

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING  
THE JOURNEY OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT FOR  
INTERNATIONALLY ADOPTED ADOLESCENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

by

Susan M. Schrank

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the perspectives of young adults who were internationally adopted to the United States during their adolescent years and to describe the experiences that contributed to their identity development. Erikson's psychosocial development theory guided this study as it examined the relationships, roles, and values that humans commit to during the critical period of adolescence. Social identity theory furthered insight as to how individuals have defined themselves and their social categorization within groups, while the multiple dimensions of identity model helped define the key categories, themes, and contextual influences that have contributed to the adoptee's psychological and social adjustment in their search for self. Thirteen participants were a purposefully selected sample of international adoptees who were ages 12–17 years at the time of adoption and have since graduated from high school or have obtained a General Equivalency Diploma (GED). Individuals were ages 18–26 years at the time of participation and had been residents of the United States for at least five years. Surveys, adoption records, semi-structured interviews, identity models, and advice letters were methods for collecting data of the adoptees' experiences and perceptions. Significant statements were captured from the data and clustered into themes. The synthesis of textural and structural descriptions provided a basis for understanding the essence of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Through this process, barriers to self-development, the impact of relationships, the international adoptee's sense of purpose, as well as the resulting complex identity dimensions they perceive, came to light.

*Keywords:* international adoption, adolescents, identity, adoptee perceptions

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### **Dedication**

This dissertation is dedicated to the many internationally adopted adolescents who have struggled to find their identity in a society, culture, and family that is very different from the one they once knew in their country of origin. Acknowledging their loss is a significant part of the journey toward healthy identity development. May each internationally adopted adolescent experience peace and know that they are loved, valued, and perfectly made.

## Acknowledgments

The doctoral journey was never a part of my life-long plan, yet I know God was always directing me toward this path. He has provided everything I needed at every turn and lit the way through each storm and valley. His grace is more than I deserve. This work is for His glory.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Country of origin (COO)

Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI)

General Equivalency Diploma (GED)

Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-Operation in Respect of Inter-country

Adoption of 1993 (HCIA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Reactive attachment disorder (RAD)

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

The population of children available for adoption due to the loss of both parents is approximately 15.1 million around the world, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2015). Another 2 to 8 million children are reported to be in institutional care with millions more who live on the streets (CAFO, 2017). Adverse environments, disease, exploitation, and violence contribute to the challenges children in low- and middle-income countries are exposed to. While there are conflicting definitions of what an orphan is (varying among abandonment, an inability to care for, or the death of one or both parents), many aid organizations have expressed that 140 million children are without stable families and care (Rotabi & Gibbons, 2012). Ultimately, the statistics of vulnerable children across the globe are staggering.

An estimated 95% of the orphaned or abandoned population of children globally is over the age of 5 (UNICEF, 2015). Yet, much of the research has focused on those who were adopted during the earliest years of life and infancy (Helder, Mulder, & Gunnoe, 2016; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005, 2007; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010), generalizing findings of older adopted children within a broad range of ages and health conditions. While the developmental transition during adolescence is documented by many psychologists, few qualitative studies have explored international adoption of those over age 12 at the time of their placement. International adoption during the adolescent stage of life creates a unique and significant trauma to their core sense of self. This study is intended to understand the perspectives of individuals who were internationally adopted to the United States during their adolescent years and the experiences that led to their identity development now that they are young adults.



Chapter One examines the background, the problem, the purpose, and the significance of this investigation. The research questions are presented along with essential terms and definitions used throughout the study. The information collected during this research study is beneficial to the international adoption community and to those who care for internationally adopted adolescents.

### **Background**

Historically, adoption has traced back to Jacob in the Old Testament book of Genesis that said, "I'm adopting your two sons who were born to you here in Egypt before I joined you; they have equal status with Reuben and Simeon" (Genesis 48:5, *The Message*). Literature has continued to show many examples where families took in abandoned children, especially during periods of war and economic hardship (Dozier, Zeanah, Wallin, & Shauffer, 2012). Healthy, same-race domestic adoptions predominantly occurred up through World War II in the United States when an interest in intercountry adoptions began (Briscoe, 2009; Brumble & Kampfe, 2011; Jacobson, Nielsen, & Hardeman, 2012). In a humanitarian response to the thousands of war-orphaned children in Germany, Greece, and Korea a decade later, families across the globe were being diversely constructed (Brumble & Kampfe, 2011; Scherman, 2010; Selman, 2012).

Worldwide adoptions continued to garner the interest of many, citing the overpopulation of poorly organized institutions. Furthermore, the changes in the tolerance and acceptance of others during the civil rights movement encouraged the adoption of transracial, special needs, and older children (Brumble & Kampfe, 2011; Jacobson et al., 2012). Childless couples, and governments, began to recognize that international adoption provided a solution to these needs (Brumble & Kampfe, 2011; Dozier et al., 2012; Jacobson et al., 2012). Between 1965 and 1976, American families adopted a combined total of 37,469 children from overseas (Brumble &

Kampfe, 2011). Driven in part by large numbers of children adopted from China and Russia (Selman, 2012), the United States received the highest number of adopted children in 2005, totaling 22,991 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016).

Adoption practices were poorly regulated across the globe until the late 1980s as disturbing stories of child trafficking, kidnapping, and abusive practices began to make headlines. The United Nations General Assembly took the first stand, developing a framework for international practices through the issuance of the Convention Rights of the Child in 1990 (Briscoe, 2009). The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-Operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption of 1993 (known as HCIA) followed shortly thereafter. The HCIA has promoted intercountry adoption for those without families in their countries of origin, while protecting against the sale, abduction, and exploitation of these young lives (Breuning, 2013; Briscoe, 2009; Rotabi & Gibbons, 2012; U.S. Department of State, n.d.; Wardle & Robertson, 2014). The primary objective of HCIA has been to focus on fundamental human rights and the best interests of the most vulnerable children and their birth parents (Briscoe, 2009). Ethical provisions, transparency, and strict legal standards have emphasized an attempt to understand the “unique risks that require attention to their needs, cultures, communities, and contextual economic stressors” (Rotabi & Gibbons, 2012, p. 107).

HCIA has become complicated as several troubling weaknesses have failed to meet critical issues (Briscoe, 2009; Rotabi & Gibbons, 2012). The acceptance of this regulation has amplified bureaucratic complications, increased the considerable costs of adoption services, and prolonged the process for waiting adoptees and their families (Briscoe, 2009; Wardle & Robertson, 2014). Continued corruption, fraud, and child trafficking, along with the fiscal impact of the 2008 recession, has resulted in a steady, dramatically declining pattern of

international adoption to the United States (Breuning, 2013; Brumble & Kampfe, 2011; Dozier et al., 2012; Jacobson et al., 2012; Selman, 2012). More notably in poorer countries, the demands of HCIA has created an orphan “crisis” (Breuning, 2013; Selman, 2012). Countries have been experiencing the burden of caring for large numbers of orphaned and abandoned children without the financial resources, infrastructure, or capacity to meet their needs (Breuning, 2013). Without permanent solutions to care for these young lives, many have been forced to rely on often substandard institutional care (Selman, 2012) or face the increasing risk of child trafficking (Selman, 2009).

Over the past decade, the United States has remained the highest receiving country for international adoptions even as global rates have declined steadily (Selman, 2009, 2012; Johnston, 2014). While the number of total international adoptions in the United States fell from 11,058 in 2010 to 6,439 in 2014, the percentage of internationally adopted children over the age of 5 grew steadily in comparison, from 25.7% to 42.9%, over the same period (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Selman (2012), a respected analyst of international adoption trends, noted that the increasing proportion of children aged five-plus being internationally adopted is “striking” (p. 390).

The psychosocial development of humans that occurs between childhood and adulthood is crucial in the formation of a healthy personal identity (Erikson, 1968; Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Significant distinctions at this life stage are central to strong identity development (Erikson, 1963, 1968; Erikson & Erikson, 1997; Newman & Newman, 1988; Rosenthal, Gurney, & Moore, 1981). It is during adolescence when individuals “attain a sense of knowing who they are and where they are going” (Moore & Boldero, 1991, p. 522). The development process is influenced by contextual influences of family, school, work, and friends, as well as

psychological issues (Frisk, 1964). Children who grow up in high-risk, emotionally deprived environments are prone to “significant developmental deficits across virtually every domain that has been examined” (Dozier et al., 2012, p. 4). These deficiencies conflict with the epigenetic laws of development and the fundamental relations found within each life stage (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Understanding the progression of healthy identity development and the significant adjustments international adoptees experience therefore become the first steps toward meeting the psychological needs of this growing population of adolescents.

### **Situation to Self**

International adoption is a topic I have personal, deep connections with since I am a parent to two biological sons and three Ethiopian-born children who were older at the time of their adoption in late 2009. Our daughters, who are biological sisters, were 10 and 12 years old, and our youngest son was 6 when their international adoptions were finalized and they came to the United States. Our daughters have an older sister and brother still living in Ethiopia who were over the maximum age for adoption at the time of their 2004 placement in the orphanage. I am also the “favorite auntie” to a sibling set of four Ethiopian-born nieces and nephews, adopted by my sister-in-law and her husband in 2008. Their ages ranged from 6 years to 15 years old at the time of adoption.

Both biological parents of our daughters, as well as our adopted son’s mother, died due to complications from AIDS. Neither of their small, extended families were financially able to meet their physical or medical needs, ultimately forcing them to make the difficult decision to place them in orphan care. The adoption paperwork for all three children is vague and conflicting. They did not have original birth certificates, their education was limited, and their knowledge of the English language was sparse. We remain in contact with our daughters’

biological siblings in their home country. It was through our communication with them and with friends of their parents that we learned about their traumatic upbringing. These relationships, as well as those that have been formed or strengthened through social media, have helped encourage a continuous link with the Ethiopian culture.

Each of our internationally adopted children has experienced personal challenges acclimating to life in the United States. Embracing how to be a member of a loving family, learning a new language, achieving in a different educational system, overcoming psychological and health issues, and adapting to a foreign culture have all been difficult challenges. Dealing with the pain and loss from their prior life is a constant reality. We have sought professional counseling and empathize with their struggles, but we also recognize the many privileges and opportunities they each now enjoy.

The difference in the physical living conditions between what our children had in Ethiopia compared to their current situation is extreme. Beyond having their own bedrooms, personal belongings, a quality education, and access to medical care, the conveniences of electricity, running water, and daily meals are now part of normal life. They seem to overlook many of the unpleasant memories of living in a poor environment and remember only positive experiences. Theoretically, Erikson (1968) recognized the amnesia that all humans develop with respect to “crucial childhood experiences. There is good reason to suspect that this individual amnesia is paralleled by a universal blind spot in the interpretation of man’s condition, a tendency to overlook the fateful function of childhood in the fabric of society” (p. 66). I initially assumed many of the participants would primarily recall mostly positive memories from their country of origin and biological family as is evident in our children. Yet, Brodzinsky and Brodzinsky (1992) presented that sometimes grief and trauma may be a significant factor in an

adoptive parent's life that may adjust their impressions. They suggested that one "can't predict which adoptee will feel incomplete or abandoned and which will feel cherished, which will choose to emphasize the *lost* nature of adoption and which will dwell on only the *found*" (emphasis in original, p. 12). I recognize that both reactions may currently exist or may have been experienced at different points along their life span, significantly contributing to their identity development (Brodzinsky et al., 1992).

I view adoption as a binding commitment to family. The sanctity of family is an aspect of life I deeply value, and I believe adoption disruption or termination should never be a consideration. Too many young lives "age out" of the system when they turn 16 without the opportunity to experience the love of a family. As Gagnon-Oosterwall et al. (2012) determined, I believe that "although pre-adoption adversity is an important risk factor for psychosocial development, adoption clearly has a positive impact on children's psychological adjustment" (p. 657). Yet, some adoptive adolescents and young adults have sought separation, and in some cases emancipation. Parents have terminated adoption agreements because children were not a "good fit" in their lives. However, through epistemological reflection, I empathize with the situations international adolescent adoptees have gone through. My personal history may create bias in an initial analysis of their experiences. I recognize that while many participants have encountered similarities through the adoption process, each of their stories is unique. Embracing the idea that there are different realities, these situations have been reported by providing the participants' words directly when appropriate (Creswell, 2013).

While participants shared the foundational experience of being internationally adopted to the United States during adolescence, their personal realities must be understood with intensity. Guided by a constructivist framework, each participant had the opportunity to openly share their

perspectives as co-researchers within this study. Collaboration allowed the discussion to evolve as facilitated by the researcher, placing value on the participants' engagement and their willingness to be involved (Patton, 2015). The intentional reflective process on experiences, perceptions, judgements, and concepts produced authenticity within the discoveries found to be common among participants (Moustakas, 1994). Focusing on whom the participants are, their characteristics, and their attributes provided a "contextual shaping" of their stories, raising the consciousness of the reader (Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007, p. 22).

International adoption has the power to positively change lives for older children and their families. However, particularly for older children who were cared for by their biological family through the early stages of life, the reality is that adoptive parents are merely a default option. Receiving that child as a member of the newly adopted family may have been a joyous occasion for those who endlessly worked and prayed to bring them *home*, but the internationally adopted teen had to give up everything they knew in the process. These teens may not encounter the same positive outlook; rather, they may find everything frightening and overwhelming. Other adoptees, according to Brodzinsky and Brodzinsky (1992), may instead be "intensely grateful for having been given the safe and loving homes their adoptive parents made for them" (p. 12). There are multiple realities for adoptees. These complex perspectives were approached with sensitivity and appreciation for their uniqueness.

### **Problem Statement**

International adoption research has mainly focused on children brought into new families during the earliest years of life and infancy (Helder et al., 2016). Through a meta-analysis of psychological adjustment of adoptees, Wierzbicki (1993) recognized that the differences between children and adolescents was significant enough that researchers needed to begin

reporting results regarding the adolescent stage of life. Yet, studies continued to emphasize the physical, cognitive, academic, and social limitations with broad findings. These results were often correlated with children who were “older,” grouping those over age 4 or 5 at the time of adoption (Barcons et al., 2012; Gagnon-Oosterwall et al., 2012; Harwood, Feng, & Yu, 2013; Helder et al., 2016; Raaska, Elovainio, Sinkkonen, Maromaki, & Lapinleimu, 2012; Reinoso, Juffer, & Tieman, 2013; Reinoso, Pereda, van den Dries, & Foreror, 2013; Tan, Major, Marn, Na, & Jackson, 2015). Studies that did examine internationally adopted adolescents were done so with the knowledge that they were placed in their families’ years earlier (e.g., Barcons et al., 2012; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Frisk, 1964; Gagnon-Oosterwall et al., 2012; Levy-Shiff, Zoran, & Shulman, 1997; Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1975), not those who were adopted during their teen years. Adoption studies that considered development adjustment concerns assumed that adolescents were in orphan or foster care and experienced hardship a majority of their lives (e.g., Brodzinsky, 1987; Harwood et al., 2013; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005; Julian, 2013; Levy-Shiff et al., 1997; Reinoso, Pereda, et al., 2013).

Scholarly literature has not accounted for the variability of pre-adoption conditions or the limited exposure to risk factors that some youth have experienced (Dalen & Theie, 2012). Family background, sociocultural conditions, peer interactions, experiences, and contextual situations have represented the multiple facets that influence development and the meaning-making of multiple identity dimensions (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Thus, the traumatic and positive experiences and relationships that internationally adopted adolescents have engaged in contributed to the understanding of their adjustment into a new culture and society.

The current study has provided young adults an opportunity to share perceptions of their personal identity development following international adoption as adolescents, an area that had



not been documented. None of the previous studies in the field of international adoption have analyzed the challenges of those who were internationally adopted, specifically during their adolescent years, through a qualitative approach. This study has given this group of adoptees an opportunity to share their unique perspectives. The practices of international adoption have changed over the last decade, and the proportional number of adolescent adoption reflects an increasing trend that is a “striking” trend (Selman, 2012, p. 390). The problem is that the field of adoption has not addressed the complex issues that international adolescent adoptees experience and how these experiences impact healthy identity development. As Younes and Klein (2014) stated, “as the global community grows more connected than ever and national boundaries blur even more, issues of race and ethnicity will take a back seat to the more basic human need for parenting” (p. 81). Considering the major potential high-risk contributors, hardship, and adversity this group of individuals has been subjected to, their voices should be heard.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the perspectives of young adults who were internationally adopted to the United States during their adolescent years, and to describe the experiences that contributed to their identity development. For this study, personal identity was defined as the significant identifications, worldviews, and ideologies young adults associate with (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Identity “represents the amount of self-knowledge, synthesis, and consistency that a person possesses over time and across situations” (Schwartz, Zamboanga, Wang, & Olthuis, 2009, p. 143). Erikson’s (1963, 1968) psychosocial development theory guided this study as it examines the relationships, roles, and values individuals commit to during the pivotal period of adolescence. Turner’s social identity theory (as cited in Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994) furthered insight as to how

individuals have defined themselves and their social categorization within groups, while the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI; Jones & McEwen, 2000) contributed to the key categories, themes, and contextual influences that captured the core sense of self. Brodzinsky added to the foundation of this study through the analysis of how adoptees have psychologically adapted and socially adjusted in their search for self (Brodzinsky, 1987, 2011; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1992). This framework provided an understanding of the significant identity dimensions and contextual influences that adolescent international adoptees have experienced and why this particular study was needed.

### **Significance of the Study**

Few people debate the dramatic changes internationally adopted children have experienced during the adoption process. In the United States between 2010 and 2014, 42,575 international adoptions were finalized, 42.9% of which were for children over the age of 5 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). In research and in practice, adopted children over the age of 5 are broadly grouped within an *older children* category or as *special needs* (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Miller, Pérouse de Montclos, & Sorge, 2016; Selman, 2012). For example, when comparing international adoptees to the nonadopted population, meta-analysis of studies on cognitive development (van IJzendoorn, Juffer, & Poelhuis, 2005), behavioral issues (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005), and self-esteem (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007), all children who were school age or beyond when they were adopted are bound within one category. Another meta-analysis on the bonding attachment between parents and their adopted children grouped older children as being over the age of 12 months (van den Dries, Juffer, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2009). The differences between school and adolescent life stage

characteristics of adoptees have rarely been explored. Through much of the current international adoption literature, a generalized assumption has existed that “the majority of internationally adopted children have experienced neglect and maltreatment” (van den Dries et al., 2009, p. 411) and that children who were adopted over the age of 5 have spent significant time in institutionalized care (Dalen & Theie, 2012; Helder et al., 2016; Julian, 2013; van den Dries et al., 2009). Neither of these assumptions are necessarily true.

Yet, the reactions to individual adoption experiences “will naturally vary with their age at adoption and maybe even more with their earlier experiences in life” (Dalen & Theie, 2012, p. 2). Little is known about the unique characteristics and outcomes of youth who were adopted as adolescents (Helder et al., 2016). Research that has been conducted with older adoptees has not addressed their later life stage time of placement. In fact, adoptees at the adolescent stage of life may have had very different experiences than those who were relinquished as infants. This study fills an empirical gap that is present specifically within the field of international adoption.

Newman and Newman (1988) explained: “Identity is a creative integration of past identifications, future aspirations, and contemporary talents and abilities that is formed within a context of cultural expectations and demands” (p. 552). Theoretically, this study seeks to understand how experiences of internationally adopted adolescents contribute to their identity during a critical stage in their development. While studies have examined adoptee psychosocial and identity development (Bazuin-Yoder, 2011; Brodzinsky, 1987, 2011; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Brodzinsky, Schechter, Braff, & Singer, 1984; Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Frisk, 1964; Gagnon-Oosterwall et al., 2012; Grotevant, 1997; Hollingsworth, 1997; Mohanty, 2015; Noy-Sharav, 2005; Reinoso, Juffer, et al., 2013), none have considered the international adoptee’s experience and the process of assimilating into a new family, culture, and society when

adoption was completed during this later stage of life. The adolescent's "self-esteem, purpose in life, internal locus of control, and ego strength" have all come into question as they learned and adapted to a new family and culture (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 145).

Adopted children are assumed to be at greater risk for adjustment difficulties compared to their non-adopted peers (Rutter et al., 2007; Rueter & Koerner, 2008) based on certain variables such as country of origin, age at adoption, length of institutional time, special needs, and pre-adoption adversity. Social adjustment and connectedness to others is a significant contributor in identity development during adolescence (Newman & Newman, 1988). The influence that external forces and social context have toward forming multiple identities directly impacts the participants' core authenticity and identity salience (Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012).

Understanding the experiences of internationally adopted adolescents is essential in the pursuit of increasing parental and professional knowledge to better meet these individuals' specific needs. Practically speaking, adoptive parental training and community resources must become more supportive and effective (Rosnati & Ferrari, 2013) for all adoptions, but understanding the identity development of internationally adopted adolescents is even more important. "Parents and teachers, for instance, often ignore or underestimate children's fears and more easily identify externalizing symptoms" (Gagnon-Oosterwall et al., 2012, p. 650). These oversights add to the reality that young adults and adults who were adopted are almost four times as likely to attempt or commit suicide (Keyes, Malone, Sharma, Iacono, & McGue, 2013; Slap, Goodman, & Huang, 2001). The perspectives of international adoptees who are now young adults shed light on how identity development responds to the significant dimensions and contextual influences in this unique population.

## Research Questions

Brodzinsky and Schechter (1990) recognized that “adoption is not a homogeneous phenomenon,” as it occurs in multiple, complex ways (p. 145). Therefore, even for internationally adopted adolescents it is expected that multiple perspectives will widely differ. Their sense of experiential reality may be uncertain, contradictory, and incongruent without any rationale or logic (van Manen, 2014). Also, van Manen (2014) acknowledged that “phenomenology does not concern itself with facts” (p. 90), but rather it is intended to “break through this taken-for-grantedness and get to the meaning structures of our experiences” (p. 215). Through the support of theoretical literature, the research questions that guided this study intended to provoke understanding of the international adolescent adoptees’ perspectives, experiences, and influences during the critical periods of pre-adoption and upon arrival into the United States.

RQ1. How do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents describe their families (first family, foster/orphanage family or families, adoptive family), sociocultural conditions, relationships, and influential experiences prior to, and following, their arrival in the United States?

Erikson (1963, 1968) theorized that to obtain a healthy identity, individuals must progress through the nine distinct life stages, systematically reaching touchstones along the journey. During adolescence, it is normal to experience an identity crisis: “the selective affirmation and repudiation of an individual’s childhood identification” (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 72). Adolescence is also the period of clarifying their personal ideology, often through the evaluation of the attitudes and beliefs of their parents (Beyers & Seiffge-Krenke, 2010; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Typically, during adolescence, individuals associate

with and maintain strong relationships with parents, friends, religious partners, community members, and cultural leaders who help guide them through identity development (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). The atmosphere of the home and the feelings of security that are present are of essential importance (Frisk, 1964). Adoptees become separated from these core influences, increasing the potential burden of identity confusion at the vulnerable period when individuals must critically synthesize the “continuity between society’s past and future” to achieve continued growth (Sorosky et al., 1975, p. 18). Social, cultural, custom, and economic adaptation becomes even more important due to the geographic changes that are present with international adoption.

Both Erikson (1963, 1968) and Turner et al. (1994) recognized the impact social groups have on an individual’s perception of themselves. How individuals define their personal sense of self comes in large part from defining the groups with which they associate (Haslam, Reicher, & Reynolds, 2012). Developing an understanding of what the participant considers a family becomes especially relevant. The relationship of socially constructed identities to an individual’s core identity provides a foundation of what relationships international adoptees perceive as important and how they contribute to their lives (Abes et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2012). Reicher, Haslam, Spears, and Reynolds (2012) generalized that “when a group is important to us, we see the world—and expect to see the world—from the perspectives of its members. Their views are our views, their judgements are our judgements, their joys are our joys” (p. 358). For internationally adopted adolescents, the dominant features that initially served a scaffold structure for their core identity have been completely replaced. This first question establishes their perceptions of what the most influential aspects of their lives are and how they have been altered.

RQ2. How do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents describe the changes of their perceived external identity dimensions (such as gender, race, culture, and religion) prior to, and following, their arrival in the United States?

During the earliest stages of life, external identity dimensions may have little meaning to a child. Children associate with their parents, seeing the world as the adults who surround them represent it (Erikson, 1968). The childhood and school age stages are periods of physical growth, skill mastery, and social awareness. Friendships are built easily without regard for appearance; religious beliefs and cultural norms are not questioned within their own practices or in others (Newman & Newman, 1988). As they mature into their teen years and as experiences become more diverse, Erikson (1968) wrote, there may be a “crisis of wholeness” that occurs. He continued:

The young person, in order to experience wholeness, must feel a progressive continuity between that which he has come to be during the long years of childhood and that which he promises to become in the anticipated future; between that which he conceives himself to be and that which he perceives others to see in him and to expect of him. Individually speaking, identity includes, but is more than, the sum of all the successive identifications of those earlier years when the child wanted to be, and often was forced to become, like the people he depended on. Identity is a unique product, which now meets a crisis to be solved only in new identifications with age mates and with leader figures outside the family. (p. 76)

Adolescence encourages a saliency and awareness between what describes “the me” and “the not me” (Newman & Newman, 1988, p. 553). Characteristics that an international adoptee was not even aware of as a child in their country of origin, may, or may not, be intensely

important to them now as a young adult. As they become “cut-off” from their extended biological family, social customs, ethnic origins, and religious practices (Brodzinsky et al., 1992), personal identity and social identity become intertwined, strengthening some attributes, while reducing others, forcing the saliency of the core sense of self to become clearer. As shifts occur during the adolescent developmental process, they must restructure themselves and the world by dealing with experiences in alternate, primitive states of adjustment (Erikson, 1968). How individuals feel about themselves has a great deal to do with how they adjust emotionally (Brodzinsky et al., 1992).

RQ3. What do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents perceive as being the most prominent challenges during their first five years in the United States and how did they persist through them?

For the internationally adopted adolescent everything around them is new. Dealing with these extreme changes may be exciting and empowering, or complicated and overwhelming. They may experience such grief that creating secure attachment bonds with others is difficult. Language and educational limitations may become barriers and add to their frustration. Racial, ethnic, and religious differences could also be disturbing to an adolescent. Basic trust must be built with their new family, peers, school personnel, and community members. As Brodzinsky and Schechter (1990) stated:

The child himself or herself brings a genetic-based temperament with intellectual and physical differences which influence the family interaction and may confound the most stable of parental predicative variables. The extended family and the broader community present certain biases, either positive or negative, which in turn influence the development of a particular child. (p. 149)



The inability to deal with loss and stress is an indicator for adjustment problems (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Retaining a sense of individualism and an autonomous identity while developing intimate relationships must be resolved for healthy development. Communicating perceived barriers, and ways to successfully negotiate these challenges, is an important strategy for future international adoptees and their families to understand early in the transition period.

### **Definitions**

Several terms are presented throughout this study that may be interpreted or defined from varying personal perspectives. Operational terminologies that are frequently referenced in this study are included below.

1. *Abandoned/unparented children* – Children who do not have the stability of a loving family due to poverty, homelessness, medical conditions, or social limitations (Rotabi & Gibbons, 2012). These vulnerable children are generically grouped as orphans.
2. *Acculturation* – Described as the acquisition or retention of beliefs, values, and practices as an individual immigrates to a different country. Behavioral categories consist of “*assimilation* (adopts the receiving culture and discards the heritage culture), *separation* (rejects the receiving culture and retains the heritage culture), *integration* (adopts the receiving culture and retains the heritage culture), and *marginalization* (rejects both the heritage and receiving cultures)” (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010, p. 238).
3. *Adoption* – While the reasons for adoption are vast, it is intended as a “childhood protection measure with the objective to provide a family to children whose biological families are not able to care for them” (Barcons et al., 2012, p. 955).

4. *Adoption triangle* or the *adoption triad* – This term is frequently used throughout adoption literature as a recognition of the three affected parties within adoption: the child, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990).
5. *Adolescence* – As defined within Wierzbicki's (1993) meta-analysis of adoptees' psychological adjustment, adolescence includes the ages 13–17. Based on U.S. Census (2010–2016) data, this category was extended to include age 12. Erikson (1968) recognized adolescence as the developmental period between school age children and young adulthood.
6. *Core identity* – Comprised of self-perceived personal attributes and personal characteristics within the MMPI (Jones & McEwen, 2000), the core is surrounded by contextual influences and socially constructed identities (Abes et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2012; Jones & McEwen, 2000).
7. *Cross-ethnic adoption* – When the parents' ethnicity is different than the adopted child, such as American parents adopting a child from Europe, it is described as cross-ethnic adoption. Their skin color may or may not be the same (Boivin & Hassan, 2015).
8. *International/intercountry/transnational adoption* – The “joining of parents and children from different countries together in adoptive families” (Levy-Shiff et al., 1997, p. 109).
9. *Orphan* – While often considered as a child with two deceased biological parents, this is not a universal definition. This term is a generic classification for parentless children under the age of 18 who are left socially and materially dependent on society for their well-being and protection due to a variety of circumstances (Abebe, 2009). Culture-specific and social conditions provide varying qualifications to include children with one living biological parent (Rotabi & Gibbons, 2012).

10. *Socially constructed identity* – With respect to the MMPI (Jones & McEwen, 2000), this area of identity includes significant characteristics such as race, gender, culture, religion, sexual orientation, geographic, and social class (Abes et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2012; Jones & McEwen, 2000).
11. *Transracial adoption* – Adopted children who are a different race than their legal parents (e.g., Asian adoptees in White families). These types of adoption could be domestic or internationally joined families (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007).

### **Summary**

This chapter contains an overview of the history of international adoption, trends, and current statistics in the United States, and a brief account of literature. It also discusses the need to more deeply investigate the perspectives of those who were internationally adopted during their adolescent years. The visible gap in qualitative research within this field has allowed for greater understanding of the experiences and challenges that have impacted the identity development of internationally adopted adolescents. This transcendental phenomenological study provided an opportunity for purposefully chosen participants to have a voice, sharing their unique perspectives for the benefit of others.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

Transcendental phenomenology is firmly rooted in the concept of intentionality (Moustakas, 1994). This design requires an understanding of what is empirically known and what questions remain unanswered. Chapter Two begins with a review of the theories specifically chosen to serve as a framework for this study. The related literature section synthesizes the most prominent topics related to adoption. Together, this literature review critically addresses the complex issues that this group of individuals must overcome to develop a healthy identity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework provides guidance and establishes barriers that a study builds upon (Patton, 2015). It reduces assumptions, influences the focus of inquiry, and provides legitimacy of perspective (Patton, 2015). This section begins with an outline of Erikson's (1963, 1968) psychosocial development as it recognized the dramatic shifts, new perspectives, and decisions that become foundational to each human's stage of life (Erikson & Erikson, 1997), essential components for understanding identity development. Turner et al. (1994), as well as Jones and McEwen (2000), provided structure to the social components of identity development while Brodzinsky (1987, 2011; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1992) considered the additional emerging issues adoptees face in their journey to discover their personal sense of self.

### **Psychosocial Development Theory**

Erikson's (1963, 1968) psychosocial development theory considers separate stages of life, each that has very distinctive traits required to attain healthy life experiences (Rosenthal et

al., 1981). Beginning with infancy and childhood, all individuals encounter crucial developmental moments of significance, sometimes referred to as crises, that require personal growth. Erikson viewed the process as “an *evolving configuration*—a configuration that gradually integrates constitutional givens, idiosyncratic libidinal needs, favored capacities, significant identifications, effective defenses, successful sublimations, and consistent roles” that develop through the adaptation of world views, religious, and political ideologies (emphasis in original, Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 74). Eventually, the “amount of self-knowledge, synthesis, and consistency that a person possesses over time and across situations” is what defines an individual (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 143). The theoretical framework for this study considered the distinct goals and attributes of each developmental period, the impact of social interaction, the unique experiences of adopted children, and how multiple dimensions of identity contribute to a healthy well-being.

**Early life cycle stages.** The first four stages of Erikson’s psychosocial development life cycle include infancy, early childhood, play age, and school age (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). During these phases, most children associate with their parents, close family, and classmates as they work through “general skills including perception, memory, judgement, reality testing, problem solving, social competence, and emotional control” (Newman & Newman, 1988, p. 551). Through personal attachments they begin to process social interactions of basic trust versus mistrust, autonomy versus shame and doubt, initiative versus guilt, and industry versus inferiority (Erikson, 1963, 1968; Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Generally speaking, if the child is adopted during infancy no differences or risk factors exist in an adoptee’s pattern of adjustment as compared to nonadopted children during these stages (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1992).

The quality of the primary relationship that infants experience determines “the basis in the child for a sense of identity which will later combine a sense of being ‘all right,’ of being oneself, and of becoming what other people trust one will become” (Ocasio & Knight, 2003, p. 5). Particularly, though not uniquely, with adopted children it is at this early stage of development that reactive attachment disorder (RAD) is first associated. Defined as the lack of “the organization of behaviors in the young child that are designed to achieve physical proximity to a preferred caregiver at times when the child needs to seek comfort, support, nurturance, or protection” (Boris & Zeanah, 2005, p. 1207). As basic needs are not consistently met, frustration leads to evolving patterns of mistrust.

Erikson and Erikson (1997) believed that infants could not survive without trust; as they grow, their willful drive to be independent becomes essential during the second stage. Children who have not experienced serious neglect and are adopted within the first year of life bond with new caregivers very easily (Boris & Zeanah, 2005) as positive interactions increase and a foundation of trust is formed. Physical development also contributes to the child’s confidence while cultural practices define behavioral patterns. Play is a critical aspect of social encounters, allowing humans to create, experiment, and plan based on shared experiences and future hopes (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Values of *hope*, *will*, *purpose*, and *competence* strengthen through maturation, with each stage being grounded in the preceding virtues before it (Erikson & Erikson, 1997).

**Adolescence stage.** The fifth stage of Erikson’s (1968) life cycle, *Identity vs. Identity Confusion*, becomes essential for an individual to answer the question, “Who am I?” Growing upon the experiences during childhood, adolescence is the critical period when individuals build self-esteem, find purpose in life, discover their internal locus of control, and begin to develop a

sense of personal well-being and self-direction (Schwartz et al., 2009). Erikson (1968) described the end of childhood as a “crisis of wholeness” (p. 76) that includes the defining of ideological values such as religious, political, intellectual, and sense of existence. Sorting through contradictions and reflecting upon meaning-making is an essential process during social interactions with others (Bazuin-Yoder, 2011). The physical changes and social awareness adolescents experience, combined with their conceptions of personal identity and those around them, causes them to “define, over define, and redefine themselves and each other in often ruthless comparison, while a search for reliable alignments can be recognized in the restless testing of the newest in possibilities and the oldest in values” (Erikson, 1968, p. 76). As Rosenthal et al. (1981) summarized:

Adolescence is regarded by Erikson (1968) as central to his theory because when the individual reaches this stage, the usefulness of identification as a mode of adjustment ends and identity formation proper begins. If the adolescent does not succeed in forming a strong identity—rooted in family, race, or ideology—adulthood becomes very difficult, with genuine intimacy being almost impossible and stable long-term relationships unlikely. (p. 526)

Identity confusion is a likely fact for all adolescents, but for the adopted child it is much more complicated (Frisk, 1964). For international adolescents who experienced early years of life in their country of origin—surrounded by individuals of similar beliefs, racial, and cultural backgrounds, with societal norms and associations that framed their identity—adoption can be a substantial trauma to their natural development. The differences that international adopted adolescents experience during the transition to a new country and culture may contradict their initial impressions of who they will become as historical, cultural, and social constructs continue

to influence their progressing identity (Bazuin-Yoder, 2011). Their sense of self “has been cut off and remains on the other side of the adoption barrier” (Sorosky et al., 1975, p. 21).

Preoccupation with peer assessment, while cultivating new roles and developing a sense of continuity, are all experienced during this intense period of maturity for most adolescents (McPhail Gray, Ispa, & Thornburg, 1986; Erikson, 1968). It is through an individual’s identification with others that they become connected with the greater whole (Bazuin-Yoder, 2011). Yet for the adopted adolescent, developing significant attachments are often an added challenge. Open questioning, experimentation, and reworking of values during the normal development progression (Newman & Newman, 1988) may be overwhelmed by learning a different language, building new family and social relationships, understanding academic priorities, and enculturating into American society. Whenever a wide range of possible identities is envisaged, the sense of identity becomes more problematic, though more necessary; but, without a foundational standard throughout each phase of development, Erikson (1968) determined that young people may prefer to be “nothing” rather than a “bundle of identity fragments” (p. 78).

**Young adulthood, adulthood, and later life stages.** The life cycle is a process of building. As Erikson and Erikson (1997) clarified, “the reliability of young adult commitments largely depends on the outcome of the adolescent struggle for identity” (p. 72). Every basic conflict of the infancy through adolescence remains in adulthood and later in life, along with the reassurances that have accrued over a lifetime, serving as a guide for further development (Erikson, 1968). *Intimacy vs. Isolation*, *Generativity vs. Stagnation*, and *Integrity vs. Despair*, *Disgust* provide levels of personal conviction in which individuals recognize their identity and seek complementary relationships (Erikson, 1968). Feeling needed while also desiring to love



and care for others is a significant aspect of maturity. Individuals may recognize their life's calling, establish family commitments, and experience a period of embracing life. Erikson (1968) recognized "in the aging person who has taken care of things and people and has adapted himself to the triumphs and disappointments of being, by necessity, the originator of others and the generator of things and ideas" (p. 120). There are new challenges and demands throughout these stages, particularly in the last stage. It becomes a period of loss, emotionally and in physical ability (Erikson, 1968).

These later life stages emphasize the importance peers and adults have in the unification of tradition, ideas, and ideals (Erikson, 1968). An individual's social environment will either expand and inspire their roles or force them to become defensive, resist others, and express discontent (Erikson, 1968). Social identity theory works to unwrap the importance the feeling of belonging has and how groups help clarify characteristics of identity.

### **Social Identity Theory**

Social identity theory focuses on the impact of group membership, power, and change and their importance in social life (Haslam et al., 2012). There is a direct relational link between how individuals positively define themselves and their social categorization within groups. Self-determined unique differences set a person apart from some groups—defined as personal identity—while characteristics that become shared between others is known as social identity (Turner et al., 1994). Personal identity is the "I and me," whereas social identity is the perception of "we and us" (Reicher et al., 2012; Turner et al., 1994). Individuals choose when and where they identify with one group versus another. "Social identities are the crucial pivot between the individual and the social" (Haslam et al., 2012, p. 202).

Turner et al. (1994) suggested that "self-categorization is comparative, inherently

variable, fluid, and content dependent” and that the view of one’s self is not “a relatively fixed mental structure but the expression of a dynamic process of social judgement” (p. 458). This becomes important in the transition process. After leaving one’s birth culture and friends, internationally adopted adolescents must recreate strong associations with a different population. At times these connections are clear while at others they are trivial. Human behavior studies have purported that even when experimentally created groups are meaningless, individuals become determined to quickly develop value and emotional significance with those around them (Reicher et al., 2012). Often individuals look for similarities rather than differences due to their yearning to belong. For example, in Younes and Klein’s (2014) study, international adoptees were asked about their identity, and they consistently found that most are not defined by international adoption. Their lack of saliency in this aspect may be because of the few adoptees living in the same community. International adoption may set them apart from others.

