial (CBT, relaxation and mindfulness training, expressive arts, etc.). It is however noteworthy that Robert (2020) cautioned against the use of a cognitive approach when working therapeutically with adopted and traumatised children, recommending instead a trauma-informed, attachment-based, and relational approach emphasising “felt-safety” (p. 71).

Groncki (2010) considered a thorough understanding of attachment and how being adopted impacts the adoptee’s present and future attachment to significant others to be imperative for any therapist working with an adoptee. She felt that not only would this necessarily inform understandings of past and ongoing relationships with significant others but it would also be pertinent to the establishment and maintenance of the client-therapist therapeutic relationship in their ongoing work together.

Certainly, whatever therapeutic modality is embraced with an adopted person, there should be respect for their perspective on their adoption experience, and an openness to conceptualising the many ways adoptees form adoptive identities (Angell, 2022).

Baden et al. (2017) found that when adopted people selected a therapist, the therapist’s level of adoption competence was the most important factor. Adoptees reported more satisfaction with therapy if their therapists placed emphasis on their adoption. Gatzke (2015), herself an adoptee as well as a psychotherapist and educator, has offered some suggestions for positioning oneself as a therapist in a therapeutic alliance or rapport with an adult adoptee. These include awareness that loss and abandonment are central to adoption but adopted clients might find these deep issues difficult to explore; willingness to reflexively critique their lack of knowledge

and seek to understand their own level of professional understanding and competence in this specialty area; willingness to develop greater skill and insight to ensure their practice is ethical; openness to deconstructing their own assumptions around the subject of adoption (given “that adoption is not always a positive event as the media portrays”, p. 95); and mindfulness that some adult adoptees might struggle or take longer to form and sustain a therapeutic rapport with a therapist.

Develop “Cultural Competency”. One approach suggested by Meyer et al. (2023) was to encourage therapists to regard a client’s adoption status as a type of “multicultural diversity” (p. 129), approaching it through the same lenses of curiosity and outsider status as one would with any other culture that differs to one’s own. Importantly, Baden and O’Leary Wiley (2007) raised the need for awareness of the cultural stigma surrounding adoption within adoptive families, the media, and wider society, reminding therapists that the adopted adult might be impacted by this stigma. Branco et al. (2023) have exhorted adoption professionals to self-reflexively recognise they themselves need to be “out of the fog” (p. 62), acknowledging that adoption is traumatic, and a non-death-disenfranchised loss that can only happen through adoption. With this acknowledgment comes an awareness of the cultural stereotypes, bionormative microaggressions, and taken-for-granted misinformation regarding birthparents, adopted persons, and adoptive parents (Parkes & Mintz, 2021); some of the impacts as described by my participants are outlined in Chapter 4. Treating adoption as a “culture” all its own using the ethnographic methodology of this thesis has proved a useful way to highlight how those outside of it are typically blind to its multiple nuanced effects.

Ensure you are Person-Centred. A person-centred approach is a relational, client-focused therapy wherein the counsellor is a compassionate facilitator who listens without judgment and acknowledges the client’s experience. The core conditions of empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard are conveyed to the client and received by him or her (Parkes & Mintz, 2021). Like McLeod (2013) and others working therapeutically from a person-centred paradigm, Corder (2012) stressed the importance of ensuring the formation of secure emotional connections within the client-therapist relationship, as well as hallmark therapeutic qualities such as empathy, active listening, and validation. Adopted adults in Oneal’s (2021) study shared how not being heard or believed had further exacerbated their mistrust of others and made it more difficult to establish a sense of safety. Adoptees’ needs for validation and support regarding their lived adoption experiences were strongly reflected in their reports regarding what was “most helpful in therapy” (Baden et al., 2017, p. 209). Thus, it is vital for mental health professionals to understand this relationship dynamic and to

enter the therapeutic alliance seeking understanding without categorising all adoptee experiences as homogenous.

Understand that Adoption is Complex, Multifaceted and Lifelong. Adoption is not homogenous. It represents different experiences for different people at different times, and as in any therapeutic relationship, counselling should “be personalised to address the aspects that are uniquely distressing for the adoptee” (Grotevant et al., 2017, p. 2201). One vitally important aspect of adoption’s complexity that has been illuminated in this dissertation, is that it is a dynamic system for birth and adoptive parents and their adult children, and its presence is experienced across the lifespan. Blake (2013) opined that the lack of professional understanding of the complexities of adoption stems from an essential lack of comprehension of this fact.

Those working in mental health must acknowledge the breadth of impacts that adoption has on the lives of those who are affected: loss and grief, intimacy and trust, identity formation, parenting, search and reunion, and ongoing navigation and integration of all the many facets across time. Even as crucially, they must listen to the lived experiences of adoptees as they narrate them, in their own words and on their own terms, rather than complicitly accepting *prima facie* the ways in which society has silenced, stigmatised and “othered” adoptee voices. Therapists need to attend to and collaborate with adoptees to recognise, locate, name, and manage the psychological and embodied emotions and effects of living a fiction.

The practice of adoption can and does produce aversive psychological experiences which can resurface in a range of different manifestations. An attuned therapist will be mindful of the kinds of issues that may lie buried below the landscape of how an adopted person may present. Juliet recalled how after the birth of her second child, a baby girl, she had slipped deeply into anxiety and depression:

My mind couldn’t make sense of the situation, there were no clues on the surface, and no-one was mirroring adoption, or postnatal depression, or anything that might be on that landscape. It was later when I was to understand—through my counselling and therapy training—that this would be a very natural time for this to occur, on the birth of a daughter. (Juliet)

Blake’s 2013 research with adopted people revealed patterns of maladaptive coping using strategies such as alcohol and drug misuse, in addition to fears of rejection and heightened senses of aloneness. She emphasised that it was crucial to acknowledge that adoption’s consequences of grief, rejection, and dislocation should not be seen according to a dominant psychological narrative which positions adoptees as “disordered” (p. 255) but rather as embedded in social power relations.

Listen to the Narrative Voices of the Adopted. This dissertation has invited the reader to immerse themselves in the rich descriptions that emerged from unparalleled levels of disclosure by my participants and myself in this braided autoethnographic study. Our experiences are echoed, validated and extended by adoptees who have participated in other qualitative academic studies (for example, Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2020; Blake, 2013; Bork et al., 2022; Conrick, 2018; Edwards et al., 2023; Irvin, 2015; Neil et al., 2023; Nowlan, 2016; O’Kelly, 2018; Parkes & Mintz, 2021). Several of these studies have been authored by adoptee researchers, bringing an additional layer of insight, reflexivity, and authenticity. A list of recommended books, research articles and other resources which therapists may find useful is included in Appendix E-ii.

Such research literature provides unique opportunities for therapists to hear stories few know much about, illuminating what for many “kept” people is an invisible, unknown population. Most people know someone who is adopted; yet, as I was repeatedly reminded over the course of this project by my own family members and the disclosures of my participants, most people have no understanding of what the adoption experience feels like as an “insider.” Like other marginalised, stigmatised, and stereotyped populations, reductive and entrenched assumptions prevail.

Without the narrative acts of telling and being heard, an individual cannot convey to anyone else—or to self—what he or she is going through. More radically and perhaps equally true, without these narrative acts the individual cannot grasp *for themselves* what painful events mean (Kidd & Carel, 2017).

The final word to therapists must surely belong to Gabor Maté (2021), who reminds us, “We can’t fix what can’t be fixed, but we can be the witness who validates that person’s experience and thereby support the healing capacity we all hold within” (para 31). Listening to the narrative voice of the adopted person helps them to uncover their own truth.

For Researchers

Over the course of this inquiry, several topics for future scholarly attention emerged which could prove useful.

Ensure that Adoptee Voices are Preeminent. The pioneering adoption reformer, Jean Paton, considered the experiential knowledge of the world of the adoptee to be the touchstone for the genuineness and accuracy of any expert study (Carp, 2014). Echoing Paton’s assertion that “Everyone except the adopted has been talking about adoption” (as cited in Carp, 2014, p. 45), it is clear that for decades adopted people were subjects of research by nonadopted researchers—“experts”— in psychiatry, psychology, and social work. The nonadopted told the world—adoptive

parents, society generally, and adoptees—"what adoption should be like" and "how we should be" (Baden, 2016; Samuels, 2022). It is clear that relatively little is known about how adoptees think and feel about their adoptions (Kowal & Schilling, 1985; Parkes & Mintz, 2021); my dissertation has highlighted that more research with adopted persons is needed—either led by adopted persons, or foregrounding their voices.

Consider More Longitudinal Studies. As has been noted, there is a need to understand adoptees' changing experiences as they grow and mature through different life stages. Exploring the perspectives and attitudes of adopted persons as they have matured across time, would offer comprehensive insights into how their understanding of being adopted and its effects on their lives may have evolved.

Research Adoptees' Engagement with Therapeutic Supports. This inquiry has shed light on the paucity of understanding of this population of adopted persons as they proceed through the lifespan. They have been largely invisible within Aotearoa New Zealand, despite their statistical prevalence, and their uptake of counselling and psychological services is unclear. Hearing from adopted persons as they reflect across their lifespan could improve our understanding of core and recurrent issues for adoptees, potentially informing assessments and therapeutic interventions across the psychosocial stages of the lifespan.

Listen to a Range of Voices—Adoptees, Their Children, Those Born through Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART). Future research could usefully foreground the voices of other types of adopted people, including those who consider adoption has had little or no impact in their lives, those who have been adopted internationally, and via random selection. Such research might deepen academic understanding and shed light on some of the underlying and influential dynamics of factors such as attachment styles, the role of search and reunion, levels of access to therapeutic support, and the efficacy of these. Key differences between female and male adoptee parents could similarly be further explored.

The depth achieved in my findings could be extended and strengthened in future in-depth studies utilising similar qualitative methodologies which foreground the voices of the adopted compared with the "kept." For example, a duoethnography comprising an adoptee researcher conversing with a "kept" researcher who was also a biological parent about their experiences of parenting could interrogate the commonalities and differences in their interpretations and perspectives. A similar design could be used with sons and daughters of adoptee parents contrasted with a matched group of sons and daughters of the kept, exploring how their respective backgrounds have shaped their relationships with each parent; the potential usefulness of scholarly research exploring the intergenerational impacts of adoption on the

children of adoptees was noted in Chapter 6. Such research could shed light on the complex interplay of factors influencing parenting relationships and dynamics, such as attachment, genetic mirroring and similarity, navigating the hybridity of birth versus adoptive family, and so on.

Finally, a further group to explore might be individuals who are aware that they were born as a result of assisted reproductive technologies (ART) such as IVF, surrogacy, and donor insemination. Chapter 5 discussed the notion of genetic resemblances and “fit” and how these may influence adopted people having a sense of “not belonging,” with parenting providing a first experience of “belonging.” Similar to adoptees, people born through such technologies lack knowledge of part of their biological heritage and genetic mirroring, which may affect the ways they approach intimate relationships, their attachment patterns, and thoughts and feelings regarding parenting.

Look at Adoption Through a Trauma Lens. As discussed in Chapter 1, medical and neuroscientific advances have suggested that the legacy of separating a newborn from its biological parents at or around birth is a preverbal trauma, leaving a mark on the baby’s nervous system (Chambers, 2017; Merchant, 2015; Merritt, 2022; Robert, 2020). Participants in my and numerous other studies have spoken of lifelong core issues of loss, rejection, grief, identity bewilderment, control, intimacy, guilt/shame, entitlement, and abandonment. It has been suggested (Dolfi, 2020; Merritt, 2022) that the traumatic stress of adoption creates extensive changes in an individual’s view of themselves and their world. Since it occurs prior to the age of 3, memories of the trauma might be stored as implicit memories in the unconscious part of the brain, not coded in the brain as a coherent memory, but as sensory and emotional fragments such as images, sounds, and physical sensations. Even decades after the relinquishment, an individual’s brain and body can instinctively react as if the traumatic experience is happening in the present. Applying the nascent knowledge from pre- and peri-natal research that science has confirmed in a systematic scholarly manner could shed further light on the long-term epigenetic changes that such events have been shown to produce.

