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Adoptive Identity: Emerging Adult International Adoptees' Narrative Coherence Following Early Institutional Care

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NARRATIVE COHERENCE FOLLOWING EARLY INSTITUTIONAL CARE**

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Abstract

It is well established that, while all orphanages are not equally harsh, none can provide the quality of care found in most homes. The depriving circumstances of many such institutions often leads to lingering delays across social, emotional, cognitive, psychological, and physical domains of development. However, for many international adoptees there is evidence of resilience and catch-up growth across these same domains following adoption. Adoptive identity theory provides the framework for this qualitative exploration assessing the degree of coherence among six previously-institutionalized (PI) international adoptees' narratives about the meaning and role of adoption in their lives as emerging adults. Adoptive identity theory has been applied to domestic adoptions; the model successfully predicts adopted adolescents' psychological adjustment as emerging adults. This dissertation addresses a knowledge gap, looking at the applicability of adoptive identity theory as it relates to international adoptees who have lived in an orphanage. Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to examine participants' individual perspectives on the impact of beginning life in an orphanage on their post-adoption life. Four super-ordinate clusters emerged from the interview data: (a) Missing Pieces of the Adoption Story; (b) Influential People in an International Adoptees' Life; (c) Complexities Faced by International Adoptees; and (d) The Meaning of Shared Culture, Family, and Friends for International Adoptees. The results are discussed in conjunction with the existing adoption literature with the intention of informing clinical practice with this population.

Keywords: international adoption, institutional care, orphanage, adoptive identity theory

Adoptive Identity: Emerging Adult International Adoptees'

Narrative Coherence Following Early Institutional Care

Context of the Problem

Recent data suggests over 19,000 children are adopted internationally each year (Selman, 2013). This number has been higher in the past, with over 40,000 children and 100 countries involved in international adoptions (Selman, 2000, 2002). There are an estimated 15.1 million orphans around the world; orphans are defined as children who have lost both biological parents ("Orphans," 2017). United States government data between 1997 and 2013 indicate approximately 12,000 international adoptions occurred in 1997, with a peak in 2004 of approximately 23,000 international adoptions; approximately 7,000 children were adopted internationally in 2013 (Schwarzwald, Collins, Gillespie, & Spinks-Franklin, 2015c). However, as specific countries have tightened their regulations and restrictions on adoption, the prevalence of international adoptions has recently dwindled; just 4,714 children were adopted into the United States in 2017 ("Adoption Statistics," n.d.). Despite this notable downturn in the number of international adoptions worldwide, an increase in adoptions into the United States could occur unexpectedly as a result of changing social and political forces around the globe. For example, this was the case in the early 1990s for adoptions from Romania during the downfall of the Communist regime (UNICEF, 1997). Fraudulent international adoptions—due to wartime adoptions and child trafficking—can leave children with particularly sparse information about their origins; for example, some international adoptees may never know whether they were adopted legally, who their biological parents really are, and where or when they were actually born (Nolan, 2019).

International adoption is a thoroughly studied phenomenon often associated with the lingering effects of institutional care on the cognitive, physical, and socioemotional development of children who lived in orphanages before adoption (van IJzendoorn et al., 2011). The impact on cognitive development due to these depriving circumstances is evident in the meta-analytic finding that these children tend to have significant cognitive underdevelopment (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2009).

Notably though, catch-up growth has also been regularly observed in physical and socioemotional functioning after adoption (McCall, 2013). Despite remarkable catch-up growth, meta-analytic findings of behavior problems among international adoptees who were previously institutionalized demonstrate significantly higher total behavior problems compared to non-institutionalized international adoptees (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005).

The effects of early institutional deprivation might not be limited to enduring behavioral issues; indeed, such experiences often also pose later challenges for the construction of a coherent sense of identity. In late adolescence and emerging adulthood, it is not uncommon for international adoptees to seek the support of adoption-competent professionals to help them make meaning and integrate their fragmented lives (Grotevant, Lo, Fiorenzo, & Dunbar, 2017; Smith, 2010). It is likely, too, that a more coherent identity narrative can help internationally adopted youth feel, problem-solve, *and* behave better.