The contextual influences and diverse new experiences can become highly stressful for internationally adopted adolescents. To this point, Ascher (1989) examined the adjustment of adolescent Southeast Asian refugees to the United States and the conflicting identity challenges they faced. Different from internationally adopted children, refugees have the option to immigrate to centralized areas with their extended families. Outwardly the teens took on American cultural traits such as their dress, hairstyles, and manners. Internally though, their ethnic identity remained strong (Ascher, 1989). These influences within immigration communities is applicable to internationally adopted children on a smaller scale. The adoptees’ desire to retain their ethnic identity of origin while fitting in with American cultural standards is equally likely. Conversely, the pull to associate with others who share similar history and speak the same language may also be a limitation to developing cross-ethnic friendships. It is the

chosen group affiliations that strongly influence what youth care about and what they do (Ascher, 1989).

Internationally adopted teenagers must adapt to new social influences while processing the involuntarily relinquishment of those from their country of origin. The saliency of these selective contributors is a critical component of their identity formation at a crucial point of development. Merging the concepts of social identity with Brodzinsky's psychology of adoption therefore is appropriate, as it may provide perspective on the dramatic impact group relationships have on the internationally adopted adolescent's unique adjustment issues.

### **Psychology of Adoption Adjustment**

Over the course of the last three decades researchers have made theoretical assumptions regarding the psychological, biological, ethological, cognitive-developmental, and social aspects of adoption in an attempt to explain the adjustment issues that adopted children experience (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). A wide range of studies and clinical opinions are published, broadly categorizing individuals into descriptive groups to create greater understanding of the complexities involved in adoption. Some argue that there are few differences in the well-being between adopted and nonadopted children (Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1998). Yet there are significant distinctions in the critical experiences between infant and adolescent adoptions, as well as between international versus domestic adoptions. Family atmosphere, social relationships, and the cultural environment have noticeably changed for older international children. Adjusting to a new home, developing attachments, recognizing biological differences, becoming aware of their adoptive status, understanding the implications of adoption, coping with the relinquishment, and overcoming social stigma are all complex challenges that must be addressed, particularly when a child is beyond the infant stage (Brodzinsky et al., 1992).

The identity crisis for an adopted child in their teenage years has been called a period of “genealogical bewilderment” by some experts, recognizing the overwhelming uncertainties that may arise from not knowing aspects about one’s heritage (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1992). For example, even though they may have known their biological parents, questions about their familial traits, talents, and skills remain vague or unanswered. Family medical histories are often incomplete or distorted in adoption records. International adoption agencies from poorer countries may not provide documentation of children’s birthdates, furthering the frustration of not knowing the most basic details of one’s life. The breach in attachment with one’s past, along with the frustration of adjusting to present issues, creates a level of stress and trauma that is exclusive for each person.

**Stress and coping.** Individual differences, and their adaptation to stress, impact that person’s psychological, emotional, or behavioral vulnerability (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). The transition to adoption is complex. The adoptee may be the family’s first child, the beginning of a second set of children, or entering the family as one of multiple children either adopted or biological. Parents may choose to adopt based on birth order, transracially, or from a different culture than their own. The adoption process can take a long time, ranging from six months to two years following the referral, allowing anticipatory emotions to be high. International adolescents may have been in foster care or an orphanage for many years. Some adolescents have experienced the death of their parents while others involuntarily leave behind living biological relatives in their country of origin. The adoptee’s individual life stage development may be hindered by lack of trust, anxiety, uncertainty, and grief (Brodzinsky, 1987).

The preconceived fantasies that formed in the minds of adoptees and their parents do not become reality in most cases. Newly connected families do not suddenly go on their way to live

“happily ever after” as some would assume (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990, p. 4). International adolescent adoptees are not always grateful for the “life filled with opportunities” that suddenly appears before them. New systems, rules, customs, rituals, and expectations have to be learned. As families build postplacement bonds, stress often builds, and all these issues must be addressed (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). Brodzinsky and Schechter (1990) reduced the theme of these adjustment implications, stating, “adoption is experienced as *stressful* by many children and parents and, consequently, results in a variety of coping efforts, some of which are successful in handling the stress and others which are not” (emphasis in original, p. 4). And it is understandable that “children who are placed later in childhood are more likely to experience acute adoption-related distress” (Brodzinsky et al., 1992, p. 84).

The role of cognitive appraisal of stress is an essential component of how adoptees can psychologically adjust. In this process, when individuals encounter a new life event, we determine if it is *irrelevant*, *benign-positive*, or *stressful* “(i.e., viewed as representing harm or loss, threat, or challenge) and, therefore, is potentially damaging to one’s well-being” (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990, pp. 5–6). Based on their unique person variables (e.g., beliefs, self-esteem, values, trust), biological variables (e.g., genetics, prenatal experiences), and environmental demands (e.g., social or family support), adoptees employ emotion-focused strategies to reduce, increase, or reappraise the stressor, or they develop problem-focused strategies that produce inward motivational or cognitive change as a response (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Sharma et al., 1998). One’s ability to be resilient is founded in these coping strategies, a strong self-image, and the availability of positive supports (Brodzinsky et al., 1992).

In the 1998 comparative assessment of adjustment levels between adopted and nonadopted adolescents, Sharma et al. recognized the likelihood that:

adoptees may experience lower levels of self-esteem, sense of mastery, sense of control, and the like (*person variables*). Environmental variables in the form of cultural and societal demands, social support, or poor psychological climate within the family might also be contributing factors. (emphasis in original, p. 799)

When adoptees responded at higher levels of adjustments on prosocial behavior, social problems, and withdrawn behaviors, few explanations are empirically determined (Sharma et al., 1998). Smith and Brodzinsky (1994) further analyzed stress and coping in children and recognized that with age, and as trusting relationships develop, adolescents may view their adoptive placement as stable and permanent, indicating less adoption related stress and a higher level of adjustment. In this same paper though, Smith and Brodzinsky raise concerns that older children may in fact be suppressing adoption related feelings. These findings correspond with Brodzinsky's model suggesting that adoption adjustment is a transactional process that is consistently impacted by how life events are appraised and ultimately how the individual the reaction to them.

**A balanced approach to traumatic loss.** The second significant contribution of Brodzinsky's research is with respect to the central influence of loss and the effect it has on adopted children of all ages. For children relinquished in earlier years of development, they may not retain memories of their parents or experiences (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). For adolescents though, the death of one's parents may have been more traumatic. Additionally, older children grieve for "other aspects of themselves that have been lost through adoption: the loss of origins, of a completed sense of self, of genealogical continuity" (Brodzinsky et al., 1992, p. 12). While there is variability in these responses, the sense of loss can be quite profound (Brodzinsky, 2011).

More recently, research suggested that youth who exhibit externalizing behavioral

problems have a direct positive relationship with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD; Harwood et al., 2013). Brodzinsky (2011) suggested that maintaining relationships with prior caregivers and friends is healing. Today, social media provides many options for internationally adopted adolescents to remain in contact with family in their country of origin or friends who have since been adopted to other areas of the world. Adoptive parents who encourage these relationships, while providing additional exposure to racial, ethnic, and cultural role models, create an additional source of emotional security (Brodzinsky, 2011). It is the family unit that predominantly influences the process of identity through the balancing act of establishing autonomous identity and intimate relationships with others (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). When children are given information about their past, experience more openness about sensitive communication, and receive positive messages about their heritage, clinicians are able to predict a stronger, secure identity in adoptees (Brodzinsky, 2006, 2011).

**Search for self.** Developing a healthy sense of self includes an awareness of how our bodies look, feel, and sound as components of our *physical self*; our *psychological self* includes qualities such as intelligence, personality, and emotional responses; and our *social self* is a notion of how we integrate and relate with others (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). In many ways, internationally adopted adolescents are not unlike nonadopted teens in the United States. Physical and psychological distinctions often lead to confusion at a time when they are struggling to understand their heritage (Brodzinsky, 1987). They have a desire to know about their history, seeking out information about their biological family (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). Struggles with peers, family dynamics, school performance, religious ideology, and self-esteem are present in the identity process for most teens. The difference is, adoptees no longer have the life-long trusted figures to help guide them through these developments with fidelity.

Integrating both pre-adoption and postplacement aspects of their lives becomes much more challenging for the international adoptee. As Brodzinsky (1987) suggested, “adoptive parents and their children experience a number of tasks or conflicts that complicate the more universal psychosocial tasks of development” (p. 43). Both families have a personal impact on shaping their identity with significant influence. Factors such as parent-child relationships, social experiences, and racial or ethnic differences each affect the adoptee’s emerging definition of self (Brodzinsky, 2011).

Acknowledging the unique characteristics in these adoptive families becomes equally challenging for parents. Social stigma remains present in the United States and is particularly recognizable in physically diverse families. Brodzinsky (1987) stated that when adoptive parents highlight the differences among individuals, essential components for individual identity development are diminished, thereby increasing the vulnerability of psychological problems during adjustment. Adoptive parents may otherwise over-emphasize the child as being fully embedded in the family, creating an atmosphere that all family members should have the same beliefs, values, and goals. In both instances, the child may begin to feel isolated, disconnected, or guilty that they recognize the diversity present in their own home (Brodzinsky, 1987). Individuals who have been adopted need their feelings to be validated and encouraged for their personal well-being.

The process of discovering and defining one’s self is a matter of recognizing personal strengths and weaknesses and building self-esteem (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). His theory is a compounding process that must occur sequentially. For those who are adopted, though, this development is more flexible.

Identity achievement can occur at different stages in different aspects of identity



formation. An individual might have achieved a moral identity, for instance, while remaining in moratorium regarding an occupational identity and in diffusion regarding a sexual identity. This is a dynamic process that continually evolves—from evaluation to resolution, from disruption to reevaluation—throughout adolescence and into adulthood. (Brodzinsky et al., 1992, p. 103)

The contexts and relationships that international adoptees experience are unique and at times may be conflicting (Abes et al., 2007). Peers, family atmosphere, social conditions, and cultural environments each have a role in how individuals perceive themselves and the progression of identity formation.

Brodzinsky's lifelong work furthers the thesis of Erikson's psychosocial development model by applying the complexities of adoption experiences and describing the adjustments required to encourage the adoptee's well-being and sense of self (Brodzinsky, 1987, 2011; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1992). The continuous process of identity formation that is presented as typical for nonadopted children is not as fluid for the adopted teen. The adolescent adoptee's ability to cope with stress and their historical trauma, on top of the complicated process of identity development, may actually require revisiting of each life stage. The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity can help clarify those meaningful influences which are perceived as being foremost in the international adoptee's life, regardless of the development stage, or period of adjustment, the individual is in.

### **Multiple Dimensions of Identity**

Evolving out of Erikson's identity theory, Jones and McEwen (2000) describe the larger impact social identities (e.g., race, ethnicity/culture, social class, religion, sexual orientation, and gender) have on one's personal identity and sense of self. By incorporating evolving research

that “underscored the importance of relative salience, sociocultural context, and overlapping identities,” the complex, interconnected, multiple dimensions of identity development is reflected in their work (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 406). While in agreement with Erikson and Turner that external forces and social context impacts personal identity, the interrelationships and recognition of social identities provide meaning to an individual’s sense of self more significantly than previously suggested (Jones et al., 2012).

The Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI; Jones & McEwen, 2000) provides the contextual framework for influences such as family background, sociocultural conditions, experiences, and life planning decisions that contribute to identity development. Prior to the development of the MMDI, models only addressed singular characteristic aspects of identity such as ethnicity, religion, or social class (Jones & McEwen, 2000; Jones et al., 2012). In fact, Jones and McEwen (2000) asserted that an individual may embrace and perceive multiple, fluid, intersecting identities. Individuals want to be understood as they understand themselves in their totality, not simply on imposed or assumed social labels (Jones & McEwen, 2000). It is the “nature of the intersections of social identities themselves and the influence of intersecting multiple identities” that directly impact a person’s sense of self (Jones et al., 2012, 700–701). When taken together, these dimensions comprise an individual’s core personal identity characteristics (Abes et al., 2007).

Context, such as family background and lived experiences, impact the relative saliency of race, social class, culture, religion, and gender (Abes et al., 2007; Jones et al, 2012). Jones et al. (2012) explained that “the more salient the social identity, the closer to the core sense of that identity is located” (p. 701). Through maturation, the process shifts, encouraging an “ongoing journey of self-discovery” (Jones & McEwen, 2000, p. 413) beyond Erikson’s (1963, 1968)

linear, additive approach (Jones et al., 2012).

Particularly for internationally adopted adolescents, this theory is in agreement with Bazuin-Yoder's (2011) findings that confirmed "culture-of-origin is inextricably related to one's identity formation because it serves as the literal and figurative soil from which all other ideas and meanings grow" (p. 88). Separating out any portion of one's identifiable characteristics may be based on the situational context of the moment. It becomes seemingly important to understand "not only *what* they perceive their identity to be, but also *how* they make meaning of their identity dimensions as they do," in addition to how important these social identities are and whether they are integrated or distinct (Abes et al., 2007, p. 19).

### **Summary of Theoretical Framework**

Boivin and Hassan (2015) recognized, "A clear identity appears to be one of the most important variables to consider in terms of psychological adjustment" (p. 1099). While Erikson (1963, 1968) provided a framework for the development life cycle, Turner et al. (1994) as well as Jones and McEwen (2000) suggested there are many influencers that must be considered. Social groups, situational context, and interrelationships each distinctly impact the saliency of identifying characteristics. Brodzinsky and Schechter (1990) clarified that for adopted individuals, particularly adolescents who are in a critical stage of development, the process is exceptionally more complex and unpredictable.

Internationally adopted children and youth must adapt to a new country, culture, and family—a family who may be of a different race and often a second language. Their contextual identity founded within their country of origin continues to develop while negotiating significant challenges and new experiences. Adoptees need to "accept their roots, their past, and their present" in order to successfully adjust (Sánchez-Sandoval, 2015, p. 157). The related literature

section that follows explores topics that influence the psychological well-being of internationally adopted adolescents. Transracial adoption, ethnic and cultural identity, pre-adoption adversity, family and social relationships, psychological, social and behavioral issues, language and academic difficulties, reactive attachment disorders, and suicide may impact identity development for these young people, particularly during this critical stage of life.

### **Related Literature**

Since the beginning of history, adoption has been recognized as a positive social service response for caring for children whose biological parents could not otherwise meet their needs. Throughout the industrial revolution, adoption practices most often focused on infants and youngsters while institutional or foster care was most often the answer for placing older children (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). Adoption was a solution for childless couples, usually of the same race and background, to build a family. As globalization, societal awareness, and adoption regulation has evolved, the issue has become much more complex. Today, families and individuals may choose to adopt for a variety of personal reasons. A wider demographic range of adults now considers “children of different race or from a foreign country, older children, sibling groups, physically and emotionally handicapped children, and other so-called ‘special needs’ children” as options for extending their families (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990, p. xi). In every circumstance, there are challenges.

Many studies address each aspect of these identifying differences in a singular fashion, emphasizing those areas that are considered the most adverse. The following section draws attention to the related literature that is most prominently discussed within the field of international adoption, highlighting the presumed topics that impact the identity progression of internationally adopted adolescents.

## **Transracial Adoption**

Transracial adoption is known as the adoption of a child who is of different race than his or her adoptive parents (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007). The term *race* most often distinguishes the physical and biological characteristics of individuals for group classification (Scherman, 2010). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services *Chartbook Based on the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents*, 59% of the total internationally adopted children in the United States at that time were Asian, 17% were of Hispanic origin, and 3% were Black in comparison to 92% of adoptive parents who were Caucasian, resulting in 84% of children adopted internationally who were in transracial placements (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). Crossing the racial boundary in parent-child relationships has been controversial over the years, primarily because of the questionable ability of Caucasian parents to meet the ethnic identity development needs of their children who come from different backgrounds (Boivin & Hassan, 2015; Hollingsworth, 1997; Jacobson et al., 2012; Samuels, 2010). Professional groups such as the National Association of Black Social Workers publicly argued that children's welfare must be a priority or their cultural identity could be lost. They claimed forming a positive integrated identity and preparing them psychologically to face a racist world is not possible in transracial settings (Boivin & Hassan, 2015; Jacobson et al., 2012; Kelly, 1995; Levy-Shiff et al., 1997).

Simon, Alstein, and Meli (1994) worked to confirm the case for transracial adoption by reflecting exceptionally high results from parents' and adoptees' positive experiences over a 20-year period. Critics rebutted shortly thereafter that of the 201 families in the initial study only 72 had been involved in these follow up interviews, suggesting that those who may have expressed painful adjustments did not have a voice (Kelly, 1995), essentially stating that findings should be recognized as limited. Reinoso, Juffer, et al. (2013) contrarily expressed that adopted children

from a different racial background appear to develop a stronger sense of cultural identity than their same-race peers. Also, in Juffer and van IJzendoorn's (2007) meta-analysis of more than 2,000 adoptees, transracial children showed similar levels of self-esteem as their non-transracial adopted peers. From their perspective, there are "no elevated risks for transracial or international adoptees" (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007, p. 1079).

### **Ethnic and Cultural Identity**

Throughout the literature, racial and ethnic cultural definitions become deeply intertwined, overlapping the theoretical concepts of race, ethnicity, and culture (Castle, Knight, & Waters, 2011; Scherman, 2010). While these identity concepts may seem interchangeable, they are not (Lee, Vonk & Crolley-Simic, 2015). Ethnic and cultural identity are grounded in religion, native heritage, or social experiences. Ethnicity, sometimes described as racial identity, is defined as "a type of categorization based on labeling (by self or other persons) that reflects membership in, a sense of belonging to, evaluation of, and identification with that group" (Scherman, 2010, p. 128). An individual's ethnic identity may be founded in traits that are inherited from their biological parents. Scherman (2010) expressed that it is not possible for an individual to self-identify in two different groups at the same time. Conversely, social relationships affect cultural identity. Scherman also stated that cultural competence develops through learned behaviors, language, and group structures. Samuels (2010) clarified that "a cultural identity is not inherited but acquired and performed through interactions within one's family and broader environment. Thus, one's cultural identity may be different than one's racial identity" (p. 28). The adoptee's parents have an essential role in the acculturation and overall psychological well-being of the international adoptee based on their attitudes on racial socialization and cross-cultural practices (Boivin & Hassan, 2015).

Internationally adopted children arrive in the United States under very different circumstances than what is typically presented with immigrants, refugees, asylum seekers, or sojourners. Their acculturation, assimilation, and enculturation conditions and acquisition processes are unique (Schwartz et al., 2010). Furthermore, race and ethnic issues are difficult to analyze for adopted children, particularly because empirical evidence lacks consistency (Hollingsworth, 1997). Hollingsworth's (1997) meta-analysis examined the link between transracial/transethnic adoptees and the effect on personal self-esteem; he concluded that the child's "age, historical content in which the study is conducted, the geographical region of the study, the size of the sample, and the level of racial/ethnic integration of the adoptees' lifestyle" are each contributing variables that require further study (p. 124). For example, parents' intentional efforts to incorporate multiracial images in the home while also exposing adoptees to same race environments, community events, and groups could not statistically be determined if a positive impact was made based on current data, though one study did suggest heightening of racial identity was likely (Hollingsworth, 1997).

Yet, some of the participants in Samuels' (2010) study examining bicultural identity formation felt these same types of efforts were "superficial connections to Black heritage" (p. 37). This later study expressed that individuals who were socialized within Caucasian family contexts were negatively affected by how Black peers related to them when they didn't meet authentic Black expectations. Transracial individuals heard, "They aren't really black," constantly from both racial groups because of their bicultural upbringing (Samuels, 2010, p. 34). Brodzinsky et al. (1992) pointed out: "issues of identity can get confused for youngsters who look one way and are raised another" (p. 99). Correlating with Boivin and Hassan (2015) results, "transracial adoptees were more likely to suffer from a weaker ethnic identity or form identity

confusion as compared to their same-race counterparts” (p. 1085), because they don’t seem to clearly fit in with either group. Being integrated into multiple cultures is often assumed to have a positive conclusion (Scherman, 2010), but few researchers determined what is truly in the best interest of the child (Hollingsworth, 1997).

Juffer and IJzendoorn (2005) discovered in their meta-analysis that children of transracial international adoptions have better behavioral and mental health outcomes than domestic adoptions. In these cases, Juffer and IJzendoorn theorized that when physical differences between parents and adopted children are so obvious, more communication and trust within the family exists that may not be present in domestic, same race adoptions. Communication with friends and family members provides the bonds people desire. Other studies confirm that by reducing the threat of marginalization, adoptees are better able to function in a variety of settings (Scherman, 2010). Samuels (2010) argued that in these cases an individual’s identity is not solely based the color of his or her skin. More broadly, Samuels indicated, “participants learned that membership within a group required more than one’s desire, racial heritage, or the use of racial labels; it required being recognized and accepted as kin by other members of the group” (p. 34).

The research findings of transracial adoptions and their development of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity is problematic; yet, there is little doubt that a healthy self-concept as a member of these groups is important (Castle, Knight, & Watters, 2011; Hollingsworth, 1997). Due to various limitations, defined conclusions cannot be supported as to the effect transracial adoptions have on a child’s identity (Boivin & Hassan, 2015; Hollingsworth, 1997; Mohanty, 2015). International adoptees’ ethnic identity development may simply be more complex (Mohanty, 2015). Juffer and van IJzendoorn (2007) could not find any significant differences in self-esteem



when compared to same-race or domestic adoptions, while other studies suggest there are distinct variations. Minimal scientific literature on culture acquisition (Samuels, 2010; Scherman, 2010) confusion among racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, incomplete definitions of the psychological process (Boivin & Hassan, 2015; Scherman, 2010) and a lack of validated scales for measurement, remain problematic within the field (Boivin & Hassan, 2015).

The age of the child at the time of adoption and the development of his or her previously established identity creates an additional challenge for internationally adopted children as they face unique racial, ethical, and cultural identity issues. Mohanty (2015) recognized that international adoptees respond differently to their ethnicity and race, ranging from vulnerability and low levels of identity to overemphasis of their heritage, excessively stressing belonging to a minority group. Some international adoptees experience ambivalence, while others become confused or face stigma while exploring their birth culture identity. Families that disregard birth culture, racial issues, and ethnicity, as well as those who take a *child-choice* approach to socialization, are at equal risk of failing to meet the psychological developmental needs of internationally adopted children (Mohanty, 2015). A moderate, integrated, balanced level of identity is optimal for their overall well-being.

### **Pre-adoption Adversity**

Assessing pre-adoption adversity has been a difficult challenge for statistical research, primarily, again, because of the limited amount of consistent information available (Tan et al., 2015). The child's country of origin, age at adoption, length of institutional time, special health care needs, and history have been important descriptives for analysis (Harwood et al., 2013; Helder et al., 2016; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005). For example, children who spent significant time in institutional care, particularly if they had a large number of rotating caregivers, tend to

show abnormalities in social relationships (Rutter et al., 2007). Yet, how these studies were conducted provide additional questions as if “the same degree of validity would apply in other circumstances” (Rutter et al., 2007, p. 27).

The landscape of children being adopted internationally has changed dramatically over the years. In 2004, adoptions began to decline from China, Russia, and South Korea while rising from Guatemala, Ethiopia, and Vietnam (Breuning, 2013; Younes & Klein, 2014). As of 2014, China, Ethiopia, and Haiti were the top three countries involving immigration via adoption to the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Existing research is not able to broadly address the current population of internationally adopted children. What has been empirically established is that children from certain countries have higher health and cognitive issues due to inadequate prenatal care, malnutrition, and psychological deprivation (Barcons et al., 2012; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005). Children from Eastern European countries are at greater risk of experiencing social difficulties while adopted children from Asia and Africa are found to have higher interpersonal relationship skills than those in other countries (Barcons et al., 2012; Helder et al., 2016).

Persike and Seiffge-Krenke (2016) asserted it is important for anyone who has relationships with adolescents to be aware of the significant bearing cultural and ethnic backgrounds have on stress and relationships. Resettlement alone can be particularly stressful as is noted in some samples (Reinoso, Pereda, et al., 2013). Higher levels of stress are also found in teens from Eastern European countries, while Asian children showed high coping skills with peers but not parents (Persike & Seiffge-Krenke, 2016). Children who are flexible and able to manage stress more successfully have better outcomes (Reinoso, Pereda, et al., 2013). Conversely, Tan et al. (2015) deduced that neither the country of origin, nor the child's

experiences, can explain a child's ability to adjust.

Studies considering age at the time of adoption generally classify *older* children to be above age 6 or sometimes even those over age 4 (Helder et al., 2016; Rutter et al., 2007). Drawing conclusions for adolescents from a group this broad ignores the developmental stages of childhood (Rosenthal et al., 1981). Frequently, these studies also assume the child's age correlates with a longer time spent in orphanages (Helder et al., 2016; Levy-Shiff et al., 1997). While this may be true in some cases, this is a broad statement that may skew results. Younes and Klein (2014) reported that unfavorable childhood experiences did cause some concern for their social well-being. Nonetheless, Helder et al. (2016) conducted the "only existing longitudinal study focusing on outcomes in children adopted at older ages" (p. 58) that examines the cognitive, behavioral, and emotional functioning in 25 internationally adopted children. Over three years, significant improvements were realized. Helder et al.'s findings were comparable to other research "suggesting that older adoptees were not more likely to have impairments than children adopted internationally at younger ages across other domains" (p. 54).

### **Families and Social Relationships**

A predominant number of families who adopt internationally are from middle or upper-class backgrounds (Levy-Shiff et al., 1997; Noy-Sharav, 2005; Reinoso, Pereda, et al., 2013). The role of the family structure in adoptive families has not been a significant contributor in the adjustment of adoptees (Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992). Families with biological and adopted children, birth-order changes, or other competing dynamics fail to reflect any consistent findings, though Brodzinsky and Brodzinsky (1992) confidently stated that structure is not an impediment. While there are some more beneficial attributes that have been recognized in internationally adoptive families (e.g., high levels of commitment by parents, family cohesion, better marital

quality), the comparison between international adoptive families and nonadoptive families are very similar (Rosnati, Ranieri, & Barni, 2013).

Assuring that open communication is present in the home and professional support is sought out when needed contributes to the overall well-being of children. Brodzinsky and Schechter (1990) encourage the frequent review of the adoption story. Clinically, it is recognized “in situations where there has been a sharp cutoff at the point of adoption and the past is forbidden territory, the child’s sense of continuity of person, of identity, is ruptured” (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990, p. 236). Ignoring an adoptee’s concerns and questions about adoption may foster feelings of inadequacy (Brodzinsky, 1987). It is the quality of the parent-child relationship that has been found to partially mediate adversities (Harwood et al., 2013; Oliva, Jiménez, & Parra, 2009; Reinoso, Juffer, et al., 2013; Rosnati et al., 2013). Positive social relationships and support from their parents are the most frequent coping strategy noted by adoptees (Reinoso, Pereda, et al., 2013). The factors also support positive social development and self-esteem (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007) while reducing the consequences of stressful life events on externalizing problems (Oliva et al., 2009). Additionally, those families who allow adoptees to openly discuss adoption and resolve how adoption fits into their overall sense of self tend to be high identity achievers (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Addressing emotional and behavioral responses, along with knowing how to behave in social situations, are crucial competencies for developing relationships during adolescence and beyond (Barcons et al., 2012).

### **Psychological, Social, and Behavioral Issues**

It is important to highlight that “adoption implies not just building a family (their adoptive family) but also losing a family (their birth family)” that may include a profound sense of loss for the adoptee and indifference to others (Reinoso, Juffer, et al., 2013, p. 265).

Researchers have focused on the psychological adjustment and social relationship attachments looking to explain and predict its frequency in adopted children as well as its persistence over time (Gagnon-Oosterwall et al., 2012; Harwood et al., 2013; Helder et al., 2016; Julian, 2013; Reinoso, Pereda, et al., 2013; Rueter & Koerner, 2008; van den Dries et al., 2009; Wiik et al., 2011). As discussed earlier, some people look to the child's country of origin to try to understand the child's ability to form significant interpersonal relationships, basing findings on the responses and perspectives of adults, not the adoptee themselves (Barcons et al., 2012). Gagnon-Oosterwall et al. (2012) suggest that "parents and teachers, for instance, often ignore or underestimate children's fears and more easily identify externalizing symptoms" (p. 650).

As with the following, it must be noted that these projects do not focus on those who were adopted during their adolescent years, but on those who were adopted and are now at the adolescent stage of life. Yet there is valuable information in these findings. In studies that analyze self-esteem, self-perception, and life satisfaction between adopted and nonadopted individuals, few differences are recognized (Brodzinsky, 2011; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007; Sánchez-Sandoval, 2015). Internationally adopted children reported that most of their problems were of an interpersonal nature (Reinoso, Pereda et al., 2013), though others do reflect externalizing symptoms, and learning problems are overrepresented in other instances (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005). Conversely, Gagnon-Oosterwall et al. (2012) found that internalizing and externalizing behavior disorders were not significantly different from nonadopted children. While internationally adopted children reported some symptoms of specific phobia, they are typically found to be well adjusted (Brodzinsky et al., 1984; Gagnon-Oosterwall et al., 2012; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005; Reinoso, Juffer, et al., 2013; Rosnati et al., 2013). Statistical differences of significance in these

studies do not surpass a moderate effect size (Brodzinsky, 2011).

There may be some accumulation of psychological risk factors that are essential in broadly understanding their development. For example, Juffer and van IJzendoorn (2005) pinpointed that international adolescent adoptees report fewer behavioral and mental health concerns than domestic adoptees except when the child experienced extreme deprivation or neglect. Therefore, generalizing psychological, social, and behavioral issues to every internationally adopted child is clearly not appropriate (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007).

### **Language and Academic Difficulties**

With the highest number of international adoptions originating from non-English speaking countries, many internationally adopted children arrive in the United States without knowing any English. Glennen, Nippold, and Larrivee (2014) observed:

For children adopted before age 2, this transition occurs smoothly with the majority eventually developing language and speech proficiency that is average for their age . . . we know even less about the transition process and outcomes for children adopted after age 2. (p. 185)

Studies such as Raaska et al. (2013) reflected that language difficulties are more frequent for international adoptees than their peers, but again they were evaluating children who were placed in families at a young age and evaluated during late childhood. Their broad statements of risk factors (such as institutionalization, abuse, and deprived environments) may not have been present in the life of an adolescent who previously lived with their biological family.

What is clear, though, as Schwartz et al. (2010) admitted, language permutations are “part of the fabric” of an individual’s identity (p. 240). Communication allows humans to build connections, transmit feelings, and express thoughts. Adolescents who had been able to openly

share with others in their country of origin, but who have abruptly lost much of that capacity to do so, may face frustration and isolation. Older children from overseas “mourn not only for the loss of her original family but also, in a sense, for the loss of her mother tongue” (Brodzinsky et al., 1992, p. 55). Conversely, adoptees who come from English speaking countries may have lower stress and resistance integrating into the classroom than those who are learning English for the first time (Schwartz et al., 2010).

Languages that are less prominently known with fluency (e.g., Swahili, Amharic, or Korean), present additional challenges to determine what are communication barriers, cultural differences, behavioral issues, or lack of exposure to academics. Assessing these students can be exceptionally difficult and frustrating for parents who want and need to connect with their adopted child. Cognitive and intelligence tests indicate that children living in institutionalized care often have lower results than those who were raised in homes (Dozier et al., 2012). Furthermore, “learning English at a later age could delay some school performance indicators” (Harwood et al., 2013, p. 417). The first three years following placement in the home can be especially traumatic as limited language understanding and a lack of valid assessment tools reduce the educator’s ability to provide appropriate support services. During this period there is a frequent mismatch between the children’s skill and their adoptive parents’ expectations (Glennen et al., 2014). Poor school performance in subject areas that an internationally adopted child has never been exposed to may further negatively impact their self-worth (Thomas, 2016).

### **Reactive Attachment Disorder (RAD)**

Parents, caretakers, and educators often become overwhelmed because of the internationally adopted adolescent’s diminished academic knowledge, behavior, or social relatedness. These are some of the reasons families of adoptees disproportionately over-

represent counseling patients, often because they quickly act on perceived problems (Feigelman, 2005; Levy-Shiff et al., 1997). The challenge for a professional counselor is to determine what is a disturbance of attachment, a different clinical disorder, or the adoptee's adjustment process through traumatic circumstances and acculturation.

Adverse experiences are known to manifest symptoms that are frequently associated with reactive attachment disorder (RAD; Raaska et al., 2012). The diagnosis of RAD is characterized by persistent or severe problems with the formation of relationships, either socially inappropriate or detached, before the age of 5 (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007). Children with a history of maltreatment, neglect, or traumatic loss may express patterns of being emotionally withdrawn during interactions with others, or without any reticence, seeking comfort from anyone including unfamiliar strangers (Boris & Zeanah, 2005; Hanson & Spratt, 2000; Raaska et al., 2012; Rutter et al., 2007). In the adoption community, it is not uncommon to hear of a child expressing aggression or other symptoms of RAD. The label becomes loosely used without consistency for a wide array of issues for adopted children (Hanson & Spratt, 2000; Woolgar & Scott, 2014), defining children and adolescents regardless of their upbringing in early life. As hypothesized within the 2009 meta-analysis of attachment in adopted children performed by van den Dries et al., the 39 publications that were conducted between 1985 and 2007 reflected expected results connected with neglect prior to placement. Most studies that provided data regarding the prevalence of RAD in high-risk populations, almost universally selected from children who were previously institutionalized (Boris & Zeanah, 2005); however, due to the lack of standardized assessment protocol to validate a diagnosis, many of these instances may not have included a coherent determination of RAD (Hanson & Spratt, 2000).

Although many young children may meet the clinical criteria for RAD, there are other



comorbid conditions that may better explain their negative attachment behavior (Boris & Zeanah, 2005; Hanson & Spratt, 2000). For example, children who have experienced severe trauma may react with screaming or fighting when feeling threatened. Hanson and Spratt (2000) suggested this could be a learned response to ward off additional abuse. Likewise, developmental delays, language disorders, conduct disorder, anxiety disorders, adjustment disorders, nonspecific behavioral problems, substance abuse by the biological parents, autism, or PTSD may also cause a young person to show aggression and anger at times of vulnerability (Boris & Zeanah, 2005; Hanson & Spratt, 2000; Woolgar & Scott, 2014).

Clinically, there is question as to whether the disorder can be reliably diagnosed in older children or if its criteria has been stretched to become an umbrella for other behavioral issues (Boris & Zeanah, 2005). Since little is known about RAD, and particularly if it can be found in older children, Woolgar and Scott (2014) advised that extreme caution should be implemented prior to making these diagnoses. The likelihood of over-identification of RAD in adopted children and adolescents leaves families feeling “helpless or with excuses to avoid engaging” as care plans do not include the evidence-based treatments that can provide real solutions and improve their psychological well-being (Woolgar & Scott, 2014, p. 363). With limited evidence and unsupported claims in current research, conclusions on lasting social and behavioral problems for adopted adolescents can only be speculative (Julian, 2013).

## **Suicide**

In the United States during 2012, and across the globe, suicide was the second leading cause of death among people between the ages of 10 and 24 years (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2015; Ma, Batterham, Calear, & Han, 2016). Difficulties in family, social, and academic settings that are often recognizable during the adolescent stage of life are

also prominent issues for individuals with suicidal tendencies (Keyes et al., 2013). Slap et al. (2001) pointed out that “depression, impulsivity, and aggression during adolescence have been associated with both adoption and suicide behavior” (p. 1).

Suicide is often related to serious mental health impairments or depression (Feigelman, 2005), traits that Juffer and van IJzendoorn (2005) determined are falsely associated with those who are internationally adopted. Likewise, Feigelman (2005) recognized that when statistical weights were applied to population samples rather than a clinical or convenience sample, the levels of suicidality and depression were similar between adopted youth and their nonadopted peers. Yet, Keyes et al. (2013) discovered that U.S. adoptees were almost four times more likely to report a suicide attempt than nonadopted peers. As noted previously though, internationally adopted adolescents experience significant differences than U.S. adoptees during this prominent period of identity development.

Interpersonal relationships are an important consideration. The Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide (IPTTS; Joiner et al, 2009) provides testable risk factor predictions for suicidal tendencies. When individuals perceive high burdensomeness (i.e., a feeling of liability or the feeling that one’s death is worth more than their life to others) and a lack of belongingness or social alienation (i.e., that one is not an integral or valued part of a group), along with the acquired capability to enact self-harm, suicide may be more likely (Joiner et al., 2009). While the interactive relationship among these three factors is not as strong across diverse populations as initially validated per the 2016 meta-analysis conducted by Ma et al., burdensome remains a strongly supported empirical concern. Based on the assimilation challenges that international adolescent adoptees experience, it seems likely that these risk factors may be present in many of their lives. These specific details, though, remain a gap in the

research.

Regardless of the actual data, avoiding suicide contagion, also referred to as the *copycat effect*, is a concern for the small community of international adoptees. Social media provides immediate news of these tragedies without filter. International adoption may include an additional source of pain due to the sense of loss of their birth parents and also their prior identity connections (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). For young people who may be already vulnerable or contemplating suicide during the crisis of adolescence, and those who are grieving due to an accumulation of significant life experiences, encouraging family connectedness is a protective factor for reducing the likelihood of suicide attempts (Slap et al., 2001).

### **Summary**

Literature on international adoption is limited or conflicting, and research on the perspectives of those internationally adopted during their adolescent years has never been presented. As Baker (2013) acknowledged, “while inter-country adoption has been practiced for decades, there is a paucity of knowledge in the schools on international adoptees” (p. 240). Often, empirical studies have focused on individual risk factors or have recognized their cumulative effect toward maladjustment for internationally adopted children (Roskam & Stievenart, 2014). Methodology issues further complicate findings based on sampling procedures, comparison groupings, and definitions of *older children* (Sharma et al., 1998).

Erikson’s (1963, 1968) psychosocial development theory and Turner et al.’s (1994) social identity theory provided a foundation for understanding how youth generally develop personal and social identities during the period of adolescence. Jones and McEwen (2000) incorporated the multiple facets of identity, bringing attention to the complex perceptions that individuals have. Brodzinsky (1987, 2011; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990;

Brodzinsky et al., 1992) contributed insight into the complexities and implications of adoption that may be experienced. Together, along with related research within the field of adoption, this chapter reviewed current literature to set the stage for better understanding the challenges internationally adopted adolescents overcome and their journey toward developing identity.

Erikson (1968) recognized that “individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically interrelated in continual exchange” (p. 114). The goal of this study was to provide parents, educators, and professionals who work with international adoptees better insight and understanding of the challenges these adolescents experience. By assuring supportive structures are in place, prospective older adoptees may have stronger potential to become happy, confident, well-adjusted contributing members of society.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

Adolescence, the critical period of exploration when an individual's identity develops, is based on the influences and relationships that have formed over one's lifetime (Erikson, 1968). Personal identity is likewise susceptible to change and flexibility (Castle et al., 2011). The unique challenges international adolescent adoptees experience further complicates our understanding of their fluid identity development. Without the focused, purposeful, detailed approach on information-rich cases that are available through qualitative design, this knowledge is not available. Chapter Three details the implementation of this research project. Specifics regarding the design and procedures are provided to clarify the steps that were taken to ensure future replication is possible. Data collection and analysis descriptions reflect the rigorous and varied techniques required for a well-rounded, triangulated study. Each of the following subsections highlights the essential aspects of this research with a determined focus on meeting the study's purpose.