Prioritise Qualitative Research. Until recently, a key failure of research in this field has been that it has favoured quantitative, survey-based studies of the effects of adoption on individual adoptees. Some studies appear to have made implicit assumptions that adopted persons possessed fixed attitudes towards adoption and thus the use of quantitative measures and methodologies would provide researchers with objective and concrete “knowledge” regarding adoption’s effects. The present study has endeavoured to take into account the contextual nature of lifespan

development through a more interpretative exploration of the subjective processes operating in adoptees. It joins a growing body of qualitative research (Ahuriri-Driscoll, 2020; Blake, 2013; Bork et al., 2022; Conrick, 2018; Edwards et al., 2023; Irvin, 2015; Neil et al., 2023; Nowlan, 2016; O’Kelly, 2018; Parkes & Mintz, 2021) in which adoptees have increasingly been finding their voices, frequently telling very different stories, interrupting the narratives which have been dominant for decades. Yet findings from qualitative inquiry are rarely cited in media, government department documents or reports, or social discourses. This is not only because social attitudes take time to shift and such studies may pose a challenge to the official orthodoxy regarding adopted people; it may also reflect a perception that qualitative research is less rigorous and accurate.

This research has sought to interrupt the established metanarratives around adoption, bringing clarity and an enhanced understanding of its lifelong effects on the adopted person, through the vehicle of the autoethnographic methodology used by the adoptee researcher which has foregrounded the voices of adoptees. To recapitulate the rationale for this choice of methodology as enumerated in Chapter 2: it has enabled the accessing of knowledge that more traditional methods would have been unlikely to access; it can hold its place within the world of academia; it has embraced the power of subjectivity and elevated it to equal importance in the acquisition of knowledge; it has shone a light on a purposeful vulnerability; it has disrupted decades of stigma and silence around this topic and sought to vocalise what has frequently gone unheard; it has been constructed in an accessible style for laypersons and academics alike; and finally, its many voices throughout encapsulate the multiple facets of what “knowing” is. Like Richardson’s (1997) prism with many sides and angles, knowledge itself is vast and perspective-dependent.

Consider Who is Asking—and Why. My final recommendation to the academic community is expressed with irony in this poem by adoptee Penny Callaghan Partridge who challenges notions of “truth” in academic enquiry. She rightly spotlights its inherent slipperiness: “how much depends on/ who’s asking whom and when/ and with what hopes for answers”.

Adoption Research: A Poet's Response

So I'm reading the Adoption Quarterly
at the Center for the Study of Adoption
when I come across this sentence.
And write down this sentence:

Even though a study relying on PARENTAL
reports has found that adopted children
rarely want to meet their birthparents
(Feigelman & Silverman, 1983),

another study (Benson et al., 1994)
used adopted adolescents' SELF reports
has shown that the majority of adopted adolescents
do want to meet their birthparents.

What an example of how slippery the
truth is: how much depends on
who's asking whom and when
and with what hopes for answers.

So now I'm thinking that before we are part of any study,
we should interview the researchers:
just how did they come to be interested
in adoption in the first place?

Who's funding them?
Who'll review their findings?
Who'll choose which
ones will be reported?

Meanwhile, have the researchers read
Joyce Maguire Pavao or seen Edward Albee?

Have they been to any of the meetings of an adopted
person's support group AND JUST LISTENED?
From whom have they LEARNED

about adoption and what do they
think this research they are
doing now will be good for?

Why do they think some parents
(and some researchers) have to
ASK why their children would
want to know their birthparents?

Why a parent might THINK
a twelve year old too
young to know her
name before adoption?

Why an experienced family therapist
would say the ONLY families that ever
made her want to reach for a cigarette
were the adoptive ones?

Why they think Bill Pierce
who quotes old Scottish studies
about only two percent of us
wanting to know our birth parents

and calls those of us who do
anti-adoption just got six
million dollars to help Americans
understand adoption better?

We hope you will be comfortable with our
questions, researchers. If you answer them,
we are likely to keep being in your studies.

We do
really
appreciate
your time.

(Penny Callan Partridge in Partridge et al., 2007; with the author's permission.)

Summary

A good life is like a weaving. Energy is created in the tension. The struggle, the pull and tug are everything. (Joan Erikson)

In order to “weave,” one must patiently work with a structure that is methodical, strong, and which can withstand and embrace the tensions inherent in the act of weaving. Arriving where I started, at my research question—*To what extent, and in what ways, might being adopted have affected the complex developmental processes of parenting across the lifespan?*—do I “know the place” (Eliot, 1942) for the first time? The voices of adopted people and a plethora of research discussed in this dissertation point to foundational effects on the psychosocial stages of an adopted person’s development. Being adopted is a unique way of being in the world, and affects everything across our lifespan. The tension comes from the interplay of warp and weft: now over, now under; balancing, contrasting, losing one’s way, straining towards a complex simplicity. Some of us experience our inner and outer worlds as perpetually undermined and complicated by loss, severance, doubt, and dislocation. For others, those strands emerge for a time, then disappear beneath. For others, the basket may be a simpler design, or never be examined closely enough to notice the interplay and complexity of strands. It is likely that the weaving of what it means to be adopted must be integrated and reappraised continuously over an adopted person’s lifetime (Field & Pond, 2018). The ongoing implications require recognition, understanding, and an intentional recalibration of focus for adopted persons, therapists, and those working in the academic community.

This completed basket is the sum of all the parts, with the strands of my own experiences, the contrasting strands of insights reworked in the light of my participant interviews lending colour and texture to my own, and additional strands of other adoption and neuroscientific scholarly studies which confirmed and triangulated these experiences serving to thicken and strengthen the basket.

APPENDIX A: 22 studies (1997-2023) regarding adoptees and parenting

Author(s)	Year	Title	Country	Researcher(s) status	Publication status	Study Sample	Ages	Gender	Research approach	Overview of findings
Vaccaro	2012	The lifelong impact of adoption on male adult adoptees: An interpretative study.	USA	Adoptee	Doctoral dissertation	n = 82	18 to 74, mean age = 41	All males	Mixed methods. Triangulation design.	52% indicated that adoption had a more negative than positive effect on their interpersonal development/capacity for intimacy, reflecting anxiety about their ability to create close, secure connections to others. Most experienced adoption as enhancing stability and security of their attachment to their own children.
Horowitz	2011	Adult adoptee attitudes towards parenthood: Comparisons between an adopted and non-adopted sample.	USA	Not stated	Doctoral dissertation	n = 101 adoptees; n = 213 non-adoptees	18 to 64, mean age = 34	Adopted females 80%; Nonadopted females 74%	Quantitative Questionnaires	Adoptees had less desire to have children and become parents than nonadopted; were less likely to report they would adopt if they were unable to have children; perceived themselves as less capable of relating to children.
Pérez, Sala & Ortega	2016	Identity construction as a mother: A comparative study between adopted and non-adopted women	Spain	Not stated	<i>Journal of Constructivist Psychology</i> , 29(2), 184–196	n = 15 adoptees; n = 15 non-adoptees	Adoptees mean age = 39; nonadoptees mean age = 38	All females	Quantitative Cross inductive design	Adoptees had more issues to consider than nonadopted comparison group; more cognitive conflicts (60%:20%), lower self-esteem (13%:67%), fear of loss and difficulty trusting seen in existence of "need for control" which was not seen at all in non-adopted sample.
Jordan & Dempsey	2013	Exploring experiences of adoption: Emerging implications for therapeutic practice	Ireland	Adoptee	<i>Counselling Psychology Review</i> , 28(1), 37–46	n = 14 adoptees	18 to 58, mean age = 37	12 females and 2 males	Qualitative Grounded theory	Needed to have someone "blood related" to them. Increased sense of security and belonging.

Author(s)	Year	Title	Country	Researcher(s) status	Publication status	Study Sample	Ages	Gender	Research approach	Overview of findings
Lutz	2011	What is the lived experience of growing up in an adopted family?	Canada	Adoptee	Master's thesis	n = 6 adoptees	32 to 42	4 females and 2 males	Qualitative Descriptive phenomenological	Out of seven major themes identified, "vulnerability", "incompleteness" and "desire to look like someone" were emphasised in how being adopted affected parenting, how they saw their children.
Greco, Rosnati & Ferrari	2015	Adult adoptees as partners and parents: The joint task of revisiting the adoption history	Italy	Not stated	<i>Adoption Quarterly</i> , 18(1), 25–44	n = 34 (one of couple being adoptee)	25 to 40, mean age = 33	20 female and 14 males	Qualitative Grounded theory	Adoptees processed and reinterpreted their adoption through parenting; range of positions taken from "valorisation" to "normalisation" (it made no difference to distancing or avoiding).
Nowlan	2016	Adoptees' experiences through a depth psychological lens: An interpretive phenomenological study	USA	Adoptee	Doctoral dissertation	n = 7 adoptees	43 to 67, mean age = 54	All females	Qualitative Interpretative phenomenological analysis	General anxiety around parenting expressed.
Hampton	1997	Adopted women give birth: Connection between women and matrilineal continuity	USA	Adoptee	<i>Feminism & Psychology</i> , 7(1), 83–106.	n = 20 adoptees	24 to 45, mean age = 33	All females	Qualitative Grounded theory	Experience of childbirth was different because they were adopted. Extreme power of the blood/genetic connection to their child.
Moyer & Juang	2011	Adoption and identity: Influence on emerging adults' occupational and parental goals.	USA	No adoptee researcher	<i>Adoption Quarterly</i> , 14(1), 1-17.	n = 10 adoptees	19 to 25, mean age = 22	All females	Qualitative Grounded theory	All acknowledged a connection between being adopted, and their own future parent roles: desire to experience what her adoptive mother missed re: conception, pregnancy & birth; importance of genetics and bloodline; having a child gave a reason to search for birth family; history will not repeat; negative thoughts on adopting one's own child.