Early Institutional Care

A great deal is known about the often shared and traumatic characteristics of institutions, such as: (a) large group sizes and caregiver-to-child ratios, (b) homogenous play groups of like children, (c) constant change in caregivers, (d) other adults frequently entering and leaving the child's life, (e) little staff training, and (f) mechanistic care that lacks warmth and responsiveness

(van IJzendoorn et al., 2011). These characteristics, along with inadequate physical resources,

describe the larger pathogenic characteristic of "structural neglect" (van IJzendoorn et al., 2011,

p. 12) often associated with children's institutions. Based on their review, researchers conclude

that the quality of care among children's institutions aligns with a broad, "severe deprivation

syndrome," as opposed to a specific post-institutional syndrome (van IJzendoorn et al., 2011, p.

18). In other words, despite some structural similarities common to orphanages, there is no set of

core symptoms which make up a syndrome that defines the experience of all post-institutional

adoptees.

Other well-known consequences of institutional care reviewed by van IJzendoorn and

colleagues (2011) relate to physical growth, cognitive development, and attachment.

Institutionalized and subsequently adopted children show developmental delays in height,

weight, and head circumference compared to non-adopted, parent-reared children. Across studies

comparing adoptees to parent-reared non-adoptees and children in foster care, adoptees' average

IQ was 84, while their foster and non-adopted counterparts' was 104. Cognitive delays were less

pronounced among children adopted at earlier ages and children who resided in foster care

before adoption.

Children raised in institutions also demonstrate troubling attachment styles: Across half a

dozen studies, just 17.1% were found to have attachment security while 72.8% evidenced

disorganized attachment; by contrast, 62% of children living continuously with birth parents

were securely attached and only 15% presented with disorganized attachment styles (van

IJzendoorn et al., 2011, p. 15).

It is important to highlight resiliency factors even in the face of seemingly severe overall

findings. These include, for example, earlier age at adoption, higher quality institutional care,

and child effects—attractiveness, intelligence, personality or temperament eliciting a more favorable response from caregivers—all of which can minimize the pathogenic effects of early institutionalization (McCall, 2013; van IJzendoorn et al., 2011).

Despite the potential for resilience and some variations in care across orphanages, the conclusions of seminal attachment research suggest that institutional care poses some unique challenges for infant development; Maternal separation or loss itself constitutes a significant adverse experience that increases a child's vulnerability to stress and likelihood of developing coping strategies that actually may increase their chances of re-experiencing adversity (Bowlby, 1982). Attachment theory provides a general map of the effects of early childhood deprivation, while the consequences of structural neglect characteristic of many orphanages lead to particular neurobiological deficiencies whose psychological and behavioral consequences may vary in severity (Perry, 2002).

It is known that post-institutionalized (PI) children adopted from international orphanages present with a complex constellation of behaviors; however, their subsequent functioning is diverse and cannot be reduced to some formulaic diagnostic or descriptive behavioral profile. For example, in one meta-analysis, researchers Brandi Hawk and Robert McCall (2010) conducted a systematic review of 18 studies—12 of which compared exclusively PI international adoptee samples—using the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) to draw conclusions about the behavior problems among international adoptees. The research questions were: (a) Do PI internationally adopted children have greater rates and levels of behavior problems in comparison to their parent-reared, non-adopted counterparts? (b) Do higher rates and levels exist for particular CBCL subscales? (c) Do specific parameters, such as age at adoption, relate to particular behavioral outcomes?

The results paint a mixed picture regarding the behaviors among PI and non-PI international adoptees and parent-reared non-adoptees. Seven of the 12 studies from Hawk and McCall's (2010) review found no significant difference for internalizing problems—behaviors that predominantly take place within the self—among both PI and non-PI adoptees, as well as non-adopted controls. For externalizing problems—behaviors that are outwardly expressed—seven of the 12 studies found significantly higher externalizing subscale scores among adoptees (PI and non-PI) compared with non-adopted controls. None of the controls had significantly higher externalizing problems. Further, six of eight studies revealed significantly higher subscale scores on the CBCL for attention problems among PI international adoptees and adoptees of unknown background (i.e., foster care) compared to non-adopted children. Three studies note significant thought problems and social problems among PI international adoptees compared to non-adoptees. Using age at adoption as a parameter, children in two of three studies who were adopted at later ages and spent more time in an institution tended to have increasingly significant CBCL scores for attention and social problems compared to non-adopted controls. Taken together, these findings provide a complex constellation of behaviors that fails to uniformly characterize the behavior among PI and non-PI international adoptees in comparison to parent-reared, non-adopted counterparts. Overall, however, there is some evidence—found in seven of 12 studies among PI and non-PI adoptees—that international adoptees have a higher incidence of externalizing behavior problems (Hawk & McCall, 2010).