### **Design**

A qualitative method was selected for this study for multiple reasons, but primarily because "qualitative inquiry is fundamentally about capturing, appreciating, and making sense of diverse perspectives" (Patton, 2015, p. xii). Moustakas (1994) clarified that "phenomena are the building blocks of human science and the basis for all knowledge" (p. 26). While the literature on international adoption is increasing, primarily through the application of quantitative inquiry, these findings do not create a deep understanding. Quantitative research provides limited meaning, or context, to the results (van Manen, 2014). van Manen (2014) recognized that "phenomenology is a rigorous human science precisely because it investigates the way that

knowledge comes into being and confronts us with the assumptions upon which all human understandings are grounded” (p. 91). Only through direct communication can the identity development of internationally adopted adolescents be adequately explored. By allowing these now young adults to reflect on their country of origin experiences, the cultural and societal changes that emerged upon immigrating to a new country, and the significant adjustments that took place with a new family and friends, understanding of their overall psychosocial adjustment and mental health can begin to take shape.

This study was predicated upon the philosophical assumption that international adolescents have diverse backgrounds and the common bond of being adopted. Along with the identity development they experience during this crucial period of life, these assumptions provided a solid foundation for inquiry. Phenomenology allows the researcher to explore these perspectives with deep appreciation (Creswell, 2013). This conceptual framework is rooted in the participant’s “descriptions of the essences of their experiences,” reporting on the common meanings that include “what” and “how” these experiences took place (Creswell, 2013, p. 78). This research process required discernment in the recognition of what is real and imaginary, while explicating how acquired beliefs are perceived or objectively evident (Moustakas, 1994).

Transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to set aside prejudgment, assumptions, and subjectivity to openly view, discern, and learn from each encounter (Moustakas, 1994). Through the systematic process of bracketing, called *epoché*, I consciously eliminated preconceptions, beliefs, and feelings during all phases of design and analysis (Moustakas, 1994). This intuitive-reflective process encouraged insight, moving “beyond the everyday to the pure ego in that everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 32). As parent of three internationally adopted children, one who was an

adolescent when she joined our family and two who were of school age, I recognized that there were assumptions and personal perceptions that must be set aside to fully embrace what participants were sharing. I remain drawn to hearing the stories of those who were adopted internationally as adolescents. The intentional process of expressing my opinions was an essential part of this project through reflective journaling (see Appendix Q).

It is the participants' insights that are most valuable to prospective and current adoptive families, friends, educators, counselors, psychologists, and their communities. At the heart of this research is "an interest in other individuals' stories because they are of worth" (Seidman, 2013, p. 8). To achieve this, participants were encouraged to take on the combined role as a co-researcher. Relinquishing the control and embracing this relationship encouraged joint discovery while emphasizing the personal knowledge that each participant has but has not been able to articulate (Patton, 2015). Participatory research brought out the life, dynamics, and character of experiences, allowing "previously taken for granted meanings of who we are for others, and who they are for us" to rise (Moustakas, 1994, p. 143).

By reducing each experience throughout the international adoptees' journey with full, open, vivid descriptions, we worked together to give textual shape to the content of their lives (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) presented that by allowing the rediscovery "of its essential constituents, variations of perceptions, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colors, and shapes" (p. 34), hidden meanings began to openly resonate. Moving toward the structural differentiation of the experience through imaginative variation, multiple frames of reference provided characteristics of the phenomena, intuitively eliminating the nonessential components to highlight the pure essence (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, Moustakas (1994) stressed the importance of synthesizing the textural and structural descriptions to arrive at the core meaning

of the phenomenon.

Data collection included the review of adoption records, two descriptive identity surveys, semi-structured open-ended interviews, a personal inventory activity, and writing a personal letter of advice to prospective internationally adopted adolescents or their waiting parents. From these documents and conversations, themes were synthesized, integrating the textural-structural descriptions of international adoptees' common experiences and perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). Through these systematic steps, the interpretation ultimately reflected the essence of the identity development journey internationally adopted adolescents experience (Patton, 2015).

### **Research Questions**

Developed from the literature review, the following open-ended questions served as a framework for collecting and analyzing data with respect to understanding the identity development internationally adopted adolescents experience following their arrival in the United States.

**RQ1.** How do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents describe their families (first family, foster/orphanage family or families, adoptive family), sociocultural conditions, relationships, and influential experiences prior to, and following, their arrival in the United States?

**RQ2.** How do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents describe the changes of their perceived external identity dimensions (such as gender, race, culture, and religion) prior to, and following, their arrival in the United States?

**RQ3.** What do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents perceive as being the most prominent challenges during their first five years in the United States and how did they persist through them?



## Setting

Qualitative research is best done in the participant's natural setting (Creswell, 2013). To assist in building rapport, participants must feel comfortable. Establishing a good partnership was crucial to achieve a detailed, rich interview (Seitz, 2016). Some individuals were not residing with their adoptive families, though their surroundings reflected some of the most important aspects of their identity. Personal artifacts highlighted important relationships and experiences in their lives and served to spur discussion (Patton, 2015). These were accounted for through observation and consequent memoing.

Participants lived in all parts of the United States. In 2016 the U.S. Census Bureau placed California, Texas, New York, Florida, and Illinois among the highest receiving states of internationally adopted adolescents over the past five fiscal years, but the distribution was present in all fifty states. I maximized variability by including participants from multiple regions. Each individual had the opportunity to select a setting where they were most comfortable—based only on the suggestion to choose a quiet location that others could not hear them. I traveled to three communities in different states to meet with co-researchers face-to-face. Each elected to meet in public spaces. For their security, and my own, this was an appropriate choice.

The remaining ten participants chose to do video-based interviews (conducted via Skype or WhatsApp) out of convenience. Video-based interviewing also had benefits over a face-to-face meetings and traditional telephone calls. Seeing the participant in their own surrounding often provided additional insight that would have otherwise not been available. Yet, I realized there were many disadvantages that had to be mitigated when conducting video-based interviews. Access to technology on the participants' behalf, poor speed connection, dropped

calls, delays, inaudible segments, limited views of their surroundings, possible disruptions, inability to read body language, and loss of intimacy were all concerns (Seitz, 2016). As such, I considered many of the strategies Seitz (2016) provided to increase the opportunities for successful video-based encounters. These included: (a) the development of a relationship with the participant before the formal interview, via Facebook messenger, texts, and emails; (b) assurance that the latest video-based software version was being used; (c) selection of a stationary setting that was quiet and free of external distractions; (d) a request that the participant speak slowly and clearly, followed with frequent assurance that they were being heard by repeating their words; (e) deliberate expressions and eye contact on my behalf to convey understanding, increase intimacy, and make the participant more comfortable; and (f) the recognition that sensitive questions made it difficult to obtain in-depth responses from participants. It was equally important to determine how comfortable the participants were with technology to determine if a video-based interview was appropriate. All adoptees were in their early twenties, and while it was not assumed that they had the same computer-based knowledge their American-born peers, we did not experience technical barriers. For those few participants who reflected they were nervous, I provided additional encouragement and patience to help them enter the interview with a sense of calmness.

### **Participants**

Internationally adopted children have diverse backgrounds, developmental disparities, and unique needs that must be approached individually (Baker, 2013). Moustakas (1994) explained that participants in this type of human science study should become fully engaged, with sustained “personal and passionate involvement,” to provide “vivid and accurate renderings of their experience rather than measurements, ratings, or scores” (p. 105). Participants in this

study served as co-researchers, influencing the study directly and with significance through their input. Their involvement became an open-ended investigation of truth, knowledge, and understanding of the phenomenon to ensure essence of the experience was fully realized with accuracy (Moustakas, 1994). Purposeful samples illuminated the inquiry of focus (Patton, 2015). Participation was voluntary and chosen based in part on their willingness to serve as co-researchers for understanding their own identity development.

A sample of internationally adopted individuals to the United States who were ages 12–17 years at the time of adoption, had obtained their high school diploma or GED, and were currently 18–26 years old were considered for this study. The chronological age and perceived age for each developmental stage were unique to each person (Brodzinsky et al, 1992). This age range was selected to encourage honest, mature responses while recruiting participants who had likely not yet progressed into full adulthood when procreativity and generativity become the major life focuses (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). I focused on individuals who experienced their first years of life within the biological family unit and had an initial sense of identity while living in their country of origin. As such, those who entered orphan care before the age of 7 were not included. Priority selection was given to those who were in transracial, transethnic, and/or families who had different religious practices from those that the participant experienced in their country of origin. Understanding how adolescents adapt and grow during these challenging situations was of interest.

Expecting older adopted children to develop English proficiency after one or two years of adoption is “unrealistic” (Baker, 2103, p. 233). Therefore, all individuals were required to be residents of the United States for at least five years to increase the likelihood of effective communication and understanding between the participant and the researcher, providing a

timeframe that is reasonably recent for accurate memory recall considering the retrospective nature of this research. It was noted that in some situations, older international adoptees may have been more comfortable speaking in a language other than English, as early memories may have been “encoded in the language in which it was experienced, eliciting an emotional response” (S. Wilson, personal communication, March 27, 2017). This situation was not present, though had there been momentary instances when the language of origin was most comfortable for the participant to communicate in, a translator would have been contacted for assistance after the interview was complete.

Children who receive low quality care in institutions, neglect, malnutrition, decreased sensory opportunities, less environmental complexity, and extreme deprivation are often at a greater risk for neurobehavioral dysfunction (Dalen & Theie, 2012; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005). While not unusual in developing countries, these conditions are commonly found in Eastern Europe (Dalen & Theie, 2012). Social stress is also found to be significantly higher in children from Eastern Europe (Barcons et al., 2012), making it more difficult for adoptees to form meaningful relationships. Orphaned or abandoned children who have experienced such pre-adoption adversity require dedicated studies. Therefore, the participant focus in this study was young adults who were internationally adopted from a non-European country as an adolescent. This delimiting condition was placed on the selection of internationally adopted participants to maximize transferability of findings to a broader population.

The international adoption community is well connected, primarily because of social media outlets and adoption agency groups. Information-rich cases were purposefully selected based on the stated criteria, with a focus to ensure diversity based on country of origin outside of Europe. Responses to the online Biographic Questionnaire (see Appendix E) garnered insight

into potential participants' background and experiences, while expressing the commitment to the project for all parties as co-researchers. Leads for additional participants were expanded through snowball sampling (Patton, 2015). Participants were asked to provide an invitational letter to their friends (see Appendix C) who were also adopted internationally during their adolescent years, providing them with my contact information if they were interested.

A sample size of thirteen individuals was ultimately selected in the study with sampling ceasing once thematic saturation was attained (Creswell, 2013). Pseudonyms were given to protect the confidentiality of all participants, their families, and friends. Demographic descriptions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

*Participant Demographic Information*

| Participant Pseudonym Name | Country of Origin | Gender | Immigration Year to the U.S. | Age at Adoption | Current Age | First Language(s)            |
|----------------------------|-------------------|--------|------------------------------|-----------------|-------------|------------------------------|
| MeiLan                     | China             | Female | 2011                         | 12              | 20          | Mandarin Chinese and Chinese |
| Delilah                    | Ethiopia          | Female | 2009                         | 12              | 21          | Amharic                      |
| Irene                      | Ethiopia          | Female | 2009                         | 12              | 21          | Amharic                      |
| Miki                       | Ethiopia          | Male   | 2009                         | 13              | 21          | Amharic                      |
| Lydia                      | Ethiopia          | Female | 2009                         | 15              | 23          | Tigrinya                     |
| Abraham                    | Uganda            | Male   | 2010                         | 14              | 22          | Ateso and Lugada             |
| Daniel                     | Ethiopia          | Male   | 2009                         | 12              | 20          | Amharic                      |
| Sammy                      | Ethiopia          | Male   | 2010                         | 14              | 21          | Amharic, Ormo, and Shinasha  |

|        |          |        |      |    |    |         |
|--------|----------|--------|------|----|----|---------|
| Alexis | Uganda   | Female | 2010 | 14 | 21 | Luganda |
| Don    | Ethiopia | Male   | 2010 | 17 | 24 | Amharic |
| Ruth   | Ethiopia | Female | 2009 | 13 | 21 | Amharic |
| Amber  | Uganda   | Female | 2011 | 13 | 20 | Luganda |
| Peter  | Ethiopia | Male   | 2012 | 14 | 19 | Amharic |

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### Procedures

This transcendental phenomenology study was focused on understanding the identity development that internationally adopted adolescents experienced through their perspective as now young adults. Emergent in nature (Creswell, 2013), this research explored themes that convey the essence of shared experiences among purposefully chosen internationally adopted adolescents. Framed by Erikson's (1963, 1968) psychosocial development theory and Turner et al.'s (1994) social identity theory, this study considered how individuals define themselves and their social categorization within groups. With the assistance of Jones and McEwen's (2000) Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI), key categories, themes, and contextual influences captured participants' perceptions of their core sense of self. Brodzinsky (1987, 2011; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1992) contributed insight into the complexities and implications of adoption that may be experienced. Participants were encouraged to broadly reflect upon their childhood, their journey to a new family in the United States, their relationships, the challenges they experienced, and the effective support systems that made an impact on who they are as now young adults.

Any undertaking that involves human subjects in research requires special thought and attention to assure the study is guided by ethical principles, respect for participants is present, beneficence is exemplified, and risks are minimized. The research questions, procedures, data collection tools, and participant instructions were reviewed by two experts with doctoral level degrees. The first expert reviewer has considerable experience with young adults, team effectiveness, inter-generational leadership, and international studies. She is a writer, speaker, and an adjunct faculty member at a private Christian university in the Midwest. Her dissertation included the analysis of multiple developmental theories during the critical life stage of adolescence through a phenomenological and grounded theory approach. The second expert reviewer is an associate professor at a medical college and staff psychologist within the international adoption clinic at a major children's hospital. Her specialty is the psychosocial development of children adopted internationally, providing support to families at all stages of the adoption journey. These two individuals offered meaningful feedback for this project. Beyond some edits in wording, they both gave valuable advice on the participant selection criteria, substantive information requested on the Biographic Questionnaire, the readability level of data collection documents, and the crucial importance of being properly prepared for emotionally sensitive issues to arise. Adjustments were made in multiple areas based on their critiques. Both individuals offered their consultation assistance for the duration of the study.

Before collecting any data, approval from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) was acquired. Following IRB approval, I conducted a pilot study with three individuals. The data from these individuals was not included in the actual research study, though they provided valuable feedback to ensure clarity in the procedures and data collection process. Following a brief analysis, a minor change in protocol was requested to adjust the

selection process and fine-tune minor wording within the data collection procedures. IRB approval was quickly granted.

The “launching” of qualitative study is one of the most important aspects of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994, p. 21). Through *epoché*, the reflective journaling process of setting aside preconceptions and assumptions (see Appendix Q), I had the opportunity to engage in this research openly, receptively hearing the experiences of participants. Participants were primarily elicited through social media, parent adoption groups, and snowball sampling procedures. As possible contacts were made, a Microsoft Access database was employed to collect contact details and assign a randomly generated six-digit number for later use in data collection. This system provided an avenue for operationally tracking recruitment communication and ensured follow-up reminders with participants was completed appropriately.

Invitations were posted on adoption related Facebook pages, addressed personally to possible participants via Facebook messenger, or by email (see Appendices B and C) that included the Survey Legend link at the bottom for those who were interested. The following Tweet was also used to generate interest: “Were you adopted from another country as a teenager? Have something to say? Let your story be heard in a cool study! Contact @SusanMSchrank.” All communication was written at fifth to sixth grade reading level to encourage understanding per the suggestion received following expert review.

The Survey Legend link included the informed consent form (see Appendix D) as the first official point of contact with a participant. The informed consent reflected details on the nature and purpose of the study, detailing the responsibilities of both parties while describing their roles as co-researchers. An electronic signature was systematically required prior to allowing the collection of any data. Following the participant’s official acknowledgement,



demographic information via the Biographic Questionnaire (see Appendix E) were requested. This determined their eligibility and interest in becoming co-researchers.

For those who met the selection criteria, adoption records were then requested of each participant to help get a picture of their identity prior to adoption and to confirm their demographics. These records sometimes included details about their biological family or notes from the orphanage or foster family that previously cared for children in their country of origin. Often these personal documents were not available. Instead, participants provided a verification letter (see Appendix G) or a direct message from someone who knew them at the time the adoption took place. At minimum, their country of origin, year of adoption, and approximate age at the time of adoption was substantiated.

Responses for the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI; see Appendix H), along with a Personal Assessment of the EPSI (see Appendix K), was also collected online. These data points and the Interview Questions (see Appendix L) inspired open and in-depth discussions. Following the interview, participants listed attributes and external influences for inclusion on a personal MMPI (see Appendix M). This was initiated with my guidance. Personal mock letters of advice to future adoptees or their parents were the final activity for the participant. All documentation was treated with great respect and confidentiality toward the participant.

### **The Researcher's Role**

I have a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration and Master of Public Administration from a private university in the Midwest. As a military family, we have enjoyed multiple moves both domestically and abroad. Professionally, my experience is equally diverse as a prior executive level manager for a national non-profit organization, school board representative, small business manager, urban charter school business operations manager, and

community volunteer. A Christian worldview is an important aspect of my daily work and ethical standards. I believe that every child can have the opportunity to make the world a better place if given the chance at the right time.

As an adoptive parent of three foreign born children, I am integrated into many social and adoption agency groups that discuss the needs and challenges for orphaned children. Our family's experience has been very positive with few behavioral or mental health complications. Yet, I recognized that many other families are not quite as fortunate. Externalizing behavior problems and anxiety can have a long-term impact on an adolescent's psychological well-being (Gagnon-Oosterwall et al., 2012). I have had direct relationships with young people who are dealing with these issues, and I recognized the pain that some participants were working through. Adoption is challenging. Adopting teenagers raises the bar. Attachment disorders exist, emotions are rampant, personalities collide, decisions are made, and adoptions are sometimes dissolved. The issues that adoptees perceived as impactful were therefore approached with sensitivity and care.

I was aware that my philosophical assumptions and beliefs could influence this qualitative study if they were not properly addressed in advance (Creswell, 2013). I also recognized that "adoption implies not just building a family (their adoptive family), but also losing a family (their birth family)" (Reinoso, Juffer, et al., 2013, p. 265). As the human instrument, my desire was to engage with participants in open, honest discussion to allow them time to richly describe their experiences and relationships to clarify the situations and events which impacted their identity development (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2015). Since the initial introduction to many adoptees was through their parents' or friends' recommendations, relationships were quickly built with openness and trust (Patton, 2015).

Confidentiality was an essential concern of my practices, even between those who had initiated the participant's recommendation. I respected the views of each individual, reporting their experiences and perspectives with appreciation for authenticity and sensitivity (Creswell, 2013).

### **Data Collection**

The conscious, intentional decision of data collection was fundamental to understanding the identity development of internationally adopted adolescents. As co-researchers, participants agreed with the purpose and intent of this investigation (Moustakas, 1994). Multiple sources of data forms were selected to gain an understanding of participants' identities both pre- and post-adoption as well as their perceptions of the relationships and situations that were most significant in their development. This section details the varied data collection tools in the order in which they were implemented. In addition to the Microsoft Access database tracking system I kept, an audit trail (see Appendix R) provides documentation as to when items were received from each participant.

### **Biographical Questionnaire**

Baker (2013) noted that demographic awareness "is essential" for understanding the issues internationally adopted children face (p. 227). Following consent, the initial survey of international adoptees included an online Biographic Questionnaire (see Appendix E) that collected basic contact information, gender identification, origin of birth, year of adoption, age at adoption, country of origin date of birth, U.S. date of birth, language(s) of origin, time in an orphanage or foster care, and grade placement after arriving in the United States. Comparative questions regarding the participant's and adoptive family's ethnic identity, family makeup, and religious preferences were also requested. This information was intended to ensure that

participants met the selection criteria in an effort to represent a diverse adolescent international adoption population sample to best inform the study (Patton, 2015).

The development of this questionnaire was founded on characteristics that are most often used as variables in quantitative research and are prominent aspects of identity. Details such as education level of the parents, contact with others of the same ethnic background or adoptive past, and mental health assistance mirror data found in other studies and that which was collected in the 2010 decennial census (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014), which offers foundational relevant details for future inquiries. This data collection tool received constructive feedback from experts who understand adolescents and/or the international adoption community. Specific details pertain to this population are unique such as multiple first languages, the lack of an accurate date of birth, and time spent in an orphanage or foster care. This survey was also included in the pilot study and was analyzed for face and content validity.

#### Biographic Questionnaire (Online)

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

First Name at Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

If different, who chose to change your name?  My parents  I did  Other

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Current City/State: \_\_\_\_\_ Year Immigrated to US: \_\_\_\_\_

How old were you when you were adopted? \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_ Country of Origin Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Age: \_\_\_\_\_ U.S. Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:  Female  Male  Other Self Identifying Category

Did you spend time in an orphanage?  No  Yes

Approximately when? \_\_\_\_\_ For how many years? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you spend time in a foster family?  No  Yes

Approximately when? \_\_\_\_\_ For how many years? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the status of your birth mother:  Deceased  Still living  Unknown

What is the status of your birth father:  Deceased  Still living  Unknown

Are your adopted parents currently married?  No  Yes  Other  N/A

Parent #1 Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Parent #2 Age: \_\_\_\_\_ or N/A

Your primary first language spoken in your country of origin: \_\_\_\_\_

Other Languages Spoken: \_\_\_\_\_

Education grade when you first entered a US school:  1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grade  
 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade  9<sup>st</sup> grade  10<sup>th</sup> grade  11<sup>th</sup> grade  12<sup>th</sup> grade

Did you go to a:  Home School  Public or Charter School  Private School

Level of English upon arriving in the United States:

Basic words  Enough to get by  Conversational knowledge  Proficient

Did you graduate from High School or obtain a GED?

Yes, I received a High School Diploma  Yes, I received a GED

If yes, what year did you received your High School diploma or GED? \_\_\_\_\_

No, I did not receive a High School diploma or GED

Are you currently working full or part time?

Yes, I am currently working full time  Yes, I am currently working part time

No, I am not currently working full or part time

Did you attend college or complete a college degree or trade school certificate program?

Yes, I completed a bachelor's degree program (B.S., or B.A.)

Yes, I completed an associate's degree program (A.S., or A.A.)

Yes, I completed a technical certificate program

Yes, I am currently taking classes towards a degree or certificate

No, I attended classes but did not finish a degree or certificate program

No, I did not receive any additional education after high school

Which category best describes your race?  Black/African American  White  Asian

American Indian/Alaskan Native  Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander  Other

Which categories best describes your adoptive parent's race?

Parent #1:  Black/African American  White  Asian

American Indian/Alaskan Native  Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander  Other

Parent #2:  N/A  Black/African American  White  Asian  
 American Indian/Alaskan Native  Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander  Other

Highest level of education of you adoptive parents:

Parent #1:  No Diploma/GED  High School Diploma/GED  Some College  
 Associate's/Bachelor's Degree  Master's/Professional Degree  Doctoral Degree  
 Parent #2:  N/A  No Diploma/GED  High School Diploma/GED  
 Some College  Associate's/Bachelor's Degree  Master's/Professional Degree  
 Doctoral Degree

Do you practice some form of religion?  No  Yes

If yes, how would you describe it? \_\_\_\_\_

Is your adopted parent's religion different from your beliefs?

No, we generally believe the same things  
 Yes, our beliefs are very different

If yes, how are they different? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have biological siblings?  No  Yes      Age(s) of biological siblings: \_\_\_\_\_

Does your adoptive family have other children?  No  Yes      How many? \_\_\_\_\_

Are other children in your family adopted?  No  Yes      Age(s) of siblings: \_\_\_\_\_

Are the children in your adoptive family the same race as you?

No  Some are/Some not  Yes  Not applicable

Do you have relationships with people who still live in your country of origin?  No  Yes

Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

Besides family members, do you have relationships with other internationally adopted individuals?  No  Yes, but not very close  Yes, we remain in close contact

Since arriving in the United States, have you received any counseling?

No  Yes  Prefer Not to Answer

Why do you want to be involved in this study? \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred Video Messaging:  Skype  WhatsApp  Google  ooVoo  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Please freely explain any of the above answers. You may also communicate any comments, concerns or questions you have at this time.

### **Adoption Records Review**

Adoption records provided a behind-the-scenes look at each adoptee's pre-adoptive circumstances and biographical history. Adoption records may have also stimulated reflections, recalled memories, and elicited stories of the past (Patton, 2015). Participants were asked to send copies of these records electronically, reaching out to family members as necessary. If technology skills, internet access, or other issues were a barrier for doing so (Patton, 2015), hardcopies could have been provided in person at the interview or sent via registered mail.

Ultimately, the participants' privacy and confidentiality were fully respected. This was a sensitive issue for some adoptees, particularly for those who did not have access to their adoption records. It also was understood that this international documentation may have had significant variability or inaccurate information. Translated versions did not always include important details. Individuals who were not able or willing to forward their adoption records were provided an alternative opportunity to confirm their origin. It was still important for their stories to be heard. Yet, something was minimally needed to verify the timeframe of their adoption and country of origin. Therefore, when international pre-adoption records (e.g., birth certificate, resident card, passport, adoption certificate) were not available, a verification letter (see Appendix G) or electronic message from a guardian/parent, qualified friend, or adoption representative was accepted in its absence to confirm basic details. Only three of the thirteen participants provided legal adoption documentation. Three adoptees had emotionally and physically distanced themselves from their legal adoptive families and did not have access to these documents. These individuals, and the remaining seven participants, asked a parent or close friend to verify their country of origin, age at adoption, confirmation of their high school graduation, and their current age.

## Assessing Identity

The EPSI (Rosenthal et al., 1981) is a self-reported survey that was completed online by each participant prior to their interview (see Appendix H). Rosenthal et al. (1981) developed this tool based on the first six of Erikson's stages to provide a respondent's profile. Via Survey Legend, this assessment was completed electronically using a 5-point Likert-type scale to measure "respondents' resolution of the conflicts associated within the first six psychological stages described by Erikson" (Rosenthal et al., 1981, p. 533). The subscale areas of *trust*, *autonomy*, *initiative*, *industry*, *identity*, and *intimacy* had twelve randomly ordered statements for participants to indicate their level of agreement (Rosenthal et al., 1981; see Appendix I).

The inventory was previously compared with results against Greenberger and Sorensen's (1974) Psychosocial Maturity Inventory (PSM) for validity and reliability. Properties were found to be reasonably acceptable (Rosenthal et al., 1981). While Thornburg, Ispa, Adams, and Lee (1992) indicated in their study that the cumulative hierarchical premise of the model should be questioned, they recognize that "a Type 1 error could be considered" (Thornburg et al., 1992, p. 435). They further discussed that the EPSI should be completed and analyzed with other samples of participants (Thornburg et al., 1992). It is in part due to these conflicts that multiple sources of data were collected in this study.

### Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (Online)

Thank you for continuing in this journey to understand the identity development of internationally adopted adolescents. The following questionnaire helps determine your identity development. Please honestly select the most representative response for each of the following statements. There are no wrong answers. We will discuss your responses during the interview process.

Assigned six digit number: \_\_\_\_\_



| Hardly Ever True  | Sometimes True | True | Mostly True | Almost Always True |
|---|----------------|------|-------------|--------------------|
| 1   | 2              | 3    | 4           | 5                  |
| 1) I am able to take things as they come                            |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 2) I can't make sense of my life                                    |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 3) I wish I had more self-control                                   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 4) I get embarrassed when someone begins to tell me personal things |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 5) I can't make up my own mind about things                         |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 6) I change my opinion of myself a lot                              |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 7) I am able to be first with new ideas                             |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 8) I'm never going to get on in this world                          |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 9) I'm ready to get involved with a special person                  |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 10) I've got a clear idea of what I want to be                      |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 11) I feel mixed up   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 12) I find the world a very confusing place                         |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 13) I know when to please myself and when to please others          |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 14) The important things in life are clear to me                    |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 15) I don't seem to be able to achieve my ambitions                 |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 16) I don't seem to have the ability that most others have got      |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 17) I've got it together  |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 18) I know what kind of person I am                                 |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 19) I worry about losing control of my feelings                     |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 20) I have few doubts about myself                                  |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 21) I rely on other people to give me ideas                         |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 22) I don't enjoy working   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 23) I think I must be basically bad                                 |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 24) Other people understand me                                      |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 25) I'm a hard worker   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 26) I feel guilty about many things                                 |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 27) I'm warm and friendly   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 28) I really believe in myself                                      |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 29) I can't decide what I want to do with my life                   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 30) It's important to me to be completely open with my friends      |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 31) I find that good things never last long                         |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 32) I feel I am a useful person to have around                      |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 33) I keep what I really think and feel to myself                   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 34) I'm an energetic person who does lots of things                 |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 35) I'm trying hard to achieve my goals                             |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 36) Things and people usually turn out well for me                  |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 37) I have a strong sense of what it means to be female/male               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 38) I think the world and people in it are basically good                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 39) I am ashamed of myself   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 40) I'm good at my work  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 41) I think it's crazy to get too involved with people                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 42) People are out to get me   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 43) I like myself and am proud of what I stand for                         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 44) I don't really know what I'm all about                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 45) I can't stand lazy people  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 46) I can stop myself from doing things I shouldn't be doing               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 47) I find myself expecting the worst to happen                            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 48) I care deeply for others   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 49) I find I have to keep up a front when I'm with people                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 50) I find myself denying things even though they are true                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 51) I don't really feel involved   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 52) I waste a lot of my time messing about                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 53) I'm as good as other people  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 54) I like to make my own choices  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 55) I don't feel confident of my judgement                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 56) I'm basically a loner  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 57) I cope very well   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 58) I'm not much good at things that need brains or skill                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 59) I have a close physical and emotional relationship with another person | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 60) I stick with things until they're finished                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 61) I'm a follower rather than a leader                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 62) I can stand on my own two feet   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 63) I find it hard to make up my mind                                      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 64) I trust people   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 65) I like my freedom and don't want to be tied down                       | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 66) I like new adventures  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 67) I prefer not to show too much of myself to others                      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 68) I don't get things finished  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 69) I like finding out about new things or places                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 70) I don't get much done  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 71) Being alone with other people makes me feel uncomfortable              | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 72) I find it easy to make close friends                                   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

From “From trust to intimacy: A new inventory for examining Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development,” by D. A. Rosenthal et al., 1981, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 10(6), 525–537. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix J).

Following the completion of the 72 EPSI questions, participants were guided to the personal assessment (see Appendix K) section of this phase within the Survey Legend platform. On each slide-bar question, participants were provided favorable and unfavorable outcome statements of each of the six psychological stages evaluated on the EPSI along with the inclusion of the last two stages of Erikson’s life cycle, *generativity* and *integrity*, in random order. On the Personal Assessment of the EPSI, participants scored between 1 and 10 to reflect their associated perceived identity status for each developmental stage.

#### Personal Assessment of the EPSI (Online)

Thank you for continuing in this journey to understand the identity development of internationally adopted adolescents. The following questionnaire helps determine your identity development. Please honestly select the most representative response for each of the following statements. There are no wrong answers. We will discuss your responses during the interview process.

Assigned six digit code number: \_\_\_\_\_

|  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|
| 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6   | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| I see myself as a unique and integrated person                       |   |   |   |   | I am conflicted as to who I really am.                                  |   |   |   |    |
| _____  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6   | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| I experience a sense of inferiority at understanding and organizing. |   |   |   |   | I have an ability to learn how things work, to understand and organize. |   |   |   |    |
| _____  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6   | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| I have concern for family and society.                               |   |   |   |   | I am primarily concerned for my own well-being.                         |   |   |   |    |
| _____  |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |   |    |
| 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6   | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
| I have the ability to make loving relationships with others.         |   |   |   |   | I do not have strong loving relationships with others.                  |   |   |   |    |

|  |   |   |   |   |  |   |   |   |    |  |   |   |   |    |
|--|---|---|---|---|--|---|---|---|----|--|---|---|---|----|
| 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6  | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |  |   |   |   |    |
| I am a self-starter.   |   |   |   |   | I have a sense of guilt to be on my own.             |   |   |   |    |  |   |   |   |    |
|  |   |   |   |   | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  | 6  | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|  |   |   |   |   | I have faith in the environment and future events.   |   |   |   |    | I am very suspicious and fear future events. |   |   |   |    |
| 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6  | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |  |   |   |   |    |
| I have a strong sense of integrity and personal fulfillment. |   |   |   |   | I am dissatisfied with life and filled with despair. |   |   |   |    |  |   |   |   |    |
|  |   |   |   |   | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  | 6  | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|  |   |   |   |   | I have a strong sense of self-control and adequacy.  |   |   |   |    | I have feelings of shame and self-doubt.     |   |   |   |    |

### Semi-Structured Interviews

The process of collecting information from participants through semi-structured, open-ended, in-depth interviews is essential to phenomenology (Creswell, 2013). A laptop computer and mobile phone recorded and captured the discussions, regardless if they were done in person or via video. Interviews were approached as a collaborative effort, giving participants the power to express what was most important to them (Patton, 2015). An equitable, effective interviewing relationship was sought through respect, sensitivity to trigger issues, conscious awareness of tension, and my desire to reflect genuine interest in the co-researchers' well-being (Seidman, 2013). Respondents were able to openly "express their own understandings in their own terms" (Patton, 2015, p. 441). Due to the conversational nature of these meetings, comments were consistently clarified as they occurred until a full understanding of the topic under discussion was achieved by both the primary researcher and co-researcher. Interviews ranged in length

between 58 minutes and almost three hours based on availability and openness of the participant.

#### Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. How did you come to live in this family? What does adoption mean to you? How would you describe your experience?
2. Do you talk to others about being adopted? Do you like to talk about it? Why or why not?
3. How would you describe yourself prior to your adoption? How would other people describe you as a child?
4. What do you remember about life in your country of origin? What did it look like? Who were the influential people in your life? What do you miss the most? Are there certain sounds, smells, or images that remind you of your country of origin?
5. Do you feel connected or disconnected with your birth country? Please explain.
6. How would you describe yourself now as a person? What are your most important characteristics?
7. How have you changed since arriving in the United States? What would you like to change as you get older?
8. What does family mean to you? How is your family today different than it was prior to your adoption? Describe your adoptive family.
9. Describe the day you met your adoptive family. What sights, sounds, and images can you recall? What do you remember about your arrival in the United States?
10. Describe what you remember from your first year in the United States. What was the most difficult part of adjusting? Tell me about a significant moment or person.
11. What is most important to you now? Why?

12. Who are the most influential people in your life? Why?
13. What is the best part about your life? How does it compare to others around you?
14. Describe the people you spend time with. What are they like? What do you like to do?
15. What do you wish you could change about your life since your adoption?
16. What do you think your life will look like in five years? What are your hopes and dreams?
17. Do you imagine that you will visit your country of origin in the future? If so, what would you imagine that trip to be like? Who would you take with you? Who/what would you like to visit?

Each adoption story was uniquely personal. Questions 1, 2, and 8 attempted to develop an understanding of the participant's attitude about adoption and how their biological and adoptive families have influenced their current sense of self. They were intended to be communication starters. These questions approached Brodzinsky et al.'s (1992) concerns that are present within adoption identity development as the participant considers who they are in relation to others. Additionally, the quality and significance of relational connectedness the participant has with their biological and/or adoptive families, friends, and social communities is considered by some researchers to be the "fundamental motif of their understanding of human phenomena" (van Manen, 2014, p. 303). Similarly, questions 4 and 5 examined the impact their country of origin and the individuals who they were closest to during their early years have on their current identity. As Bazuin-Yoder (2011) believed, it is not possible to separate one's past identity formation, "because it serves as the literal and figurative soil from which all other ideas and meanings grow" (p. 88). The participant was invited to consider the extent of these influences.

Brodzinsky et al. (1992) defined self-concept as “how children see themselves” and self-esteem as “how much they like what they see” (p. 62). Being adopted complicates both images. Questions 3, 6, and 7 inquired on how the participant described their personal characteristics in the past, how they may have changed since being adopted, and what they are working toward. Maturity certainly plays a role in this development. Other questions consider how these characteristics were influenced.

Seeking the participant’s subjective reconstruction of their experience is at the heart of phenomenology (Seidman, 2013). Yet, the experiences international adoptees had during their early years of development may consciously or subconsciously affect their memories (Bazuin-Yoder, 2011). Questions 9 and 10 directly addressed the participant’s perception of their adoption journey within a time frame. Questions that elicit responses based on specific moments are particularly valuable for discovering experiential details (van Manen, 2014). In the process of asking participants for contextual background within their stories, they were less constrained by memory issues, thereby building their story rather than attempting to recall it (Seidman, 2013). At times questions brought about traumatic moments of being overwhelmed and feeling vulnerable. Question 15 built upon these responses by asking how things could have been better, and question 13 encouraged the participant to recognize the positive aspects of their surroundings. The emergence of future hope, as addressed in question 16, is a strength that represents a “sense of irrevocable identity” associated by Erikson and Erikson (1997, p. 79) to the infancy stage. It is therefore an essential value during adolescence for which the individual builds a capacity to trust themselves and move forward to sequential psychosocial stages.

When internationally adopted adolescents leave their country of origin, they must assimilate, integrate, separate, or reject the identity development process that has begun (Bazuin-

Yoder, 2011). The new groups of people who become involved in their daily lives impact that transition process and the saliency of their identifying characteristics. Who they choose to spend time with may be an indicator on what they care most about as participants selectively define themselves based on the “permeability of group boundaries and the security of intergroup relations” (Haslam et al., 2012, p. 204). Questions 11, 12, and 14 addressed the people and influences in their life, providing an opportunity to reflect on why they have importance and meaning.

As with the other data collection tools, all interview questions received expert review. Question 17 was added verbatim by a reviewer as it adds to understanding the participant’s desire to reconnect with, or more deeply explore, their country of origin. The integration of the adoptee’s original cultural heritage and the emerging facets being discovered in the United States may be closely related to the relationships participants have with their adoptive parents (Noy-Sharav, 2005). This question continued the mission of addressing the multiple layers of personal and social identity development and where the participant is within this process.

### **Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI)**

The MMDI (Jones & McEwen, 2000) represents the significant identity dimensions and contextual influences that illustrate an individual’s core sense of self. Jones and McEwen (2000) recognized personal attributes and characteristics such as gender, economic class, sexual orientation, professional status, religion, culture, and race as the most prominent intersecting social identities. Relative saliency is demonstrated by how close to the core each dimension is placed with the notation of contextual influences, such as family background, experiences, and sociocultural conditions, externally surrounding the model (Abes et al., 2007; Jones & McEwen,



2000). Jones and McEwen (2000) recognized social identity orientation is uniquely defined; therefore, a variety of notions may be highlighted by an individual.

At the completion of the interview, the MMDI (Jones & McEwen, 2000) was presented to participants in person or via email if the interview was done from a distance (see Appendix M), inviting them to draw a personal MMDI. With my guidance, participants considered the contextual attributes and social characteristics that were central to their sense of identity. Individual were asked to create a list self-described labels that they perceived as being the most important in their life. Examples may have included gender, race, religion, ethnicity, social class, or sexual orientation. They had two options to complete this task. A minimum of five priority labels were requested as descriptives of their personal dimension of identity. Some placed these descriptives directly on the intersectional framework, illuminating a pictorial image of their core personal dimensions of identity. Others simply created a listing, highlighting those that they believed were the most essential. Participants then drafted a second list of external influences that impacted who they are and how they act. Examples of these influences might include family, religious organizations, community groups, their employer/school, or friends. At this point, the participant also selected their pseudonym for the remaining two activities.

#### Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI)

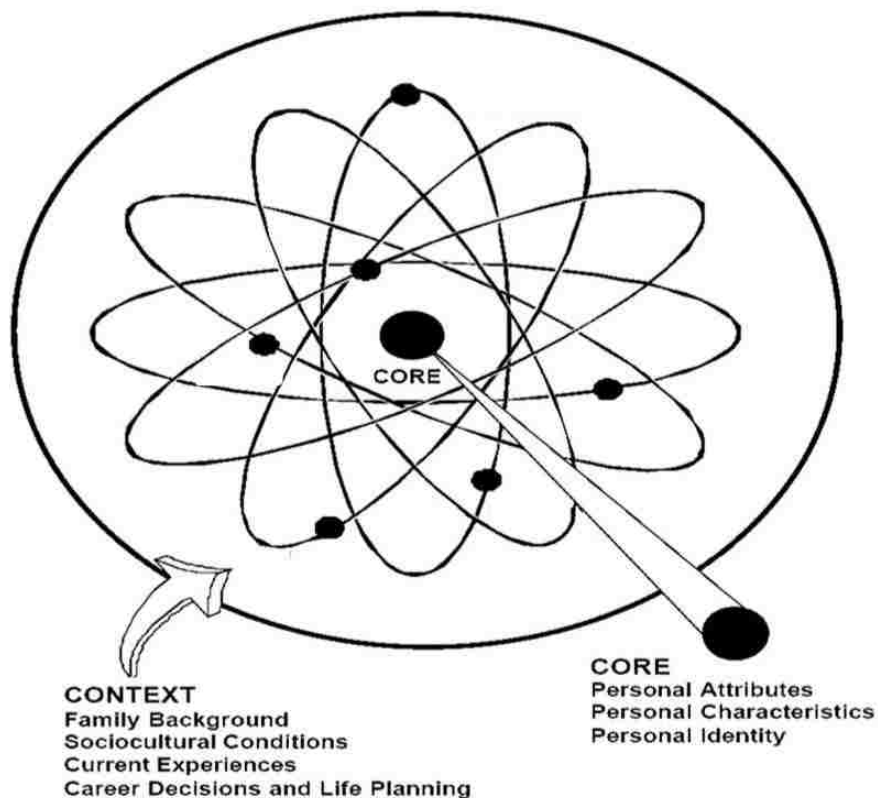
Step 1: Make a list of the words that you would use to describe yourself. These labels are called personal attributes and characteristics. Examples to think about may be your gender, race, religion, ethnicity, social class, or sexual orientation.

Step 2: Using these words, select at least five labels. Place them on the below model to create a picture of your core identity.

Step 3: Make a second list of the other influences in your life. These may include your family, religious organizations, community groups, employer/school, or your friends.

Step 4: Write these labels on the outside of the circle.

Pseudonym Name: \_\_\_\_\_



From “Reconceptualizing the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity: The role of meaning-making capacity in the construction of multiple identities,” by E. S. Abes et al., 2007, *Journal of College Student Development*, 48, p. 4. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix N).

### **Personal Letters of Advice**

To gain an additional personal perspective, participants were asked to write letters of advice to prospective adoptees or to parents who are considering adopting an adolescent internationally (see Appendix O). Participants were asked to communicate their challenges, the experiences that were most meaningful to them throughout their adolescent years, and information on what can be done to help an international adolescent adoptee adjust. They were able to include anything they had learned about themselves. To assure confidentiality, I requested that they not include any specific names in their writing. Most often their document

was sent as an attachment or link via email, though was signed with their previously selected pseudonym. A brief follow-up phone call or text message was conducted when follow-up was needed.

### Personal Letters of Advice

The last phase of the data collection process is writing a mock letter to a prospective adoptive parent of an international adolescent or directly to a prospective international adolescent adoptee. Take a moment to reflect on what we have discussed in our interview and what you have learned about your identity. This is a chance to openly share your thoughts on your experience as an international adolescent adoptee. You can write anything you wish, but please do NOT include any specific names in your letter. Please sign it with your pseudonym name.

Please type your response as a Microsoft Word document and email it to [sschrank@liberty.edu](mailto:sschrank@liberty.edu) in the next seven days. This should take less than 30 minutes to complete.

Here are some prompts to consider as you begin:

- What would you have wanted to know as an adolescent adoptee coming to the United States?
- What challenges should international adolescent adoptees be ready for?
- Describe the people who positively influenced your first years in the United States.
- How can the transition be easier for international adolescent adoptees?
- Explain what your largest challenge was during your first years in the United States.
- How did you get through your most difficult day at school?
- What are you most grateful for since your adoption?
- How has your life changed? How have you changed?
- What encouraging words can you share to help adoptive families adjust?

### **Data Analysis**

While *epoché* is essential prior to collecting data, this conscious refrain continued through data analysis, allowing the phenomenon to be viewed with a fresh, naïve, open sense, “from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 33). As

Moustakas (1994) clarified, “each experience is considered in its singularity, in and for itself” (p. 34). The removal of my own experiential understandings and presuppositions through personal journaling was essential through each part of the analysis phase.

Upon electronically receiving the Informed Consent and Biographic Questionnaire (see Appendix E) from participants, descriptive details were compared and analyzed to assure the selection criterion was met. This process was completed by importing their raw survey data into a Microsoft Access form. A focused review of country of origin, current age, adoption age, high school/GED status, graduation year, and year of immigration was the first tier of requirement. Secondary selection was considered based on transracial adoption, religious differences, and if English was not their primary language. Those who did not meet the selection requirements were sent an email or Facebook message, depending on how communication was established, thanking them for their interest and response (see Appendix F). Those who remained as participants were contacted notifying them of their preliminary selection with a request for copies of their adoption records or the verification response within one week. An additional review was conducted to compare details on their legal documentation (e.g., country of origin, age at adoption, current age, and any personal details) with their Biographic Questionnaire responses. Significant details were highlighted on both sets of documents and coded accordingly. A portrait of their pre-adoptive identity began to take place through this first step of the triangulation process. It was important to remain open to “see what is, just as it is, and explicate what is in its own terms” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41). These documents confirmed participants met the selection criteria and provided insight as to how their past contributed to their identity process, which was of primary interest.

Building an image of the participant's current development stage provided meaningful insight into their perspectives. An analysis of the self-reported EPSI (see Appendix H) was conducted to form a better understanding of the development status of each international adoptee. The EPSI "measures respondents' resolution of conflicts associated with the first six psychosocial stages described by Erikson" (Rosenthal et al., 1981, p. 533). As each participant completed their EPSI, raw data was imported into Microsoft Access. This program categorized each development stage (see Appendix I) and conducted automated calculations (see Appendix S), including reverse scoring when required. With selections from 1 "Hardly Ever True" through 5 "Almost Always True," possible subscale scores ranged from 12 to 60, and total scores ranged from 72 to 360. Mean scores were calculated individually and collectively (see Appendix T). Higher values relate to the resolution of crisis within that stage.

The participant's Personal Assessment of the EPSI (see Appendix K) possible subscale scores ranged from 1 to 10, providing a secondary source of information on development stage. For comparison, these scores were divided by 2. Subscales from the EPSI and Personal Assessment were compared side-by-side using Microsoft Access as a reporting function (see Appendix S). The results from the EPSI and the Personal Assessment were shared with the co-researchers for comparative joint analysis following the collection of all data steps. I created simple line graphs to portray responses for both identity assessments individually (see Appendix U) and for the EPSI collectively (see Appendix V). These tools were helpful in analyzing identity development similarities among participants.

Semi-structured, open-ended interview questions were transcribed verbatim by myself apart from identifiable information that was redacted for confidentiality. As follow up was required, discussions were similarly transcribed. Essential mail and message correspondence

was also collected within memos. Accuracy of transcription was examined through individual member checking by the co-researchers. The participant's personal MMPI was reduced, after analyzing the self-perceived identity labels, along with the top three contextual influences, that were mentioned in the interview process. Discussions surrounding this activity were also transcribed. Letters of advice from the participants were read with reflection on their meaning and ideas.

Understanding that there were significant time demands requested of participants in this study, I analyzed incomplete data sets on individuals if they had minimally accomplished each step through the semi-structured interview. At that point, I had a solid understanding of the experiences and development of the individual. While the MMPI and letters of advice provided deeper supplementary insight to their perspectives, the initial pieces allowed significant enough information to reveal the essence of their identity journey. Eleven of the participants completed all aspects of the data collection process.

All interview transcripts and participant data collection documents were uploaded into NVivo 11 Pro for data organization and coding automation to assist with the coding and analysis process as they were received. While multiple well-established Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) programs are available, NVivo is more widely chosen for phenomenology studies; for educational purposes; and for research that uses interview data, documents, or surveys/questionnaires than ATLAS.ti, the other CAQDAS tool with the longest history (Woods, Paulus, Atkins, & Macklin, 2016). It should be stressed that software is just a tool that supports the analysis process—it does not do the work or the thinking for the researcher (Tummons, 2014). CAQDAS furnishes a data management system that is convenient for the user and increases transparency, while improving accuracy, consistency, and efficiency

(Tummons, 2014; Woods et al., 2016; Zamawe, 2015). This software also allows the researcher to “engage in analytical practices extending beyond the limits of manual/paper-based techniques, most notably to support coding and retrieval of data, differentiate coding data by participant characteristics, and investigate conceptual relationships” (Woods et al., 2016, p. 610).

Furthermore, “NVivo has features such as character-based coding, rich text capabilities, and multimedia functions that are crucial for qualitative data management” (Zamawe, 2015, p. 13). These functions enhance the visibility of the steps employed and therefore the robustness of a study (Tummons, 2014).

Moustakas (1994) wrote: “descriptions keep a phenomenon alive, illuminate its presences, accentuate its underlying meanings, enable the phenomenon to linger, retain its spirit, as near to its actual nature as possible” (p. 59). Individual interview transcriptions, memos, and the personal letters of advice were reread multiple times, pulling significant statements, sentences, and quotes out of the text while clustering them into meaningful themes (Moustakas, 1994). Verbatim statements from participants were included to reflect the wholeness of their perceptions (Moustakas, 1994). During the first pass of all data collection tools, there were over a thousand highlights that were eventually combined and reduced to 392. From there, the concept of horizontalization encouraged me to consider these statements and description as equal (Moustakas, 1994). NVivo assisted in this process by providing a listing of all identified items. Intentional and intuitive reduction occurred. This process allowed relevant expressions that described and clarified essential situations, intentional experiences, events, and relationships to remain, while overlapping and irrelevant statements were eliminated (Moustakas, 1994). Broad thematic statements relating to positive contributions and barriers to adjustment rose directly out of the data through this reduction, providing textural descriptions. I worked to eliminate bias,

presumptions, and speculations by “reaching a transcendental state of freshness and openness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 41) through journaling and limiting time and focus on specific participants’ data sets.

A reflective phase that considered underlying possible meanings, themes, or contexts through imaginative variation then took place, seeking various “frames of reference, employing polarities and reversals, and approaching the phenomenon from divergent perspectives, different positions, roles, or functions” (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 97–98). These structural descriptions provided insight on “the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (Patton, 2015, p. 82). Clusters of meaning were coded into interpretive categories. This information, which was primarily generated from the transcripts, letters of advice, and memos, was then triangulated with data reported within the identity assessments and MMPI collection tools. Through constant comparative analysis, each set of data was synthesized, integrating the textural-structural descriptions of international adoptees’ common experiences. The task of sorting, reducing, and eliminating duplicated findings continued until a unified statement with a clear understanding of the phenomenon’s essence was revealed (Moustakas, 1994). The Theme Reduction Table is found in Appendix W.

### **Trustworthiness**

Lincoln and Guba (1985) recognized that the strategies employed through qualitative inquiry are dependent upon the “flexibility, insight, and ability to build on tacit knowledge that is the peculiar province of the human instrument” (p. 113). Ensuring that the interpretation of data is truthful was a complex process founded in the researcher’s beliefs, practices, and traditions (Schwandt et al., 2007). Therefore, the research design purposefully considered the four critical aspects of trustworthiness, which included credibility, dependability, confirmability, and



transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Addressing the techniques and perspectives that were implemented throughout this study operationally established the justifications of its findings.

### **Credibility**

To authentically represent the experiences of participants, I spent significant time engaging with them in various ways. Semi-structured interviews were the primary means of collecting their perspectives, but through the review of adoption records, identity assessments, MMPI, and the advice letters participants wrote, prominent concepts were clarified (Schwandt et al., 2007). This triangulation of data has been an important aspect of credibility (Patton, 2015). Attentiveness to the “cultural, political, social, linguistic, and ideological origin” of the participants, as well as my own perspective, was likewise necessary for proper analysis (Patton, 2015, p. 381). To reduce bias, reflective journaling (see Appendix Q) was employed to record my thoughts and assumptions (Moustakas, 1994). Via the member checking process, each participant was given an opportunity to review, edit, and approve their individual transcripts and their participant section narrative for accuracy prior to its use in the study. Additional contact was made when clarification of their background, insights, or comments were needed during the analysis process. As co-researchers, they also had the opportunity review and comment on the final representation of the findings.

### **Dependability and Confirmability**

Schwandt et al. (2007) recognized the importance of establishing dependability and confirmability through an examination of the process and product results that is possible through an audit trail. Data collection procedures were recorded on the Audit Trail (see Appendix R), and the researcher’s views to clarify biases were detailed on the Reflexive Journal (see Appendix Q) to provide transparency of the data analysis process. These sections of the study provided the

external auditor a vision for study replication and confirmed its practical compliance.

Additionally, two individuals with familiarity with transcendental phenomenology, adolescent development, or adoption also presented an objective look at the study's process to increase the rigor of the methodology for dependability and reliability. Furthermore, promises to participants were kept. I was attentive and listened with sensitivity and respect to the co-researchers and the information being provided. Communication was prompt, and scheduled meetings met time commitment expectations. Preserving their sense of trust was an essential component of our ongoing relationship.

### **Transferability**

To provide an opportunity for this research to be applied in other circumstances, thick, rich, descriptive information was provided (Schwandt et al., 2007; Patton, 2015). By maximizing the variation of participants by gender, country of origin (excluding those adopted from Eastern European countries), and geographical placement within the United States, it was my intent that data collected within this study can be applied to similar findings elsewhere.

### **Ethical Considerations**

In addition to trustworthiness, ethical principles were at the foundation of all research with human participants (Moustakas, 1994). Honesty and trust were consistently valued above research outcomes. Beginning with IRB approval, communication procedures were followed as outlined in the informed consent form (see Appendix D). The consent form was the initial point of contact with individuals, and no data was sought out prior to its execution. Participants volunteered their time and opened their lives to some questions that may have been emotional or difficult to answer. Helping the co-researchers manage their emotional burden as sensitive topics arose throughout the interview process was imperative. Those who notated on their Biographic

Questionnaire that they had previously received professional counseling were encouraged to reach out to their counselors. For those who did not have this resource, I was prepared to assist them in finding a local resource. A listing of counseling and crisis phone numbers was readily available and was provided when it was needed (see Appendix O). I have followed up with participants to promote this communication in two cases, but it is up to the individual to make the initiative.

Participants were allowed to withdraw at any time during the investigation. This option was communicated in the written consent form and discussed during the interview process. One individual chose not to complete the personal advice letter, and another decided to withdraw following the interview. Pseudonyms were provided for all participants, sites, and adoption agencies, allowing them to speak openly while preserving their sense of dignity (Moustakas, 1994). Potentially harmful information was not disclosed except in cases where illegal activities were present and required reporting by law (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

To further ensure confidentiality, all electronic files and digital recordings were password protected, and paper documentation was contained in locked file cabinets. Throughout the study, a visual “data collection matrix” was created to locate and identify information while physically separating participant details (Creswell, 2013, p. 175). Data was secured and will remain stored for three years following the dissertation publication. Information will be accessible only to me as per federal regulation.

Participants did not receive any direct benefits from taking part in this study, though it was hoped that participants gain insight and appreciation of their own identity development process. The opportunity to share one’s experiences contributed to the understanding of others in the adoption community, likely impacting the psychological health of international adolescent

adoptees and their families in the future. Written documentation (see Appendix D) detailed the purpose of the study, how results could be used, and the minimal risks involved.

Since I have an association with many adoptive parents, setting personal boundaries was an important aspect of my role. While topics were sensitive and engaging, the relationship between researcher and participant did not overstep into a counseling or advisory role (Patton, 2015). I likewise would not be an intermediary among participants, their adoptive parents, or friends. Therapeutic relationships were avoided as I was there to learn, not to provide guidance (Seidman, 2013). If traumatic or emotionally troubling situations arose that needed professional consultation, I assisted participants in contacting a counselor via a crisis resource (see Appendix P). For those that listed prior counseling on the Biographic Questionnaire, I encouraged them to make an appointment with someone that could meet their emotional or psychological needs.

I limited the details of my family's personal international adoption story with participants unless I was asked. This allowed a greater opportunity for the participant to reflect on their own meaningful thoughts and experiences (Creswell, 2013). Providing my children a sense of privacy was also important to me. Recognizing the impact social media has, I was aware of the conflicts my own children may face. I refrained from including their immediate friends to reduce possible conflicts of interest.

### **Summary**

A purposeful sample of young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents from non-European countries were invited to participate in this study. Their pre-adoptive background, along with the meaningful relationships and situations that impacted their lives, provided rich descriptions of participants' perspectives. Data collection was focused on understanding the identity development internationally adopted adolescents experience.

Biographic questionnaires, adoption verification documents, self-reported psychosocial inventories, individual semi-structured interviews, a personal MMPI diagram of identity characteristics, and letters of advice to prospective international adoptees provided the necessary data to further understand this phenomenon. The *epoché* process was an essential component of all phases in this research, requiring an intentional and consistent reflection of past thinking. Following the steps for transcendental phenomenological analysis as described by Moustakas (1994), the identification of significant statements was captured from the data and clustered into themes. Textural and structural descriptions were synthesized, providing a basis for understanding the essence of the journey that internationally adopted adolescents experience toward developing identity (Moustakas, 1994).

Establishing trustworthiness through measures to increase credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, while also considering ethical standards, was foundational to decisions made throughout the research process. Presenting my personal values, biases, assumptions, and experiences clarified my role as the researcher. Ultimately, my goal was to respectfully collect and analyze data, reflecting the meaning and essence of the identity development internationally adopted adolescents experience (Patton, 2015) in a truthful, ethical, and accurate manner.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

This phenomenological study examines the perspectives of young adults who are internationally adopted to the United States during their adolescent years and describes the experiences that contributed to their identity development. This chapter begins with a discussion of the thirteen-participants' demographic information, their background, and their experiences through their journey of international adoption. Their perspectives provide insight into their lives today and their personal trajectory of identity development. Analysis includes the presentation of textural and structural descriptions that rose out of the collected data. Themes are aligned through the lens of the theoretical framework and are associated with the research questions. A synthesized concluding summary provides an understanding of the essence internationally adopted adolescents experience toward their identity development.

### **Participants**

This study attracted a sample of thirteen volunteer participants who were internationally adopted during their teenage years to families in the United States. They represented three countries of origin and currently live in nine states. These adoptees were able to reflect upon their first years of life within the biological family unit and living in their "home" country. One third of the participants had a biological parent who was still living at the time of the study, though they each resided in an orphanage or boarding school facility prior to their adoption. All participants graduated from a U.S. high school, were over age 18, and had never been married. In every case, their adoptive parents were a different race, with at least one other child who lived in the home at the time of their immigration. Many had other internationally adopted siblings.

Each participant practiced a religion founded in Christian beliefs. While numerous similarities existed, their backgrounds and perceptions were unique.

### **MeiLan**

MeiLan is a 20-year-old female who lives in the southern part of the United States. Adopted from China as a young adolescent, she experienced both foster care and life in an orphanage. She admitted that during those years she was scared—“really scared”—and acted tough with the hopes that no one would get to know her (MeiLan, personal interview, September 15, 2017). Her foster experience was volatile, surrounded by prostitution, rape, and illicit drugs. She started smoking at age 6. In retrospect, MeiLan doesn’t believe she would have survived in China because of the situations she endured. At age 11, an older adolescent took an interest in MeiLan and positively impacted her life. She told MeiLan: “God gave you a life. You don’t understand it, but don’t make the same choices.” This young lady came from an extremely poor, lower class family with multiple children (which was illegal at that time); yet, she was still able to guide MeiLan and help her see that life could be better. It was at this point when MeiLan took the initiative by requesting to join an orphanage. She didn’t have any concept or understanding what a family was supposed to be, though she saw adoption as an opportunity for a better future.

Since arriving in the United States in 2011, MeiLan has worked with a counselor and her adoptive parents to overcome the traumatic and abusive messages of her past. There have been many examples of when society has compounded her emotional challenges with ethnically charged comments like: “Oh, you are Chinese, you don’t really know much.” Similarly, classmates and teachers looked to MeiLan when Chinese government or cultural issues arose. She often became frustrated trying to live up to their racially-based assumptions. In public she frequently came across other individuals who were also quick to make judgements and

disparaging remarks. Together, these comments created feelings of inadequacy and shame during her transition into American society.

Today, MeiLan's priority is to develop relationships within her family, determine her educational pursuits, and intimately explore her Christian faith. She is more confident than she was in China and no longer needs to act in an inauthentic way. MeiLan's definition of family is simply founded in "protection and happiness." She recognized that her adoptive parents have taught her to be independent, become more mature, and face challenges. She feels supported and cared for. MeiLan described her family, which includes a younger adopted sister who is also from China, as:

They're like my breath. I cannot breathe without air. I feel like they are my oxygen. My family right now are like oxygen. Without them I cannot breathe right. I think they also to me is my water and my food (laughs). I cannot function well, or be better, without them. They are my water running in my life to give me energy—to charge me up. It's more like I have to say my parents are like guardian angels right now. My sister, ah, sometimes she is annoying. But, she usually to me is my . . . she's . . . she's . . . someone that I felt like I'm not alone. Like, I felt like . . . mmmm . . . friends come, friends go, but my sister, my mom, dad, when they come they will never leave me. They will never suddenly disappear. (MeiLan, personal interview, September 15, 2017)

The kindness and patience of MeiLan's adoptive family has made a significant impact on her adjustment to life in America. She presents a grateful spirit and is an example of how a person can change their attitude and demeanor with persistence and hard work.



**Delilah**

At 21 years of age, Delilah has had multiple care-givers both in Ethiopia and in the United States. Following significant challenges with her original adoptive parents, she spent a short period in a U.S. foster home and then was legally adopted a second time by a single mother in the same state. While coming to America at one point seemed like a dream come true, she experienced sadness and disappointment during those initial years of transition. Delilah reflected upon her frustration and pain around these circumstances. The uncertainty that remains for obtaining documentation for U.S. citizenship heavily weighs on her spirit. This is especially troubling because her biological mother, siblings, and extended family are still living in Ethiopia. They all look forward to her visiting someday.

Delilah describes herself as shy, anxious, and scared. She doesn't like being alone. Her honesty, stubbornness, tenacity, and resiliency also came through in our interview and were highlighted attributes listed on the MMPI. She speaks bluntly and openly. Her second adoptive mother has been influential in helping Delilah understand American culture and become more comfortable in this society. She values being able to talk with others about how she is feeling. There was joy and laughter in Delilah's voice when she spoke of her current adoptive mom and the fun they have together. They have a solid bond that is based on trust and mutual respect. Delilah has become a successful athlete. Sports have been a good outlet for her that provide an additional sense of accomplishment and pride. She volunteers and appreciates the opportunity to serve others. Delilah is currently studying to be a social worker and hopes to make an impact in the adoption field. She said, "I want to be kind. I want, ah . . . younger kids to see I'm valuable so I'm worthy for something. Yea, so they can look up to me" (Delilah, personal interview, September 3, 2017).

**Irene**

Irene's biological father died when she was very young. She remembers going to live with an older sister and other siblings following her mother's death. She was only 5 years old at the time. Irene lived with an aunt, and later a grandmother, prior to going to an Ethiopian orphanage four years later. Once there, she became best friends with another girl her age in the orphanage. When her friend was chosen to be adopted, Irene pleaded with her friend's visiting new mom to find a family for her, so she too could also go live in America. That mom could not leave Irene behind knowing the bond the two girls shared. She proceeded with the additional documentation and shortly thereafter, these girlfriends were legally sisters, with a new adoptive family, departing for a new country together. Irene reflected on her early upbringing stating:

It was very tough because I didn't know who to trust. I didn't know, you know, if I was going to be able to stay in one place or not. So, it was kind of hard. And, um, yea . . . and also getting, ah, different parents. I mean, it was exciting, but the same time it was kind of difficult. (Irene, personal interview, August 27, 2017)

Both girls were placed in sixth grade in their first American school. Neither spoke English very fluently, and while it was tough being in separate classrooms, in reflection Irene felt it was a good decision as they made friends and became social more quickly. A year later the family moved, and they skipped to the ninth grade. The girls were not allowed to speak their native language when other family members were around. These first few years were often frustrating because of the language barrier, but this family worked hard to get to know each other. Irene commented that their English as a Second Language teachers were very influential in helping with their transition and understanding of American culture.

Irene moved to multiple states over the past nine years, including a period when she chose to leave her adoptive parents and live with her grandparents. Today she lives independently in a new state, different from the rest of her family. Her attachment with her adoptive family is not as strong as she would like, though she recognizes the importance that her mom, grandmother, and friends have had in her development since arriving in the United States. They have encouraged her to remain strongly connected with her Ethiopian heritage and to give back to the country she still considers as “home.” Her relationships and experiences have provided a unique perspective on life and family. Irene knows what it was like to be a part of different cultures, to not have anything, to lose her family, to be loved by a new family, and what it means to now “have everything” (Irene, personal interview, August 27, 2017).

### **Miki**

Miki’s biological mother died when he was just a toddler. While living with his grandmother on their farm was “okay” he frequently had issues with his extended biological family who also lived there. At age 8 he made the decision to move to an orphanage and pursue a new “adventure” (Miki, personal interview, August 31, 2017). The two Ethiopian orphanages that cared for him over the next five years provided security, hope, and a private school education.

Miki’s parents did not have plans to adopt a child as they already had two older biological sons. His mother traveled to the orphanage where Miki was living in support of her sister during the adoption process of her little girl. Miki simply smiled at this stranger during a chance encounter, and a special bond emerged. His mother knew he was supposed to be a part of their family. After about a year of collecting documentation and legal proceedings, Miki was

adopted and immigrated to the United States. An immediate attachment formed with both his parents and brothers. To put his life in perspective, Miki said:

Adoption means a lot to me. Actually, it's kind of a life changer. Umm . . . because my parents didn't have to do anything. They just took a chance. Kind of to help me out, basically. And um . . . So, I'm not trying to take it for granted or anything. I'm trying to work hard, trying to improve, trying to . . . in a way help my parents out. Just 'cause they helped me out so I'm going to help them out too as well. But, I don't know how I'm going to do it yet. So it means a lot to me. (Miki, personal interview, August 31, 2017)

Miki considers family to be broadly defined to include close friends: those that support him, whom he can trust, and say anything to. Their large extended family has spent most American holidays together sharing laughs and having fun.

Miki remains grateful to those women in his life that believed in him. Beginning with his biological grandmother who loved him as her own son, the nun at the orphanage who saw his potential, and his adoptive mom, whom he recognized as “this random person” that gave him a better chance to live a full life (Miki, personal interview, August 31, 2017). He loves being physically active through soccer, track and field, and other outdoor sports. He shares life openly with everyone around him, frequently making silly jokes. People often say he is always smiling, and he lives as if there is nothing to be sad about with his big, confident, fun-loving personality. Miki will complete his bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering and has hopes of landing a position with an automotive or aerospace company following graduation. He appreciates where he is from and the memories he has made growing up. As a way of giving back, Miki also has dreams of starting a business in Ethiopia to provide a sustainable source of employment.

**Lydia**

Lydia remembers living with her biological parents in a small town near the countryside of Ethiopia. She smiles as she recalls frequent visits to her grandparents' home and many moments that were "always happy" (Lydia, personal interview, January 6, 2018). Lydia lost her biological parents when she was about 8 or 9 years old. She then lived with her uncle in the city of Addis Ababa for about a year before he made the decision to take her to an orphanage. Lydia admits she was very angry with her uncle for placing her up for adoption. These feelings continued for many years and made transitioning with her adopted family difficult. Upon arrival at age 15, Lydia didn't want to be in the United States. She didn't want to be with that family. She didn't "want any of it" (Lydia, personal interview, January 6, 2018). The loss of her Ethiopian family, friends, and a culture she loved was emotional for Lydia to discuss. The change in weather, the loss of her native language, even the different food was very difficult for her. Other siblings in the home were also internationally adopted, but from a different country. She felt detached and alone. Resentment issues continued to diminish the entire family's quality of life. Due to a rapport Lydia made with another American family during their visit to the orphanage a few years earlier, a decision was made for her to live with them. She retains a legal relationship with the first family, though personal interaction is very limited.

Over the eight years Lydia has resided in America she lived in the Midwest, the West Coast, the East Coast, and the Southeast. She attended multiple public high schools and was homeschooled when she moved in with the second family to create stability and focus. Each move provided diverse experiences and encouraged a broader viewpoint of life, but she mostly enjoyed areas which had a bigger Ethiopian community that reminded her of home. Exploring and expressing her faith was another challenging aspect of being in her first adoptive family.

Their belief systems were significantly different and often conflicting. Lydia commented on her internal struggle and the contentment she now experiences:

I would say the difference with this family is they, they haven't really asked me to be something that I didn't want to be in order for them to accept me. They've just kind of accepted me. So, um, whereas the other family I felt like I had to be something in order for them to accept me. (Lydia, personal interview, January 6, 2018)

She recognized special relationships with her new family and long-time friends as the most important aspect of her life. Lydia stated they make her feel loved and allow her to be herself: "Being me is good enough for them. So, they bring a lot of joy to me" (Lydia, personal interview, January 6, 2018). She possesses a complicated perspective about adoption that continues to evolve.

### **Abraham**

As a young boy living in Uganda, Abraham's sole purpose was finding the resources to survive. His young, divorced mom faced traumatic circumstances that made it impossible for her son to belong in their home. He chose to move to the slums with an older sister and was later given an opportunity to attend school at a distant children's home. While Uganda is primarily a homogeneous country, Abraham was acutely aware of the cultural disparities that surrounded him. Distribution of food was always an issue. There was isolation and division among tribes, threatening behaviors of children who had experienced civil unrest, and excessive demands from adults reflecting a constant theme that he was unworthy. He knew he was a vulnerable child in need of help, yet reflectively describes himself as being happy. Abraham reflects on his life in Uganda with the recognition that his only focus at that time was personal survival. Every decision he made was to just stay alive. Today he can think and see issues from a variety of

viewpoints. His connection to his home country has a lot to do with understanding and resolving his experiences, while deriving possible solutions so that other children do not face similar abuse (Abraham, personal interview, November 25, 2017).

Abraham's parents went to extremes to adopt him after their encounter in Uganda while on a mission trip. The children's home where he lived did not intend to allow any adoptions and were against their petition. His adoptive mother met with lawyers, government officials, medical professionals, and appeared in court multiple times, residing in Uganda for over five months while awaiting approval. They fought hard for him and have made some large sacrifices. "Family means more to me because of that," he said (Abraham, personal interview, November 25, 2017). Abraham is working to complete his bachelor's degree in pre-med and political science. He also competed in both soccer and track at the collegiate level. Following graduation, he hopes to travel and then begin working to finance a master's program. Abraham is focused and goal oriented. His adoptive family gives him autonomy to make his own decisions, providing independence, confidence, and security. He said, "What drives me most is knowing in the back of mind that I'm adopted. It reminds me that some people sacrificed for me and for that reason I have to work hard in order to honor their sacrifice" (Abraham, MMDI comment, December 31, 2017). Without hesitation, Abraham is appreciative of this tremendous gift and opportunity to fulfill his dreams.

### **Daniel**

During his earliest years Daniel lived a privileged life in the capital city of Ethiopia. Both his parents were well educated and had high paying jobs. He had everything he needed and most things he wanted (Daniel, personal interview, November 8, 2017). At about age 5 he lost his biological dad. His mother continued to work hard and provide for her two children, but

about three years later his mom died of tuberculosis. Daniel and his young sister went to live with an aunt and uncle and their children. Within a year, life took another heavy turn when their uncle passed. His aunt lacked personal affection and became abusive primarily due to the stress of not being able to provide for four children without any income. By age 9, when he and his sister arrived in the orphanage, Daniel had already experienced significant loss and neglect. He said, “Life happened too fast for me” while reflecting on the trauma he encountered during his early years (Daniel, personal interview, November 8, 2017). The orphanage provided a sense of comfort for Daniel. He appreciated that all the kids could relate to his experiences, knew what it was like to watch a parent die, understood what neglect feels like, and what it means to go hungry (Daniel, personal interview, November 8, 2017).

Daniel’s adopted mother did not intend on falling in love with that young boy when she visited in 2008 with her daughter. There was something special about Daniel, though, and finding out he had a sister was a sweet surprise. Within a year they were both adopted and headed to the United States. During his years in high school Daniel kept himself at a distance from the Ethiopian culture and affiliation with his homeland. Even the relationships he highly valued from living at the orphanage were now limited. He needed to fit in and felt that relationships were formed on perceived commonalities. He struggled in social settings and felt like an outsider for multiple reasons. Daniel wanted to construct a new life, one that looked like the dream he envisioned, moving toward limitless possibilities. After nine years of denying his identity, unresolved emotions began to fester. He wrote: “I wish I knew that erasing or suppressing the past was the exact opposite of what I should have done to move forward” (Daniel, advice letter, January 10, 2018). He recognized how his supportive adoptive family was patient and loving through this process.



Daniel is currently studying mechanical engineering at a Christian university. He is well spoken and has an excellent command of the English language. He does not let society or his mistakes define him, and he focuses on his core values and principles. Opportunities are frequently sought out so he can challenge himself, grow his self-esteem, and improve his confidence. Daniel's desire to help others after graduation is strong, but he is not quite certain what the next step will be. He remains grateful for how things turned out and for the people who protected him and altered the trajectory of his life (Daniel, personal interview, November 8, 2017).

### **Sammy**

While Sammy's family had six older biological children, they were strong advocates for international adoption. In 2010, his parents adopted two sons from Ethiopia and returned later that same year to adopt Sammy and another boy. Sammy's younger biological brother was adopted just over a year later. All five boys were adolescents. As a family they have continued to speak to others about their experiences and the positive changes they have witnessed in their personal development. Together the boys and their mom have helped eight of their friends from the orphanage connect with adoptive parents. They believe that every child deserves the opportunity to receive a high-quality education and the loving support of a family. As Sammy reflected, he stated:

To be honest, if I were back home I wouldn't know what I would be doing right now. I don't think school was for me back then. Life . . . was complicated. But after I came here my mind opened up. Like now I know what I want to do. There is a lot of potential . . . that is a big, big difference. (Sammy, personal interview, December 15, 2017)

Sammy also emphasized that while in Ethiopia the concept of family was not very deep. His time with his birth parents, though he does have a fond memorable connection with them, did not have the same impact as he experiences now. The relationships he has developed since moving to the United States, including those with his adopted parents, brothers, friends, teachers, and professors, are the most meaningful aspects of his life today.

Sammy is close to finishing his degree in hospitality and business. After finding a job he enjoys, he hopes to begin his master's degree within the next five years as well. Sammy has been back to Ethiopia multiple times since his adoption, spending time with his extended biological family and enjoying the culture. He recognizes that societal issues need to be addressed. Sammy believes he has the skills and abilities to make a difference in the lives of others.

### **Alexis**

Alexis is a young adult from Uganda. She lived in a large orphanage for six years before an American couple chose to adopt Alexis and her two younger cousins. The orphanage director specifically chose Alexis for this family because she was one of the adolescents who was close to aging out of the international adoption program. Alexis always believed there was a family for her and knew God had big plans for her life. The relationship she has with her adoptive parents and five siblings has helped her grow personally, to listen with wisdom, and to develop a foundation of trust. They continuously strive to learn more about each other. She feels deeply loved and accepted for who she is. In contrast, when Alexis reflected on her family in Uganda, which includes her biological parents who are still living, she said, "I just consider them my relatives" (Alexis, personal interview, December 31, 2017).

The Ugandan culture is reflected in how Alexis connects with those around her. Her bright smile is inviting and kind. She cares deeply about people around her, which has at times caused her some pain. Alexis is a strong, independent, confident young woman who confided she has also always been stubborn. These traits have propelled her to where she is today. Alexis lives with the hope of being an example for others, particularly young girls. She communicates publicly about self-love, accepting others, and the importance of obtaining a good education. Currently Alexis is focused on completing an undergraduate degree in business and has intentions of moving forward with a master's in business administration. She has ambitions and dreams for the future:

I feel like in five years . . . in five years, my life is going to be, I think, what God wants it to be. I feel like there are so many big things that I am gonna do. And, I feel like . . . ummm . . . in five years I'm gonna be somebody's role model, in five years . . . ummm . . . I'm going to have everything that I thought I couldn't have. You know, accomplish things that I wouldn't have accomplished. I feel like my future's going to be bright. I just feel that. I just have that feeling. (Alexis, personal interview, December 31, 2017)

## **Don**

Family has had a significant impact on Don's life both in Ethiopia and in the United States. He has a brother and sister that are biological children of his parents, additional half-biologically related siblings that remain in Ethiopia, as well as a large set of siblings here in the United States. Both of his biological parents are still living, though he was initially raised by his grandmother before moving to the orphanage at age 10. He has clear memories of spending time with his dad and interactions with his grandmother. The challenges they faced as a young family were traumatic, particularly when he discussed being separated from his brother and sister. At

times there were few options in their lives, and they simply had to draw straws to make heartbreaking decisions. He shared this description of living in Ethiopia: “Like the whole family was very tight, you know. And, pretty much like, I don’t know . . . when you don’t have a lot of stuff the only thing you have is just love, I guess. They did love each other so much” (Don, personal interview, December 31, 2017). Don remains passionate about both families and while there are differences, he values both of them and the positive impact they made in his life calling them “equally cool” (Don, personal interview, December 31, 2017).

Don is a bright, intelligent, confident young man who is very introspective and curious. He had to adjust from Ethiopian cultural norms where blunt honesty is more widely accepted. Admittedly, he has become more emotional during his personal development journey. Don succeeded in high school with an exceptional grade point average, taking advanced placement classes, and finishing near the top of his class. Sports were a significant aspect of his ability to adjust socially. He chose not to pursue college and has become quite accomplished in a skilled trade. He is proud that he has worked hard for everything that he has, but also commented that some of his abilities have gone to waste. His biological parents believed he was going to be a doctor in Ethiopia. Now at age 24, Don is very happy with his life and realizes he is on a good track for future success. He has a strong faith and does not worry as, “Tomorrow is in God’s hands. That’s what I’ve been told my whole life, you know. God is in control. I live with that philosophy” (Don, personal interview, December 31, 2017).