Author(s)	Year	Title	Country	Researcher(s) status	Publication status	Study Sample	Ages	Gender	Research approach	Overview of findings
Pinkerton	2010	Adoptees become mothers: Adoptees' experiences of pregnancy and new motherhood	USA	Adoptee	Doctoral dissertation	n = 10 adoptees	32 - 44	All females	Qualitative Grounded theory	Baby represents a new kind of relationship (biologic/genetic connection); concern over baby's appearance; having a baby as healing; adoption affects experience as a mother and birthing experience; fear of being separated from one's baby; conscious of what if one's child grew up without one.
Prakash	2014	Adopted persons as parents: The impact of adoption on adjustment to parenthood—a qualitative descriptive study	NZ	Adoptee	Honour's dissertation	n = 5 adoptees	Early 40s to late 50s	3 females, 2 males	Qualitative Descriptive	3 of the 5 participants said that adoption had very little impact in how they adjusted to parenthood. 2 spoke of uncertainty and genetic vacuum.
Sherr, Roberts & Croome	2019	Parenting concepts and experiences of adults abandoned as infants [NB 'abandoned' regarded as different to 'adopted']	UK	Not stated	<i>Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies</i> , 14(1), 36-49	n = 16 adoptees	26 - 76, mean age = 59	9 females, 7 males	Qualitative Thematic analysis	Having a child noted as true biological and genetic continuity and their first experience of a blood tie to another human being - this was seen as very precious. Others, however, were challenged or avoided parenting altogether.
Conrick	2018	Being adopted and being a mother	Australia	Not stated	<i>Adoption & Fostering</i> , 44(1), 56-74	n = 21 adoptees	Mean age = 44	All females	Qualitative Thematic analysis	Motherhood was a vehicle providing an opportunity to "rework" the impact of the various elements of their adoption, though not resolving these. Quality of relationships with adoptive families appeared relevant. Being a parent prompted searches for further information about their own adoption and seeking contact with birth family members, not only for their own sake but also for that of

Author(s)	Year	Title	Country	Researcher(s) status	Publication status	Study Sample	Ages	Gender	Research approach	Overview of findings
										their children.
Bork, Kwee & Socholotiuk	2022	Intergenerational voices of adoption: family stories of adoptees and their adult children	USA	Not stated	<i>Adoption Quarterly</i> , https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2022.2156010	n = 5 participant families, dyadic (adoptive parent and adult child) or triadic (adoptive parent and two adult children)	56 - 64, mean age = 59	All female adoptees	Qualitative Narrative inheritance interviews	Findings suggested that adoptees continued to be influenced by their adoptive experience throughout their adulthood. Mothers passed down 'narrative inheritances' i.e. stories of adoption experiences characterised as 'embracing' or 'cautious' of their adoption narrative. This was echoed by their children's narratives, which were also curious. Both generations stated that coconstructing family adoption narratives was meaningful for them.
Edwards, Kennedy, Knights, Kovshoff, Kreppner, Maughan, & Sonuga-Barke	2023	When people adopted from severely depriving institutions become parents: The experiences of young adult mothers from the ERA study and their adoptive parents	UK	Not stated	<i>Adoption & Fostering</i> , 47(4), 415—433	n = 14 adoptees [NB 6 with cognitive impairment]	22 - 25	All female adoptees	Qualitative Thematic analysis	Experienced parenthood very positively to date, a sense of pride and achievement, more closely connected to their adoptive families.
Egan, O'Connor & Egan	2022	Creating a new narrative: A theory of how adopted individuals readjust their adoptive identity in parenthood	Ireland	Not stated	<i>Adoption & Fostering</i> , 46(3), 318-335	n = 8 adoptees	32 - 46	7 females, 1 male	Qualitative Classic Grounded Theory	Becoming a parent led to a reexamination of aspects of their adoption including their feelings about birth parent(s) and their adoptive parents' infertility; hypervigilant to cues of rejection by their

Author(s)	Year	Title	Country	Researcher(s) status	Publication status	Study Sample	Ages	Gender	Research approach	Overview of findings
										children; emphasised need to be self-reflective to avoid projection of their own history.
O'Kelly	2018	My first known blood relative: A psychotherapeutic exploration of female adoptees who give birth to biological children	Ireland	Not stated	Bachelor's thesis	n = 3 adult adoptees	Not stated	3 females	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)	Becoming a parent led to feelings of empathy or anger toward their birth mother; enormity of meeting their first blood relative. Overprotectiveness noted in their relationships with their biological children. Adoption issues do not cease on parenthood.
Despax, Bouteyre & Guiller	2020	Comparison of adoptees' and nonadoptees' experience of parenthood and mediating role of dyadic coping	France	Not stated	<i>Journal of Social and Personal Relationships</i> 38(2), 544–563	n = 268 adoptees matched with 268 non-adoptees	Adoptees mean age = 38; non-adoptees mean age = 37	230 females, 38 males	Quantitative Questionnaires	The matched groups did not differ on the experience of parenthood (this contradicts most previous studies). The groups differed on measurements of attachment, mental health and dyadic coping.
Despax, Bouteyre & Halidi	2021	Refusal versus massive investment: Qualitative study of parenthood among adopted adults in France	France	Not stated	<i>Journal of Social and Personal Relationships</i> , 38(11), 3219–3242	n = 13 adoptees	Mean age= 32	7 females, 6 males	Qualitative (semi structured interview) Thematic analysis	Participants were polarised into two opposite groups of adoptees: those who refused parenthood (satisfaction, parenting by proxy, views on child adoption) or invested massively in it (parenting style, desire for children, difficulties encountered). Determinants of these positions were explored (impact of adoptee status, relationships with adoptive parents and with partners). Becoming a parent viewed as a vehicle to mend their adoption history by creating

Author(s)	Year	Title	Country	Researcher(s) status	Publication status	Study Sample	Ages	Gender	Research approach	Overview of findings
										their own biological family and experiencing an intense relationship with their child(ren).
Benson	2019	From adopted child to becoming a mother: The experience of adoption and its significance in parenthood ideation and motherhood	USA	Adoptee	Doctoral dissertation	n = 5 adoptees	31 to 36, mean age = 34	All females	Qualitative Interpretive phenomenological analysis	Descriptions of ambivalence, fear and idealisation regarding motherhood; sharing likeness and physical similarities with their children; effects of attachment on their relationships; biology considered to be more important than environment; difficulties with their adoptive mothers.
Neil, Rimmer & Sirbu	2023	How do adopted adults see the significance of adoption and being a parent in their life stories? A narrative analysis of 40 life story interviews with male and female adoptees	UK	Not stated	<i>Children and Youth Services Review</i> , 155, 1-12	n = 40 adoptees	21 to 54, mean age = 33	20 females, 20 males	Qualitative Narrative identity framework, life-story interview	Wide diversity of adopted people's experiences and the ongoing impact of difficult early life experiences on adopted individuals as adults and parents. Parenting raised additional challenges for many adopted people, but could also be a positive turning point.
Irvin	2015	The impact of motherhood on an adoptee's sense of self and sense of belonging	USA	Adoptee	Doctoral dissertation	n = 10 adoptees	23 - 51, mean age = 37	All females	Qualitative Transcendental phenomenology	All participants felt that having a biological child had affected their sense of self and sense of belonging in a meaningful and impactful way. NB mean age of children = 6; little interpretive analysis as emphasis was on description.

APPENDIX B: ETHICS APPROVAL



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

31 March 2021

Rhoda Scherman
Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences

Dear Rhoda

Re Ethics Application: **21/65 The Adoptee as Parent**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 31 March 2024.

Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. Inclusion in the 'how do I agree' section that participants must return a signed, scanned or photographed Consent Form to the researcher before their interview.

Non-standard conditions must be completed before commencing your study. Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTEC before commencing your study.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using the EA2 form.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using the EA3 form.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
7. It is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard and that all the dates on the documents are updated.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management approval for access for your research from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

For any enquiries please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz. The forms mentioned above are available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>

(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: juliaandmike173@gmail.com; Janis Paterson

APPENDIX C-I: RECRUITMENT FLYER



Were you adopted in a 'closed' adoption in New Zealand between 1950 and 1970? Are you a person of New Zealand European/Pākehā ethnicity who has parented your own biological children?



Are you interested in being part of a research project that is exploring how being adopted affects our relationships with, and how we have parented, our own biological children, throughout the lifespan?

If so, I invite you to talk with me.

'The adoptee as parent' Study

Please contact
julia.field@autuni.ac.nz

APPENDIX C-II: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM



Participant Information Sheet

Thank you so much for expressing interest in taking part in **The Adoptee as Parent** study. This Information Sheet is designed to answer any questions you may have regarding what would be involved if you decided to take part.

Date Information Sheet Produced: 24 March 2021 [date to be modified dependent on timeframe of AUTC approval]

Project Title: *The adoptee as parent*

An invitation:

My name is Julia Field, I am an adult adoptee born in 1963, and I warmly invite you to participate in my research. This study will explore the lived experiences across the lifespan of adult adoptees in New Zealand who have parented their own biological children.

Your participation is voluntary. Whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you, and you may withdraw at any time. Your participation will be greatly appreciated, and will contribute to the research requirement of my doctoral studies—and to the expansion of our knowledge about adult adoptees as parents.

What is the purpose of this research?

The primary purpose of this study is to gain insight into the lived experiences of how being adopted affects the experience of being a parent to one's own biological children. Despite the historically high prevalence of adoptions in Aotearoa New Zealand, the dominant cultural narrative of 'closed' adoption (i.e. being raised in a genetically unrelated 'stranger' family) has tended to minimise or deny the complexity of the adoption experience and its pervasive effects over an adopted person's lifespan. The study aims to investigate and gain a comprehensive, advanced and far-reaching understanding of one of the typical life stages that, until now, has been under-investigated for the population of adult adoptees: parenthood. Areas to be explored in this context include how being adopted influences adoptees' desires or decisions to parent, and to what extent adoption has affected their feelings around fertility, pregnancy, birth, and genetic relatedness. Further, to what extent and in what ways has being adopted potentially impacted the nature of their relationships with their own biological children, and their parenting through their children's life stages.

This research is also being undertaken in fulfilment of my study towards a PhD in Psychology. In order to disseminate the knowledge gained from this study, I anticipate publishing the findings in a scholarly journal, and other academic publications or presentations.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Recruitment has taken place via notices (online and hard-copy) and word of mouth. It is most likely that either you saw the flyer for the study, or that someone you know has told you about the study, and encouraged you to contact me.

You are invited to participate in this study if you meet the following criteria:

- you were adopted into a 'closed' adoption (a family that was not genetically related to you, and you had no contact with your birth family while you were growing up);
- your adoptive family were the same ethnicity as you (this is in order to narrow the focus of the research);
- you identify as New Zealand European/Pākehā (the study of adoption of Māori children and the customary practice of 'whāngai' are outside of the scope of my project);
- your adoption took place in New Zealand between 1950 and 1970;
- you have your own biological child/ren with whom you were in a day-to-day parenting relationship while they were growing up, of whom at least one is now an adult (20 years old);

How do I agree to participate in this research?

By emailing me or my supervisor (emails listed below). If you do agree to take part in this project, you will be sent a Consent Form before the interview. You will be required to have signed a copy of the Consent Form before the interview proceeds.

It is important that you know that while your participation would be greatly appreciated, it is entirely voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. If you do not wish to participate or would like to withdraw after initially indicating a desire to participate, you can do so at any time; you do not have to give a reason and you will not experience any disadvantages. You will also be offered the choice

between having any data that can be identified as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used (but still kept confidential). However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

We will schedule one or more interviews (of at least an hour's duration), during which time you'll be asked to share your story and reflect on how your adoptee status has influenced how you parented across your child's lifespan; and to consider in what ways (if any) being adopted has affected your relationship with your biological child/ren. You will be invited to retrieve and reflect upon personal mementos, such as photographs, diaries, journals, etc for the purposes of reminiscing and sharing your experiences. These will remain your own property and will neither be retained by the researcher, nor included in the final report. They will not be photographed without your written permission.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, should the government decide to raise the region to Alert Level 3 or higher, social distancing requirements dictate that all interviews will have to be conducted electronically, via a convenient mode of videoconferencing. If the alert level allows for the interview to take place in person, you'll have the option to be interviewed face-to-face, at a location of your choosing. I'm happy to come to your home, or any other quiet and private location of your choice. Whether in-person or online, the interview will be digitally audio-recorded and later transcribed, with transcripts returned to you in order to verify accuracy. In the event of our using an online platform for the interview(s), the additional section of the Consent Form regarding online interviewing will be fully discussed with you prior to signing your consent.

What are the discomforts and risks?

There are no physical discomforts associated with this study, nor are you likely to be at significant risk. However, there is always a possibility of emotional uneasiness when talking about personal experiences, which may trigger certain emotions or psychological discomfort. You are not obliged to answer any questions that may cause you discomfort (something that you will be reminded about, at the beginning of your interview).