A related body of research, also focusing on behavior problems, similarly depicts the diverse presentations of international adoptees. For example, researchers Femmie Juffer and Marinus van IJzendoorn (2005) performed a meta-analysis of behavioral problems and referrals for mental health services among international adoptees, domestic adoptees, and non-adoptee

controls. Effect sizes were used to determine significant differences between adopted and non-adopted controls for internalizing, externalizing, total behavior problems, and mental health referrals. The research questions were: (a) Do international adoptees have more behavioral problems and mental health referrals than domestic adoptees and non-adoptees? (b) Do children with preadoption adversity, older age at adoption ($\geq$ 12 months of age), and boys present greater behavior problems and mental health referrals? (c) Do international adoptees have more behavioral problems in adolescence than preadolescence?

Juffer and van IJzendoorn's (2005) results demonstrate that international and domestic adoptees compared with non-adopted controls had a greater incidence of behavior problems, but, notably, this effect size was small. Mental health referrals for both international and domestic adoptees compared with non-adopted controls were greater; this effect size was large. Comparing behavior problems among international adoptees with domestic adoptees, the international adoptees actually showed fewer behavior problems. Similarly, for mental health referrals among international adoptees compared with domestic adoptees, international adoptees were referred significantly less often. In addition, there is some indication that time post-adoption makes a positive difference in adjustment: Adolescent international adoptees actually showed fewer problem behaviors when compared with preadolescent international adoptees.

Overall, then, these data support the ideas that international adoptees do not comprise a monolithic group. It is significant, for example, that international adoptees showed fewer problem behaviors and fewer mental health referrals than their domestically adopted counterparts. Notably, however, international adoptees who came from orphanages do evince more problem behaviors than their international counterparts from non-institutional care. Still,

their behavior appears to improve over time; adolescent international adoptees had fewer total problem behaviors than international adoptees in early and middle childhood (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005).

In total, the reviews of the literature on behavior problems following international adoption do not support a uniform portrayal of the behavior of internationally adopted children. Upon closer examination of the data, there is a paucity of overwhelming evidence for internalizing or externalizing behaviors depicting an enduring or traumatic legacy of such early adversity. In fact, there is evidence that some previously institutionalized adoptees demonstrate notable resilience and catch-up growth when compared to their domestic counterparts and non-adopted peers.

Resilience Following Adoption

Research into Romanian adoptees who lived with their adoptive family for at least three years and resided in an orphanage for an average of 14 months pointed to significantly lower cognitive development compared to Romanian adoptees who were adopted before four months old and non-adopted, Canadian-born counterparts (Morison & Ellwood, 2000). All participants were adopted into Canada, which allowed for comparison among the groups. Interestingly, Romanian children who lived in an orphanage for an average of 14 months had significantly lower responsiveness scores to the stimulation offered by their adoptive family environment. The researchers suggest this might be explained by the notion that children institutionalized for longer periods of time show lower response to stimulation and less frequent cues to their caregivers to provide this stimulation necessary for cognitive development. Morison and Ellwood's research demonstrates how earlier age at adoption allows for greater exposure to resiliency-promoting factors during the early critical period of development.

A combination of other individual and environmental factors contributes to the resilience that makes it increasingly likely for children to successfully move past stressful and unfavorable developmental hurdles like institutional care and international adoption (Rutter, 1987). For example, a high-quality adoptive home is one variable that appears to be strongly associated with higher self-esteem in international and domestic adoptees. In a large-scale meta-analysis of 88 studies comparing the impact of international and domestic adoptions, Femmie Juffer and Marinus van IJzendoorn (2007) found that international adoptees did not have significantly lower self-esteem, as might be expected due to cultural or ethnic difference in their adoptive family, compared to domestically adopted counterparts. International adoptees' capacity for resilience is highlighted by a sample of 300 hundred PI international adoptees, who showed significant resilience—measured via self-esteem—compared to non-adopted counterparts in institutional care (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007).