## **Ruth**

While Ruth’s biological parents are still living, she resided in two different Ethiopian orphanages for approximately seven total years prior to adoption. Her biological mother often came to visit the orphanage, though she faced significant hardship. Ruth became increasingly

concerned that her older age of 13 was legally going to eliminate the possibility of having a family who could properly meet her needs. In 2009 her adoptive family arrived. While this was a time of excitement, saying goodbye was also quite emotional. Today her Ethiopian family remains one of the largest external influences in her life. Ruth views her adoption as:

like a miracle . . . my greatest gift I've ever been given. If it wasn't for them I wouldn't be here, and so like my family means the world to me. Especially the ones who are here and the ones who are in Ethiopia. Like, I love them both equally. (Ruth, personal interview, December 19, 2017)

The journey has been difficult and traumatic at times. Ruth immigrated to the United States with a significantly younger boy who was not biologically related to her. His behavior, and apparent lack of gratitude, are still challenging for her to fully understand. Ruth also recognized that her adoption took place at a pivotal stage of personal development. She pointed out that, "The idea of a changing body at the same time changing location and not knowing what to say and how to ask for help" made things more dramatic (Ruth, personal interview, December 19, 2017). The cultural changes were also significant. Her comprehension of how people interacted, particularly the differences between living with a large group of people in an orphanage to that in a small family, was new to her. The social boundaries that individuals hold took some time for this "follow-the-rules" adolescent to fully grasp. These and the obstacles of learning the English language and enjoying the new cuisine were challenges she worked hard to overcome. She provided this thoughtful advice to future adoptees as a reassurance:

You are going to experience many challenges. You will have some ups and downs throughout your weeks and sometimes even just within a day. However, I want you to know this: no matter what happens, you have a family who adopted you because they

love, adore, and want to care for you. They are there to be your guides, your support to success and achievement, and most of all give you and shower you with abundance of love. (Ruth, advice letter, February 16, 2018)

Ruth relishes traveling and the sense of adventure, activities that her adoptive family also frequently enjoy. She has recently taken multiple international trips on her own because of the confidence her parents have instilled in her—including once back to Ethiopia. The family values going out, exploring, hiking, and having quality time together more than material things (Ruth, personal interview, December 19, 2017). She is grateful for the opportunity to pursue a college education and intends to enter the field of teaching. Impacting the young children in Ethiopia who live outside of the capital city is her biggest goal.

### **Amber**

In Uganda, Amber's existence was focused on being social and carefree. She disliked school and accepted regular spankings as inevitable regardless of the efforts she made. Her impression of the United States was that everyone was affluent and that everything was perfect—just like she saw in the movies. Amber was attending a boarding school when she became aware that some children were being adopted into families overseas. Because her mother was not in their lives and her father was overwhelmed with the responsibility of raising three young girls on his own, Amber initiated the possibility of adoption with the school director. She was 11 or 12 years old at the time. Following her father's consent, an American family was selected.

A year later, Amber and her middle sister were meeting their new mother who was willing to love them forever. Due to circumstances that were out of their control, her youngest sister, who is now 14 years old, had to remain in Uganda. This separation has been very difficult for Amber. She emotionally uttered, "I just want to do life with her. I just wish she was here

with us so we could do all these things together” (Amber, personal interview, January 20, 2018). Her hope is to sponsor her sister based on the Immediate Relative Immigration Visa provision after Amber turns 21.

During the six years Amber has lived in the United States she has tried to adjust her style and personality to fit in. Issues of food, race, command of the English language, social roles, and cultural differences were challenges. She wrote this advice in her letter to prospective adoptees:

So I want to let you know that adjustments are not easy. Making friends is not easy. But what’s easy, is to be yourself. You shouldn’t have to change who you are in order to fit in with other people. Putting who you are on hold in order to be someone else is definitely not the way to go. (Amber, advice letter, February 2, 2018)

Amber is persistent and energetic. She strives to learn more about her environment and improve meaningful relationships within her family and circle of friends. She has a strong faith and connects with the people in her college Bible Study. The opportunities for Amber have been slightly overwhelming, and she does not quite know what she wants to do for future employment. What is clear though, she is thankful for the life she has.

### **Peter**

Peter became an orphan at the age of 6 following his mother’s death. He has clear memories of his early years in Ethiopia recalling images of his mother working as a seamstress, her progressive illness, and going to church frequently to pray that she would be healed. The emotional turmoil was especially difficult for Peter as he was often getting into trouble and picking fights with other kids. His mother was concerned about this behavior and asked his aunt to assure he was well taken care of following her passing. Both women did their best, encouraging him to do well in school and modeling a strong work ethic. Peter lived with his

aunt in Addis Ababa for five years until the decision was made that the orphanage would provide him with better life opportunities. He holds some fun memories from his time there. Over the next three years, Peter watched as other orphans passed through and finalized their adoption. His confidence shattered as he became a young adolescent who desperately wanted parents of his own. Finally, at age 14, an American couple, who now have a large racially mixed family, chose Peter.

Peter was homeschooled through high school upon arriving in the United States. He is a fast learner so the first year seemed easy academically because of the private schooling he had when living with his aunt. His mom focused on activities to help encourage a smooth transition. While his English skills were reasonably good, communicating with others remained a challenge. Most of the children he interacted with were significantly younger and on the occasion Peter was around other adolescents they did not talk much. Peter's experience with soccer also did not provide the social outlet he wanted. He found it difficult to initiate conversations due to self-doubt and fear (Peter, personal interview, January 25, 2018). His struggle to socialize is a persistent burden that isolates him from connecting with both Ethiopian and American peers. Peter pointed out, "I want to identify as an Ethiopian person, but I don't act like that. I have American and Ethiopian in me. I just expected everything to be perfect and it isn't" (Peter, personal communication, April 18, 2018).

Peter appreciates that his adoptive parents worked hard to provide him a strong foundation for future success. Following an advanced skills training program and an internship, Peter was offered an entry-level professional position within a nationally recognized company at the young age of 19. This was a great achievement that few in his class had the opportunity to pursue. He is excited to be living independently in a large city within a thriving Ethiopian



community and hopes to build a deeper connection to his native culture. His next goal is to build and develop better personal relationships.

## **Results**

An analysis of demographic surveys, adoption records, the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI), the participant's Personal Assessment of the EPSI, individual interviews, responses on the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (MMDI), and participants' adoption advice letters provided data for this study. A multi-step approach was initiated to triangulate recurring information and to assure significant details are fully presented. Throughout the process, I bracketed out personal thoughts and feelings to assure the co-researchers' insight would be received clearly and without bias. Theme development is presented through textural and structural descriptions. Provided quotes include direct transcriptions from interviews and advice letters written by the co-researchers. These passages include pauses and grammatical errors that may occur in casual communication with individuals who did not learn English as their first language. Finally, textural and structural descriptions are synthesized by research questions, presenting a basis for understanding the essence of the journey internationally adopted adolescents experience toward developing identity (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Assessing Identity**

The first part of data analysis included the EPSI and Personal Assessment of the EPSI. To understand the participants' stage of identity development, a high-level statistical overview was conducted and is provided in this section. The MMDI further clarifies the attributes and contextual influences that respondents recognize as principally impacting their core sense of self.

**Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI).** The theoretical framework for this study considered psychosocial development as an aspect of understanding identity health. The

intent of the EPSI (Rosenthal et al., 1981) and Personal Assessment of the EPSI was to measure the strength at which participants had resolved conflicts associated within each life cycle stage. In relation to Erikson's (1963, 1968) theory, the conceptual basis of the EPSI suggests that the earliest life stage subscale should have the highest value as crises are resolved (Thornburg et al., 1992). In the process of evaluating the strength of each attribute for this small population, the first stage of *trust* is the lowest overall mean score among the six assessed life stages and the lowest subscale for twelve of the thirteen participants. EPSI results for the consecutive developmental stages are close to being consistent with the hierarchical model, though there is a spike in the *industry* subscale. In contrast to the EPSI, the Personal Assessment scores do not follow any distinct pattern. Analyzing the individual dimensions between the two surveys revealed one strong correlation for the dimension of *trust*, while all other subscales are weak to moderate. Table 2 presents a summary of mean scores (possible ranges from 1 to 5), standard deviations, and correlation values for each of the assessed subscales.

Table 2

*Sample Means and Standard Deviations for Subscales of the Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory and Personal Assessment (N=13)*

| Dimension  | EPSI     |           | Personal Assessment |           | Correlation       |
|------------|----------|-----------|---------------------|-----------|-------------------|
|            | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | <i>M</i>            | <i>SD</i> | <i>R</i>          |
| Trust      | 2.82     | 0.55      | 2.77                | 1.52      | +0.59<br>Strong   |
| Autonomy   | 3.69     | 0.56      | 3.12                | 1.21      | +0.25<br>weak     |
| Initiative | 3.66     | 0.41      | 3.73                | 1.32      | -0.08<br>weak     |
| Industry   | 3.99     | 0.33      | 3.35                | 1.46      | +0.34<br>moderate |

|              |      |      |      |      |                   |
|--------------|------|------|------|------|-------------------|
| Identity     | 3.45 | 0.73 | 2.92 | 1.38 | +0.40<br>moderate |
| Intimacy     | 3.19 | 0.46 | 4.15 | 0.75 | +0.10<br>weak     |
| Generativity | **   | **   | 2.81 | 1.44 | -                 |
| Integrity    | **   | **   | 3.92 | 1.19 | -                 |

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Note: results are not significant  $p < 0.05$

\*\* Generativity and Integrity are not assessed on the EPSI (1981)

**Multiple Dimensions of Identity.** Each participant's MMPI was analyzed to determine the impact social identities have on their personal identity and sense of self. An MMPI Enumeration Table was created by collecting the highest attributes and contextual influences as reported by respondents (see Appendix X). Physical characteristics such as race, gender, nationality, and faith were recorded most frequently, but personal attributes carried more significance for participants. Being kind, friendly, helpful, stubborn, and hardworking were characteristics they felt strongly about, contributing to their intrapersonal (who they are as individuals) development. Family and friends received the two highest marks for the contextual influences followed by church, school, and work. These areas further underscore what is important to these individuals for interpersonal (how they construct relationships) development (Abes, 2009).

### **Theme Development**

Following the collection of online surveys, psychosocial assessments, personal interviews, identity models, letters of advice written by co-researchers, and memos, I broadly analyzed the data per participant, per source type, and per research question. Significant statements and codes were organized with the implementation of NVivo 11 standard. Within

this program, evaluation began by highlighting details within each interview question and then grouping and cross-referencing each code with responses from each data collection tool. This process resulted in the identification of codes that were eventually reduced into categories based on those that positively affected identity development and those that were viewed as barriers. Broad themes (see Appendix W) were reduced as repeated, and irrelevant statements were removed. Themes were then organized in relation to the research questions.

**Proponents of identity development.** During the infancy, early childhood, play age, and school age stages of life, each adoptee resided in their country of origin, and most were living with biological relatives. Relationships and activities have contributed to adoptees' foundational sense of *trust, autonomy, initiative and industry* as reflected on the EPSI and Personal Assessment of the EPSI (see Appendix T). Abraham, who was grouped within the top 20% identity assessment scores in three of these early stages, remarked multiple times how important it is to develop a basic sense of trust in the adoption process and in relationships. He said:

I've read some stuff online where some kids feel like they don't identify or they don't belong. Sometimes I felt like that in my house and just like, "oh my God!" But, yeah, exactly, you are adopted, you know! (laughs) Of course you are different. But like, it's not . . . it is true that you're adopted so it's bizarre to think that you're different -- if that makes sense. Yes, you are different. So I think that accepting yourself is good in a way. 'Cause again I think society can just take adoption out of context and just see it as it is in the movies or whatever, and like . . . at the end of the day, the family that adopts you is just family. My family is extremely close to me and like, they have shown everything to me to deserve my trust. (Abraham, personal interview, November 25, 2017)

He appreciated that his family encourages autonomy and recognized that he has learned from his choices. Abraham's MMPI also reflected a core attribute of independence. Likewise, Miki, who responded with the highest scores in all six EPSI categories, displayed a sense of confidence and assurance in his future. Together with Sammy, who also returned strong marks in these areas, shared that acceptance of the past, engagement with opportunities, and a dedication to forming strong relationships were prominent contributors in their personal development. Additionally, the progress MeiLan achieved to overcome shame and doubt in developing positive relationships correlates directly with her EPSI results with her strongest marks in *autonomy*. While she continues to struggle in some areas, she is working to overcome the trauma of her past to attain personal acceptance.

Foundationally, *hope* and *will* are well represented across the EPSI, interviews, letters of advice, and MMPI. Core personal attributes such as diligence, determination, stubbornness, and being a hard worker were mentioned in the interview process and MMPI (see Appendix X) by Abraham, Alexis, Amber, Delilah, Irene, and Ruth. It is within the *industry* subscale that participants who are developing a sense of self is most prominently recognizable. All thirteen individuals selected responses to produce their highest, or second highest, individual mean score for life cycle stage. The integration of relationships and a desire to be kind, friendly, helpful, loyal, and committed are examples on the MMPI of the adoptee's influences and capacity. The saliency of these identifications and attributes are further highlighted within the subthemes of sense of self, sense of purpose, and sense of relationships as contributors for positive identity growth.

***Sense of self.*** Participants in this study expressed they had some connection to their birth parents, extended family, or friends in their country of origin. They were all able to recount

childhood memories of the path they walked to school, time spent in comfortable environments, experiences in the homes they lived in, details of interaction with biological family members, or perceptions of social interactions. Some memories were not pleasant. The efforts made by family members or guardians to care for them were impressive, and it was noted how hard adults worked to provide for them in the toughest of circumstances. Daniel, Ruth, and Amber stressed how their parents made tremendous efforts to assure they had everything they needed while enduring daily survival challenges. Biological familial impact ran deep, and primary relationships that were formed during early childhood have had lasting effects, earning the largest number of contextual influence appearances on the MMPI (see Appendix X). Participants reflected on the attributes of these adults and the positive impact that was made on their lives. Encouragement, like what Sammy remembers about his mother, was echoed by many:

I didn't have a lot of time with her, but I was with her until I was 8 and, um, I can remember little things that she used to say to me, like, you know like, "You're going to be a great man" and "you're going to succeed in life" and all those kinds of things, you know. (Sammy, personal interview, December 25, 2017)

Additionally, playing with friends was a critical memory for most participants. Social interactions with biological cousins, siblings, neighborhood children, or fellow orphans made a significant impact on their lives during this early stage of development. Don recounted in our December 31, 2017 interview:

They would have to like . . . they would have to drag me to, to go back in the house. I was always outside playing soccer, like, like past midnight. And, I'm under, like, 7 years old. We have a field by the house where, you know, my grandma's house, and she would

have to drag me back in the house to eat and then . . . my passion for soccer and my family too . . . yea, that is what a lot of people would tell you.

Apart from MeiLan, this type of childhood image remains very clear even for those individuals who are not currently well connected to their country of origin. Shared fond memories like these are strong indicators of resolving crisis in the first three stages of life.

Decisions that were made during their earliest years still carried raw emotions for many participants. Accepting the rationale for relinquishment was not easy. Some are now able to gracefully reflect on the behaviors of their family members with acceptance and understanding. According to Abraham, who remarked that the Ugandan culture does not “have a lot of forgiveness ’cause like everyone has like—everyone is trying to survive, survive . . .,” the ability to adapt and trust in the process of adoption became fundamental for personal maturity (Abraham, personal interview, November 25, 2017). The death of a parent often included promises by relatives to ensure they were well cared for. Resources were limited, especially if multiple children were living in the home. Lydia, who has struggled with her adoption, has progressed slowly through healing. She said, “So for years I was very upset and angry with my uncle. But then, eventually, I understood why he did it” (Lydia, personal interview, January 6, 2018). After the loss of both his parents and an uncle, Daniel also shared how difficult it became for his aunt to care for them. He recognized that she did her best, particularly without any income or emotional support. “I don’t blame her for anything,” he said. “I have a different perspective on things and I realize what it means, and how fortunate I am to have certain things like an education and, um, even a steady meal. That means a whole lot” (Daniel, personal interview, November 8, 2017). This psychological growth, as experienced in some form by each adoptee, was not directly tied to receiving professional counseling.

Seven participants initiated the adoption process themselves by garnering the assistance of an appropriate adult. Stories of the chance encounters they may have had with their adoptive parents during an ancillary visit to their country, the pleas from another adoptee, or the insisting belief from an orphanage director for placement, each had visible impact on the adoptee's demeanor. Being selectively chosen for adoption resonated as "a gift" or "a miracle" (Ruth, personal interview, December 19, 2017).

Adoption provided many life changing experiences that transformed the development trajectory for these young people. For some, their faith and relationship with God has been a consistent assurance that continues to be present in their lives today. Miki, Delilah, and Abraham, who had the highest mean scores on the EPSI adolescent stage, each held strong ideological beliefs and values that are accounted for through statements of faith and nationality on the MMPI. Seven total individuals shared on the MMPI that the church is a significant contextual influence in their life (see Appendix X). Accounts of being happy, excited, and nervous were expressed as their dreams of having a family started to become reality. Each was grateful to have new opportunities to pursue and experience a new-found sense of balance.

Keeping a strong connection to their country of origin has been an important aspect for some adoptees, particularly those who have parents, siblings, and relatives that they communicate with. Delilah spoke to this when she wrote, "Do not forget the culture where you came from. This is always going to be a part of who you are, and it is important to remember all that you loved about your birth country and culture" (Delilah, advice letter, September 17, 2017). Six participants have visited their birth country since their adoption. Ugandan and Ethiopian international adoptees remarked about the close bonds within their native communities, six of whom specifically noted their ethnicity as a prominent characteristic on the MMPI. Amber's



bubbly personality articulated the joy she experienced walking to the local market, “It was about how people take the time to actually talk to you. They took the time to know your neighbors. I lived in a community where everybody knows everybody” (Amber, personal interview, January 20, 2018). Cultural traditions were important, such as sharing coffee or celebrating over a meal. Likewise, an appreciation of their native music stirred a sense of emotion that carried deep meaning and an ability to fondly connect to their heritage.

*Sense of purpose.* The pursuit of education was a large focus for many international adoptees in this study. Particularly for the three individuals from Uganda who struggled to pay for basic fees in their country of origin, the freedom to attend school was remarkable. Abraham, Alexis, and Amber each expressed that their education was their priority. In total, nine participants are currently pursuing higher degrees, three of which have intentions of attending graduate school. MeiLan is still searching for her professional passion and hopes to resume classes at a local community college soon. Don, Irene, and Peter each have technical certificates and are finding success within their fields.

Becoming independent and stable was an exaggerated topic with these young adults through the interview process with additional acknowledgement on the MMPI (see Appendix X). Alexis, Don, Irene, Miki, and Sammy all have dreams of starting their own businesses, most of them in their country of origin. Similar to Amber, Abraham spoke of finding a way to “save my sister . . . who if she would have been able to go to school my sister . . . I don’t know. Or if her husband would have been able to have job, something like that” (Abraham, personal interview, November 25, 2017). Building a school, a hospital, or helping their biological family, supporting others in their native land was very important. Sammy passionately said:

I want to go back and forth, you know, give back to the community. Because I don't want to just educate myself and stay here and not do anything about back home because there are a lot of people that need help, a lot, you know. Because Ethiopia is my country, and that's part of my responsibility to give out to the community. So, I want to help out. Like, save street kids. Like, that is like my main focus. I want to create a job opportunity for them. (Sammy, personal interview, December 15, 2017)

While other aspects of life may still be challenging for these young adults, the propensity to give back was strongly conveyed. For those who continue to explore and growth their personal faith, this sense of purpose appeared to have greater meaning.

*Sense of relationships.* The relationships that were made, particularly during their first year of transition, have had a significant impact on these participants. Some met at least one adoptive parent during visits in their country of origin before legal proceedings took place. Families that had opportunities to communicate via Skype or by letter had a smoother first in-person encounter. Alexis, for example, spoke of the first time she met her adoptive mom in Uganda and how a simple gesture made such tremendous impact:

They were already outside ready to meet, to meet us. And, when I was walking up, I guess I heard my orphan director say, "Oh there she is!" you know. So my mom walked and met me half way on the hill. And she was just, you know . . . she was happy I guess. I don't know how she felt but she was just like . . . she just hugged me and . . . you know and I, at the moment was just like, okay. (laughs) Ummm . . . so, I remember when she did that. I don't know what she told me, but I remember I asked her before we said . . . before we met . . . if I go with you, is this going to be forever, or . . . ? You know? So, she said the best words of all time. (Alexis, personal interview, December 31, 2017)

For those that were able to spend quality time together in their country of origin prior to immigrating an additional layer of comfort was formed without the stress of environmental and cultural changes.

Upon arriving in the United States, newly international adoptees were often overwhelmed by family and friends waiting at the airport. In over half of these instances they met their adoptive father and/or siblings for the first time. Nine individuals remarked on groups of people greeting them, but frequently other details from that moment were lost. Exhaustion and emotional stress were common explanations. Don could only describe those introductions as “Crazy! That was a weird day, for sure, you know? It’s like everybody was just home waiting for us, and . . . this is home!” (Don, personal interview, December 31, 2017). MeiLan, who was not culturally accustomed to open physical touch, commented:

I heard a lot of people say “Nice to meet you! Welcome! Welcome to here! Welcome, welcome!” And then I was like, “Uh? Uh? Was this real?” They all, they all, I think the biggest sign they all hugged me. I was like oh my gosh what is going on, why do people do this? (laugh) yea. That was the first sign, the biggest memory, that they hugged. The first thing! They saw me and they hugged me. (MeiLan, personal interview, September 15, 2017)

In retrospect, the efforts to help them feel welcome were appreciated.

Being surrounded by people who outwardly expressed empathy toward them was powerful. When clear communication was frustrating and difficult, it was a small group of people who made the greatest impression. Families who worked to learn, change, and grow together have developed tremendous respect and appreciation for each other. “Once you know they love you and would do anything for you,” Irene wrote, “it becomes easier for you to love

them back and trust them completely!” (Irene, advice letter, February 25, 2018). They talk openly about social and cultural issues that help everyone feel valued. Abraham, who has a very deep bond with his adoptive family, reflected upon his transition:

Especially that first year, I just felt loved. I just felt a lot of love and that just helped me feel like everything was perfect. Which I needed at that point. I needed that because . . . it kind of was like the perfect American picture like what you see in the movies. Everything was perfect. People were sweating to make things happen, like your parents were going through stuff, and your siblings were going through stuff, and I’m going through stuff too (laughs). Well, if anything, all the weight, to think, to be stressed out, was kind of . . . it was not on my plate. (Abraham, personal interview, November 25, 2017)

Like Abraham, others including Alexis, Amber, Daniel, Irene, and Sammy deeply value the relationships they have with their similar-aged adoptive siblings. These relationships were particularly meaningful in social situations and times of uncertainty. Brothers and sisters were able to relate on a very different level than their adoptive parents and were more accepting than new friends. There was a sense of empathy and grace that was shared. Conversely, Ruth intensely cares for her younger sibling, though recognized that they had different unrelatable needs. If she could have changed one thing about her adoption experience, it was to have a sibling closer to her age. These special peer connections that were innately made within the family, especially early in the transition process when language barriers were most difficult, were tremendously powerful.

Positive interactions were notable not only with adoptive family members, but with teachers, coaches, and new friends. Eight adoptees discovered friendships developed more

easily through organized sports, primarily in playing soccer or running track. Asking for assistance or clarification in most environments was strenuous. Having opportunities to talk with other international adoptees, and even international students, has provided comfort and reassurance in moments of uncertainty. Relationships that removed expectations were fully cherished. Being accepted by others, particularly in school and other social settings, increased confidence and a sense of personal worth. Lydia, who experienced challenges with her first adoptive family said:

I would say the family that I live with right now . . . they just . . . everyone at first overwhelmed me. But everyone kind of just accepted me every family member I met in this family, they kind of . . . they didn't expect me to be anything. They just . . . so going from like a feeling like I needed to be something in order to be good enough, to just being accepted . . . just you know, they showered me with all that love . . . that built up my confidence and also let me see that I'm good enough, I guess. (Lydia, personal interview, January 6, 2018)

**Barriers to identity development.** Conceptually, since the participants do not follow Erikson's hierarchical life cycle theory, it is appropriate to consider the factors that may be barriers to identity development. Don and Daniel, who had the lowest EPSI scores for the *trust* subscale on both the EPSI and Personal Assessment of the EPSI (see Appendix T), remarked on the challenges they have experienced and how a lack of trust has held them back, particularly with relationships. Don shared that relationships outside of his family are particularly challenging:

Like trust . . . and this is where it comes in, you know, also I don't have a whole lot of friends. I keep mine small, and while I say I keep contact with people, like, not on like

everyday you know, like every two weeks, or like sometimes every three months, sometimes a year. (Don, personal interview, December 31, 2017)

Similarly, Lydia, who was in the lowest 20% of scores among participants in all subgroups on the EPSI, expressed a reserved personality and inability to make decisions easily in her interview and MMPI. She struggled with the image she wants people to see beyond the identity of being internationally adopted. When describing new relationships, Lydia shared:

So, I try when I meet new people I try not to share that too much. I mean, I know it is a part of who I am, but I feel like there is more to me than just that. If that makes sense. It's not that, like, I don't like that part of me. I love that part of me. It makes me who I am—I know that. I try and not share too much of it because I feel like there is more to me than that. (Lydia, personal interview, January 6, 2018)

Peter acknowledged that he also chooses not to answer questions about his past because most people simply cannot understand. “I don't compare,” he said (Peter, personal communication, April 18, 2018). For Lydia and each of the other participants, numerous cultural and environmental differences were difficult to overcome. Their ability to overcome barriers related to change, in addition to the trauma they each previously experienced, was directly related to the personal characteristics and attributes that they possessed.

***Barriers related to change.*** For most of the participants in this study, adoption to the United States seemed like a miracle or a dream. They were happy and excited to experience the many opportunities before them. At first some believed they needed to leave their past behind, moving forward by fully embracing the new relationships and culture that were a part of their new life. Disconnecting from their country of origin has been an ongoing, internal struggle for some participants. This became a barrier for self-development, though, as Daniel recognized:

In the first few months as an adolescent adoptee, I felt new, clean, and empty in a good way. In fact, the magnitude of finding myself in a first world country with people who cared about me so deeply and a possible future was so strong for a few days my every waking moment felt like a dream . . . This is because I was old enough to paint a distorted picture of what life would be here in the USA before my arrival. (Daniel, personal interview, November 25, 2017)

The denial of his origins has brought about some intense emotions. Ruth summarized the consistent struggles and reworking of cultural values she has experienced:

Part of me is like, you need the connection, you need to have your roots and everything. But at the same time I'm like why should I? I don't know. I think it is out of my comfort zone and I just don't want to face the past. Like, being in an orphanage for too long, or just giving up being Ethiopian. I am proud to be an Ethiopian, but some part of me wants to let go of it, so it's like, a battle. But, I know for sure that I am proud to be Ethiopian because I have Ethiopian stuff, I love listening to Ethiopian music. I could do anything, I guess. I'm not as fully as Ethiopian as I should be I guess. (Ruth, personal interview, December 19, 2017)

Pride in their native heritage is strong, yet participants also feel embarrassed when they don't know specific details about their culture or history. Those who have lost the ability to speak their native tongue are regretful.

Amber and MeiLan expressed aggravation with unrealistic expectations they felt in the classroom. Assignments, such as 9-11 or U.S. history assignments, created additional pressure since they did not have prior association to the subject matter. The pain and embarrassment they shared across multiple examples was devastating. MeiLan expanded on the frustration she

experienced when coursework reflected on China:

So, I feel very unknowledgeable. Even though when I was in high school people would say “Oh you are Chinese, you should know the answer for the geography. or bio, or the math, or you should know the answer about Chinese communism” or something like that. Or, “tell me about Chinese business” and everything. I’m like, “Oh my gosh I was not born in the city or, I was born in a very low family. I don’t know how Chinese people do factory or business or black shopping!” I have NO idea! If I had questions I didn’t have my parents, you know. Which I understand, but I felt like gosh I should know these things before I was adopted so I could be prepared. But yea, that time I went home I just started studying, learn as Chinese. Whenever drama, or the way Chinese economic works, or communism, or everything works, try to learn everything as possible before my junior year. Because I felt so ashamed that people ask me questions and I’m like, “I don’t know. I have no idea.” (MeiLan, personal interview, September 15, 2017)

School was also difficult because the American educational system is structurally different, not because of their academic ability. Alexis and Don both commented that they felt like outsiders. Even for the adoptees who reported they had conversational knowledge of the English language, communication was not easy for any of the participants. Some received additional support in the classroom, though others did not. Many expressed that language was the most significant barrier to participating in the learning process and developing friendships. Ruth explained that at times restating herself to accommodate for a perceived deficiency was not worth the additional effort.

The impact that expressions of faith had on their upbringing was mentioned frequently. Particularly in Ethiopia, religion is rich in tradition and is part of an individual’s genetic disposition. The most prevalent denominations and holiday observances are deeply intertwined



in culture. Irene, Lydia, Miki, and Ruth commented on their personal conflicts when religious practices collided with those that were adhered to in the orphanages and in their adoptive communities within the United States. Immigrating during a period of development when exploration of faith is a significant component of identity provided further complications and questions. For adoptees who continue to communicate with biological family, there are additional pressures to remain connected to their native beliefs. In many respects, the desire to be accepted within their family, friends, and greater community became the priority.

Challenges with food was determined to be the largest adjustment issue among all international adoptees, to the point where this was referred to as experiencing “a food problem” upon arriving in the United States (Ruth, personal interview, December 19, 2017). Participants clearly had an emotional tie to biological family, social gatherings, and holiday traditions that were previously directly linked to sharing meals. Even MeiLan, who does not hold fond memories of her country of origin, commented that she does not miss anything about China except for the food (MeiLan, personal interview, September 15, 2017). Most adoptees struggled with getting enough to eat when they lived overseas, yet they refused to even try American meals for quite some time. During the first year in the United States, Amber coaxed her younger sister to taste-test everything before venturing into something new. To accommodate for her anxieties, her adoptive parents convinced her that all meat was a different form of chicken. She laughed while talking about her fear of eating hot dogs due to the literal interpretation she had imagined.

***Barriers related to trauma.*** The childhood and early adolescence conflicts that happened in the lives of these young people are difficult to fully comprehend. Experiencing the death of a loved one, acknowledging the abandonment of a parent, dealing with the guilt of leaving behind biological siblings, or reliving the pain that arose from relinquishment continues to emote

feelings that participants struggle with. Daniel plainly stated, “It’s not a light subject, you know. I don’t mind saying, ‘Ya, I am adopted.’ That’s fine but getting into details is like . . . it gets really uncomfortable. It can change the mood” (Daniel, personal interview, November 8, 2017). The journey which led to international adoption was not easy for any of these individuals. Pain was also present in Ruth’s voice when she said, “Sometimes I jeer at myself because I’m like, I should be contacting these families, these people, all the time. But at the same time, I’m like oh, they are the ones who let me go” (Ruth, personal interview, December 19, 2017).

As young children, participants expected their biological family would be able to care for them. Impressions of abandonment have developed into a broader lack of trust making new relationships more challenging. For those who lived in multiple settings, these feelings were exacerbated. Irene stated that the hardest part of her transition was “getting to know my (adoptive) parents, because in the first, like first time, whenever I was there . . . I really . . . I don’t know . . . me and my mom we fought a lot because she wouldn’t understand who I was, and getting to know them” (Irene, personal interview, August 27, 2017). The time spent within the orphanage setting created not only a sense of security, but special friendships developed. There was cultural unity and a level of empathy that only these young people could really understand. Daniel recognized how significant this loss has been:

I miss having a lot of friends who have gone through the same experience. Because, we had quite a bit of things that we related, you know. So, I kind of appreciated having someone who understands what it means to feel neglected, what it means to lose a parent or two. What it means, you know, to go hungry for months—even years, you know. (Daniel, personal interview, November 8, 2017)

There was additional grief having to say goodbye to extended relatives, siblings, and in five instances, their biological parents. Some participants were able to regain contact with former orphans upon arrival in the United States via social media. Additionally, a few had the opportunity to send letters back to their country of origin or talk on the phone with family members. Facing the past and rekindling these relationships also created a sense of guilt that international adoptees have found exceptionally difficult.

Feelings of uncertainty has been overwhelming for some adoptees. Lydia and Delilah, who also had difficult transitions, recounted their sense of inadequacy and isolation when they failed to meet the perceived expectations of their adoptive families. Many expressed frustration with their inability to meet conceptual personal achievement benchmarks of peers their age. Past distressing situations like MeiLan experienced caused her to doubt everything:

I didn't feel happy or sad or . . . I just felt like I don't know. This is something new, like, actually have a man and a woman and a little girl that actually—I am part of their family! I just didn't . . . I was unsure, really, really, unsure about what to feel. Um, but I was just, ah, I think they tell me they were really happy they saw me. They think I was really lost (laughs). I think that's right! 'Cause I think I was lost. (MeiLan, personal interview, September 15, 2017)

Concerns about future success were also overwhelming for these current young adults. One third of the participants remain scared and confused about what they are going to do. Multiple individuals are troubled about debt and finances. For participants who did not feel like valued individuals, decisions regarding their employment seem to be made by default. Peter, who has been quite successful within his trade, compared his life to his classmates stating:

Other people have a lot more going for them than me. That's why I get worried about my future. 'Cause, they have been living . . . they know the country and they know what they want. I don't really know what I want. I just want, I basically want just what's best for me. (Peter, personal interview, January 25, 2018)

Three of the young men in this study have considered going into the military in large part due to the financial security that it represents. While each also expressed an appreciation for this country and the opportunity it affords, again, this life choice was being considered primarily based out of desperation.

Socially, the impact of not relating to others who are "like them" in their local communities was also found to be upsetting. At times the adoptee was the only person of color in their family, in their school, or in their church. The inability to communicate clearly was one of the challenging aspects of building friendships. For those who are shy and quiet, the detachment is even more pronounced. Only a few participants commented that they had more than two friends beyond family members, though school-based acquaintances, often out of convenience, were recognizable. While she remains grateful for the opportunities she has experienced, Irene summarized the challenges she has experienced with a statement of how life could have been better for her:

I would say: to help them while they are in their culture, in their country, I think, for me. [S. Schrank: And why do you think that would be more helpful?] Because I think . . . I don't know . . . they wouldn't lose the side of who they are, number 1. And, uh, also, you know, it wouldn't be really rough. Like they wouldn't feel like they are in two places, because . . . I don't know . . . For me, like, it's very hard to fit in both places. I feel like I'm in my own world. Like, when it comes to the language for example. It's very . . . I

don't know fully Amharic or I don't know fully English. So, I feel like I'm in between, you know? (Irene personal interview, August 27, 2017)

### **Research Question Responses**

The three research questions that guided this study were intended to provoke understanding of the international adolescent adoptees' perspectives, experiences, and influences during the critical periods of pre-adoption and upon arrival into the United States. Framed by the support of theoretical literature, composite meanings were synthesized from textural and structural descriptions discovered throughout the data.

**RQ1: How do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents describe their families (first family, foster/orphanage family or families, adoptive family), sociocultural conditions, relationships, and influential experiences prior to, and following, their arrival in the United States?** Participants in this study had a broad understanding of family prior to, and following, their arrival in the United States. Initially, there was often a simple biological link that was expressed for those who continue to live in their country of origin. Amber, for example, viewed family as serving in functional roles such as “mom and dad” (Amber, personal interview, January 20, 2018). Sammy discussed the differences he experienced since being adopted:

I mean when my parents passed away we were very little, so like the parent thing wasn't really for us, like you know. And like in the orphanage, nobody really sees you as their own kid or treats you like their own kid. So, we never really had that family thing, a family connection or whatever. (Sammy, personal interview, December 15, 2017)

Most participants communicated a feeling of pride and appreciation when they recounted memories on the individuals who cared for them in their country of origin. They recognized that

sacrifices were often made to give them better life opportunities.

Since their adoption, these young adults have discovered that familial descriptions extend beyond genetics. Family can include friends (Delilah, personal interview, September 3, 2017; Irene, personal interview, August 27, 2017; Miki, personal interview, August 27, 2017). Peter described family simply as a “group of people who are connected” (Peter, personal interview, January 25, 2018). While not initially, all adoptees felt and loved and cared for by a current adult in their life. They have each been learning what it means to have a family structure for the first time. Having household rules, a family calendar for future events, or planning for visitors was a new concept (Miki, personal interview, December 20, 2017). MeiLan’s perspective of family now assures, “You don’t feel alone anymore. You can depend on someone who is going to teach you. To me adoption means, ah, not just a family, to me it is more about your future” (MeiLan, personal interview, September 15, 2017). Some, like Abraham, have discovered a new sense of identity in his adoptive family:

It’s just like, if you’re not like a . . . if it’s your adopted family then—it’s like your adopted family isn’t a credit to the person who you are. And that bothers me mostly because I feel like, like a good amount of my traits and the person I am have come from my family and that’s how I want to be viewed—from my adoptive family—and that’s why I want it to be taken seriously (Abraham, personal interview, November 25, 2017).

The experiences that were most influential prior to adoption were ones where individuals gave selflessly. Neighbors, people on the street, orphanage workers, and biological relatives reflected a level of generosity that profoundly impacted the lives of these participants. Amber, Delilah, Daniel, Don, and Peter highlighted the exceptional sacrifices individuals made to

provide for them. Alexis talked in detail about the people of Uganda and differences she has experienced in the United States:

People are so welcoming and so happy there. No matter how little they have. And the hospitality there is . . . amazing. And people are connected all together. Like everybody knows each other in a way. That's kind of what I miss . . . the connection and how everybody relates to each other. People call each other brother and sister even if they're not and . . . They consider each other family and how like, they will share the little they have with those who don't and those around them. It's just their hearts I guess. And, um, when I came here I kind of expected it to be the same, I believe, but it is very different here. Everybody keeps to themselves. People stay in their houses a lot. And we don't talk to them, they don't talk to you. It's like, ummm, America lacks that. (Alexis, personal interview, December 31, 2017)

**Sense of relationship.** There are distinct differences between the relationships of adoptees with individuals from their country of origin and those within the United States. Extended biological family members served in parenting roles by default, not necessarily because they had the ability to care for these young people. Adoptees discussed both the generosity found in communities as well as a sense of discrimination. Raw emotion was elevated when a few participants talked about not having enough food to eat. Love was expressed in new forms within their adoptive families. The appreciative difference for Abraham was clear in his definition:

Family, I think, uh, I mean family means a lot because, again, it's . . . family is this idea—especially in my case—if I had a biological family I would probably dismiss it. I mean the family . . . I think for me it is been deeper than a biological family. 'Cause it's

like, it's sort of like, strangers taking you into their house and suppressing every human . . . ah . . . like the obvious . . . not the obvious, that's not even the right word, but like the ability for my family—my adoptive family—to take me into their house and to do all of that for me is like a huge sacrifice. It's like HUGE. So that holds me. Family means MORE to me because of that. (Abraham, personal interview, November 25, 2017)

For those who felt immediate acceptance, a shift in understanding happened within the first year. Individuals who experienced personal conflicts during early interactions required a much longer period for a sense of family to resonate. Yet for Lydia, who has created some distance with her adopted parents and now associates herself with a different family, relationships are formed in commonality such as culture and language. Because of this, even after six years, she stated: “I don't know them that well, and they don't know me as well, really” (Lydia, personal interview, January 6, 2018).