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

If for any reason you feel distressed during the interview, you can pause or stop the process at any point. If you feel you need to speak to someone after the interview, there are several organisations that you can contact for support:

- free call or text 1737 for support from a trained counsellor
- Lifeline 0800 543 354

What are the benefits?

As a participant in this study, you will have the opportunity to voice and openly discuss your experiences, and in doing so you will contribute to an as-yet under-researched body of academic research regarding a fundamental aspect of adult adoptees' psychological well-being and adjustment as we pass through our developmental life stages. It is hoped that the study will provide valuable insights in order to deepen the understanding of the lived experience for us adoptees, our children and grandchildren; to equip those professionals who work therapeutically with us; and to enlighten those who are not adopted. As this research is being undertaken as part of my doctoral (PhD) degree, an additional benefit of the research is that it will help me to successfully attain this qualification.

How will my privacy be protected?

Privacy and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the research process. This will be reiterated at the beginning of the research interview, so you are fully aware and reassured of this point. Although full anonymity cannot be offered because I will be interviewing you in person, confidentiality will be assured: only the researcher and those directly involved in this study will have access to research data; pseudonyms for yourself and family members will be used in all transcriptions and interpretive texts; no identifiable information about you or anyone you speak about will be presented in the final report, nor given to third parties; and all transcripts and data during analysis will be securely stored on a password protected computer. Interviews will be audio recorded only, no video recordings will be made if interviewed online (or in person), further ensuring your confidentiality.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There are no financial costs to participate in the study; the only cost will be your time spent in the first and any subsequent interview(s) as well as transcript checking. Interviews will be open-ended and scheduled at your convenience.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

After receiving this information sheet, you have until approximately 30 March 2021 (date to be modified dependent on timeframe of AUTC approval) to respond. You are welcome to contact me (by emailing julia.field@autuni.ac.nz) or my supervisor (via the contact details below), for further information.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

If you wish to receive a written summary of the research findings, just tick the "Yes" box on your Consent Form. I will send you an electronic summary of the study's findings.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Rhoda Scherman, rhoda.scherman@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 (extension 7228).

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTC, Dr Carina Meares, ethics@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 6038.

Who do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Julia Field | E: julia.field@aut.ac.nz | T: 027 3528 027

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Rhoda Scherman | E: rhoda.scherman@aut.ac.nz | T: 921 9999, ext. 7228

APPENDIX C-III: CONSENT FORM



Consent Form

Project title: **The adoptee as parent**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Rhoda Scherman**

Researcher: **Julia Field**

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Participant Information Sheet dated **24 March 2021** [example]
- ☐ I confirm that I was adopted between 1950 and 1970 into a 'closed' adoption, that I am of New Zealand European/Pākehā descent, and have raised my own biological child/ren, of whom at least one is 20 years old.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that the interviews will also be digitally audio-recorded and transcribed, with transcripts returned to me in order to verify accuracy.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐
- ☐ I understand that due to the COVID-19 pandemic, should the government decide to raise the region to Alert Level 3 or higher, social distancing requirements will dictate that all interviews will have to be conducted electronically, via a convenient mode of videoconferencing.

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Participant's Contact Details:

..... (email)

..... (mobile phone)

.....

Date:

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 31 March 2021, AUTEK Reference number 21/65

APPENDIX C-IV: INDICATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Indicative Interview Questions

Project title: **The adoptee as parent**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Rhoda Scherman**

Researcher: **Julia Field**

This document contains potential questions for use in the semi-structured, open-ended interviews with participants. Please note that questions are subject to change, and will be influenced by information gathered during the interview process. The possible areas of inquiry (listed below) are included to either generate discussion and/or encourage elaboration:

(A) Opening questions about the participant and their children, such as:

1. Can you tell me about your adoption?
2. Can you tell me about your own children (and grandchildren, if any), their ages and names?

NB: Information pertaining to the identities of the children will not be reported in the final research report; participants will be informed of this.

(B) Questions about the participant's feelings, experiences and reflections on becoming a parent, such as:

3. What was it like for you as an adopted person, approaching the issue of starting your own family?
4. Did you have any particular concerns? If so, what were they?
5. How did you feel about being adopted as you went through your (or your partner's) pregnancy and delivery? (first and then any subsequent pregnancies)
6. How much did you think about your birth parents during your own (or your partner's) pregnancy and birthing experience?
7. To what extent, and in what ways, did being adopted affect your feelings about your new baby?

(C) Questions about the participant's experience of parenting through their child/ren's developmental stages, such as:

8. As your child was going through [identify, and picture/walk through each developmental stage: toddler/preschool/primary school/adolescence/young adulthood],
 - a) when do you recall thinking about your own adoption?
 - b) what triggered these thoughts? What do you recall? How did this feel?
 - c) can you describe your relationship with your child/ren at this stage?
9. Tell me about how you navigated the relationship with your adoptive parents and your birth parents, when it came to your children and their relationship with their extended family?

(D) Questions about the participant's interpersonal relationship with their child/ren, such as:

10. What does your child/ren know of your adoption? Tell me about how you explained it to them.
11. How would you describe your relationship with your child/ren? To what extent and in what ways do you consider that your being adopted affected this relationship?
12. To what extent do you consider your child/ren were affected by your own feelings about being adopted?
13. As you look back over the years since having your children, in what ways do you feel being adopted has affected your relationship with them?
14. And what else?

Interview and observation protocols

Prior to commencing the interview

1. Participant Information Sheet (Appendix F) has been read through over the (approximate) four weeks preceding the interview prior to signing, and questions/clarification from the participant invited.
2. Two copies of the Consent Form (Appendix G) have been read and signed, one retained by the participant. If the interview is taking place online, the participant can sign, then scan or photograph and send to the researcher.
3. Date, time and venue of interview has been scheduled to both participant and researcher's convenience.

4. Confidentiality and privacy for the participant is reiterated, including use of pseudonym, storage of information collected, and the ways in which the participant's identity will be unable to be identified.
5. The venue chosen is a comfortable temperature and soundproof (i.e. what is said in the room cannot be overheard by someone outside the space).
6. Water/refreshments have been made available if desired.
7. Any mementoes brought by the participant are acknowledged and noted (Appendix H)
8. The participant is reminded that the researcher is required to abide by the Research Code of Conduct and AUTECH's Guidelines and Procedures, particularly in respect of the safeguarding and use of personal data.

During the interview

1. An audio recording is made of the interview. If the interview is occurring via video-conferencing, it is audio-recorded.
2. The researcher commences by thanking the participant for their time, willingness to participate, and that they are welcome to pause or terminate their participation at any time during the process. Reminder that the entire process is voluntary and refusal to participate/continue will not affect them adversely in any way.
3. The researcher takes written notes to supplement recording, paying particular attention to suprasegmental aspects such as facial expression, body language, posture etc and monitoring the participant's emotional equilibrium.
4. The researcher periodically pauses to check on participant comfort, energy/fatigue, any sign of emotional discomfort, need to take a break etc
5. Although the interview is open-ended, the researcher seeks guidance from participant as to when it is appropriate to complete the interview.
6. The researcher behaves at all times in culturally appropriate and sensitive ways.

After the interview

1. The researcher thanks the participant for their contribution.
2. The need for follow up interview is discussed and scheduled if mutually desirable.
3. The researcher clarifies any immediate questions/comments the participant may have.
4. The researcher ensures the participant has her contact details, as well as those of counselling/psychological support.

APPENDIX C-V: RESEARCHER SAFETY PROTOCOLS



Researcher Safety Protocols

Project title: **The adoptee as parent**

Project Supervisor: **Dr Rhoda Scherman**

Researcher: **Julia Field**

This document makes arrangements to help protect the researcher's safety. These arrangements will be enacted if the researcher is required to meet participants within their home, or within another public location.

If the researcher is required to conduct a one-on-one interview within a participant's home, the following safety protocols will be followed:

- The supervisor and the researcher's husband will have a schedule of the researcher's visits, including venue addresses, for a particular morning or afternoon.
- The researcher will report to the supervisor and the researcher's husband via phone call/text message immediately before entering and immediately after leaving a participant's home.
- All interviews will be conducted within daylight hours.
- Appropriate public health protocols will be followed with regard to Covid-19, depending on what Alert Level the country, region, and/or participant are currently in. This may include the wearing of face mask(s), social distancing, and postponing the meeting if either party is unwell.
- Suitable methods of contact between the researcher and supervisor will be established prior to any interviews.
- When visiting participants in their homes, the researcher will always act in a culturally and socially sensitive manner – remembering that she is a guest, and that the participants are doing the researcher the favour by agreeing to participate and share their homes.
- Should confirmation of safe interview completion and departure from the participant's home not eventuate:
 - if the supervisor or the researcher's husband does not hear from the researcher when the interview was scheduled to conclude, the supervisor or the researcher's husband will telephone the researcher.
 - if the researcher does not answer her phone within 15 minutes, the supervisor or the researcher's husband will contact the Police and express their concern.

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 31 March 2021 AUTEK Reference number 21/65

APPENDIX C-VI: PROTOCOL FOR USE OF ARTIFACTS



Protocol for Use of Participant Artefacts

Participants will be invited to retrieve and reflect upon their own items of personally relevant data for the purpose of reminiscing, sharing their experiences of parenting, and reflecting on their relationship with their children.

Such mementoes might include (but are not limited to) items such as photographs, journals or diaries kept by the participant, children's letters, drawing, poetry or art.

Artefacts such as noted above, will be voluntarily brought by participants into the interview environment, expressly for their own personal use during the interviews. As such:

- The artefacts are not part of the study design, nor the data analysis.
- The artefacts will not be photographed by the researcher unless the participant has given specific written permission, and any such photographs will not be included in the final written report.
- The artefacts will not be retained by the researcher; they remain the personal property of the participant.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 31 March 2021, AUTEC Reference number 21/65.

APPENDIX D: AUDIT TRAIL

The following is a description of my data analysis, detailing my process and thinking in developing my themes and arriving at my final thematic structure.

Phase 1—Familiarisation with the Data Set

Interviews Transcribed: Of Telescopes and Microscopes

I chose to transcribe my audio-recorded interviews myself. This rigorous and thorough process was time-consuming, but it was an excellent way to start familiarising myself with my dataset and developing a far more thorough understanding of its depth and breadth. As I transcribed, I included all verbal utterances. I also explicitly noted suprasegmental audible aspects of the interviews, including hesitations (e.g. “Ummm [long pause], to be honest with you, I think there is something deeply flawed in me that I can’t have those connections”) (Kenneth, line 212) and sighs (e.g. “It’s horrible, to be honest with you. [sighs]”) (Kenneth, line 292) and where words were given particular emphasis (e.g. “And I know the intent behind that is to say we couldn’t have children and we were so lucky to get you, but what I heard was, ‘We desperately wanted to have this [our own child] and we couldn’t get it—so you’re the booby prize’”) (Kenneth, line 43).

I had kept a pad with me during the interviews on which I had jotted any non-verbal and inaudible parts of the interview that contained emotional salience (e.g. facial expression). These were noted in my post-interview memoing and subsequent transcripts, (e.g. “And it’s like [grimaces] ‘You can’t say that’ but we don’t talk about it. Again, we don’t talk about it”) (Kenneth, line 63); “...and it was Christmas Day [blinks back tears]. It’s quite emotional remembering that, because I was a teenager” (Juliet, line 66).

The reflexive memoing I had done immediately after the interviews, when the experience had been fresh in my mind, was a parallel bracketed process that I had set aside. I revisited these memos in the transcription phase since they acted as “telescopes”, supporting me to engage critically with each interview as data from a distance of time and space, facilitating my process of making sense of the meaning actively and critically, and reflecting on broader potential patterns.