Children who begin life in orphanages clearly benefit from having the best institutional care that is possible. Indeed, in his study exploring the factors that contribute to resilience and catch-up growth among PI adoptees, Robert McCall (2013) makes a compelling case for improving orphanages. As discussed, however, noteworthy catch-up growth has routinely been observed in the physical and socioemotional development of PI adoptees now living in loving homes; children adopted at a younger age from more stimulating and caring institutions likely begin their new lives better prepared to take advantage of the opportunities that being part of a family confers upon them. In short, there is evidence that: (a) children placed with their adoptive families at an earlier age, (b) a high-quality home, and (c) improvements in the quality of institutional care have an impact on resilience following adoption.

Narrative Coherence and Emerging Adulthood

Narrative coherence is used as a general term in reference to Harold Grotevant's six elements of adoptive identity—discussed in the theoretical framework section of this study—and is defined as the extent of meaningful reflection and integration one has pursued in regard to their adoptive identity (Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). When interviewed in adolescence, domestic adoptees who had more coherent adoptive identity narratives reported significantly fewer internalizing mental health problems in emerging adulthood (Grotevant et al., 2017). This lends credence to the purpose of this study to understand whether more coherent (i.e., meaningfully reflected upon and integrated) narratives among emerging adult international adoptees who lived in early institutional care are similarly associated with greater psychological adjustment.

Emerging adulthood is an ideal time for this study of adoptive identity based on research by Jeffrey Arnett (2000), who argues identity exploration and consolidation takes place predominantly in the time period from approximately 18 to 25 years old. He explains how adolescence is actually the beginning of one's identity exploration, while emerging adulthood is the time when greater opportunities for love, work, and the development of one's worldview make consolidation possible. In addition to replicating Grotevant's (1997) theory with international adoptees, my focus on the developmental period of emerging adulthood might engage participants at a key developmental time when they are already more likely to be reflecting on the meaning of their early experiences and adoption.

Key Terms

Disenfranchised grief. Originally coined by Kenneth Doka (1989), the term disenfranchised grief refers to the profound sense of unrecognized loss adopted children

experience. Orphans sustain compounding losses due to being separated from their birth parents, movement into and through alternative care, and usually very limited information about their birth family. Internationally adopted children can be thought to further lose their birth culture, kinship network, and orphanage community. This sense of grief, if further marginalized by the adoptive family environment and community—however unintentionally in an effort to integrate them into their new lives—can complicate the already complex process of developing a coherent adoptive identity (Brodzinsky, 2011; Grotevant, 1997).

Institutional care. Children's institutions around the world are not created equally. However, many are characterized by large group sizes, large child-to-caregiver ratios, homogenous play groups, frequent change in caregivers, little staff training, and mechanistic care (van IJzendoorn et al., 2011). The lasting effects of institutional care on child development, even when basic needs for food and clothing are provided for, have been long noted in seminal work since John Bowlby (1951) and Rene Spitz (1952). Over the years, and up to the present time, other prominent researchers confirm the long-term effects of orphanage care among PI and non-PI internationally adopted children, specifically with respect to neurobiological underdevelopment across brain regions—including the prefrontal cortex, hippocampus, and amygdala—largely responsible for judgement and decision making, storage and retrieval of information, and emotion processing (Nelson, Bos, Gunnar, & Sonuga-Barke, 2011; Pollak et al., 2010). More recent research by Rose Vanderwert and colleagues (2016)—as a follow-up to the Bucharest Early Intervention Project (BEIP; Smyke, Zeanah, Fox, & Nelson, 2009)—fortifies the research that a high-quality home environment can promote significant catch-up growth in previously institutionalized children's brain development.

Narrative approach. This method is situated within the broader postmodern tradition (Neimeyer & Bridges, 2003). Postmodernism is largely inspired by social constructivism (Bruner, 2004; Mahoney, 1991), social constructionism (Gergen, 2008), and narrative psychology (McAdams, 2001). Constructivism focuses on how individuals meaningfully organize and are organized by the world around them; constructionism is the way individuals collectively story their lives in connection with others in changing social and historical contexts; and narrative is the form or coherence of the stories the individual tells and are told about who they are in the world (Neimeyer & Bridges, 2003). A narrative approach is an essential component of adoptive identity theory (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011).