Each international adoption was a unique experience. Yet, all thirteen participants described their transition into U.S. culture as “difficult.” For those who have relationships with individuals from their country of origin, particularly other international adoptees near their same age, adjustments were perceived as being smoother. Having direct contact with another person in their native language, sharing memories, and current events provided comfort. Whereas, the inability to communicate openly, engage in religious traditions, and participate in cultural celebrations felt as a tremendous loss.

Relationships with their newly adoptive parents, extended family, and classmates are a significant aspect of how adolescents process social interactions. Challenges at school and getting to know people were often directly related to the language barriers. Sports were an avenue that transcended this necessity. Most notably, confidence and security came with being



surrounded by patient, engaged, empathetic, and encouraging adults during a chapter when these international adoptees were otherwise overwhelmed by the realization that “everything was new” (Alexis, personal interview, December 31, 2017).

**Sense of purpose.** When living in constant survival mode, participants were not able to focus on the future or the contributions they may later make in society. The daily struggle for food and basic necessities was momentous as described by Miki, Abraham, Daniel, Don, and Amber. While obtaining a quality education was important and encouraged especially by their guardians, Sammy recounted in his December 15, 2017 interview, “Back home, in the orphanage, I was always, ah, not a very focused person. I didn’t know what I wanted to do back home.” If they even survived through adulthood, multiple participants assumed they would become day laborers. MeiLan believed she would have been pulled into the pornography industry, and yet she previously saw adoption as a form of gambling with her life. She said,

’Cause I don’t know what it was going to be like. I feel like, I’m going to be in a place that don’t know what it is. . . . I don’t even have a clue. . . . So I feel like adoption was like gambling on my future. (MeiLan, personal interview, September 15, 2017)

Living in the United States has provided many more opportunities than what once seemed possible in their home countries. Educational pursuits have prepared these young people for better futures. Some are still trying to determine what that future may look like, but they clearly are determined to become independent and successful. Many participants, like Peter, expressed these feelings: “I have, I guess I have a better future because I am going to school and, yeah, I have plans for the future so that’s good” (Peter, personal interview, January 25, 2018). Making their adoptive parents proud was also a distinct change from their past. Miki said,

My parents didn't have to do anything. They just took a chance. Kind of to help me out, basically. And um . . . So I'm trying not to take it for granted or anything. I'm trying to work hard, trying to improve, trying to . . . in a way, help my parents out. (Miki, personal interview, August 31, 2017)

Additionally, the desire that participants have to give back to their native communities and biological families is obviously something most could not conceive of previously. This propensity is an example of the gratitude they possess and the role models they have in their lives. As an example, Irene recognized that her adoptive mom has positively contributed to her life:

She has influenced me to become umm . . . very . . . to not take anything for granted and you know, and um . . . to not to think about myself but also to think about other people as well. You know? And not to forget who I am and where I come from. (Irene, personal interview, August 27, 2017)

**RQ2. How do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents describe the changes of their perceived external identity dimensions (such as gender, race, culture, and religion) prior to, and following, their arrival in the United States?** In their country of origin, all participants lived in homogeneous societies. As a young adolescent in Uganda, Amber believed “that ALL Americans were white or vanilla,” while people of dark skin only lived in Africa (Amber, personal interview, January 20, 2018). Yet differences in gender, race, and religion were common in the countries represented within this study. Discrimination was recognized within their native culture based on a variety of physical characteristics. The participants' contact with Caucasians (who were believed to be American or Canadian) was fluid as people passed through the orphanages.

During the interview process, it appeared as if having transracial parents was not a significant barrier for adjustment. Participants reported this was more of an annoyance when individuals from the public recognized physical familial differences. Restaurant servers frequently asked if separate checks were required, and strangers inquired if they were adopted—a topic that brought about uncomfortable memories in public environments. In fact, race was merely a complicating issue for adoptees when it was related to culture. Only Sammy commented that, “It’s hard to come and live with a person that’s not like me ’cause I’m not like the White people. You know, it’s hard to be able to adapt to their culture” (Sammy, personal interview, December 15, 2017). This is interesting since race, country of origin, nationality, and gender were significant attributes that participants self-reported on the MMPI (see Appendix X).

Cultural differences were extensively discussed within the interview process and documented in letters of advice. Yet the MMPI did not reflect the same heightened core association to their native heritage for many adoptees. The level of connectedness individuals perceived with their country of origin, biological family, and with others of the same nationality varied, as did their retention of first-language communication skills. Most adoptees in this study were able to adapt their religious practices as foundational differences of faith were only present in one case. Many adoptive families have incorporated native holidays and diverse cultural foods into their lives.

**Sense of self.** As participants have matured and become more introspective they have also adapted to their diverse background and experiences. Cultural events such as holiday gatherings were discussed by most individuals, particularly those from Ethiopia. Many have shared these traditions with their adoptive family and close friends. Don is exceptionally proud of his Ethiopian heritage and openly shares details of his home country. Conversely, Daniel did

not want to stick out from his American peers, stating, “I feel like I have to conform. BUT, that’s a very shallow thing for me to say. Conformity is like one of the things, at least, in my high school mind though, I needed to fit in” (Daniel, personal interview, November 25, 2017).

Similar comments were made by MeiLan, Amber, and Peter. Irene also remarked, “If I stand out in certain ways then I’m like, I kind of start feeling the loneliness” (Irene personal interview, August 27, 2017). For individuals who have other internationally adopted siblings from the same country, or if they are connected with friends or social groups of the same nationality, these dimensions differ based on who they are with.

The concept of race has not changed the participants’ sense of identity. Even early in their relationships, the differing skin tone of other adoptive family members did not have a tremendous impact on their identity. Ruth said in her December 19, 2017 interview:

It was weird because like we had never seen—well we had seen white people, but it was weird to see that they were MY family, like they were here to take me to America. And, um, there was obviously joy but at the same time . . . I, I didn’t think about it honestly.

While race was not a significant issue, talking about being adopted was dependent on their surroundings. When strangers inquire if they are adopted, most often participants respond with a simple answer. In public, adoptees become uncomfortable discussing their story unless it is for a greater purpose. This is not to reduce their dimensions of identity, but to refrain from sharing painful information.

**RQ3. What do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents perceive as being the most prominent challenges during their first five years in the United States and how did they persist through them?** The trauma of ending one chapter and beginning another was dramatic for these young people. For those who enjoyed school in their

native country, the transition to the U.S.-based educational system was easier for some, particularly in subjects such as math. Don, Lydia, Miki, Ruth, and Sammy commented that problems in school were specific, but significant. English, social studies, and history were more demanding primarily because of the language barrier. Regardless, challenges at school was the most cited issue. Abraham, who arrived in the United States during the summer months, wrote:

School came and I was about to be exposed to a whole new world of education—another adjustment. The other students, the teaching style, the technology I had only seen in movies, the new people I had never met . . . I mean you name it all. And as goes with everything in life, every stage had it is own ups and downs. (Abraham, advice letter, February 18, 2018)

Building upon social relationships and getting to know people was the second most mentioned challenge. This corresponds with the difficulties adoptees faced in school. Communication with classmates was limited, making it difficult to connect during this crucial stage. Discovering like interests, such as playing sports, working out, watching movies, fishing, shopping, studying, enjoying a meal together, or just “hanging out” are normal activities for this group. Common interest binds the rapport, but they are difficult for international adoptees to initiate. To accommodate, they often looked to form bonds within their own homes as MeiLan did:

I felt like . . . mmmm . . . friends come, friends go, but my sister, my mom, dad, when they come they will never leave me. They will never suddenly disappear. Yea, I just feel like—sorry, I might cry—I think they are really . . . Like my shoulder. They help me, like, go through all of my lifetime. (MeiLan, personal interview, September 15, 2017)

The strongest friendships were consistently enjoyed with adoptive siblings, teammates, and college-level classmates that blossomed out of frequent contact. Fostering trust with a small group of confidants provided emotional security and self-confidence.

Cultural and environmental changes were challenges. Nine individuals commented on the weather, the landscape, or the aromas. Peter recoiled when he thought about those first moments: “It was warm outside. It smelled. I thought it was smelling bad. We were on the highway and I was like really . . . I guess that was the first time of me looking at a highway that big. I was like surprised” (Peter, personal interview, January 25, 2018). For adoptees who immigrated to a northern state from a country south of the equator, the drop of temperature was quite a shock. Daniel laughed as he recalled his winter arrival: “It was 40 degrees and they were saying, ‘This is warm, don’t worry! You just need a light jacket!’” (Daniel, personal interview, November 8, 2017). The beauty of the countryside in their native lands are missed. The rainy season, the green vegetation, and the red dirt of Uganda was fondly remembered. MeiLan also momentarily reflected on the beautiful colors and landmarks that were present in China.

While these young adults reflected characteristics of determination, courage, and an ethic of hard work throughout their interviews, in their advice letters, and more specifically on the MMPI (see Appendix X), it was the people who surrounded them that were most influential during the first years of transition. Family, friends, church, and school were prominent contextual influences for this sample. A sense of trust and respect became essential for overcoming the uncertainty and lack of confidence that was often reflected in previously recounted poor behaviors.

**Barriers related to change.** Reformulating the barriers for adolescents who spent the first four stages of the development cycle in another country is a key area of adjustment. There

were numerous environmental and cultural differences that created a sense of confusion in these young minds. Compounded by the inability to feel confident in their communication skills and food choices, some individuals chose to retreat while others challenged authority. Additionally, the priorities for raising children have a different life focus in other cultures. Alexis wrote,

I was raised different. I was 13 when I first got here but I knew how to cook, clean, and basically knew how to perform all the motherly duties. Most of the children from here were not raised like that. [In Uganda] we were raised as brothers and sisters in a community whether related or not. We didn't have much, everything we had we had to work hard for, whether it's water or food. (Alexis, advice letter, February 28, 2018)

Some participants felt inadequate during their first years in the United States. Those who faced challenges in school were often reserved and did not freely ask questions. The sense of being stuck between their country of origin and the new culture where they resided compounded issues. Many international adoptees believed their knowledge base was limited about both societies. Even while playing sports, they had new equipment to use and rules to follow that were not previously known. This became overwhelming for some individuals. Peter expressed this frustration when he said,

The reason why I say everything was difficult because it wasn't like we focused on one thing at a time, just because of the nature of me coming was like I was an infant, I was at a weird age, but I guess if I was an infant then I guess we wouldn't be talking about it because I wouldn't know. (Peter, personal interview, January 25, 2018)

Adapting to acceptable cultural behaviors was an additional challenge. For those who were accustomed to physical altercations, or being "brutally blunt," adoptees recognized they had to

change (Delilah, personal interview, September 3, 2017; Lydia, personal interview, January 6, 2018; Don, personal interview, December 31, 2017).

Determining balance between relationships formed with their adoptive family and new friends in the United States, with the connections they want to retain within their country of origin, was emotionally taxing. Some adoptees wanted to leave their past behind, removing influences and associations from their lives. Consequences to this option are now being addressed. Others feel guilty because they are not more closely involved with biological family, their language, or cultural practices. To process these differences, Amber determined,

[I needed] to change my culture—not change it but adjust it to the new culture more because Uganda and the United States are totally two different countries. And so, I had to let a whole bunch of stuff go 'cause I felt they would kind of be weird here and at that moment I was trying to fit in. (Amber, personal interview, January 20, 2018)

Another portion of respondents yearn to learn more about their native society, its culture, and their heritage. Alexis provided advice to prospective international adoptees based on her ability to acknowledge all aspects of herself more broadly:

Accept the new country as your new home and most importantly don't compare it to your homeland because it will never be anything like home and that will make your transition very hard. Things will only get better and beautiful for you with time. (Alexis, advice letter, February 28, 2018)

**Barriers related to trauma.** Each international adolescent adoptee had experienced trauma to some extent. Experiencing the death of a loved one, enduring physical or emotional abuse, facing hunger and a shortage of basic needs, or leaving behind everyone and everything they knew impacted them all differently. Frequently, as children, they believed they were



contributing to problems within their homes. Delilah thought this even within her first adopted family: “I feel like she should be, like as a mom, she should be close more. So I would say, there were a lot of burden even when we come here” (Delilah, personal interview, September 3, 2017). The care and attention that this sample of adoptees received was diverse. While some families immediately explored professional counseling, others did not.

Allowing oneself to accept the love of others was not easy for participants. For those who continued to feel out of place, they chose not to talk about being adopted or the traumatic situations of their past. Particularly with people they do not know well, adoption is difficult to openly discuss. MeiLan explained these feelings:

The reason I don't want to share it, or even have a conversation about it, because I felt left out. I felt . . . you know . . . It felt like you are in a group where you are the only one that is different than everybody else. It's just felt like so unreal. I just felt so ah . . . not embarrassing or anything, I just felt really uncomfortable 'cause that's something that not everybody has in common in my situation. I felt like, people might judge me if I say something about myself too, so I don't really. (MeiLan, personal interview, September 15, 2017)

Peter also felt as if he was being judged and treated differently from the moment others heard his accent (Peter, personal communication, April 18, 2018). This sense of isolation made it more difficult to build connections within their schools and community. While most international adoptees had acquaintances with people in their age groups, building friendships was more challenging. Even for those with outgoing personalities, adoptees only have one or two American-born friends. Significant relationships that are solidly built upon trust occur primarily with similar aged siblings or other internationally adopted adolescents.

## Summary

This chapter presented the background of the thirteen international adolescent adoptees who participated in this study on identity development. Using recurring information discovered within textural descriptions across all data collection tools, themes emerged. Structural descriptions provided an understanding of how the co-researchers as a group have developed their personal identities. Integrating these descriptions together provides an understanding of the essence of the journey international adoptees experience during identity development.

Adoption is challenging, particularly during the adolescent stage in life. How international adolescent adoptees perceived their personal worth, through the development of their sense of self and their sense of relationships, became an essential aspect for overcoming barriers related to trauma and change. American families often did not fully understand the cultural and environmental challenges that came with living in a new country. Beyond the time it takes to adapt to new surroundings, these adoptees struggled with the communication gap that was often overwhelming. Participants discovered that individuals who showed patience, acceptance, and took the time to form a bond of understanding helped to reduce insecurity and built confidence. International adoptees who were able to adapt more openly to their surroundings, develop rapport, and engage with their new families found the transition easier. For healthy development, they had to believe that their lives mattered. With time and maturity, adoptees now recognize that he or she has a greater sense of purpose.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to understand the perspectives of young adults who were internationally adopted to the United States during their adolescent years, and to describe the experiences that contributed to their identity development. Thirteen young adults, who were internationally adopted between the ages of 12 and 17, shared personal information through surveys, adoption records, semi-structured interviews, and advice letters to prospective adolescent international adoptees, which all provided a basis for triangulating evidence. Intentional and intuitive reduction has encouraged the development of themes through textural and structural descriptions of international adoptees' common experiences and perceptions. In relation to the research questions that guided this study, chapter five summarizes the findings and discusses the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. An assessment of the delimitations and limitations of this study are presented along with recommendations for future research opportunities.

### **Summary of Findings**

Research question one asked, "How do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents describe their families (first family, foster/orphanage family or families, adoptive family), sociocultural conditions, relationships, and influential experiences prior to, and following, their arrival in the United States?" Based on responses from participants, the concept of family has evolved since experiencing international adoption as an adolescent. During childhood in their country of origin, the biological or functional association with relatives was a prominent definition for individuals. Everyone had an appreciation for someone who cared for them, particularly when resources were scarce. Since their adoption, familial descriptions extend

beyond genetics to include friends. For most adoptees, family is about the bonds that are present. Irene said simply, “Family . . . It means . . . it doesn’t have to be blood. It could be, you know, my friends. It could be anybody I have a connection with. And that I . . . that I love. Those are my family” (Irene, personal interview, August 27, 2017).

Within their new communities, the language barrier was often difficult to overcome. Adoptees relied on connections with individuals who understood their past with acceptance. Stress and uncertainty were mitigated by relationships that helped encourage the participant’s sense of self. Now they look toward the future with a sense of purpose beyond what was possible in their country of origin. Giving back to their extended family and native communities has become a priority because of the opportunities they have been given.

The second research question inquired, “How do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents describe the changes of their perceived external identity dimensions (such as gender, race, culture, and religion) prior to, and following, their arrival in the United States?” The perceived changes in external identity dimensions between the adoptee’s country of origin and the United States were analyzed through multiple lenses. Transracial issues were not significant on an individual basis unless it was tied to cultural differences. Public remarks about ethnicity were disturbing, often because it led to traumatic questions about their adoption journey. Time in the United States has allowed for reflective understanding and personal growth that often comes with maturity. Their sense of self transcends physical characteristics and prioritizes core attributes that are foundational identifiers across all contexts.

Finally, the third research question considered, “What do young adults who were internationally adopted as adolescents perceive as being the most prominent challenges during their first five years in the United States and how did they persist through them?” Through the

literature and expressed opinions of these adoptees, I found that adoption is hard. There is rarely an easy path for any family, regardless of the age of the adoptee. Adolescent international adoption has an emotional component that is unexpected and often traumatic for everyone involved. For this group of participants, barriers of adjustment included differences in environment, culture, communication, and a lack of trusting relationships. The change in food was a frequent topic of discussion. Maintaining connections with their country of origin, adoptive families, and friends impacted the participant's ability to persist through these challenges.

### **Discussion**

To understand the essence of internationally adopted adolescent identity development during a complex stage of life, this study was guided by Erikson's (1963, 1968) psychosocial development theory. Turner's social identity theory (as cited in Turner et al., 1994) furthered insight as to how individuals have defined themselves and their social categorization within groups, while the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity (as cited in Jones & McEwen, 2000) contributed to the key categories, themes, and contextual influences that captured the core sense of self. Brodzinsky added to the foundation of this study through the analysis of how adoptees have psychologically adapted and socially adjusted in their search for self (1987, 2011; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1992). The discussion section integrates psychosocial development and the social components of identity development literature with research results.

### **Psychosocial Development Theory**

Erikson (1963, 1968) extensively deliberated the need for belonging and security during early childhood as a foundational aspect of experiencing *wholeness* later in life. The progression

of identity development suggests that the resolution of crisis is required in a fixed hierarchical sequence of stages. The adoptees in this study had at least one biological parent or close family member present in their lives during the earliest stage of life. At times when they needed comfort, nurturing, or protection, care was provided. Personal attachments and basic trust developed. Yet they each faced traumatic loss at a young age: illness of one or both parents, abandonment, or relinquishment. Participants explained they lived with extended family before entering orphan care, foster placement, or boarding school. Many were “tossed around from relative to relative” due to the inability to meet the needs of multiple children in the home and, as Alexis pointed out, became “the least of their responsibilities” (Alexis, personal communication, March 20, 2018).

These young children persisted through what most would consider neglectful circumstances. Through the chaos, participants expressed feelings of joy for at least a period of time during their early lives. This was also evident in the vivid memories adoptees from Ethiopia and Uganda shared. While MeiLan’s childhood experience was not pleasant, she did share encounters of growing up in China with some fondness of the environment and the cuisine. As potential adoptees, all were vulnerable, and levels of personal attachment were varied. Erikson and Erickson (1997) theorized that conditions such as these may have created a “chronic state of mourning” with a possible “depressive undertone to the remainder of one’s life” (p. 87). For this group, it was another influential adult in all thirteen cases who was sought out or stepped in and cared for them, changing their path. Often it was a volunteer, a teacher, or the orphanage director who fulfilled an encouraging role.

The adolescence phase in the life cycle is one of self-discovery and confusion. Physical and psychological changes that they experienced during this period of life further complicates

their perception of self. Amber directly acknowledged how important it was to have a mother to talk to about these issues (personal interview, January 20, 2018). Identification to family, community, culture, and ideological values are inherently questioned and affirmed during this stage. The international adoptee is forced to not only confirm the selections of their childhood self-images, they must determine and synthesize what associations are important in their new environment.

Immigrating to the United States during the adolescent stage of life, unlike that of an infant, allowed for a more personal connection to their country of origin. In this study, continuity with biological extended family was dependent on resources as well as the retention of their native language. Some participants communicate frequently via social media or Skype. Others have been able to return to their homeland for a visit. While Daniel has made an intentional choice to not have contact with his biological relatives, he believes there will be an opportunity to reconnect in the future. MeiLan, on the other hand, only has a bond with friends from her Chinese orphanage, and her desire is to only see the landscape should she return to China. Cultural influences were apparent based on exchanges they have retained abroad with family, or even within the United States with same-ethnic friends or adopted siblings. It is partially through the encouragement of these relationships, as well as an understanding of the opportunities that they have been given, that these international adoptees are focused on attaining independence. As Moore and Boldero (1991) stated, “self-concept enhancement and independence development are germane to the formation of a stable and satisfying sense of personal identity” (p. 523). The young adults who have the greatest sense of self have recognized that who they were is a significant aspect of knowing who they are today.

As adolescents, international adoptees were not interested in finding out what was unique about themselves as Erikson (1968) purported would be common during this phase. Rather, they want to blend in with their peers. New associations with adoptive parents, extended family, teachers, classmates, and team members have been a significant aspect of how internationally adopted adolescents processed social interactions. With maturity, positive influences, and in some cases professional counseling, each internationally adopted participant have been working toward being able to accept and resolve their past. They do not want to discuss adoption broadly because of the uninformed public response that is often received, but in small groups with those they trust, it provides a source of healing. Over the five or more years that these participants have been in the United States, international adoptees have all found a sense of purpose and “ego strength that represents both a sense of well-being and a sense of self-direction that is essential for ‘getting ahead’” in adulthood (Schwartz et al., 2009, p. 145).

Admittedly for some of the participants in this study, trust issues, lack of confidence, and uncertainty still exist. The analysis of the EPSI and Personal Assessment reflect similar concerns. The dimension of *trust* had the lowest mean score as a subscale and was the lowest subscale for twelve of the thirteen participants. *Industry*, the fourth subscale, reflected a majority of the highest EPSI mean scores. This diversion of Erikson’s (1963, 1968) fundamental view that the process of identity formation emerges as an evolving configuration therefore comes into question with this population. Yet without question, *hope*, “the first basic strength and root of ego development” (Erikson & Erikson, 1997, p. 60), abounds within the responses provided throughout the interview process and letters of advice. This fundamental aspect of early development may overcome the sense of trustfulness that was damaged during the traumatic segment of their youth. They also expressed determination to succeed and present an ethic of



hard work and honesty throughout the data. These characteristics represent personal development and are closely associated within the *industry* phase, a stage appropriate for school age children.

This peak in the life cycle suggests that the following *identity* construct is not yet fully resolved. According to Erikson's psychosocial development theory, young adults would generally reflect stronger mean scores during adolescent years. While it is understood that remnants of each earlier stage of crisis continue to influence all individuals, these participants have uncommon results. It is possible that the Type I error cited by Thornburg et al. (1992) should be considered, particularly since this is a small sample. Additionally, since language has been a noted barrier for this population, participants may have interpreted identity assessment statements differently from their intent. What remains clear throughout the data presented in this study is that self-development and traumatic barriers need to be substantially resolved for healthy development. This group of internationally adopted adolescents faced a different sense of crisis and social identification, which are not comparable to children who were raised in traditional American families.

### **Social Identity Theory**

An aspect of Turner's work with social identity relates to the power that comes with associating with groups (Reicher et al., 2012). The self-categorization that international adolescent adoptees constructed varied depending on the context of their surroundings. They are socially mobile, and group boundaries are more permeable because of access to new opportunities. Issues of transracial adoption, ethnic, and cultural identity have been often resolved within the family unit. Even in the instances when a strong link to their country of origin was not felt, adoptive parents have encouraged their children to embrace traditional

celebrations and cultural celebrations. Miki shared his excitement when he had the opportunity to connect with his “buddies” at the Ethiopian Sports Federation of North America annual gathering. This cultural and networking event works to build community through soccer. Speaking their native language and enjoying the food was very meaningful. Likewise, Don has passionately shared information about his heritage and country of origin. Their enthusiasm reflected how strong this aspect of social identification and ethnic pride is among most of this sample.

Remaining in contact with others who they befriended in their orphanage has also been helpful in easing identity challenges. For MeiLan, who does not feel personally attached to her country of origin, the affinity she has retained with a fellow international adoptee has provided healing:

The reason why, uh, she’s the only one in my 20 years . . . she’s the only one who accept who I am. She knows my stories. She’s always cheering me. She always, uh, she always tells me I can do it even though I felt like I’m a loser and cannot do it anymore . . . and she told me how to get more closer . . . I felt like the reason like God literally used her in my life so I could be more open to other people so I don’t have to . . . I don’t have to make up stories any more. (MeiLan, personal interview, September 15, 2017)

Similarly, Daniel discussed how he missed having friends consistently around him who intimately understood what their lives were once like as he did in the orphanage (personal interview, November 8, 2017). For most adoptees, their personal stories, the struggle to communicate in English, the separation from their native culture, new religious practices they may experience, understanding how to operate within a family structure, feelings of inadequate knowledge about their country (or the United States), dealing with differing expectations, and

rising above overwhelming fears were areas that fellow classmates could not empathize with or understand. This created a sense of perceived division within social settings for many adoptees, at least during their early adjustment.

The sense of “us” within international adoption and ethnic groups are recognized as a binding force. Yet in agreement with the findings of Younes and Klein’s (2014) study, these young people do not wish to be defined by international adoption. A main point in this study was that they just want to fit in, particularly during those first few years in the United States. As Amber stated:

My identity description may change socially but only for a short period of time. The reason it may change socially is because of how I want people to view me as. I want to be liked by people the moment I meet them. I guess what I mean is that once I get comfortable with one or a group of people, my identity may change to the real me because I feel that I can be comfortable with people who won’t judge me and my imperfections. Overall, I can say that I’ve been immensely influenced by society and what they may think of me a person. (Amber, personal interview, January 20, 2018)

Similarly, Miki concurred he changed his “whole style” to adapt to American culture. His appearance, he feels, is now more representative of the people he associates with (Miki, personal interview, August 31, 2017). The conclusion by Turner et al. (1994) that social identity is fluid and dynamic was clearly present, particularly as they navigated through new relationships at school and within their community.

Assumptions based on the color of skin created a gap that disassociated the adoptee from the family they now identify with. This was often frustrating. Issues of race were most apparent when expectations of individuals outside of the adoptee’s social circle were voiced. They did not

appreciate being defined by someone else's preconceived social identity dimensions. Amber brought a specific example to our discussion:

I'll be at school and somebody will be playing like hip-hop music. And they expect you to know it. I honestly cannot stand hip-hop music. I just CAN'T. And somebody once told me too like, "How can you be chocolate and not really cuss," and I'm like, "how can you not?" Like, they just . . . there are all these different expectations. So it was kind of hard. (Amber, personal interview, January 20, 2018)

Recognition of the physical differences in adoptive families was one of the dimensions that Peter most appreciated about his life, though he noted it was often a surprise to others. For him, this unique characteristic was important. Having the autonomy to make decisions on their personal image, the affiliations they formed, and the extent they chose to incorporate American or country of origin cultural traits into their identity, the saliency of these self-categorizations, was a purely individual choice.

### **Psychology of Adoption Adjustment**

Brodzinsky was one of the first in the field of adoption related research to consider the psychological affects and vulnerability risks that adopted children experience. For the participants in this study, where they came from, who their birth parents were, and why they were relinquished (Brodzinsky, 1987) were not questioned to the same extent it would have been for a young child. Many of these young adults had clear memories or had retained relationships with biological family members that helped clarify their aptitudes, personality, and physical traits that help define their sense of self. That is not to say that they have been without other stresses though. Adoption is hard. International adoption is riddled with additional complexities that can drain emotional and financial resources. Adolescents are psychologically vulnerable due to

unforeseen lengthy delays, strict legal proceedings, anticipatory emotions of transitioning into a new family, and anxiety of leaving their country. How they dealt with these issues and other past trauma has been a prominent barrier of development with lasting effects.

Communication was a frequently noted challenge, both due to cultural differences and comprehension. For a few of the adoptees in this group, the early interactions with their adoptive mothers contained disappointing memories. Poor communication and misunderstandings were emotionally damaging. As Sharma et al. (1998) would expect, these individuals often presented with lower self-esteem, were less social, and identified themselves as being quiet and withdrawn. Co-researchers now recognize that this initial turmoil impacted their overall disposition and reactions upon conflict. For example, in instances when newly adopted adolescents were confined by household rules, they responded as if this was a personal attack based on lack of trust. Conversely, those who felt accepted, whose families acknowledged their differences and were patient with them, had an easier transition period (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Consistent with the results discussed by Rueter and Koerner (2008), families who valued conversation and were not overly demanding have mitigated some risks associated with adolescent adjustment problems. Additionally, as considered previously, those individuals who have remained in contact with family in their country of origin, or friends who have also been adopted, communicate in their native language and openly share experiences. Talking through prior misconceptions and the realities of daily challenges has provided healing and emotional security.

The sense of loss international adoptees experience, most often during their earliest years of life, may produce externalizing behavioral problems. While these issues were not directly addressed in this study, Brodzinsky's research with respect to the influence trauma and loss can have on this group cannot be overlooked. How adoptees process the acceptance of their past

socially impacts future relationships and life events. Some of the adoptees experience guilt from leaving people they love while enjoying a lifestyle they only dreamed of. The curiosity they initially expressed in their country of origin is now often tempered by fear (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). A few participants commented they have been very anxious with new people, changing their behavior to help ensure they would be liked. Adoptees have felt overwhelmed by options. Adjusting from a focus on immediate survival, to a future of limitless possibilities, has been a scary prospect. Even as participants are grateful to have the opportunity to pursue higher education, most are not certain what they will do long-term. While many have positive relational influences and support structures in place, resolving these issues remains complex. These unique circumstances confirm that a model for identity development for international adoptees cannot be easily applied.

### **Multiple Dimensions of Identity**

This study identified core attributes and contextual influences through the MMIDI (see Appendix X) that contribute to an individual's identity development. The MMIDI provided a framework for understanding what identity dimensions were perceived as most prominent, which were then supported through data collected during interviews and written personal letters of advice. How participants make meaning of their identity dimensions contribute to the research in this field.

While physical features of race, gender, heritage, and culture were mentioned by some participants, emphasis was more often placed on human characteristics. As discussed above, the saliency of race and ethnicity, in particular, was dependent on situational and sociocultural dynamics. Participants did not want to stand out because of their appearance, yet they were proud of their culture. When they were in contact with people from their country of origin, they

often embraced these qualities. Conversely, when communicating with biological family members and ideological changes were realized, emotions of guilt and frustration occurred. The fluidity of identity dimensions was most clear in moments of conflict.

As Jones and McEwen (2000) confirmed in their research, this group of adoptees wanted to be valued and understood for the totality of their personal attributes, not by those that were imposed upon them. For example, being adopted is a part of their identity, but they did not want their past to define who they are. It is only in the presence of other international adoptees that this dimension becomes important. Honesty and kindness are essential for many participants because of the poor interactions they have endured. Participants reported that an ethic of hard work, with qualities of stubbornness and diligence, are important qualities due to prior life experiences. They recognized the opportunities that were before them and these attributes have directly impacted their ability to overcome new challenges. In context, these attributes were seen in their desire for independence and control over many situations. Many adoptees responded they would like to be less shy and more confident, yet a spirit of resiliency was identifiable in each of them.

The MMPI tool, along with personal responses, also provided insight into how intrapersonal development appeared among this group. The integration of social identities from their country of origin and the impact that interpersonal relationships have in the United States provided a peek into the contextual influences that are strongly present during this current chapter in their lives. Biological and adopted extended family remain foundational to their identity development process as confirmed by Frisk (1964). While these influences will continue to shift as adoptees mature, the saliency of their perceived multiple identities intersections represents a healthy acceptance of their past and their ability to adjust to a new culture and

environment. These identity dimensions also reflect how closely their sense of self, sense of purpose, and sense of relationships are intertwined.

### **Implications**

Several theoretical, empirical, and practical implications have resulted from the findings of this study. This section provides an overview of what was learned and how these concepts may further affect the international adoption community. Understanding the phenomenological essence of the international adolescent adoption experience, their relationships, and the adjustment that transpire during a critical life stage may ease the transition for individuals in the future.

#### **Theoretical Implications**

Erikson's (1963, 1968) psychosocial development theoretical model has been widely accepted. Turner et al. (1994), Brodzinsky (1987, 2011; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1992) and Jones and McEwen (2000) reflected on this work as a structural component within their own studies. With each of these theories there is significant applicability to individuals who grow up in "normal" American households. Even as Brodzinsky considered the psychology of adoption, each study has primarily focused on children who enter families as infants. The challenge occurs when individuals do not fit within these perimeters, as is the case for international adopted adolescents. Additionally, the traumatic loss that this population experienced is on a different scale than what Brodzinsky analyzed. In consideration of the results of this study, progress to ease adjustment for international adolescent adoptees can now take place.

This study also shows an anomaly in the psychosocial development model since *trust* is the lowest scoring subscale for all adoptees. At the earliest stages of infancy, the participants



had the nurturing relationships required to build trust. It is possible that had other complications not existed, they would have developed identity according to the theory presented by Erikson (1963, 1968) within their country of origin. In connection with Brodzinsky's research (1987, 2011; Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992; Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990; Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994), the trauma and loss they experienced had a significant impact for these adoptees. One must question if their trust diminished from levels that were initially established for growth. Essentially, an additional crisis occurred after they had resolved past the *trust* development stage. This aspect of adolescent trauma, beyond the population of youth who were internationally adopted, may have significant theoretical implications.

### **Empirical Implications**

The participants in this study approached issues of race very differently than what has been presented in other literature. These young adults recognized that there are obvious challenges that are present within transracial families, but they did not question their Caucasian parents' abilities to meet their personal needs. Most participants acknowledged that their parents encouraged communication with other international adoptees and biological family members. The fact that transracial and biracial families are becoming more common in American society has had positive effects. Family units are better informed to talk about issues associated with skin color and cultural differences. Furthermore, because relationships with other international adolescent adoptees are frequently retained, transracial families have become normalized among this group. These participants seemingly did not feel as if their situations were unique.

Empirical contributions were also made toward understanding ethnic and cultural identity, particularly on the use of native language and food. Some households did not allow adoptees to talk in their original tongue if other family members were present. The desire of

parents was to create a fully inclusive home and increase familial bonding. While most adoptees can now reflect on these decisions with understanding, it was difficult early on. The lack of opportunities to openly express themselves with ease may have damaged their sense of cultural identity. Assimilating to new foods was an additional challenge that was not previously found in the literature. This issue expands beyond adapting to different cuisine. For this group of individuals, the impact was much more dramatic than what has been experienced for families who immigrate to the United States. The emotional, cultural, and social impact that food had on these young people is significant. Bridging this basic human need may be more critical than previously addressed.

Most importantly, this study explores research that moves beyond the categorization of “older children” to issues that affect internationally adopted adolescents. Some of these participants did not spend much time in an orphanage as other studies assume. Their relationships, sense of self, trauma, and barriers of adjustment are simply different. At the adolescent stage of life, they had an appreciation and understanding of their past, allowing personal connections to flourish (or dissolve) as they chose. Appreciating this implication provides a long list of practical suggestions and future research possibilities.

### **Practical Implications**

This study has practical significance for families, teachers, and community members. Primarily, the barriers to adjustment that internationally adolescent adoptees encountered have been due to language issues, cultural misunderstanding, and a lack of trusting relationships. Adoptive families need to recognize the importance of relationships and the grace that is required during the first years of transition. A different set of expectations and priorities should be in

place for the adolescent who is overwhelmed by new experiences. Everything is new to them. They are reconceptualizing what family is and must learn how to trust people.

Participants remarked the unique impact adoptive siblings have on their transition. When considering the adoption of an adolescent, it is therefore recommended that other older children live in the home and jointly participate in fun social activities. Playing sports and watching movies are opportunities for the newly adopted individual to build a sense of comfort without having to be concerned with language challenges. Creating a safe, trusting environment where they can experience a sense of belonging and normalcy is essential for these young adults.

School systems are exceptionally important during the period of adjustment. Teacher preparation programs are needed to increase awareness and understanding of the challenges these young people face. It should be expected that these adoptees have experienced trauma. Educators and parents need ongoing professional development to properly meet these psychological needs. Interpreters must be available to answer questions and serve as a resource in a variety of settings. Fellow students and teammates should be encouraged to initiate communication with internationally adopted teens, even when the adoptee appears distant and reserved. They want to feel like they belong. Positive interaction through peer mentorship can reduce anxiety and uncertainty. A sense of security can be realized through even basic contact and reassurances.

Knowing the importance social identity has on their sense of self, encouraging relationships that foster how individuals define themselves remains essential. The connections these individuals have with extended biological family members and other adoptees needs to be encouraged through social media and in-person visits. Cultural training with families through adoptive networks and camps that help inspire broad interaction should be sought out and widely

publicized. Additionally, celebrations and traditions need to be shared both within the home and at school.

Most importantly, the impact that food has had on this sample cannot be overstated. In their countries of origin, the sharing of meals was a reflection of how individuals cared for one another. Therefore, a concerted effort must be made to ensure that opportunities exist to explore the adoptee's native cuisine. Search for ethnic restaurants and supply sources prior to bringing the child home. Coordinate with traveling families to replenish spices and specialty items that the adoptee enjoys. Participate in the creation of meals when visiting their country of origin. Make an effort to embrace their cultural practices with respect and appreciation. The most formidable connections are made when people gather, laugh, and communicate over a good meal.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Individuals who were adopted to the United States, who were between the ages of 12 and 17 at the time of adoption, and had obtained their high school diploma or GED were considered in this study. All participants were residents of the United States for at least five years and were between the ages of 18 and 26 during this process. These delimitations were made to increase the likelihood of their understanding of the English language and recall accuracy required for personal reflection of their adolescent experiences.

An intentional decision to focus on non-European adoptees was made for this study. In prior research it is apparent that many Eastern European adoptees have significantly different experiences from adoptees originating in other countries. When explaining the differences in adaptation, adopted children who originate from Eastern Europe statistically experience more problems with attachment, behavioral issues, lower cognitive competence, and pre-adoption

adversity (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005; van den Dries et al., 2009). This study sought to develop a rich understanding of the perceptions internationally adopted individuals experience during their adolescence. Therefore, the Eastern European population was excluded from the sample participants.

Beyers and Seiffge-Krenke (2010) pointed out in their study on identity development, if ethnic samples are not significantly diverse, cultural similarities may reduce transferability to broader populations. A potential weakness of this study that could not be controlled was primarily within the available sample of participants. China, Russia, Ethiopia, and South Korea have historically been the top sending countries to the United States for many years (Selman, 2012). Yet, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (2016), South Korea had only 20 children over the age of 5 adopted to the United States between 2010 and 2014, accounting for less than 1% of their total adoptions. China and Russia reflected approximately 20% of adoptions to America that were above age 5, while Ethiopia had a majority (53.9%) of older children adopted to the U.S. during this time (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Therefore, the population of international adolescent adoptees is small.

In this study, Ethiopian participants account for 69.23%, Ugandans 23.08%, and Chinese 7.70% of the sample. While somewhat diverse, this small sample is not completely reflective of U.S. Census Bureau international adoption statistics for the larger population. This diversion is a notable limitation per Bazuin-Yoder (2011) who asserted, “One might possibly conclude that one’s culture-of-origin is inextricably related to one’s identity formation because it serves as the literal and figurative soil from which all other ideas and meanings grow” (p. 88). It could be further argued that the individuals from African countries have similarities that are not found in other areas of the world. Per U.S. Census Bureau (2016) statistics, females (54.3%) were more

often adopted than males (45.7%) during this same period. Proportions based on gender were met.