The process of transcription itself, and reflexively memoing throughout regarding what came up for me as I transcribed, was an intensely immersive process. The “microscope” of my closeness and familiarity with participants’ language, pauses, and emotions evoked, supported a “deep and intimate knowledge” (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p. 42) of the dataset, as I was utterly absorbed in this process. Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that memos created during this phase are tools for use in my analytic process, a means to retain ideas with which I have started to engage.

Although I had noted in my ethics application the potential risks to researchers of sensitive research topics and the toll this can take on emotional health, I had not anticipated the emotional toll aspects of transcribing. Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) noted that in qualitative research, where researchers have chosen to undertake their own transcription of sensitive research interview data, that this has the propensity to affect the researcher's emotional health. This may be exacerbated when they are the person who has also collected the data, which essentially requires a reliving of the original interview.

After transcribing the interviews, I sent each one back to the participant asking them to check that I had captured "their voice", and inviting them to add, amend or remove anything to ensure authenticity and accuracy. It took them between 1 and 11 weeks to read the transcripts and return them to me, which meant that each transcript was necessarily left to "lie fallow" for a period of time. Participant quotes are used verbatim in the body of the dissertation; line numbers have been omitted to assist the reader.

Reflecting Critically on my Memos

As an adopted person who has her own four biological children and has been immersed in adoption and reunion-related topics for decades, I knew quite a lot about the topic, and so I approached the interviews and resulting data set expectantly and with a sense of familiarity.

Engaging analytically with my data, what struck me and what did I notice?

- ◆ Not all participants went into the topic as deeply as I had hoped they might, but for some it was a very "deep dive" and they had clearly given it much thought.
- ◆ There were many memory gaps for participants: for example, some participants had no memory of a nine-month pregnancy, both the facts of it but especially the feelings and thoughts they had experienced.
- ◆ My insider status gave me access into aspects of the adopted experience. For example with Bridget, asking about the smell of her babies and her adoptive mother, would I have known to ask about that that had I not been an adopted person?
- ◆ It was easy to identify with many aspects of being adopted, for example the awkwardness and challenges of being the daughter of an infertile mother. My empathy and that I was "getting it" created an atmosphere of relief as they had these experiences validated and were able to put words to dynamics which had not previously been articulated.
- ◆ There were also times where participants' experiences did not align with mine, for example Felicity who did NOT spend her entire childhood and adolescence

yearning, fantasising about her real family, in essence coming to an awareness of the impacts of adoption until adulthood, well after the birth of her daughters.

- ♦ Many participants approached the interview almost like a counselling session, with more self-disclosure than I had anticipated, sharing deeply personal emotions and reflections. I felt extremely privileged that they trusted me with this content and believed this to be due in part to my being a member of the studied population.
- ♦ At times my emotions were very close to the surface. In every interview I experienced feeling tearful at times, and the toll of repressing emotions until they could safely be processed later was definitely tiring. I felt the effects of mirroring in shared parallel descriptions. For example, when Juliet was pregnant for the second time, she shared that she had believed that she wouldn't be able to love another child because all of her love was for her first child—and this had been my own fear when pregnant with my second son. Juliet's description of her euphoria in the aftermath of birthing was extremely powerful. Her statement that at last she belonged in the world once he was born, felt to me as though I was speaking myself.

The narratives and descriptions gifted by the participants were mesmerising. As I became more engaged in the data, I had to consider that my unique perspective as an independent researcher who was also an adopted person would definitely shape the analytic process. Thinking critically about the thematic structure I was developing and the coding decisions I made, I was conscious that my assumptions and expectations of the data might have blinkered me to alternative readings, or that I might have overlooked material that may have enriched my interpretation. On the other hand, my knowledge and lived experience of the topic could be seen as an adjunct to the quality of my analysis. The fact that one of my supervisors was a member of the group being studied and one was not, offered me investigator triangulation by way of a mitigating factor, and was an adjunct to compare insider and outsider perspectives. At times it was also a useful stimulant to my reflexivity.

Phase 2—Coding

Initial Coding

I had decided to utilise NVivo, which is data analytic software. Using NVivo, a researcher can reduce large amounts of data into small chunks of meaning, thus organising it into meaningful groups. Despite some reservations regarding its utilisation in qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), I found NVivo to be efficient since I had a large amount of interview material to manage (each interview was between 10,000 and

23,000 words; an average of 12,000). The software enabled me to store and organise a potentially unwieldy amount of data, making it feel more manageable.

After receiving the final version of each interview back from the participant, I imported each transcript into NVivo Version 12. I coded each segment of data (fragments and motifs by way of word, phrase, segment, paragraph) that I believed was relevant to or that specifically captured something interesting about my research question. I sought to highlight anything that would help me understand the participant's views, experiences and perceptions as they related to my research question regarding the ways being adopted might be influencing their parenting and relationships with their children across their own lifespan.

From the outset I acknowledged and consciously bracketed the themes that had constituted my findings in the critical systematic literature review I had completed for my Master's thesis (Field & Pond, 2018). These five themes had definitely resonated in my own experience as an adopted person, and I anticipated that they might emerge for some of my participants. However, rather than deductively setting up nodes (the NVivo term for a code) ahead of time, I elected to work inductively, creating the codes from the interviews. I used open coding, developing and modifying the nodes as I worked through the coding process with each transcript. I did not code every single piece of text inductively line-by-line.

I defined each descriptive code by staying close to the data, endeavouring to use the participants' words, with one or two words or a short phrase (ensuring it was self-explanatory, so I could easily reference back to it). For each one I gave each a short definition, such as for "Adoptive mother not having experienced pregnancy" the description read "Where reference is made to the fact that the participant's adoptive mother had not gone through the experience of pregnancy". I did this for the entire transcript then repeated the whole process for the next transcript, and the next, and the next. As I was concerned with addressing my specific research question, being guided by the conceptual framework of my study, and the need to organise my material systematically, I was intentional and deliberate about approaching the data with this in mind.

By the end of this initial coding of all the transcripts, I had a long list of forty-seven nodes that I had identified. At this point I set aside nodes that I had used for my own process during coding:

"Brings up memory for interviewer"

"Duoethnography"

"Personal impact quotes"

"Researcher becomes counsellor"

This left me with 43 nodes, with the number of data extracts in each ranging from 4 to 157. The 43 nodes (and their descriptions) are summarised in Table 6.

Table 6

43 Descriptive Nodes

Node name	Description
1. Adoption as a theme through either family	Some members of the participant's birth or adopted family were themselves adopted
2. Adoption systemically and in society	Participant reflecting on the bigger picture of adoption as a societal phenomenon and beyond their own experience
3. Adoptive mother not having experienced pregnancy	Where reference is made to the fact that the participant's adoptive mother had not gone through the experience of pregnancy
4. Anxiety and fear and shame	Emotions experienced regarding being adopted and being a parent
5. Baby born—feelings	How the participant felt when the baby was born
6. Being pathologised	The participant experiencing others regarding them as “flawed” or psychologically unwell
7. Belonging	The participant referring to feeling or not feeling a sense of belonging
[Brings up memory for the interviewer]	Coded to trigger my reflection on my own process/memory provoked by a participant interview—set aside
8. Clarity of distance and time	As the participant looks back with the benefit and wisdom of hindsight
[Duoethnography]	Coded to trigger possible methodological approach—set aside
9. Effect on my children due to my being adopted	How the participant considers that being an adoptee has affected their child(ren)
10. Effects of early life experiences	Formative instances from earlier life recounted by the participant
11. Feelings about being a new parent	What the participant remembers feeling when starting the parenting journey
12. Feelings about being pregnant	How the participant felt when they knew they were expecting a child
13. Feelings during pregnancy	How the participant felt for the 9 months of pregnancy

Node name	Description
14. How being adopted affects me	Participant's reflecting on the impact of adoption in their life
15. How has participant dealt with their adoption	Ways in which the participant considers they have coped with being adopted
16. Importance of genetics—DNA—resemblance—mirroring	Inherited characteristics and the significance of being genetically related to someone
17. Infertility	Any reference made to infertility appearing in adoptive family or the adopted person's mind, or any other context
18. Influence of adoptive parents on participant	How adoptive parents impacted upon parenting in any way(s)
19. Knowledge about birth mother being pregnant with participant	How much—if any—information did the participant have regarding their own gestation and birth
20. Lack of information because adopted	Influence of being in a “closed adoption” on becoming a parent and/or parenting
21. Looking more deeply at being adopted and my parenting	Where the participant has reflected on these issues in a “big picture” way
22. Mental health issues	References to post-natal or other depression, struggles with mental health that have impacted on participants' parenting or that they consider adoption related. Includes mental health of their own children, their adoptive and/or birth families
23. Miscarriage or termination	The participant or those close to them having experienced a miscarriage or termination of pregnancy and how this may have been influential
24. My child during their childhood	What participants can recall of how being adopted themselves showed up in their child's/children's lives through the developmental stages
25. My children knowing about my being adopted	The sharing of information about adopted status with one's own biological children: when, how, why etc
26. My children's relationship with my adoptive family	Participant reflections and feelings about their biological children's relationship with the participant's adoptive family
27. My children's relationship with my	Participant reflections and feelings about their biological children's

Node name	Description
birth family	relationship with the participant's birth family
28. My relationship with my biological children	How does the participant regard how their relationship has been and is with their biological child(ren)?
29. NOT remembering	Parts of the participant's narrative/past that are unretrievable, which surprised the researcher
30. NOT thinking about adoption or birth parents during pregnancy and early years	An absence of preoccupation with adoption-related themes in this context
31. Overprotective or possessive	The participant experiencing unusual preoccupation with or overattachment to their biological child(ren)
32. Paradox	Instances where two opposite or contrary things/feelings have both been present
33. Part of me	Participant expressing/regarding their biological child as a part of themselves
34. Participant family background—birth & adoptive	Influences of either/both family backgrounds on the participant
35. Protecting adoptive parents—guilt and loyalty	Participant expressing levels of guilt and a high level of loyalty to the adoptive parents
[Personal impact quotes]	Coded as a reminder to researcher—set aside
36. Reflecting on adoption generally	Participant reflecting on the bigger picture of adoption as phenomenon wider than their own family system
37. Religion	The role of the church or religious beliefs and practices in the participant's experience of adoption and parenting
[Researcher becomes counsellor]	Coded reflexively when interviews became more therapeutic (distress, strong feelings evoked, using counselling reframing etc)—set aside
38. Role of partner	Any influence of the participant's partner through the parenting journey
39. Search and reunion	The interplay of searching for and reuniting with members of the participant's birth family and how this influenced their parenting and relationship with their own biological children

Node name	Description
40. Secrecy	Participants referring to lies and secrets and absence of transparency and honesty in their parenting experience
41. Seeing myself in my child or grandchild	The participant referencing “mirroring” in their biological offspring
42. Thinking about adoption or birth parents during pregnancy	To what extent was the participant preoccupied with adoption-related themes while expecting their child(ren).
43. Thinking about getting pregnant	Preconception, to what extent was being adopted part of the participant’s thinking about what becoming a parent might entail

Prevalence

Part of the flexibility of thematic analysis is that it allows codes and their prevalence to be determined in a number of ways (Braun & Clarke, 2006). From the outset I was curious about prevalence of codes, in terms of how this might enrich my analysis. NVivo automatically counts the number of times participants refer to each category and subcategory; this was interesting in order to note recurrent motifs, threads and patterns within each data item (had the code appeared in each individual interview?) and prevalence across the entire data set (how many different participants had articulated the motif across the entire data set?). It was important to remember that codes occurring more frequently did not necessarily mean the idea was more crucial. Rather, how “key” an idea became would depend on whether it was capturing something important vis-à-vis my overall research question. Therefore at this descriptive stage of coding, I noted prevalence and continued to reflect on how I might best present it in a meaningful way as my analysis continued.

Ishak and Bakar (2012) reminded me,

NVivo is just another set of tools that will assist a researcher in undertaking an analysis of qualitative data. However, regardless of the type of software being used, the researcher has to dutifully make sense of all the data him or herself, without damaging the context of the phenomenon being studied. Inevitably, the software cannot replace the wisdom that the researcher brings into the research because at the back of every researcher’s mind lies his or her life history that will influence the way he or she sees and interpret the world (p. 102).

As my coding had developed and evolved in the analysis of successive transcripts, and 2 months had elapsed between coding of my first transcript at the start of January and the final one at the start of March, I revisited the first transcripts I had

coded, to ensure consistent application of my codes. This iterative process of manually rechecking for text I had missed in earlier coding improved trustworthiness, credibility, and validity of my findings. Finally, after a further iteration of revisiting all nine coded transcripts again, I was able to more clearly ascertain whether I could merge some of the codes together, or redefine the descriptive code, if there was a high degree of overlap.

As previously experienced, the process of re-immersing myself in the narratives felt heavy and energy draining. Working at the coding at an analytic level had been a cognitive process, but being back “in” the story, reliving the emotions, I noticed I found it tiring and emotional, and I needed to take many breaks. My ethics application (approved in March 2021) had explicitly documented the possibility of harm to myself as a researcher using the methodology of autoethnography and writing myself “into” the narrative. I continued to reflexively document my emotional reactions and discomfort arising during my reading, interviewing and analysis, as well as continuing to access ongoing therapeutic support through my existing professional clinical and academic supervision process.

As with the emotional labour of transcription, I had not anticipated the emotional toll of coding. Woodby et al. (2011) emphasise that the coding process for sensitive material interviews can result in increased vulnerability and distress for the coder. Repeated exposure to the material as the coder listens and relists to the audiotapes to ensure accuracy, results in continuous immersion in the data and a sense of ongoing connection to the participants. They warn that coding can be a “hidden source of emotional distress” (Woodby et al., 2011, p. 834) which must be taken into consideration, with guidance provided to researchers about navigating emotional challenges and the “saturation” that might emerge during this phase.

Distilling and refining

Working systematically through each of the forty-three nodes, I reread all of the data extracts. Working longhand, I systematically summarised, defined and synthesised what I was seeing in each. I checked constantly to see how I had coded for each one across the data set, what the degree of overlap was between nodes, if any, and whether nodes could be merged or redefined. This took longer than I had expected, but the engagement with the data was extremely useful as it helped me to start noticing underlying ideas that ran through many themes. Interestingly, the manual aspect of processing the data longhand, rather than electronically, proved to be a far more visceral way of engaging, providing yet another layer of clarity from a distance. By the end of the process of retaining, removing and merging, I had distilled the

descriptive forty-three nodes down to eighteen refined codes that seemed to share a common meaning. These refined codes were (alphabetically)

- ♦ *Belonging*
- ♦ *Birth*
- ♦ *Clarity of distance and time*
- ♦ *Genetics and seeing myself*
- ♦ *How being adopted affected and still affects me*
- ♦ *How I've dealt with being adopted*
- ♦ *Mental health*
- ♦ *My adoptive parents*
- ♦ *My birth family*
- ♦ *My children*
- ♦ *in childhood*
- ♦ *their knowledge about my being adopted*
- ♦ *their relationship with my birth family*
- ♦ *their relationship with my adoptive family*
- ♦ *part of me*
- ♦ *possessive/overprotective*
- ♦ *the effect my being adopted has had on them*
- ♦ *our relationship then and now*
- ♦ *Not knowing—lack of information*
- ♦ *Paradox (dichotomisation/contradiction)*
- ♦ *Pregnancy*
- ♦ *Reflecting on adoption*
- ♦ *Religion*
- ♦ *Role of partner*
- ♦ *Secrets and lies*
- ♦ *The feelings*

Table 7*Distillation of Descriptive Nodes*

Name	Description and destination (removed or merged into 18 refined codes)
Adoption running through either family	Some member of the participant's birth or adopted family was themselves adopted [removed as not a theme]
Adoption systemically and in society	Participant reflecting on the bigger picture of adoption as a societal phenomenon and beyond their own experience [merged into "Reflecting on adoption"]
Adoptive mother not having experienced pregnancy	Where reference is made to the fact that the participant's adoptive mother had not gone through the experience of pregnancy [merged into "My adoptive parents"]
Anxiety and fear and shame	Emotions experienced regarding being adopted and being a parent
Baby born—feelings	How the participant felt when the baby was born [merged into "The feelings"]
Being pathologised	The participant experiencing others regarding them as "flawed" or psychologically unwell [merged into "How being adopted affected and still affects me"]
Belonging	The participant referring to feeling or not feeling a sense of "belonging"
Clarity of distance and time	As the participant looks back with the benefit and wisdom of hindsight
Effect on my children of my being adopted	How the participant considers that being an adoptee has affected their child(ren) [merged into "My children"]
Effects of early life experiences	Formative instances from earlier life recounted by the participant [merged into "How being adopted affected and still affects me"]
Feelings about being a new parent	What the participant remembers feeling when starting the parenting journey [merged into "The feelings"]
Feelings about being pregnant	How the participant felt when they knew they were expecting a child [merged into "Pregnancy"]
Feelings during pregnancy	How the participant felt for the 9 months of pregnancy [merged into "Pregnancy"]
How being adopted affects me	Participant's reflecting on the impact of adoption in their life [merged into "How being adopted affected and still affects me"]

Name	Description and destination (removed or merged into 18 refined codes)
How has participant dealt with their adoption	Ways in which the participant considers they have coped with being adopted
Importance of genetics—DNA—resemblance—mirroring	Inherited characteristics and the significance of being genetically related to someone [merged into “Genetics and seeing myself”]
Infertility	Any reference made to infertility appearing in adoptive family or the adopted person’s mind, or any other context [merged into “My adoptive parents”]
Influence of adoptive parents on participant	How adoptive parents impacted upon parenting in any way(s) [merged into “My adoptive parents”]
Knowledge about birth mother being pregnant with participant	How much—if any—information did the participant have regarding their own gestation and birth with them [merged into “My birth family”]
Lack of information because adopted	Influence of being in a closed adoption on becoming a parent and/or parenting [merged into “Not knowing—lack of information”]
Looking deeper at being adopted and my parenting	Where the participant has reflected on these issues in a “big picture” way [merged into “Reflecting on adoption”]
Mental health issues	References to post-natal or other depression, struggles with mental health that have impacted on participants’ parenting or that they consider adoption-related. Also mental health of their own children, their adoptive and/or birth families [merged into “How being adopted affected and still affects me”]
Miscarriage or termination	The participant or those close to them having experienced a miscarriage or termination of pregnancy and how this may have been influential [merged into “Pregnancy”]
My child during their childhood	What participants can recall of how being adopted showed up in their child’s/children’s lives through the developmental stages [merged into “My children”]
My children knowing about my being adopted	The sharing of information about adopted status with one’s own biological children: when, how, why etc [merged into “My children”]
My children—relationship with adoptive family	Participant reflections and feelings about their biological children’s relationship with the participant’s adoptive family [merged into “My

Name	Description and destination (removed or merged into 18 refined codes)
	children”]
My children—relationship with birth family	Participant reflections and feelings about their biological children’s relationship with the participant’s birth family [merged into “My children”]
My relationship with my biological children	How does the participant regard how their relationship has been and is with their biological child(ren)? [merged into “My children”]
NOT remembering	Parts of the participant’s narrative/past that are unretrievable, which surprised the researcher [merged into “Paradox”]
NOT thinking about adoption or birth parents during pregnancy and early years	An absence of preoccupation with adoption-related themes in this context merged into and renamed as “Paradox”]
Overprotective or possessive	The participant experiencing unusual preoccupation with or overattachment to their biological child(ren) [merged into “My children”]
Paradox	Instances where two opposite or contrary things/feelings have both been present
Part of me	Participant expressing/regarding their biological child as a part of themselves [merged into “My children”]
Participant family background—birth & adoptive	Influences of either/both family backgrounds on the participant [removed as not a theme]
Protecting adoptive parents—guilt and loyalty	Participant expressing levels of guilt and a high level of loyalty to the adoptive parents [merged into “My adoptive parents”]
Reflecting on adoption generally	Participant reflecting on the “bigger picture” of adoption as phenomenon wider than their own family system [merged into “Reflecting on adoption”]
Religion	The role of the church or religious beliefs and practices in the participant’s experience of adoption and parenting
Role of partner	Any influence of the participant’s partner through the parenting journey
Search and reunion	The interplay of searching for and reuniting with members of the participant’s birth family and how this influenced their parenting

Name	Description and destination (removed or merged into 18 refined codes)
	and relationship with their own biological children [merged into “My birth family”]
Secrets and lies	Participants referring to lies and secrets and absence of transparency and honesty in their parenting experience
Seeing myself in my child or grandchild	The participant referencing “mirroring” in their biological offspring [merged into “Genetics and seeing myself”]
Thinking about adoption or birth parents during pregnancy	To what extent was the participant preoccupied with adoption-related themes while expecting their child(ren) [merged into “How being adopted affected and still affects me”]
Thinking about getting pregnant	Preconception—to what extent was being adopted part of the participant thinking about what becoming a parent might entail [became child node of “Pregnancy”]

Interpretive Coding—Refining Initial Codes

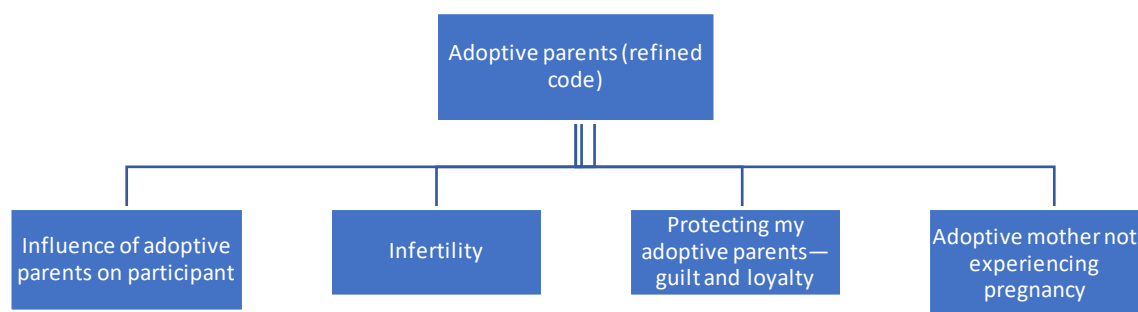
In the process of mind mapping the eighteen codes, I realised that I had simply organised and ordered my data into categories at a surface descriptive level rather than engaging more deeply with meaning. Large categories such as “My children” and “Seeing myself/genetics and DNA” were little more than topic summaries. Braun and Clarke (2006) reminded me that denoting them as “themes” would be analytic foreclosure (p. 342), little more than passive extraction. Their emphasis that a theme is actively created through my interpretative engagement with the data—rather than residing “in” the data—kept nudging me to reflect deeply on the role I play in identifying patterns and themes, selecting which ones are of interest, and reporting them to readers. The notion that themes actually resided in my head from thinking about and creating links as I understood the data, gave me licence and scope to step back. I saw that I needed to go beyond a surface description of the relevant features of my participants’ accounts; rather, I needed to focus on my interpretation of their meaning and aspects that might be more implicit. As there was still such a large amount of data, I decided to utilise NVivo for a second tier of coding to generate interpretive codes that captured the aggregated meaning, with the research question front and central in my mind.