It should also be noted that the perceptions of volunteer participants may be skewed by those who have had positive adoption experiences at a higher degree than the larger population. This sample also randomly had a strong belief system founded in Christian values. Findings may therefore be different based on varying contextual influences. Because they were all required to have completed high school or an equivalency program, priorities regarding higher education could also be slanted. These individuals may not fully be representative of the entire internationally adopted adolescent community. Additional limitations may include researcher bias, participant predisposition, emotional trauma, recall error, and language and communication barriers.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

As initially stated, the research regarding the international adoption of adolescents is minimal. Upon reflection on the results, implications, limitations, and delimitations placed on this study, multiple opportunities for future research exist to address the complex issues that international adolescent adoptees experience. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches should be considered, though because of small sample populations, qualitative analysis may provide greater understanding and transferability. This section provides a snapshot of recommended areas that would contribute to the field in terms of broadening the sample population and focus of study.

#### **Age**

Since this study incorporated perspectives of individuals who are currently younger than 26, it would be interesting to increase the maximum age, including international adolescent

adoptees who are younger than 35. This age group would provide additional insight into crisis resolution and intimate relationships. An older age group may also provide greater diversity because of fewer regulatory restrictions that were in place during the time they were adopted. Additionally, during the selection process multiple individuals were disqualified because they were adopted at an older age, but not during adolescent years. These young people also have perspectives that are valued.

### **Country of Origin**

The initial intent of this study was to provide a broad perspective from diverse countries. The culture and environment that individuals grow up in may have made a difference in the results within this study. Encouraging participation from other countries, including Eastern Europe, would provide additional insight and the possibility for greater transferability.

### **Cultural, Ethnic, and Gender Limitations**

Exploring the intricacies of one cultural or ethnic group would provide an opportunity for greater understanding into the barriers of adjustment within the United States. Likewise, gender differences are often cited in current research literature. Delving into more focused perceptions may provide valuable information from these specific groups.

### **Receiving Country**

The United States has traditionally been the highest receiving country of international adoptions by a significant margin. Italy, France, Spain, and Canada have only a small total population of intercountry adoptions. Comparing the perceptions of young adults who have immigrated into families within these countries is of interest, particularly in the areas of communication and cultural barriers.

## **Religion**

Faith had an substantial impact on the perspectives of these adoptees that deserves greater attention. The participants in this study primarily expressed Christian beliefs and practices in their country of origin and within their adoptive families. While there was some adjustment for those who were Orthodox Christians, they adapted. Christians remain the largest religious group in the world though the Pew Research Center stated that Muslims are growing naturally at a higher rate (Hackette & McClendon, 2017). Those who are unaffiliated with any organized group represent another 16% of the global population. Making a concerted effort to study other non-Christian groups and the additional barriers that may be encountered with differences of faith would be beneficial.

## **Adoptive Mothers**

Adoptive mothers were an important influence in the identity development for these international adolescent adoptees. Understanding international adolescent adoptee identity development from the mother's perspective should be pursued. The decision to initiate the process of adopting an older child is a phenomenon worthy of investigation. How these types of adoption affect the family unit, the identity adjustment each member goes through, the attributes and characteristics that are required for personal growth, and the challenges that they overcome are all areas that have not been explored.

## **Families in Conflict**

International adoptees experience traumatic circumstances that have long-term psychological, behavioral, and emotional consequences. Most persevere through these challenges, developing healthy productive lives and integrating well into their families. For those adoptees who choose to disconnect from their adoptive families, further research is needed.



Why were these decisions made? What could have been done differently during the pre-adoption process? How do the individuals involved reflect on the circumstances leading up to the dissolution? What conclusions can be made to avoid future adoption related conflicts?

### **Psychosocial Development of Families**

In 1987, Brodzinsky began to evaluate the psychological risk and vulnerability associated with adoption in the United States. At that time, Brodzinsky presented a model of the adoption adjustments that families face based on Erikson's (1963, 1968) psychosocial stages of development. Like much of the adoption literature available, this examination was based on clinical impressions of children who were adopted during infancy. While this was an important step for understanding the challenges families experience, expanding the research to include children adopted at an older age is also necessary.

### **Resiliency**

There has been some investigation into the resiliency of internationally adopted children, though the primary focus has been on institutionalized infants and young children. These studies have often focused on the impact of a deprived institutional life on development that may result in cognitive, social, or emotional delays (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). Many of the individuals in this group faced neglect and abuse at the hands of biological relatives or caregivers to whom these young children were entrusted. Their ability to overcome these scars and become productive world citizens is remarkable. Additional study is warranted to determine what attributes or factors contribute to their resiliency.

### **Implementation of the MMPI**

In retrospect of the process in which the MMPI was implemented in this study, the methodology could have been approached differently. Because this data collection tool was

often completed shortly after the interview process, it brings into question whether participants provided skewed responses based on unintentional acknowledgement from the researcher. Some co-researchers took excessive care to assess the multiple dimensions and contextual influences in their life. Future research should consider implementing the MMPI before the interview process to collect unfiltered data. Making sense of identity development and the complex meaning making structures that international adolescent adoptees construct is still an area that deserves more attention through qualitative analysis. How their core attributes and contextual influences change with maturity is also of value.

### **Summary**

To understand young adult development following the experience of being internationally adopted as an adolescent, this study collected data through multiple surveys, interviews, and personal letters of advice. The study's conceptual framework provided structure for analyzing the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of their lives. Erikson's psychosocial development theory guided this study as it examined the relationships, roles, and values that humans commit to during the critical period of adolescence. Social identity theory furthered insight as to how individuals have defined themselves and their social categorization within groups, while the MMPI helped define the key categories, themes, and contextual influences that have contributed to the adoptees' psychological and social adjustment in their search for self. Erikson and Erikson (1997) stated "An individual life cycle cannot be adequately understood apart from the social context in which it comes to fruition. Individual and society are intricately woven, dynamically interrelated in continual exchange" (p. 114). International adolescent adoptee identity development is a dynamic, fluid, continuing evolving process (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). How

international adoptees construct and adapt their sense of self, sense of purpose, and sense of relationships directly correlates to their identity health.

As diverse individuals touch our lives, humans determine the significance of those interactions and how they will impact the core of who we are. Interpersonal and intrapersonal development reduces the effects of adjustment barriers and risk factors associated with a traumatic past. This study also confirms the foundation premise of Jones and McEwen (2000) that as international adolescent adoptees mature and experience diverse encounters, their “ongoing journey of self-discovery” continues (p. 413). While some of these international adoptees are still working through individual identity challenges, the sentiment shared by Miki was profound. For him, and many other participants in this study, adoption has provided the opportunity to become “a whole person” (Miki, personal interview, August 31, 2017).

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**APPENDICES****APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER****LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 30, 2017

Susan M. Schrank


IRB Approval 2881.053017: A Phenomenological Study Examining the Journey of Identity Development for Internationally Adopted Adolescents in the United States

Dear Susan M. Schrank,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

  
**G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP**  
*Administrative Chair of Institutional Research*  
**The Graduate School**

**LIBERTY**  
UNIVERSITY.  
*Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

**APPENDIX B: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE****(From the Primary Researcher)**

Spring 2017

[Recipient]

[Address 1]

[Address 3]

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research on the perspectives of young adults adopted from another country during their teen years. My goal is to understand the identity process of those who were adopted between the ages of 12 and 17, who are now between ages 18 and 26, have graduated from high school or have a GED, and have been in the US for at least 5 years. You have a good story that should be heard.

\_\_\_\_\_ thinks you have had an interesting life. If you participate, your name and everything you share with me will be kept private at all times. You may quit at any time and do not need to answer any questions that may be uncomfortable. No one will know you are doing this unless you tell them.

Below you will find a link to the consent form that will tell you more about my research. This link will also connect you to a 20-minute survey that asks about your life. If selected, you will be asked to complete an identity survey. I will then contact you so we can set up a time to talk.

If you would like to learn more about this study, please contact me at [sschrank@liberty.edu](mailto:sschrank@liberty.edu) or 937/654-2782. I am happy to answer any questions you may have. Otherwise, simply proceed by clicking on the below link.

This could be a powerful study that will help other adopted teens and their parents. I hope you will consider participating.

With Regards,

Susan M. Schrank

Agreement form and questionnaire link: <https://www.surveylegend.com/s/8vy>

*P.S. - If you have friends who were also internationally adopted between the ages of 12 and 17, please have them contact me or forward them the attached referral email.*

**APPENDIX C: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE****(From Another Participant/Nominating Friend)**

Spring 2017

[Recipient]

[Address 1]

[Address 2]

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I thought you may want to be a part of this interesting research. Susan Schrank is a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University who is conducting research on the perspectives of young adults that were adopted from another country during their teen years. Her goal is to understand the identity process of those who were adopted between the ages of 12 and 17, who are now between ages 18 and 26, have graduated from high school or have a GED, and have been in the US for at least 5 years. You have a good story that should be heard.

Below you will find a link to the consent form that will give you more information about her research. This link will also connect you to a 20-minute survey about your life. If selected, you will be asked to complete an identity survey. Susan will then contact you so to set up a time to talk.

You may quit at any time and will not need to answer any questions that may be uncomfortable. If you participate, your name and everything you share with her will be kept private at all times. No one will know you are doing this unless you tell them.

If you want to learn more about this project, please contact Susan at [sschrank@liberty.edu](mailto:sschrank@liberty.edu) or call her at 937/654-2782. She will answer any questions you have. Otherwise, simply proceed by clicking on the below link.

This could be a powerful study that will help other adopted teens and their parents. I hope you will consider participating.

Regards,

Participant

Agreement form and questionnaire link: <https://www.surveylegend.com/s/8vy>

*P.S. - If you have friends who were also internationally adopted between the ages of 12 and 17, please feel free to pass this information along or have them contact Susan.*

## APPENDIX D: CONSENT FORM (ONLINE)

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
5/30/2017 to 5/29/2018  
Protocol # 2881.053017

### CONSENT FORM (ONLINE)

#### A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING THE JOURNEY OF IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT FOR INTERNATIONALLY ADOPTED ADOLESCENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Susan M. Schrank  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study that examines the challenges, experiences, and perspectives of young adults who were internationally adopted during their adolescent years with an intent to understand their identity development. You were selected as a possible participant because of your diverse background and unique insights. Only internationally adopted individuals to the United States, who were between the ages of 12 and 17 at the time of adoption have obtained their high school diploma or GED, are currently above age 18 and under the age of 26, will be asked to participate in this study. All individuals must proficient in English and residents of the United States for at least five years to increase the likelihood of improved communication and understanding between the participants and the researcher. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have prior to agreeing to be in the study.

#### Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand the identity development internationally adopted adolescents experience following their arrival in the United States through a description of their families and the relationships they encounter, the changes they perceive, and the challenges they encountered during their first five years.

#### Procedures:

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

1. Complete a confidential biographical questionnaire using Survey Legend. This will take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Within one week of receipt, you may be selected to continue in this study as a co-researcher.
2. If selected, copies of adoption records and artifacts (such as photographs) will be requested. This task may depend on how accessible these documents are to you but should take no longer than 30 minutes.
3. Next, you will be asked to complete an Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory (EPSI) and a short personal assessment. Together these surveys will take approximately 45 minutes to complete. A Survey Legend link will be forwarded to you.
4. One to two audio-recorded individual interviews will be done in person or via video chat (such as Skype). Initial interviews are expected to take two hours or less, and follow-up interviews will be less than 30 minutes. The designated time and location will be organized based on a schedule that meets your needs.
5. Following the interview questions, you will be provided detailed instructions and asked to complete a Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identities Diagram (MMDI).

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
5/30/2017 to 5/29/2018  
Protocol # 2881.053017

- which should take less than 25 minutes of your time. The researcher will remain available to assist you with this task. This discussion will also be recorded.
6. Finally, you will be asked to compose a mock letter to a prospective international adoptive parent or adolescent, sharing your perspectives on how to best support their identity development journey. This should take roughly 30 minutes to complete. It is requested that you return this letter to the researcher within 10 days of the interview via an email attachment.
  7. You will be provided with an opportunity to review and clarify your interview comments, the EPSI, MMDI, and mock letter to assure your perspectives are clearly communicated during a second video chat, which should take less than 30 minutes.

#### Risks and Benefits of Participation in this Study:

The study has minimal risks, no more than those you would encounter in everyday life. Participants should not expect to receive direct benefits from taking part in this study. Through the personal evaluation of your experiences and development, it is hoped that you gain further insight of your identity. Furthermore, the international adoption community may be able to learn from your perspectives, paving a way for future adolescents to be understood in ways that were not previously possible.

#### Compensation:

There is no compensation for participation in this study.

#### Confidentiality:

All responses and adoption information will be kept strictly confidential. You will be given a pseudonym (a made-up name) in the final publication and a code for privately submitting documentation. No personal details will be shared with other participants, their parents, or other interested parties.

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. I may share the data I collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if I share the data that I collect about you, I will remove any information that could identify you, if applicable, before I share the data.

Interviews will take place at a mutually agreed upon location where others will not easily overhear our conversation. For those conducted via video, the researcher will use headphones to further insure privacy. Audio recordings and interview transcriptions will be secured with password protection and later destroyed. Data will be secured and stored for three years following the dissertation publication as per federal regulation and will be accessible only to the researcher. Future studies and presentations will not contain any identification of participants.

#### Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the researcher or Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question, and you have the right to withdraw at any

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Protocol # 2881.053017

time without affecting those relationships. If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Susan M. Schrank. You may ask any questions you have and you are encouraged to contact her at 937/654-2782 or [sschrank@liberty.edu](mailto:sschrank@liberty.edu). You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Gail Collins, at [gcollins2@liberty.edu](mailto:gcollins2@liberty.edu).

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read and understood the above information. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received answers. A copy of this document has been provided to me. I hereby consent to participate in this study.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me, or my surroundings and documents, as part of my participation in this study.

---

Signature of Participant

Date

---

Signature of Investigator

Date



**APPENDIX E: BIOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE (ONLINE)**

Full Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

First Name at Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

If different, who chose to change your name?  My parents  I did  Other

Email Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Current City/State: \_\_\_\_\_ Year Immigrated to US: \_\_\_\_\_

How old were you when you were adopted? \_\_\_\_\_

Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_ Country of Origin Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Current Age: \_\_\_\_\_ U.S. Date of Birth: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender:  Female  Male  Other Self Identifying Category

Did you spend time in an orphanage?  No  Yes

Approximately when? \_\_\_\_\_ For how many years? \_\_\_\_\_

Did you spend time in a foster family?  No  Yes

Approximately when? \_\_\_\_\_ For how many years? \_\_\_\_\_

What is the status of your birth mother:  Deceased  Still living  Unknown

What is the status of your birth father:  Deceased  Still living  Unknown

Are your adopted parents currently married?  No  Yes  Other  N/A

Parent #1 Age: \_\_\_\_\_ Parent #2 Age: \_\_\_\_\_ or N/A

Your primary first language spoken in your country of origin: \_\_\_\_\_

Other Languages Spoken: \_\_\_\_\_

Education grade when you first entered a US school:  1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grade

6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade  9<sup>th</sup> grade  10<sup>th</sup> grade  11<sup>th</sup> grade  12<sup>th</sup> grade

Did you go to a:  Home School  Public or Charter School  Private School

Level of English upon arriving in the United States:

Basic words  Enough to get by  Conversational knowledge  Proficient

Did you graduate from High School or obtain a GED?

- Yes, I received a High School Diploma  Yes, I received a GED

If yes, what year did you received your High School diploma or GED? \_\_\_\_\_

- No, I did not receive a High School diploma or GED

Are you currently working full or part time?

- Yes, I am currently working full time  Yes, I am currently working part time

- No, I am not currently working full or part time

Did you attend college or complete a college degree or trade school certificate program?

- Yes, I completed a bachelor's degree program (B.S., or B.A.)

- Yes, I completed an associate's degree program (A.S., or A.A.)

- Yes, I completed a technical certificate program

- Yes, I am currently taking classes towards a degree or certificate

- No, I attended classes but did not finish a degree or certificate program

- No, I did not receive any additional education after high school

Which category best describes your race?  Black/African American  White  Asian

- American Indian/Alaskan Native  Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander  Other

Which categories best describes your adoptive parent's race?

- Parent #1:  Black/African American  White  Asian

- American Indian/Alaskan Native  Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander  Other

- Parent #2:  N/A  Black/African American  White  Asian

- American Indian/Alaskan Native  Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander  Other

Highest level of education of you adoptive parents:

- Parent #1:  No Diploma/GED  High School Diploma/GED  Some College

- Associate's/Bachelor's Degree  Master's/Professional Degree  Doctoral Degree

- Parent #2:  N/A  No Diploma/GED  High School Diploma/GED

- Some College  Associate's/Bachelor's Degree  Master's/Professional Degree

- Doctoral Degree

Do you practice some form of religion?  No  Yes

If yes, how would you describe it? \_\_\_\_\_

Is your adopted parent's religion different from your beliefs?

- No, we generally believe the same things

- Yes, our beliefs are very different

If yes, how are they different? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have biological siblings?  No  Yes Age(s) of biological siblings: \_\_\_\_\_

Does your adoptive family have other children?  No  Yes How many? \_\_\_\_\_

Are other children in your family adopted?  No  Yes Age(s) of siblings: \_\_\_\_\_

Are the children in your adoptive family the same race as you?

No  Some are/Some not  Yes  Not applicable

Do you have relationships with people who still live in your country of origin?  No  Yes

Please explain: \_\_\_\_\_

Besides family members, do you have relationships with other internationally adopted individuals?  No  Yes, but not very close  Yes, we remain in close contact

Since arriving in the United States, have you received any counseling?

No  Yes  Prefer Not to Answer

Why do you want to be involved in this study? \_\_\_\_\_

Preferred Video Messaging:  Skype  WhatsApp  Google  ooVoo  Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Please freely explain any of the above answers. You may also communicate any comments, concerns or questions you have at this time.

**APPENDIX F: REPLY EMAIL TO NON-SELECTED ADOPTEES**

Spring 2017

Dear \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your interest in this research study to understand the identity development of internationally adopted adolescents. After significant contemplation, you will not be asked to continue with this particular research project. This decision was not easy.

While the criteria for participating in the study is very specific, there is also an effort to maximize the variation of participants by gender, country of origin and geographical placement within the United States. It is my intent that data collected within this study can be applied to similar findings elsewhere so that more families can find results to be beneficial. Please be assured that this decision does not disqualify you from future projects. Your perspective has value and importance.

To assure confidentiality, the information you have provided to me will be destroyed. If you would like to receive an electronic copy of the final publication you may send me an email request at [sschrank@liberty.edu](mailto:sschrank@liberty.edu).

Most sincerely,

Susan M. Schrank

**APPENDIX G: VERIFICATION LETTER (SAMPLE)**

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

Attention: Susan Schrank

Via Email: [sschrank@liberty.edu](mailto:sschrank@liberty.edu)

From: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

I have personally known \_\_\_\_\_ (adoptee) and/or the \_\_\_\_\_ family (adoptee's last name) since \_\_\_\_\_ year.

This letter is to verify that \_\_\_\_\_ (adoptee) was adopted from the country of \_\_\_\_\_ in the year \_\_\_\_\_. He/she was approximately \_\_\_\_\_ years old at the time.

As their \_\_\_\_\_ (capacity of your relationship – e.g., friend, neighbor, counselor, etc.), I can attest to know the following details of their adoption journey:

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

## APPENDIX H: ERIKSON PSYCHOSOCIAL STAGE INVENTORY (ONLINE)

Thank you for continuing in this journey to understand the identity development of internationally adopted adolescents. The following questionnaire helps determine your identity development. Please honestly select the most representative response for each of the following statements. There are no wrong answers. We will discuss your responses during the interview process.

Assigned six digit number: \_\_\_\_\_

| Hardly Ever True  | Sometimes True | True | Mostly True | Almost Always True |
|---|----------------|------|-------------|--------------------|
| 1   | 2              | 3    | 4           | 5                  |
| 1) I am able to take things as they come                            |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 2) I can't make sense of my life                                    |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 3) I wish I had more self-control                                   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 4) I get embarrassed when someone begins to tell me personal things |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 5) I can't make up my own mind about things                         |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 6) I change my opinion of myself a lot                              |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 7) I am able to be first with new ideas                             |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 8) I'm never going to get on in this world                          |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 9) I'm ready to get involved with a special person                  |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 10) I've got a clear idea of what I want to be                      |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 11) I feel mixed up   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 12) I find the world a very confusing place                         |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 13) I know when to please myself and when to please others          |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 14) The important things in life are clear to me                    |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 15) I don't seem to be able to achieve my ambitions                 |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 16) I don't seem to have the ability that most others have got      |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 17) I've got it together  |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 18) I know what kind of person I am                                 |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 19) I worry about losing control of my feelings                     |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 20) I have few doubts about myself                                  |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 21) I rely on other people to give me ideas                         |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 22) I don't enjoy working   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 23) I think I must be basically bad                                 |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 24) Other people understand me                                      |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 25) I'm a hard worker   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 26) I feel guilty about many things                                 |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |
| 27) I'm warm and friendly   |                |      |             | 1 2 3 4 5          |

- |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| 28) I really believe in myself   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 29) I can't decide what I want to do with my life                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 30) It's important to me to be completely open with my friends             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 31) I find that good things never last long                                | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 32) I feel I am a useful person to have around                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 33) I keep what I really think and feel to myself                          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 34) I'm an energetic person who does lots of things                        | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 35) I'm trying hard to achieve my goals                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 36) Things and people usually turn out well for me                         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 37) I have a strong sense of what it means to be female/male               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 38) I think the world and people in it are basically good                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 39) I am ashamed of myself   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 40) I'm good at my work  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 41) I think it's crazy to get too involved with people                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 42) People are out to get me   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 43) I like myself and am proud of what I stand for                         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 44) I don't really know what I'm all about                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 45) I can't stand lazy people  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 46) I can stop myself from doing things I shouldn't be doing               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 47) I find myself expecting the worst to happen                            | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 48) I care deeply for others   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 49) I find I have to keep up a front when I'm with people                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 50) I find myself denying things even though they are true                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 51) I don't really feel involved   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 52) I waste a lot of my time messing about                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 53) I'm as good as other people  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 54) I like to make my own choices  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 55) I don't feel confident of my judgement                                 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 56) I'm basically a loner  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 57) I cope very well   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 58) I'm not much good at things that need brains or skill                  | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 59) I have a close physical and emotional relationship with another person | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 60) I stick with things until they're finished                             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 61) I'm a follower rather than a leader                                    | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 62) I can stand on my own two feet   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 63) I find it hard to make up my mind                                      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 64) I trust people   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

|   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 65) I like my freedom and don't want to be tied down          | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 66) I like new adventures                                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 67) I prefer not to show too much of myself to others         | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 68) I don't get things finished                               | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 69) I like finding out about new things or places             | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 70) I don't get much done                                     | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 71) Being alone with other people makes me feel uncomfortable | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| 72) I find it easy to make close friends                      | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

From "From trust to intimacy: A new inventory for examining Erikson's stages of psychosocial development," by D. A. Rosenthal et al., 1981, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 10(6), 525–537. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix J).



**APPENDIX I: ERIKSON PSYCHOSOCIAL STAGE INVENTORY (SCORING)**

| Item Number | Subscale  | Score<br>1-5  |
|-------------|---|---------------|
|             | <i>TRUST</i>  | <i>TOTAL:</i> |
| 3.          | I wish I had more self-control <sup>a</sup>                             |               |
| 12.         | I find the world a very confusing place <sup>a</sup>                    |               |
| 19.         | I worry about losing control of my feelings <sup>a</sup>                |               |
| 20.         | I have few doubts about myself  |               |
| 24.         | Other people understand me  |               |
| 31.         | I find that good things never last long <sup>a</sup>                    |               |
| 36.         | Things and people usually turn out well for me                          |               |
| 38.         | I think the world and people in it are basically good                   |               |
| 42.         | People are out to get me <sup>a</sup>                                   |               |
| 47.         | I find myself expecting the worst to happen <sup>a</sup>                |               |
| 53.         | I'm as good as other people   |               |
| 64.         | I trust people  |               |
|             | <i>AUTONOMY</i>   | <i>TOTAL:</i> |
| 1.          | I am able to take things as they come                                   |               |
| 2.          | I can't make sense of my life <sup>a</sup>                              |               |
| 5.          | I can't make up my own mind about things <sup>a</sup>                   |               |
| 8.          | I'm never going to get on in this world <sup>a</sup>                    |               |
| 13.         | I know when to please myself and when to please others                  |               |
| 28.         | I really believe in myself  |               |
| 39.         | I am ashamed of myself <sup>a</sup>                                     |               |
| 54.         | I like to make my own choices   |               |
| 55.         | I don't feel confident of my judgement <sup>a</sup>                     |               |
| 62.         | I can stand on my own two feet  |               |
| 63.         | I find it hard to make up my mind <sup>a</sup>                          |               |
| 65.         | I like my freedom and don't want to be tied down                        |               |
|             | <i>INITIATIVE</i>   | <i>TOTAL:</i> |
| 7.          | I am able to be first with new ideas                                    |               |
| 16.         | I don't seem to have the ability that most others have got <sup>a</sup> |               |
| 21.         | I rely on other people to give me ideas <sup>a</sup>                    |               |
| 23.         | I think I must be basically bad <sup>a</sup>                            |               |
| 26.         | I feel guilty about many things <sup>a</sup>                            |               |
| 34.         | I'm an energetic person who does lots of things                         |               |
| 46.         | I can stop myself from doing things I shouldn't be doing                |               |
| 50.         | I find myself denying things even though they are true <sup>a</sup>     |               |
| 57.         | I cope very well  |               |
| 61.         | I'm a follower rather than a leader <sup>a</sup>                        |               |
| 66.         | I like new adventures   |               |
| 69.         | I like finding out about new things or places                           |               |

|     | <i>INDUSTRY</i>   | <i>TOTAL:</i> |
|-----|---|---------------|
| 15. | I don't seem to be able to achieve my ambitions <sup>a</sup>                  |               |
| 22. | I don't enjoy working <sup>a</sup>  |               |
| 25. | I'm a hard worker   |               |
| 32. | I feel I am a useful person to have around                                    |               |
| 35. | I'm trying hard to achieve my goals   |               |
| 40. | I'm good at my work   |               |
| 45. | I can't stand lazy people   |               |
| 52. | I waste a lot of my time messing about <sup>a</sup>                           |               |
| 58. | I'm not much good at things that need brains or skill <sup>a</sup>            |               |
| 60. | I stick with things until they're finished                                    |               |
| 68. | I don't get things finished <sup>a</sup>                                      |               |
| 70. | I don't get much done <sup>a</sup>  |               |
|     | <i>IDENTITY</i>   | <i>TOTAL:</i> |
| 6.  | I change my opinion of myself a lot <sup>a</sup>                              |               |
| 10. | I've got a clear idea of what I want to be                                    |               |
| 11. | I feel mixed up <sup>a</sup>  |               |
| 14. | The important things in life are clear to me                                  |               |
| 17. | I've got it together  |               |
| 18. | I know what kind of person I am   |               |
| 29. | I can't decide what I want to do with my life <sup>a</sup>                    |               |
| 37. | I have a strong sense of what it means to be female/male                      |               |
| 43. | I like myself and am proud of what I stand for                                |               |
| 44. | I don't really know what I'm on about <sup>a</sup>                            |               |
| 49. | I find I have to keep up a front when I'm with people <sup>a</sup>            |               |
| 51. | I don't really feel involved <sup>a</sup>                                     |               |
|     | <i>INTIMACY</i>   | <i>TOTAL:</i> |
| 4.  | I get embarrassed when someone begins to tell me personal things <sup>a</sup> |               |
| 9.  | I'm ready to get involved with a special person                               |               |
| 27. | I'm warm and friendly   |               |
| 30. | It's important to me to be completely open with my friends                    |               |
| 33. | I keep what I really think and feel to myself <sup>a</sup>                    |               |
| 41. | I think it's crazy to get too involved with people <sup>a</sup>               |               |
| 48. | I care deeply for others  |               |
| 56. | I'm basically a loner <sup>a</sup>  |               |
| 59. | I have a close physical and emotional relationship with another person        |               |
| 67. | I prefer not to show too much of myself to others <sup>a</sup>                |               |
| 71. | Being alone with other people makes me feel uncomfortable <sup>a</sup>        |               |
| 72. | I find it easy to make close friends  |               |

<sup>a</sup> Reversed items

From "From trust to intimacy: A new inventory for examining Erikson's stages of psychosocial development," by D. A. Rosenthal et al., 1981, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 10(6), 525–537. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix J).

## APPENDIX J: PERMISSION FOR EPSI USE CORRESPONDENCE

Re: EPSI Requested Use

Doreen A. Rosenthal <d.rosenthal@unimelb.edu.au>

Fri, 15 Jul 2016 9:21 PM

To: Schrank, Susan <sschrank@liberty.edu>

Dear Susan,

You are welcome to use the EPSI for the purposes described in your email. Good luck with your doctoral research.

Kind regards,

Doreen Rosenthal

Sent from my iPad

On 16 Jul 2016, at 11:13 AM, Schrank, Susan <sschrank@liberty.edu> wrote:

Dr. Rosenthal,

I am a doctoral candidate in education at Liberty University currently studying the identity development of young adults who were internationally adopted to the U.S. as adolescents. There is a gap in the research for this group of individuals, particularly within qualitative analysis. Using Erikson's life-span developmental theory as a foundation, understanding of how internationally adopted adolescents progressed in their identity development has become a passion.

The Erikson Psychosocial Stage Inventory may present valuable information that will help me understand the current psychosocial stage of my participants. Therefore, I am requesting permission to use the EPSI as a data collection tool in my research. The requested permission extends to any future revisions of my dissertation, to the public circulation of my dissertation by Liberty University or its agents, and to the prospective reproduction of the dissertation in any form.

If you have additional resources which you believe would be beneficial to my research, I would appreciate hearing your advice. I do look forward to hearing from you so that I may proceed with my research proposal.

Respectfully,

*Susan M Schrank*

*p: 937-654-2782*

## APPENDIX K: PERSONAL ASSESSMENT OF THE EPSI (ONLINE)

Thank you for continuing in this journey to understand the identity development of internationally adopted adolescents. The following questionnaire helps determine your identity development. Please honestly select the most representative response for each of the following statements. There are no wrong answers. We will discuss your responses during the interview process.

Assigned six digit code number: \_\_\_\_\_

|  |   |   |   |   |  |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
|--|---|---|---|---|--|---|---|---|----|---|---|---|---|----|
| _____  |   |   |   |   |  |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
| 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6  | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |   |   |   |   |    |
| I see myself as a unique and integrated person               |   |   |   |   | I am conflicted as to who I really am.                               |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
| _____  |   |   |   |   |  |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
|  |   |   |   |   | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  | 6   | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|  |   |   |   |   | I experience a sense of inferiority at understanding and organizing. |   |   |   |    | I have an ability to learn how things work, to understand and organize. |   |   |   |    |
| _____  |   |   |   |   |  |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
| 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6  | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |   |   |   |   |    |
| I have concern for family and society.                       |   |   |   |   | I am primarily concerned for my own well-being.                      |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
| _____  |   |   |   |   |  |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
|  |   |   |   |   | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  | 6   | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|  |   |   |   |   | I have the ability to make loving relationships with others.         |   |   |   |    | I do not have strong loving relationships with others.                  |   |   |   |    |
| _____  |   |   |   |   |  |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
| 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6  | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |   |   |   |   |    |
| I am a self-starter.   |   |   |   |   | I have a sense of guilt to be on my own.                             |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
| _____  |   |   |   |   |  |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
|  |   |   |   |   | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  | 6   | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|  |   |   |   |   | I have faith in the environment and future events.                   |   |   |   |    | I am very suspicious and fear future events.                            |   |   |   |    |
| _____  |   |   |   |   |  |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
| 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6  | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |   |   |   |   |    |
| I have a strong sense of integrity and personal fulfillment. |   |   |   |   | I am dissatisfied with life and filled with despair.                 |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
| _____  |   |   |   |   |  |   |   |   |    |   |   |   |   |    |
|  |   |   |   |   | 1  | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5  | 6   | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 |
|  |   |   |   |   | I have a strong sense of self-control and adequacy.                  |   |   |   |    | I have feelings of shame and self-doubt.                                |   |   |   |    |

**APPENDIX L: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. How did you come to live in this family? What does adoption mean to you? How would you describe your experience?
2. Do you talk to others about being adopted? Do you like to talk about it? Why or why not?
3. How would you describe yourself prior to your adoption? How would other people describe you as a child?
4. What do you remember about life in your country of origin? What did it look like? Who were the influential people in your life? What do you miss the most? Are there certain sounds, smells, or images that remind you of your country of origin?
5. Do you feel connected or disconnected with your birth country? Please explain.
6. How would you describe yourself now as a person? What are your most important characteristics?
7. How have you changed since arriving in the United States? What would you like to change as you get older?
8. What does family mean to you? How is your family today different than it was prior to your adoption? Describe your adoptive family.
9. Describe the day you met your adoptive family. What sights, sounds, and images can you recall? What do you remember about your arrival in the United States?
10. Describe what you remember from your first year in the United States. What was the most difficult part of adjusting? Tell me about a significant moment or person.
11. What is most important to you now? Why?
12. Who are the most influential people in your life? Why?

13. What is the best part about your life? How does it compare to others around you?
14. Describe the people you spend time with. What are they like? What do you like to do?
15. What do you wish you could change about your life since your adoption?
16. What do you think your life will look like in five years? What are your hopes and dreams?
17. Do you imagine that you will visit your country of origin in the future? If so, what would you imagine that trip to be like? Who would you take with you? Who/what would you like to visit?

### APPENDIX M: MODEL OF MULTIPLE DIMENSIONS OF IDENTITY (MMDI)

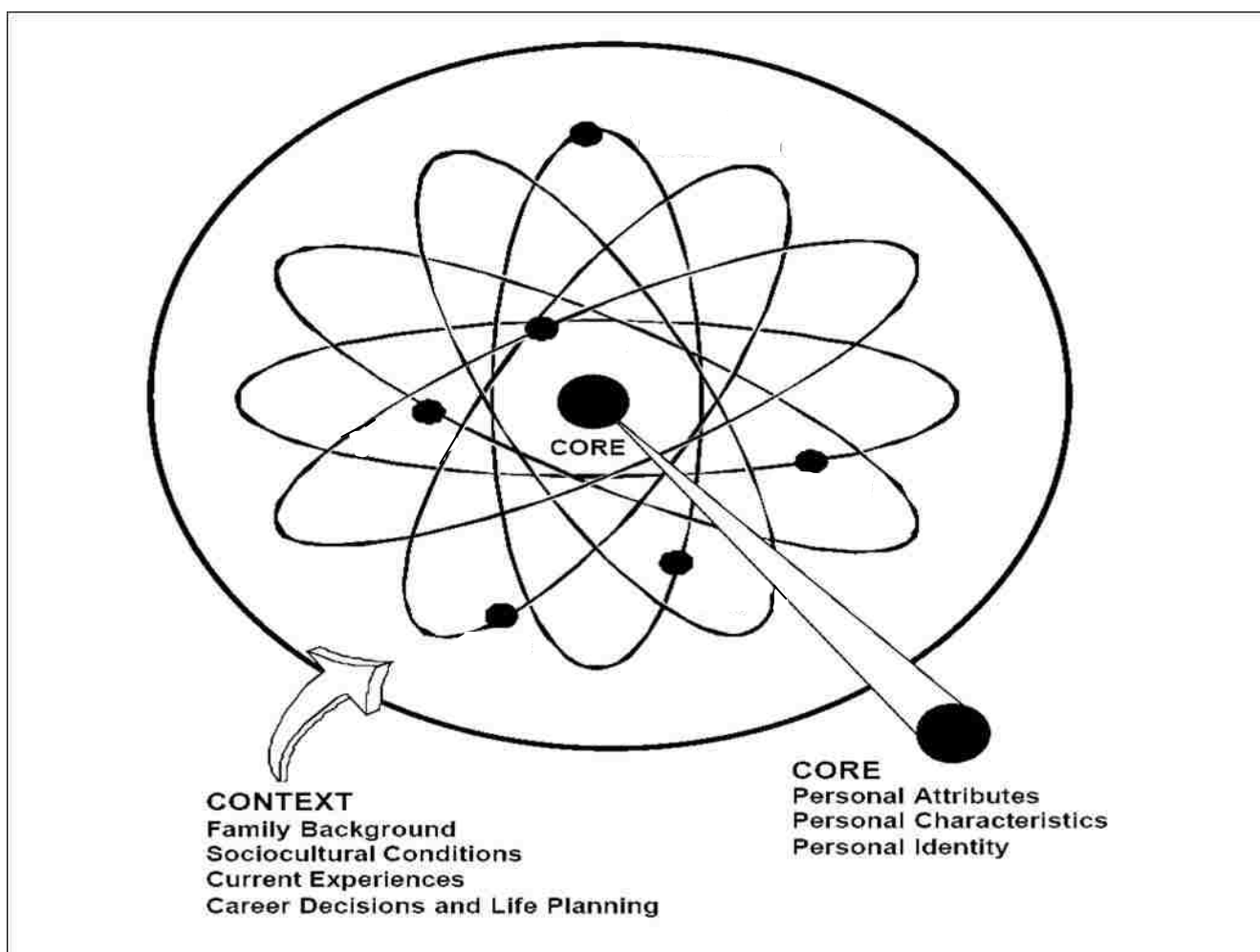
Step 1: Make a list of the words that you would use to describe yourself. These labels are called personal attributes and characteristics. Examples to think about may be your gender, race, religion, ethnicity, social class, or sexual orientation.

Step 2: Using these words, select at least five labels. Place them on the below model to create a picture of your core identity.

Step 3: Make a second list of the other influences in your life. These may include your family, religious organizations, community groups, employer/school, or your friends.

Step 4: Write these labels on the outside of the circle.

Pseudonym Name: \_\_\_\_\_



From “Reconceptualizing the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity: The role of meaning-making capacity in the construction of multiple identities,” by E. S. Abes et al., 2007, *Journal of College Student Development*, 48, p. 4. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix N).

## APPENDIX N: PERMISSION FOR MMDI USE CORRESPONDENCE

**Sent:** Tuesday, February 7, 2017 8:42:29 AM  
**To:** Schrank, Susan  
**Subject:** Re: MMDI - Use for Dissertation

Hi Susan,  
 The permission extends to the publication of your dissertation.  
 I hope your research went well.  
 Elisa

Sent from my iPhone

On Feb 6, 2017, at 5:25 PM, Schrank, Susan <[sschrank@liberty.edu](mailto:sschrank@liberty.edu)> wrote:

Dr. Abes,

Thank you for your acknowledgement and permission to use the MMDI as a data collection tool in my dissertation research.

Would you please confirm if your approval extends to the publication of the dissertation itself? Liberty University requires the clarification of your permission regarding this important detail for me to proceed.