Each of the eighteen refined codes was in fact a file comprising all extracts from the descriptive codes that comprised it. For example, the refined code of “Adoptive parents” had been the aggregate of four initial nodes: “Adoptive mother not

experiencing pregnancy”, “Infertility”, “Influence of adoptive parents on participant”, and “Protecting my adoptive parents—guilt and loyalty”.

Figure 14

Aggregation to Refined Codes



I grappled with “What is the underlying construct that sits beneath **why** adoptive parents are pertinent to how being adopted affected my parenting”? I knew—as an adopted person, but also hearing it echoed through listening to my participants—that having adoptive parents had absolutely affected our experience of becoming and being a parent. Returning to the data extracts I had coded under “Adoptive parents” I sought to identify unifying meanings beneath descriptions of how participants experienced interchanges pertaining to infertility—how unnatural and uncomfortable—and how the spectre of infertility was the fabric or foundation on which many of us navigated our lives. Working autoethnographically, I interrogated the data, charting the connections, excavating for the latent meaning beneath what my participants had shared.

I followed this extremely intense second-tier coding process with all eighteen refined code files, resulting in twenty-four useful interpretive codes in NVivo that were frequent, dominant and significant. One of the many advantages of NVivo was that it allowed me to sort, sift and deep dive into each to locate the original data of participant voices within each interpretive code. At this stage I was not trying to apply specific theoretical concepts in my coding, though my broad disciplinary approach (autoethnographic—looking inward; ethnographic—looking outward at the social and cultural aspects) and my research question were guiding me.

The twenty-four interpretive codes were:

- Being mirrored—likeness—genetic linking
- Belonging
- Clarity of distance and time—hindsight
- Connection and attachment
- Disconnection and detachment
- Fear and anxiety
- Ignorance—blindness—not knowing—blank
- Intergenerational
- Legacy of adoption/How the legacy of adoption has shown up for me personally
- Loss
- Natural v unnatural, familiar v unfamiliar
- Paradox
- Performative
- Relationships challenging
- Religion
- Self-abandoning
- Self-efficacy
- Severance
- Symbiosis—merging
- Taboo or unspoken stigma
- Therapy
- Unconscious and dissociated and unaware—in the FOG—awakening
- Visceral—somatic—primal
- Wholeness, realness/Incomplete, less than.

Phase 3—Generating and Developing Initial Themes

NVivo had helped me to identify these twenty-four interpretive codes which encapsulated deeper patterns of meaning; now my analysis was refocused. This “gestation” period saw me giving deep consideration to my 24 codes, using a range of processes to explore areas where there might be some similarity of meaning.

In the first instance I transcribed each of the twenty-four interpretive codes onto a strip of paper so I could easily manipulate and move them around. This meant I could consider, combine, and sort different ones in a very concrete way, clustering together codes which seemed connected, which might become potential overarching themes.

According to Braun and Clarke (2021), a “candidate” theme is distinct because it has a central organising concept. However, it might contain a number of different ideas or aspects related to that concept. In order to capture the underpinning central organising concept, I developed a set of guiding questions to help me remain critical and evaluative alongside my personal engagement with the data. These questions sat alongside the twenty-four codes:

- my research question “To what extent, and in what ways, might being adopted have affected the complex developmental processes of parenting across the lifespan?”
- an excavation-type question: “What’s actually going on here?”
- my OUTWARD-looking lens: “What are the social, cultural and historically aspects of the (closed adoption) adoptee experience?”
- my INWARD-looking lens: “Where is the vulnerable self—moving through, refracting, resisting cultural interpretations?” I am “native”, insider, I have intimate familiarity—foregrounding my lived experience as CRUCIAL to understanding the phenomenon being studied.

By now I was more comfortable with the absence of a road map or linear process, reassured by Braun and Clarke’s (2022) reminder that uncertainty and tentativeness in this phase are part of the process in reflexive thematic analysis, and “There’s no one right route to the end” (p. 79). Their question “Where will this journey take me?” (p. 79) reminded me of my original intentions vis-à-vis the research journey, that the findings would evolve and emerge organically. This theme gestation was very creative and active; as I worked, I continued my active reflection by frequent memoing, holding in mind the image of the Cherokee woman as she wove the strands, with pattern and design emerging organically as a coherent form. Reviewing the participants’ words under each of the twenty-four codes, I moved the codes around the table, noticing how patterns in the data conveyed something significant about my research question, and had a uniting aspect, leading me to group them together.

A cluster around genetic mirroring/linking was an obvious one. Many codes and extracts referenced or evoked in some way, being genetically related to children and grandchildren: *Being mirrored—likeness—genetic linking*. Similarly, data relating to ignorance of one’s genetic origins/ancestry, not knowing, and the blank slate of closed adoption practice seemed relevant to understanding genetic mirroring and how it affected parenting, so the code *Ignorance—blindness—not knowing—blank* was included in this cluster.

I was interested in a number of ideas relating to the losses sustained by an adopted person, and the influence of these on parenting. The codes *Loss* and

Severance were included here, in addition to *Visceral—somatic—primal* since these related strongly to the adopted person's lived experience of loss. This foundational developmental platform on which any person, adopted or kept, starts to construct a life experienced at a primal, sensory level from pre and peri-natal experience. For an adopted person, the idea of not trusting the world into which we are thrust, because it is unsafe and fearful due to severance and loss feels natural and familiar to us, so the codes *Natural v unnatural*, *familiar v unfamiliar* and *Fear and anxiety* were another facet of this central organising concept.

I considered that there were interesting meanings clustering around a relational dimension. For this I started to cluster together a wide range of codes that spoke to notions of healthy or dysfunctional relationship with self, and with other. These included *Belonging*, *Symbiosis—merging*, *being Self-abandoning*, and *Relationship challenging*. For the adopted person, the salience of being attached to another person—or its antithesis—was captured in the codes of *Connection & attachment/Disconnection & detachment*, and linked to why parenting was regarded as a potential conduit to potentially at last experiencing a sense of relational completeness: *Wholeness/realness/Incomplete/less than*.

As I sat with participants' reflections on the legacy of adoption in their lives as parents, their insights told me something important and relevant in relation to my research question. The stigma experienced both within the social climate of society and their family had silenced them, creating a performative adaptive self, which for some had lasted until the gradual or sudden awakening to this legacy through parenting. I clustered these four codes together: *Legacy of adoption/How the legacy of adoption has shown up personally*, *Performative*, *Taboo—unspoken—stigma* and *Unconscious—dissociated—in the FOG—awakening* as these multiple facets contributed this central organising concept.

I was able to demonstrate that these four themes had salience both within a single interview and across all of the interviews, as I systematically linked the descriptive, semantic coding from the first-tier analysis across to the interpretive coding for the second-tier analysis.

By the end of this phase, I had a collection of four “candidate” theme groupings, each containing a number of codes (with all of the relevant data extracts tagged to them). I did not abandon anything at this stage, being aware that some might yet be discarded, refined, combined, or separated (see Figure 15: Theme gestation: pairing and grouping into “Candidate” themes). Four codes (Religion, Paradox, Therapy and Self-efficacy)

was distinctive, with a plethora of data supporting it, and that each of my candidate themes adequately captured the contours of my coded data.

As I reflected on my themes and considered what the story was that they were telling me, I realised that they linked closely to four of the psychosocial stages of Erikson's paradigm, and the existential question posed for each of the stages. I wrote a lengthy process memo when the Erikson overlay emerged organically:

If adoption has affected me, and how I show up as a person in the world, then surely it follows that adoption must show up in my parenting. But that presupposes that adoption is the platform, is my "Ground Zero" that the Life that I construct is built on: being adopted. And I need to think that through, as to how that might be different for a person who is not adopted. What is the platform upon which Mike [my non adopted husband] has constructed and built his own life and his parenting? So that people with an insecure, anxious attachment—attachment, you would argue, is the foundation for relationships, including with one's children—could come from a place of adoption. As Rowena pondered: those early weeks of attaching or not attaching to someone might be the fabric that affects trust and the ability to be healthily attached to oneself and to others? Perhaps the pre-natal environment also plays a part? But it seems to me that every aspect of my being adopted—how I see myself, how I feel about myself, how I showed up in the world—has infused my experience of being a parent. Before, during, all the way along, with all of these themes (on the table) coming up. Would an adopted person with no children have all of those same themes in their lives—around belonging, symbiosis and merging, connection and disconnection, wholeness versus being incomplete, fear and anxiety, that visceral stuff, loss, being in the fog, being taboo—yes? Maybe? The mirroring? That piece is linked into search and reunion, and if I hadn't had children, I guess I would have sought the mirroring in my birth parents and birth siblings and birth grandparents (which of course I did, and still do) but I looked primarily to my children. The piece that adoptees without children lack is the legacy for their children of ignorance and blindness and blankness... and presumably those relational challenges (trust, attachment, self-efficacy, wholeness, belonging in the world) can be addressed through therapy. Because if you choose to remain childless or can't have children, it doesn't mean you can't be a whole person. For me as an adoptee, having children has brought the losses and the complexities into sharper relief. It also made it not just about me; it made it about four other humans, which gave it an additional starkness and urgency and import—and in many cases was what

brought all of the subterranean stuff up to the surface. Perhaps for the childless adoptees, some of these things stay subliminally located, unactivated, and never emerge?

I look at my themes spread out before me today and see that these are some of the key aspects of the culture of closed stranger adoption; things that show up for an adopted person, that don't show up for people outside that culture, "kept" people, when they become parents. People I know well—my husband, my colleague. My friend, who has two biological daughters and who had a son who died because he was born too early... so she is no stranger to loss and grief and fear and anxiety. So what makes it different for me than them, being a parent? I need to keep that wider, telescopic lens, zooming outward, examining the social and cultural aspects which sit alongside that stigma, legacy, taboo of closed stranger adoption, blindness, severance... and how all of those played out.

Then I started thinking about Erikson's paradigm of the core developmental stages through which humans move...intimacy, connection, identity development...then if what's formed in that initial preverbal part of one's life is interrupted, then maybe as you reach each of the developmental stages as an adopted person, and get mired or stuck in it, especially around intimacy and identity, then as you go on to have children and THEY reach those developmental stages (and my participants spoke to that; Kenneth when his daughters were the age that his birth mother had been, Cassie when her daughters were the age when she was placed finally for adoption; the developmental understanding of what adoption is for a 5 year old compared to a 12 year old) up it all comes, reactivated.

Watching—observing one's own children knowing who they are and whose they are, and witnessing their taken-for-granted natural belonging which you never had or were able to take for granted!—ease and synchronicity with yourself as their parent. They never question. They are not in a void, they are not in a vacuum, they are not in a blank. So, by seeing what is, up comes seeing in stark relief what is not. And so, in having a biological child [weeps] you experience, minute by minute, hour by hour, week by week by month by year as your children traverse those developmental stages—and maybe I go back to Erikson for that and reference my participants—but they are the unlived life that YOU did not have as an adopted person. And so they are the walking, talking, laughing, breathing manifestation of what you lost, what you lacked, what you

didn't have. Which is paradoxically wonderful and painful, and brings adoption into the room, over and over again.