With respect and thanks,

*Susan M. Schrank*

---

### Re: MMDI - Use for Dissertation

Abes, Elisa <[abeses@miamioh.edu](mailto:abeses@miamioh.edu)>

Thu 18-Aug-16 3:14 PM

To: Schrank, Susan <[sschrank@liberty.edu](mailto:sschrank@liberty.edu)>

Dear Susan,

I apologize for the delay in replying to your email. Thank you for your interest in the Reconceptualized-MMDI for your research. You have permission to use it for data collection in your dissertation. You will need to seek additional permission if you reproduce the model in publications. Good luck with your research; it sounds very interesting.  
 Elisa

On Fri, Jul 15, 2016 at 8:33 PM, Schrank, Susan <[sschrank@liberty.edu](mailto:sschrank@liberty.edu)> wrote:

Dr. Abes,

I am a doctoral candidate in education at Liberty University currently studying the identity development of young adults who were internationally adopted to the U.S. as adolescents. There is a gap in the research for this group of individuals, particularly within qualitative analysis. Having an understanding of how they adjusted to a culture and society which is different from their country-of-origin during a critical period of development has become a passion of mine as an adoptive parent.

Your collaborative research with Drs. Jones and McEwen has been tremendously interesting! I'd like to use the Model of Multiple Dimensions of Identity to understand how these individuals see themselves and how they make meaning of their identity dimensions. Therefore, I am requesting permission to use your model as a data collection tool in my research. The requested permission extends to any future revisions of my dissertation, to the public circulation of my dissertation by Liberty University or its agents, and to the prospective reproduction of the dissertation in any form.

If you have additional resources which you believe would be beneficial to my research, I would appreciate hearing your advice. I do look forward to hearing from you so that I may proceed with my research proposal.

*Susan M Schrank*

---

Elisa S. Abes, Ph.D.  
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 Student Affairs in Higher Education (SAHE)  
 Miami University  
 304 McGuffey Hall  
 Oxford, Ohio 43058  
 614-329-0164 / 614-329-1729 (fax)  
[abeses@miamioh.edu](mailto:abeses@miamioh.edu)  
[www.miamioh.edu/sahe](http://www.miamioh.edu/sahe)



## APPENDIX O: PERSONAL LETTERS OF ADVICE

The last phase of the data collection process is writing a mock letter to a prospective adoptive parent of an international adolescent or directly to a prospective international adolescent adoptee. Take a moment to reflect on what we have discussed in our interview and what you have learned about your identity. This is a chance to openly share your thoughts on your experience as an international adolescent adoptee. You can write anything you wish, but please do NOT include any specific names in your letter. Please sign it with your pseudonym name.

Please type your response as a Microsoft Word document and email it to [sschrank@liberty.edu](mailto:sschrank@liberty.edu) in the next seven days. This should take less than 30 minutes to complete.

Here are some prompts to consider as you begin:

- What would you have wanted to know as an adolescent adoptee coming to the United States?
- What challenges should international adolescent adoptees be ready for?
- Describe the people who positively influenced your first years in the United States.
- How can the transition be easier for international adolescent adoptees?
- Explain what your largest challenge was during your first years in the United States.
- How did you get through your most difficult day at school?
- What are you most grateful for since your adoption?
- How has your life changed? How have you changed?
- What encouraging words can you share to help adoptive families adjust?

**APPENDIX P: COUNSELING AND CRISIS RESOURCES**

Depression and Bipolar Support.  
Phone: 800-273-8255

Crisis Call Center. 24 hour assistance available.  
Phone: 800-273-8255  
Text: ANSWER to 839863  
Website: <http://crisiscallcenter.org/crisis-services>

National Center for PTSD. Mobile application provides self-help, education and support following trauma.  
Website: <https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/materials/apps/index.asp>

National Hopeline Network. Provides crisis assistance to adolescents and young adults through phone or text.  
Phone: 800-442-4673  
Website: <http://hopeline.com/online/>

National Mental Health Association Hotline. 8 am to 8 pm.  
Phone 866-615-6464  
Website: <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/index.shtml>

Thursday's Child National Youth Advocacy Hotline.  
Phone: 800-872-5437

Your Life Your Voice: Provides a free hotline to kids, teens and young adults at any time. Call, chat, text or email, or use their mood journaling app.  
Phone 800-448-3000  
Website: <http://www.yourlifeyourvoice.org/Pages/home.aspx>

### APPENDIX Q: REFLEXIVE JOURNAL

| Date     | Perceptions and Reflections  |
|----------|--|
| 03/16/17 | Assuring that steps are in place to protect participants in the event of trauma from processing or recalling events prior to or after adoption has also been stressed by both reviewers. I must be cognizant of their emotional well-being at all times.   |
| 04/1/17  | Based on the advice from one of the expert reviewers, I have spent quite a bit of time editing the directions on each data collection tool to make them easier for participants to understand. Meeting the requirements of IRB, while reducing the readability grade level, has not been easy.   |
| 04/17/17 | Adding the verification letter for those individuals who do not have access to their adoption records, or do not wish to release them, is a solution I feel confident about. While I want to believe most participants will be willing to provide them, I cannot assume as such.   |
| 05/4/17  | <p>The time commitment – I am struggling with how I can reduce the participant’s time demand and still obtain a rich data set. Reducing the EPSI by 2 questions may help. Looking forward to talking through this with my committee.</p> <p>I am concerned about having a professional counselor readily available. I need to find additional resources in the participant’s community before their individual interview is conducted.</p>                                       |
| 05/8/17  | Appendix P was created so that a listing of readily available crisis and counseling phone numbers and website could be provided to participants with immediate needs   |
| 06/5/17  | I noticed 15 people have looked at the initial consent form and demographic survey. I went back in and noticed a formatting error which would have caused some frustration. I wish I knew if this stopped anyone from completing the activity. Disappointment.   |
| 06/28/17 | I completed the first interview of the pilot study. It was much more emotional than I had anticipated (though my committee had warned me it might be!). The participant was an amazing communicator and had such an incredible grasp of her challenges. Her past was riddles with trauma and hard times, yet she is filled with joy today. She has an exceptionally strong faith. Recently she moved away from her adoptive mother. Her search for identity remains her mission. |
| 07/5/17  | The second pilot study is now complete. This participant had a very different journey from #1. While his life is equally challenging, his disposition was very different. Both individuals were very positive and grateful, showing ultimate   |

|          |   |
|----------|---|
|          | <p>praise to God and wanting to give back to their communities and to the country of origin. He was more secure in his identity. Great perspective.</p> <p>I am now reconsidering why I limited the age of participants to be so low. Both individuals would have shared incredible insight to the full study. My initial concern that they would have progressed to the adult stage of life was not valid in these two cases. More thought needs to go into this.</p>  |
| 07/12/17 | <p>I've made the decision to adjust the residency requirements and current age span of participants. While I am disappointed these two individuals will not be in the full study, I am thankful for the insight and perspectives they have shared. Furthermore, they have helped me grow my interviewing skills and suggested positive adjustments in the process for future participants to thrive. IRB will be contacted.</p>   |
| 07/20/17 | <p>I've been working on my Access record keeping and understanding of NVivo to assure the process makes sense and can easily be followed. I am recording contact attempts on the back of demographic survey printouts for an easy to see reference now. That has been helpful.</p>  |
| 08/1/17  | <p>It has been frustrating that many potential participants have either started the process and then left on vacation or have simply not responded to multiple requests. I will find the third pilot study participant.</p>   |
| 08/21/17 | <p>Finally! Pilot study participant has come through! This individual also struggled with some identity challenges during her late teens. The relationship she had with her adoptive parents was bumpy. Like the other two, she has biological family still in her country of origin and has been back to visit them. That connection seems instrumental in their development.</p>  |
| 08/19/17 | <p>Survey Legend has come through for me! They adjusted their program to allow me to delete records that were not fully completed. Great Customer Service!</p>  |
| 08/27/17 | <p>Tonight, was the official interview of my first official participant. Her most powerful statement came towards the end of our time together as she talked about living in two worlds – her Ethiopia culture and heritage and the life she is living in America. She felt split between the two, not really fitting into either one. She also has a biological connection to her country of origin and has been back to visit. She seems to be overall well adjusted, though there is pain that has come with the challenge of adjusting to an independent life in America.</p> |
| 08/31/17 | <p>I need to provide separation within my questions. Using all three statements at once has become confusing for the participants and their answers are not so well rounded. I need to also reduce my chatter.</p>  |

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| 09/15/17 | Exciting interview with individual from China with a friend who lives near me. They have made contact. Would love to do an in person interview!  |
| 09/21/17 | Two participants have mentioned that they were not allowed to speak their native language after immigrating to the US  |
| 09/28/17 | I need to disqualify a participant for not answering questions with integrity. She had another individual in another state complete Steps 3 and 4. How unfortunate. Also, one of my most exciting possible participants declined today. She would have uniquely represented a country with very few adoptions – much less those who were of adolescent age. God must have a bigger plan. |
| 10/07/17 | Transcribing an interview – my heart hurts for this participant and the trauma she experienced both in her country of origin, and the challenges she has faced in the US. To see her smile today is amazing. She is an example of courage and perseverance.  |
| 11/08/17 | Faith in God continues to resonate through multiple participants<br>Involvement in sports is a frequent common activity for developing friendships   |
| 11/26/17 | Multiple adoptees “found” their families by chance. Their mothers came to their country of origin for other reasons and fell in love with these kids.  |
| 11/30/17 | I am again impressed by the degrees some of these young people are choosing. Engineering, pre-med.... Smart kids! Some of them have a true command of the English language. They are well spoken. Others still struggle.   |
| 12/04/17 | Recognized the need to talk more about identity development at the onset and during the interview process. Some participants are reflecting more details about their adoption story than are necessary.  |
| 12/15/17 | Many of the participants express how they were “trouble makers” at some point or they had to fight others. This may reflect their determination.   |
| 12/31/17 | Almost all of the participants comment on the country of origin being “home”. Going back and helping, giving back, is a frequent comment. Many want to create a business or “do something” there.  |
| 01/05/18 | Still working on getting diverse participants. Made a random contact with a family from Uganda. Hope it works out. Considering the release of a few Ethiopians for lack of participation.  |
| 01/21/18 | Surprising how many participants have living biological parents. Many were the catalysts for seeking out adoption both in Uganda and in Ethiopia.  |

|          |  |
|----------|--|
| 02/15/18 | I have hundreds of significant statements and nodes now. There are so many different viewpoints from the participants. Struggling how this is going to come together.  |
| 03/01/18 | Noticing the desire for individuals to be in community by people within their nationality.   |
| 03/05/18 | Reviewing other dissertations to understand how research questions, interview responses, and all these nodes will intersect.   |
| 03/06/18 | Recurring Concepts: The Impact of Connection with their country of origin (COO); The Impact of Communication; The Impact of a New Environment; The Impact of Culture; The Impact of Relationships (Adults, Family, & Friends)  |
| 03/08/18 | “Somebody who loved you somewhere” – Some kids who lived in chaotic environments turn out to be okay. It’s directly proportional to relationships. Fix the trauma that has caused people to be the way they are. (Oprah Winfrey, CBS This Morning, March 6, 2018). <a href="https://www.cbsnews.com/news/oprah-winfrey-childhood-trauma-ptsd-60-minutes-report/">https://www.cbsnews.com/news/oprah-winfrey-childhood-trauma-ptsd-60-minutes-report/</a> |
| 03/10/18 | Racial issues are different than I expected. Coming primarily from homogenous countries, discrimination was present. Uganda it was across tribal affiliation. Uganda and Ethiopia talked about differences in skin tone and religion.  |
|          | Food, food, food....they all mention it.   |
| 3/11/18  | Reworking themes. The Enumeration Table has to be adjusted again. Constantly rethinking how this is to be organized.   |
| 3/13/18  | MeiLan has a very different past from everyone else. Early childhood is not really known.  |
| 03/20/18 | Trauma Informed Care is consistently in the blogs I am now reading. Need to put that aside and work to assure that is not fully informing my thought process.  |
| 4/01/18  | The importance of siblings and ”everything is different” are prominent statements that require a more detailed discussion.   |

**APPENDIX R: AUDIT TRAIL**

| Date     | Task   |
|----------|--|
| 07/15/16 | Received permission to use EPSI from Doreen Rosenthal  |
| 08/18/16 | Received permission to use MMDI for data collection from Elisa Abes  |
| 02/06/17 | Requested clarification for publication from Elisa Abes  |
| 02/07/17 | Received dissertation publication permission from Elisa Abes   |
| 03/10/17 | Received expert reviewer feedback on the overall proposal intent, research   |
| 03/16/17 | questions, data collection tools, and data analysis. Edits, corrections, and   |
| 03/27/17 | adjustments were made as appropriate.  |
| 04/19/17 | Proposal sent to Chair for pending committee review and approval   |
| 05/15/17 | Successfully defended proposal to committee<br>Submitted IRB application   |
| 05/30/17 | Received IRB approval letter<br>Made edits to documentation as requested by IRB  |
| 06/02/17 | Dr. Wilson sent the recruitment letter to all WI post-adoption resource centers (5), a few agency contacts, and personal friends/clinicians who may know possible participants   |
| 06/02/17 | Posted on Adopting the Older Child FB Page   |
| 06/04/17 | Sent recruitment letter to Of Capes and Combat boots – to be posted on FB page and included in the authors blog on 6/06/17   |
| 06/05/17 | Consent and demographic questionnaire received 128393 for ok for pilot   |
| 06/06/17 | Contacted Holt International support services team<br>Contacted the Adoptive Families FB page<br>Contacted Older Child Adoption from China FB page<br>EPSI Received for 128393 – pilot   |
| 06/10/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for MeiLan – ok for main<br>Verification received and compared with biographic questionnaire for MeiLan  |
| 06/11/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 117338 – ok for pilot  |
| 06/13/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for Irene – ok for main  |
| 06/17/17 | Posted to I AM ADOPTED, Adoption.net, Layla House, Ethiopia, and Adoptive Families FB pages<br>Adoption records received and compared to biographic questionnaire for 117338 – pilot   |
| 06/18/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for Delilah – ok for main  |
| 06/19/17 | Added “How old were you when you were adopted” to the demographics survey<br>Added “you do not need to answer any question that makes you uncomfortable” to the invitation letters.<br>Posted to Holt International Children’s Services, The Adoption Exchange, and WACAP FB Pages |
| 06/21/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 149807 – ok for pilot  |
| 06/22/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 149686 – ok for pilot  |

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| 06/23/17 | Released 149686 from pilot due to schedule conflicts<br>Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 143518 – ok for pilot<br>Consent and biographic questionnaire received for Miki – ok for main   |
| 06/24/17 | EPSI received 149807 – pilot<br>Adoption records received and compared with biographic questionnaire 149807 – pilot<br>Adoption records received and compared with biographic questionnaire Miki – main   |
| 06/25/17 | EPSI received Miki – main   |
| 06/27/17 | EPSI received Irene – main  |
| 06/28/17 | Completed first interview pilot study 149807 – Female, Brazil, Age 26, Student<br>Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 150032 – ok for pilot<br>Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 169348 – ok for main   |
| 07/05/17 | Completed second interview pilot study 117338 – Male, Uganda, Age 26, Pilot   |
| 07/07/17 | EPSI received 117338 – pilot  |
| 07/13/17 | Requested Change of Protocol to IRB   |
| 07/14/17 | Received Change of Protocol Approval from IRB to include participants “under the age of 26 (to include those who are ages 18 through 25),” to remove the ten-year maximum US residency requirement, and to make minor edits to recruit documents.<br>EPSI received 143518 – pilot |
| 07/15/17 | Verification received and compared with biographic questionnaire Delilah – main   |
| 07/17/17 | EPSI received Delilah – main<br>MMDI received 149807 – pilot  |
| 07/21/17 | Adoption records received and compared with biographic questionnaire Irene – main   |
| 07/23/17 | Advice Letter received 149807 – pilot   |
| 07/31/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 150152 – ok for pilot<br>EPSI received 150152 – pilot<br>Adoption records received and compared with biographic questionnaire 150152 – pilot<br>MMDI received 117338 – pilot  |
| 08/11/17 | Advice Letter received 117338 – pilot   |
| 08/21/17 | Completed third pilot study interview 150152 – Female, Ethiopia, Age 24, Missionary Student   |
| 08/25/17 | Conducted brief analysis of pilot study participant data. Themes: Faith, Independence<br>Released 128393, 143518 and 150032 from continuing pilot study   |
| 08/27/17 | Completed first participant interview Irene – Female, Ethiopia  |
| 08/31/17 | Completed second participant interview Miki – Male, Ethiopia  |
| 09/03/17 | Completed third participant interview Delilah – Female, Ethiopia  |
| 09/04/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for Lydia – ok for main<br>Verification received and compared with biographic questionnaire for Alexis – main   |



|          |  |
|----------|--|
| 09/08/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for Abraham – ok for main  |
| 09/10/17 | MMDI received Delilah – main   |
| 09/11/17 | EPSI received MeiLan – main  |
| 09/15/17 | Completed fourth participant interview MeiLan – Female, China  |
| 09/17/17 | Advice Letter received Delilah   |
| 09/18/17 | Checked EPSI survey responses against MS Access calculations for accuracy<br>Changed email address on the Verification Letter<br>MMDI received MeiLan – main   |
| 09/19/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 906778 – declined due to adoption age<br>Appreciation letter sent  |
| 09/30/17 | Disqualified participant 169348 due to data integrity<br>Appreciation letter sent  |
| 10/01/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for Daniel – ok for main<br>Verification received and compared with biographic questionnaire for Daniel.   |
| 10/02/17 | Due to a few participants noting issues when using Safari, I added this language to both Survey Legend pages <b>** THIS WEBSITE OPERATES BEST WHEN COMPLETED WITH GOOGLE CHROME **</b> .                                       |
| 10/04/17 | MMDI received partial Irene – follow up requested  |
| 10/07/17 | EPSI received Lydia – main   |
| 10/14/17 | EPSI received Abraham – main   |
| 10/16/17 | EPSI received Daniel – main  |
| 10/19/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for Sammy – ok for main  |
| 10/20/17 | Verification received and compared to biographical questionnaire for Sammy.  |
| 10/24/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 105550 – ok for main<br>Verification received and compared with biographic questionnaire 105550 – main   |
| 10/31/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for Alexis – ok for main   |
| 11/01/17 | Posted on Ugandan Adoption Group   |
| 11/08/17 | Completed fifth participant interview Daniel – Male, Ethiopia<br>Verification received and compared with biographic questionnaire Abraham– main<br>Advice Letter received MeiLan – main  |
| 11/10/17 | Posted on Haitian Adoption Group   |
| 11/16/17 | MMDI received Miki – main  |
| 11/17/17 | MMDI received Daniel – follow up requested   |
| 11/25/17 | Completed sixth participant interview Abraham (in person) – Male, Uganda   |
| 12/01/17 | Follow-up with Ugandan Adoption Group FB page  |
| 12/04/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for Don – ok for main<br>Verification received and compared with biographic questionnaire for Don – main<br>Consent and biographic questionnaire received for Ruth – ok for main |
| 12/05/17 | EPSI received Don – main   |
| 12/07/17 | EPSI received Ruth – main<br>Verification received and compared with biographic questionnaire Ruth – main  |
| 12/11/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 274326 – declined due to adoption age  |

|          |  |
|----------|--|
|          | Appreciation letter sent   |
| 12/12/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 130487 – ok for main   |
| 12/13/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 106468 – ok for main   |
| 12/14/17 | EPSI received Sammy – main   |
| 12/15/17 | Completed seventh participant interview Sammy (in person) – Male, Ethiopia   |
| 12/19/17 | Completed eighth participant interview Ruth – Female, Ethiopia   |
| 12/20/17 | Advice Letter received Miki – main   |
| 12/21/17 | Verification received Peter (sent prior to questionnaire by parent without request) – main   |
| 12/22/17 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 150717 – ok for main   |
| 12/27/17 | Completed ninth participant interview Don – Male, Ethiopia<br>EPSI received 130487 – main  |
| 12/29/17 | Follow-up with Ugandan Adoption Group FB page  |
| 12/30/17 | EPSI received 105550 – main  |
| 12/31/17 | Completed tenth participant interview Alexis – Female, Uganda<br>MMDI received Abraham – main  |
| 01/02/18 | Follow-up with Haitian Adoption Group  |
| 01/06/18 | Completed eleventh participant interview Lydia (in person) – Female, Ethiopia<br>Adoption records received and compared to biographic questionnaire for Lydia – main<br>MMDI received Don – main |
| 01/07/18 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for 142157 – ok for main   |
| 01/10/18 | EPSI received 142157 – main<br>Advice Letter received Daniel – main<br>MMDI follow up received Daniel  |
| 01/14/18 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received for Amber – ok for main  |
| 01/16/18 | Consent and biographic questionnaire received and compared with verification for Peter – ok for main   |
| 01/17/18 | EPSI received Amber – main   |
| 01/20/18 | Verification received and compared with biographic questionnaire for Amber – main<br>Completed twelfth participant interview Amber – Female, Uganda  |
| 01/22/18 | MMDI received Ruth – main  |
| 01/24/18 | EPSI received Peter – main   |
| 01/25/18 | Completed thirteenth participant interview Peter – Male, Ethiopia  |
| 01/29/18 | MMDI received Amber – main   |
| 02/02/18 | Advice Letter received Amber – main  |
| 02/03/18 | Advice Letter received Don – main<br>MMDI received Lydia – main  |
| 02/04/18 | EPSI received Alexis – main<br>130487 removed from study for lack of participation<br>105550 removed from study for lack of participation  |
| 02/07/18 | MMDI received Peter – main<br>Advice Letter received Peter – main  |

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| 02/10/18 | Lydia withdrew from participating in last step  |
| 02/13/18 | Emailed participant counseling resource listing with encouragement to seek professional assistance  |
| 02/16/18 | Advice Letter received Ruth – main  |
| 02/18/18 | Advice Letter received Abraham – main<br>Highlighted significant statements in transcriptions, MMIDI, and letters in Nvivo.<br>Will continue to do so as information is received and reviewed   |
| 02/19/18 | Sent Participant Section and Transcript to MeiLan for review/member checking  |
| 02/20/18 | MeiLan returned response with approval of accuracy<br>Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Delilah for review/member checking   |
| 02/21/18 | Delilah returned response with a question and partial approval of accuracy<br>Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Irene for review/member checking<br>Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Miki for review/member checking   |
| 02/22/18 | Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Lydia for review/member checking<br>Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Abraham for review/member checking<br>Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Daniel for review/member checking  |
| 02/23/18 | Daniel returned response with approval of accuracy<br>Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Sammy for review/member checking<br>Lydia returned response with approval of accuracy  |
| 02/24/18 | Miki returned response with approval of accuracy<br>Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Alexis for review/member checking<br>Abraham returned response with approval of accuracy   |
| 02/25/18 | Advice Letter received Irene -main<br>Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Don for review/member checking<br>Irene returned response with approval of accuracy<br>Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Ruth for review/member checking<br>MMIDI received Alexis – main<br>Alexis returned response with approval of accuracy<br>Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Amber for review/member checking<br>Don returned response with a minor change. Approved for accuracy thereafter. |
| 02/26/18 | Amber returned response with approval of accuracy<br>Sent Participant Section and Transcript to Peter for review/member checking  |
| 02/27/18 | Went through each interview and added concise, consistent Heading Levels to each interview question within Nvivo. Coded interview responses to pertinent individual interview questions for broad analysis.   |
| 02/28/18 | Advice Letter received Alexis – main  |
| 03/01/18 | Recoded interview responses to cases, rather than the entire interview, to properly capture their insights with emphasis. Coding reflects only participant responses for more accurate analysis of word/theme repetition.<br>Ruth returned response with approval of accuracy   |
| 03/02/18 | Peter returned response with approval of accuracy<br>Sammy returned response with approval of accuracy<br>Sammy withdrew from last two activities   |

|          |   |
|----------|---|
| 03/03/18 | Created Interview Theme Folders based on Chapter 3 methodology – Future Hope, Impact of COO, Influences/Importance/& Meaning, Perception of Adoption, Personal Characteristics, Positive Surroundings, Sense of Self, What Could be Better. |
| 03/06/18 | Delilah returned response with approval of accuracy   |
| 03/09/18 | Using 392 significant statements from surveys, interviews, personal letters of advice, memos, and correspondence, began grouping to determine prominent statements  |
| 03/11/18 | Enumeration Table drafted with possible Themes  |
| 03/16/18 | Researched professional editors   |
| 03/19/18 | Reworked and condensed themes   |
| 03/20/18 | Distributed manuscript for peer review/audit<br>Made adjustments and clarifications and suggested   |
| 03/23/18 | Drafted MMDI Enumeration Table to assist with analysis  |
| 03/25/18 | Distributed manuscript for second and third peer review/audit   |
| 03/29/18 | Submitted draft manuscript for Chairperson review   |
| 03/30/18 | Completed recommended edits following discussions with both peer reviewer/auditors  |
| 04/02/18 | Completed recommended edits from Chairperson to include renaming the Enumeration Table to Theme Reduction Table<br>Full dissertation draft sent to all participants   |
| 04/11/18 | Clarified process based on committee feedback and APA edits   |
| 04/20/18 | Conducted defense presentation with committee members for constructive feedback and evaluation  |

## APPENDIX S: EPSI AND PERSONAL ASSESMENT SCORING ANALYSIS

(Example as Created for Each Participant)

| EPSI RESULTS                 |           | Almost Always True = 5 True = 3 Hardly Ever True = 1 |                 |                              |             |                   |                 |             |      |          |   |
|------------------------------|-----------|--|-----------------|------------------------------|-------------|-------------------|-----------------|-------------|------|----------|---|
| <b>TRUST</b>                 |           | <b>AUTONOMY</b>                                      |                 | <b>INITIATIVE</b>            |             |                   |                 |             |      |          |   |
| Q3Score                      | 2         | Q36Score   | 4               | Q1Score                      | 4           | Q39Score          | 5               | Q7Score     | 2    | Q46Score | 4 |
| Q12Score                     | 3         | Q38Score   | 4               | Q2Score                      | 4           | Q54Score          | 2               | Q16Score    | 5    | Q50Score | 4 |
| Q19Score                     | 3         | Q42Score   | 1               | Q5Score                      | 4           | Q55Score          | 4               | Q21Score    | 4    | Q57Score | 3 |
| Q20Score                     | 4         | Q47Score   | 4               | Q8Score                      | 5           | Q62Score          | 3               | Q23Score    | 5    | Q61Score | 4 |
| Q24Score                     | 2         | Q53Score   | 2               | Q13Score                     | 3           | Q63Score          | 4               | Q26Score    | 4    | Q66Score | 4 |
| Q31Score                     | 4         | Q64Score   | 2               | Q28Score                     | 4           | Q65Score          | 2               | Q34Score    | 3    | Q69Score | 5 |
| <b>TRUST</b>                 | <b>35</b> | <b>2.92</b>  | <b>AUTONOMY</b> | <b>44</b>                    | <b>3.67</b> | <b>INITIATIVE</b> | <b>47</b>       | <b>3.92</b> |      |          |   |
| Self Identified              | 6         | 3.00   | Self Identified | 3                            | 1.50        | Self Identified   | 9               | 4.50        |      |          |   |
| <b>INDUSTRY</b>              |           | <b>IDENTITY</b>                                      |                 | <b>INTIMACY</b>              |             |                   |                 |             |      |          |   |
| Q15Score                     | 5         | Q45Score   | 2               | Q6Score                      | 5           | Q29Score          | 4               | Q4Score     | 4    | Q48Score | 3 |
| Q22Score                     | 5         | Q52Score   | 4               | Q10Score                     | 2           | Q37Score          | 4               | Q9Score     | 2    | Q56Score | 4 |
| Q25Score                     | 4         | Q58Score   | 5               | Q11Score                     | 4           | Q43Score          | 4               | Q27Score    | 5    | Q59Score | 2 |
| Q32Score                     | 4         | Q60Score   | 2               | Q14Score                     | 2           | Q44Score          | 4               | Q30Score    | 2    | Q67Score | 3 |
| Q35Score                     | 4         | Q68Score   | 5               | Q17Score                     | 2           | Q49Score          | 4               | Q33Score    | 2    | Q71Score | 4 |
| Q40Score                     | 4         | Q70Score   | 4               | Q18Score                     | 3           | Q51Score          | 4               | Q41Score    | 4    | Q72Score | 2 |
| <b>INDUSTRY</b>              | <b>48</b> | <b>4.00</b>  | <b>IDENTITY</b> | <b>42</b>                    | <b>3.50</b> | <b>INTIMACY</b>   | <b>37</b>       | <b>3.08</b> |      |          |   |
| REV - Self Id                | 7         | 4  | 3.50            | Self Identified              | 4           | 2.00              | Self Identified | 5           | 2.50 |          |   |
| Self Identified Generativity |           | 5  | 2.50            | Self Identified Integrity    |             | 9                 | 4.50            |             |      |          |   |
| <b>EPSI TOTAL</b>            |           | <b>253</b>   | <b>3.51</b>     | <b>Self Identified Total</b> |             | <b>48</b>         | <b>3.00</b>     |             |      |          |   |

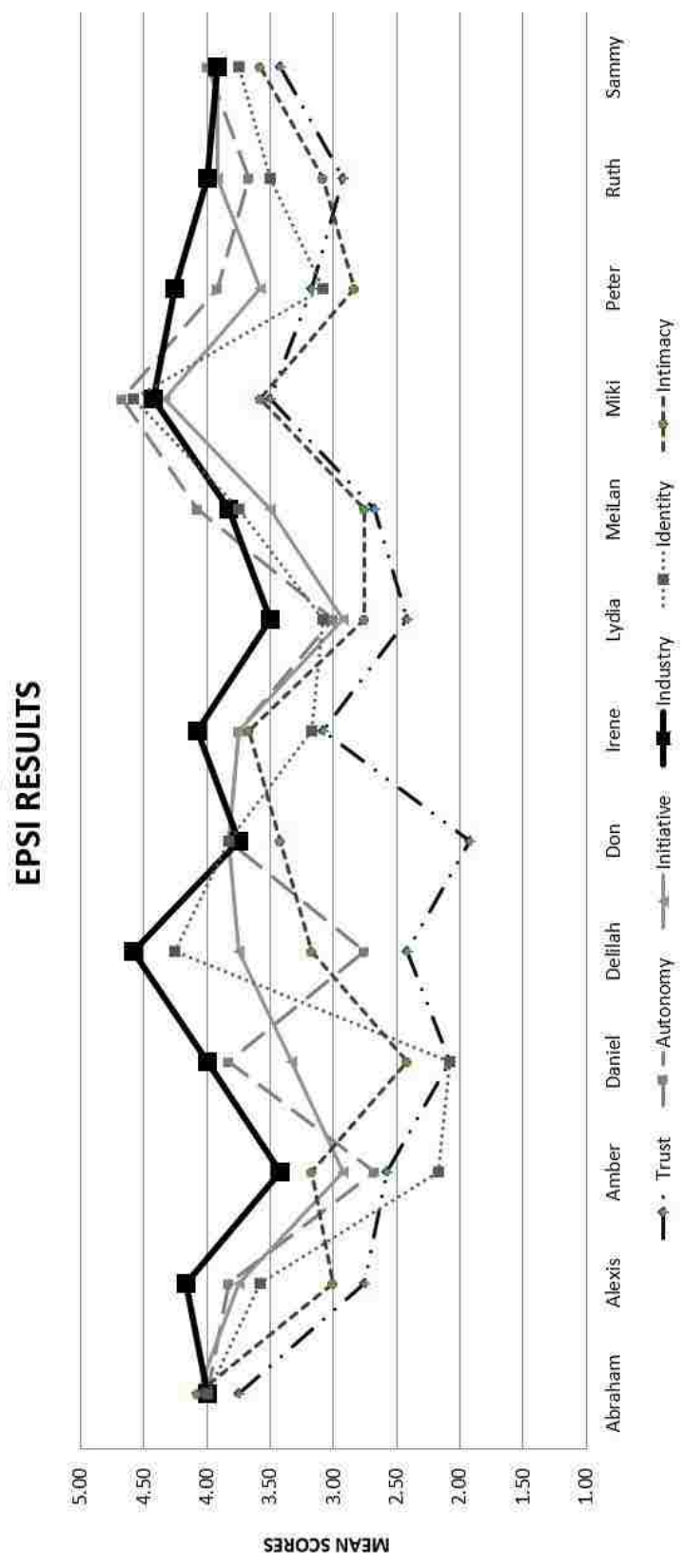
## APPENDIX T: PARTICIPANT EPSI AND PERSONAL ASSESSMENT RESULTS

| Participant | Number of Categories in Top 20% in Bottom | Number of Categories in Bottom | Trust  |      | Autonomy |      | Initiative |      | Industry |      | Identity |      | Intimacy |      | Generativity |      | Integrity |      |
|-------------|---|--------------------------------|--------|------|----------|------|------------|------|----------|------|----------|------|----------|------|--------------|------|-----------|------|
|             |   |                                | EPSI   | PA   | EPSI     | PA   | EPSI       | PA   | EPSI     | PA   | EPSI     | PA   | EPSI     | PA   | EPSI         | PA   | EPSI      | PA   |
| Abraham     | 5   |                                | 3.75 * | 5.00 | 4.00 *   | 5.00 | 4.08 *     | 5.00 | 4.00     | 4.50 | 4.00 *   | 4.00 | 4.08 *   | 4.50 | 2.00         | 5.00 | 4.50      | 5.00 |
| Alexis      |   |                                | 2.75   | 3.00 | 3.83     | 3.00 | 3.75       | 5.00 | 4.17     | 5.00 | 3.58     | 3.00 | 3.00     | 4.50 | 3.00         | 4.50 | 3.00      | 4.50 |
| Amber       | 4   |                                | 2.58   | 1.50 | 2.67 -   | 3.00 | 2.92 -     | 5.00 | 3.42 -   | 0.50 | 2.17 -   | 2.50 | 3.17     | 3.00 | 0.50         | 5.00 | 3.00      | 5.00 |
| Daniel      | 4   |                                | 2.08 - | 0.50 | 3.83     | 3.00 | 3.33 -     | 3.00 | 4.00     | 3.00 | 2.08 -   | 2.00 | 2.42 -   | 3.50 | 3.00         | 1.50 | 3.00      | 1.50 |
| Deilah      | 2   | 1                              | 2.42   | 2.50 | 2.75 -   | 3.00 | 3.75       | 3.00 | 4.58 *   | 5.00 | 4.25 *   | 5.00 | 3.17     | 4.00 | 3.00         | 5.00 | 3.00      | 5.00 |
| Don         |   | 2                              | 1.92 - | 1.50 | 3.83     | 3.50 | 3.83       | 4.50 | 3.75 -   | 3.50 | 3.83     | 2.50 | 3.42     | 4.50 | 2.50         | 3.00 | 2.50      | 3.00 |
| Irene       | 1   |                                | 3.08   | 2.50 | 3.75     | 3.00 | 3.75       | 3.00 | 4.08     | 4.00 | 3.17     | 2.00 | 3.67 *   | 2.50 | 5.00         | 2.50 | 2.50      | 2.50 |
| Lydia       |   | 6                              | 2.42 - | 5.00 | 3.00 -   | 3.00 | 2.92 -     | 5.00 | 3.50 -   | 2.50 | 3.08 -   | 5.00 | 2.75 -   | 4.50 | 3.00         | 2.50 | 2.50      | 2.50 |
| Melhan      | 1   | 1                              | 2.67   | 1.00 | 4.08 *   | 0.50 | 3.50       | 1.00 | 3.83     | 4.50 | 3.75     | 1.00 | 2.75 -   | 4.50 | 0.50         | 4.50 | 0.50      | 4.50 |
| Miki        | 6   |                                | 3.50 * | 5.00 | 4.67 *   | 5.00 | 4.33 *     | 3.00 | 4.42 *   | 0.50 | 4.58 *   | 5.00 | 3.58 *   | 5.00 | 4.50         | 5.00 | 4.50      | 5.00 |
| Peter       | 1   |                                | 3.17   | 3.50 | 3.92     | 3.00 | 3.58       | 2.00 | 4.25 *   | 3.50 | 3.08     | 2.50 | 2.83     | 4.00 | 5.00         | 3.50 | 3.50      | 3.50 |
| Ruth        | 1   |                                | 2.92   | 3.00 | 3.67     | 1.50 | 3.92 *     | 4.50 | 4.00     | 3.50 | 3.50     | 2.00 | 3.08     | 4.50 | 2.50         | 4.50 | 2.50      | 4.50 |
| Sammy       | 2   |                                | 3.42 * | 2.00 | 4.00     | 4.00 | 3.92 *     | 4.50 | 3.92     | 3.50 | 3.75     | 1.50 | 3.58     | 5.00 | 2.00         | 4.50 | 2.00      | 4.50 |

Note: + signifies top scores in a stage; - signifies lowest scores in a stage



### APPENDIX V: COMBINED EPSI RESPONSES GRAPH





**APPENDIX W: THEME REDUCTION TABLE**

| Significant Statements  | Themes                     |
|---|----------------------------|
| <b>Proponents of Identity Development</b>   |                            |
| Acceptance of the Past<br>Connection to Bio Family<br>Connection to Culture<br>Memories of the Environment<br>Influences of Adults<br>Engagement with Opportunities<br>Feeling of Wholeness<br>Attributes of Strength | Sense of Self              |
| Changed Life<br>Future Hopes<br>to Return to COO<br>for Independence<br>Education<br>Positively Impact Others<br>Impact of Faith  | Sense of Purpose           |
| Family<br>Adopted/Extended<br>Biological/Extended<br>Community<br>School<br>Sports<br>COO Connections   | Sense of Relationships     |
| <b>Barriers to Self-Development</b>   |                            |
| Cultural<br>Language<br>Food<br>School<br>Faith<br>Environmental<br>Inadequate Knowledge<br>Personal Attributes<br>Lack of Trust<br>Differing Expectations<br>Overwhelmed/Concerned About the Future                  | Barriers Related to Change |
| Adoption is Hard<br>Damaging Past<br>Family Remaining in COO<br>Unhappy Memories in COO<br>Feelings of Guilt<br>Emotional Pain  | Barriers Related to Trauma |

**APPENDIX X: MMDI ENUMERATION TABLE**

| Dimension of Identity           | Enumeration of Attribute Appearances |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| <b>Core Attributes</b>          |                                      |
| Adaptable                       | 1                                    |
| American, COO Nationality       | 10                                   |
| Artistic, Athlete               | 5                                    |
| Christian                       | 5                                    |
| Diligent, Hard Worker, Stubborn | 11                                   |
| Gender                          | 6                                    |
| Honest                          | 6                                    |
| Independent                     | 4                                    |
| Courage, Resilient, Authentic   | 6                                    |
| Kind, Friendly, Helpful, Loyal  | 7                                    |
| Optimistic                      | 1                                    |
| Pessimistic/Realistic           | 2                                    |
| Outgoing, Fun                   | 6                                    |
| Particular/Indecisive           | 3                                    |
| Race                            | 6                                    |
| Reserved, Shy, Timid, Sensitive | 6                                    |
| Sexuality                       | 3                                    |
| <b>Contextual Influences</b>    |                                      |
| Church                          | 7                                    |
| Culture                         | 2                                    |
| Economics                       | 2                                    |
| Family                          | 11                                   |
| Friends                         | 8                                    |
| School                          | 5                                    |
| Work                            | 4                                    |