I hear those echoes, coming out of the fog around fertility, around thinking about having a child, becoming pregnant, having the child... and then the awakening. It's coming out of the fog, it's swallowing the red pill, whatever metaphor you want to use—and then it continues throughout the lifespan, and now at 58 [weeps again] here is my girl child having a girl child—and up it all comes again, my mother didn't want her girl child, she doesn't want me still. And the spectre always of infertility and grief and loss in my family, which muted me and spiralled me down more into secrecy and disenfranchised stuff and gaslighting myself. And so now as I get to experience Rebecca, who knows who she is and whose she is, and has a qualitatively different experience to coming a parent than I did, I get to journey that next chapter, which will bring my stuff up. And the timing in terms of my PhD is phenomenal because it helps me see...from inside the experience but also from outside the experience (Process memo, 16 April 2022).

Table 8

Summary Table of Themes and Connection to Erikson

Theme (grouping of codes)	Erikson's psychosocial crisis	Existential question	Provisional theme name/to amend
Loss; severance; visceral—somatic—primal; natural v unnatural, familiar v unfamiliar; fear and anxiety	Trust versus mistrust Infancy (under two years)	"Can I trust the world?"	Trusting
The cultural and personal legacy of adoption; taboo—unspoken—stigma; performative; unconscious—dissociated—in the FOG—awakening	Autonomy versus shame/doubt Toddlerhood (2-4 years)	"Is it okay to be me?"	Being
Being mirrored—likeness—genetic linking; ignorance—blindness—not knowing—blank	Identity versus role confusion Adolescence (13-19 years)	"Who am I?" "Who can I be?"	Knowing
Belonging; symbiosis—merging; self-abandoning; connection and attachment/disconnection and detachment; wholeness/realness—incomplete/less than; relationship challenging	Intimacy versus isolation Early adulthood (20 -39 years)	"Can I love?"	Joining

At the end of this phase, Braun and Clarke (2006) encourage the researcher to generate definitions and names for each theme. They recommend using “concise” and “punchy” terminology (p. 93) that will immediately convey to the reader a sense of what each theme is about. Dwyer and Gidluck (2005) suggested that in qualitative research, themes are usually expressed as statements which highlight explicit or implied meaning running through most of the collected data or involving deep and profound emotional or factual impact. At this stage however, I decided to use one-word core descriptors that linked to Erikson’s developmental stages and encapsulated the central concept of each area.

As I was in Phase 4 reviewing and refining my themes, I noticed that two codes still did not fit neatly into any of the four candidate theme groupings, yet they were important across all: *Intergenerational*, *Clarity of distance and time*. A key “lens” through which my participants were looking was the intergenerational legacy of parenting: the notion of being a son or daughter, of being a parent, of being a grandparent. The second “lens” was the clarity gained from reflecting across distance and time. These two codes were fundamental facets of my research question, looking across the lifespan, and reflecting on these issues with that clarity and maturation.

Phase—Refining, Defining & Naming Themes

Grappling with the “story” that each candidate theme told, I considered how it fitted into what the broader overall “story” was telling me about the data, in relation to my research question, to ensure there was not too much overlap between themes. It was necessary to consider the themes themselves, and each theme in relation to the others. For each of the four overarching individual themes, I wrote a detailed analysis.

By the end of this phase I had defined what my themes were and what they were not. Braun and Clarke (2021) cautioned that a theme cannot do too much, nor should it be too complex or diverse. They suggested that a useful test to see whether each theme needs further refinement, was to check that I could clearly define what the themes were (and what they were not), describing the scope and content of each theme in a couple of sentences. This process was hard, and at times felt almost paralysing, since the flexibility of the thematic analysis method allows for such a wide range of things that could be said about the data. My analysis was driven by my research question and my broader theoretical assumptions, as I made final refinements and distilled down the essence of each theme, determining what aspects of the data each theme captured.

Braun and Clarke’s theme-evaluation questions (2022, p. 85) served to provide a validity check on the validity and scope of my candidate themes.

- 1) Does this provisional theme capture something meaningful?

- 2) Is it coherent, with a central idea that meshes the data and codes together?
- 3) Does it have clear boundaries?
- 4) Does each theme work when it is read in relation to all the data that are supposed to evidence it?
- 5) Does each theme capture a different core point—a central unifying/organising concept, and some rich diversity and nuance/different manifestations of that idea about the dataset?
- 6) Am I trying to “massage” the data into a pattern that isn’t there?
- 7) What am I missing or not noticing here?
- 8) Can I develop the richness of my themes that will result in a rich, nuanced analysis that addresses my research question?
- 9) Are my themes built around a singular centralised idea that has coherence?
- 10) Do my themes illustrate richness and diversity?
- 11) Are the themes too fragmented and multi-layered?
- 12) Are my themes distinctive and boundaried? i.e. does each one have its own focus and boundaries and not merge into each other? What does each theme include and exclude?
- 13) Do my themes have enough meaningful data to evidence them?
- 14) Do my themes convey something important (in relation to the dataset, my research question and the wider context)?

Phase 6a—Writing Up the Participants’ Stories

This was essentially the end point of my research and my final opportunity for analysis. I needed to tell the complicated story of my data in a way which would convince the reader of the merit and validity of my analysis. It was important that writing up my analysis would incorporate vivid and compelling extract samples, yet also provide a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tell, both within and across themes. I defined each theme then illustrated using extracts from participants’ stories and discussed in relation to the literature.

My write-up needed to provide sufficient evidence of the themes within the data, with enough data extracts to demonstrate the prevalence of the theme. I sought extracts which captured the essence and were easily identifiable as an example of the issue I was demonstrating. I embedded the selected extracts within an analytic narrative in order to compellingly illustrate the story I was telling about my data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

I worked through the structure of this process with my supervisors, scaffolding according to themes and sub-themes embedded within them. I sought to keep my analysis to the participants only, telling their stories first, using powerful, evocative, quoted words, and being as representative as I could across the participants. Josselson (1996) noted that in reaching the writing stage, in order to form a relationship with readers, the researcher was necessarily stepping back from the relationship with the participants. In writing up, he felt he was talking about them behind their backs, experiencing an ethical conflict in so doing. Having previously been responsive to them, now he had a sense of using their lives for his own purposes, to “show” something to others. As I wrote up my analysis, my participants’ voices were being filtered through me, despite the use of quotes. I sought to remain conscious and critically self-aware of how personal and moral this process was, self-reflexively pondering a range of aspects:

- Who would be reading, utilising, and evaluating my work?
- To what extent would my audience affect and influence the representation I created?
- Was I emphasising certain aspects at the expense of others? Was I inadvertently blocking alternative voices and letting my subjectivity take the prominent position?
- How would those receiving my findings (supervisors, participants, other stakeholders, markers) make sense of what I gave them?
- As it was my social and ethical duty to present my work in useful, understandable, and accountable ways, how could I represent versions of reality that were my participants’ lives, and bring these to a wider audience?

The rhetoric, focus and perspective of the writing was necessarily overlaid with my own scholarly and subjective voice, and filtered through my own experiences, readings, and reflections. Richardson (1997) reminded me to attend to whose voice was being privileged in the writing process, noticing where my voice ended, and others’ voices began. I had walked away from many interviews with a palpable heaviness of the responsibility to do the story justice but was reassured that the power of my writing would come from my emotional involvement (Ellis, 1998).

Phase 6b—Writing Up My Autoethnography

My braided autoethnography took shape as my narrative voice in two parts. First, my story before the study, comprising writing from across many years synthesised into the interview I had had “with myself”. Then, as I revisited, reworked, and rewove my understanding of my story as I juxtaposed it with the participants’ experiences and literature, “after”: having heard and reflected on my participants’

stories, what did I think now? Had my perspective changed? Been reinforced?
Validated?

APPENDIX EI: A LIST OF RECOMMENDED BOOKS, WEBSITES AND PODCASTS FOR ADOPTEEES

Books/Articles

You don't look adopted: A memoir. Anne Heffron (2016). Running Water Press:

Independently published ISBN 9781086423433 (ISBN10:1086423437).

Journey of the adopted self: A quest for wholeness. Betty-Jean Lifton (1994). New York, NY: Harper-Collins.

Adoption Loss: When Grief is Suffocated by Kate Murphy

<https://katemurphytherapy.com/2024/03/adoption-loss-when-grief-is-suffocated/>

'This is what no one tells you about adoption' by Andrea Ross.

https://www.huffpost.com/entry/adoption-trauma-savior-myth_n_608598b9e4b05af50db72167

The body keeps the score. Bessel Van der Kolk (2014). The body keeps the score:

Mind, brain and body in the transformation of trauma. Penguin Random House: United Kingdom.

The primal wound: Understanding the adopted child. Nancy Verrier (1993) Gateway Press.

Adopted—Loss, love, family and reunion. Jo Willis and Brigitta Baker (2022). Massey University Press.

Websites

<https://www.jowilliscoach.com/for-adopted-people>

<http://anneheffron.com>

<https://dearadoption.com>

http://www.adopting.org/silveroze/html/lifelong_issues_in_adoption.html.

<http://adoptionnz.com/>

Podcasts & Audio

Paul Sunderland's excellent lecture <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3pX4C-mtil>

Adoptees On <https://www.adopteeson.com/>

Once Upon A Time In Adopteeland <https://onceuponatimeinadopteeland.com/>

Pulled By The Root <https://www.pulledbytheroot.com/>

Adoptee Voices—supporting adoptee storytelling <https://adoptee-voices.com/>

Who am I really? <https://whoamireallypodcast.com/>

APPENDIX EII: A LIST OF RECOMMENDED BOOKS, WEBSITES AND PODCASTS FOR THERAPISTS

Books

- Lifton, B. J. (1994). *Journey of the adopted self: A quest for wholeness*. New York, NY: Harper-Collins.
- Verrier, N. N. (1993). *The primal wound: Understanding the adopted child*. Gateway Press.

Articles

- Atkinson, A. J., Gonet, P. A., Freundlich, M., & Riley, D. B. (2013). Adoption competent clinical practice: Defining its meaning and development. *Adoption Quarterly*, 16(3-4), 156–174.
- Atkinson, A. J., & Riley, D. B. (2017). Training for adoption competency: Building a community of adoption-competent clinicians. *Families in Society*, 98(3), 235-242.
- Baden, A. L., & O'Leary Wiley, M. (2007). Counselling adopted persons in adulthood: Integrating practice and research. *The Counseling Psychologist*, 35(6), 868-901.
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Ross, A. (2017). 'This is what no one tells you about adoption':

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Silverstein, D., & Kaplan, S. (1982). *Lifelong issues in adoption*.

<http://library.adoption.com/articles/lifelong-issues-in-adoption.html>

Vote, B., & Kasket, E. (2017). Therapists' experience of the therapeutic relationship

when working with adults adopted as infants. *Counselling Psychology Review*, 32(2), 14-29.

Resources

Paul Sunderland's excellent lecture: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3pX4C-mtil>

CASE Training for Adoption Competency <https://adoptionnsupport.org/training-for-adoption-competency/>

Center for Adoption Support and Education (CASE) <https://adoptionnsupport.org/>

Jo Willis Coach is a leadership and personal development coach who works with adult adoptees by way of counselling, coaching and mentoring. She draws on her own experience as an adopted person, in addition to evidence-based tools and resources, to support adoptees who feel confined by, or languishing in, adoption-related patterns to understand and integrate their adoptive experience. Jo also educates professionals about the impact of adoption on adopted people

<https://www.jowilliscoach.com/for-adopted-people>

AdoptionNZ.com is a website for adopted people, parents, partners, friends and families of people impacted by adoption. Managed by two adoptees, it aims to provide resources and support for people impacted by adoption, to educate and raise awareness of the impacts of adoption, and keep people updated regarding adoption law reform in Aotearoa New Zealand.

<http://adoptionnz.com/>

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