Identity. The concept of identity, organized along a series of developmental stages, was initially put forth by Erik Erikson (1950). Adoptive identity is particularly concerned with the Eriksonian stage of identity versus role confusion, which is believed to take place between adolescence and into emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). In this stage, young people reexplore and consolidate earlier identity stages, now including both external feedback from their peers and greater metacognitive awareness of whom the individual wishes to be internally (Erikson, 1950). For international adoptees, this stage of identity development can be especially challenging. For example, a sense of identity integration must include some understanding of relationships with birth family and orphanage caregivers, and adoptive family members who do not necessarily share a racial and cultural background (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011; McKail, Hodge, Daiches, & Misca, 2017), often in the context of limited verifiable information—about the birth family, circumstances around one's relinquishment for adoption, medical history, or even actual date of birth—that might offer data points for a coherent identity narrative to form.

Resilience. Both personal and environmental resilience enable children to successfully move past stressful and unfavorable developmental obstacles like institutional care and international adoption (Rutter, 1987). Examples of personal qualities that contribute to resilience include attractiveness, intelligence, and personality or temperament eliciting a more favorable response from caregivers. Environments that foster resilience offer the opportunity for children to develop a secure attachment relationship with at least one primary caregiver—who provides warm, empathic, and attuned responses to their child's needs—and a high-quality home environment that facilitates neurobiological, social, emotional, and cognitive catch-up growth.

It is helpful to distinguish resilience from similar terms, including for example: self-esteem, self-concept, and protective factors. Self-esteem and self-concept—how one evaluates their sense of overall worth—have been used in the adoption literature interchangeably to describe "buffering processes" that enable the child to move past early adversity (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007, p. 1068). Protective factors, including, for example, secure attachment with one parent, adoption at a younger age, early intervention, and the blessing of a good temperament, buffer children from adversity that might otherwise be overwhelming (Werner, 2000). In combination, all of these ingredients—personal and environmental resilience, self-esteem, self-concept, and protective factors play a dynamic role in the course of adoptive development; therefore, resilience is both something an individual has and something an environment can foster.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is adoptive identity theory. Harold Grotevant (1997) was among the first to articulate a theory on the topic of adoptive identity. His pioneering research synthesized the existing literature on identity development augmented by interviews

with both clinicians and adopted individuals to understand the process of "coming to terms" with one's adoption (Grotevant, 1997, p. 3). The theory was inspired by Erik Erikson's (1950) stages of identity development and narrative psychology (McAdams, 2001).

Grotevant's (1997) initial research revealed several key distinctions when considering adopted individuals' identity development. Adoptive identity construction is not an event, but rather a process that is revisited whenever adoptees encounter social or contextual transitions in life. The given nature of adoption—the fact that the individual did not choose and cannot change their status as an adoptee—means the process of adoptive identity construction requires coming to terms with one's status as an adoptee over the course of development (Grotevant, 1997). This theory has great salience for the current investigation since it is well established that identity development can be further complicated for international adoptees needing to make a coherent narrative out of numerous significant identity differences including for example, culture, race, and an incomplete and fragmented historical narrative common for children adopted from different countries (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005; Tizard, 1991).

To illuminate adoptive identity theory, Grotevant (1997) and his colleague (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011) explored the elements of identity narratives, depth, salience, internal consistency, flexibility, positive affect, and negative affect, in their interviews. *Depth* refers to the degree of reflection one has pursued with regard to the personal meaning of their adoption. *Salience* is the amount of emphasis one places on their adoption and its role in their life choices. *Internal consistency* or narrative coherence is how clearly one supports themes in their narrative with examples drawn from their life. *Flexibility* is one's capacity to take others' perspectives and integrate opposing views. *Positive affect* refers to favorable evaluations of particular aspects of one's adoption, whereas *negative affect* refers to unfavorable evaluations of particular aspects of

one's adoption (Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant et al., 2017; Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). The primary goal in conducting identity interviews using adoptive identity theory is to gather information that answers the questions, "Who am I as an adopted person? What does being adopted mean to me? And, how does this fit into my understanding of my self, relationships, family, and culture" (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011, p. 586)?

Using this framework, identity development in international adoptees has been the subject of some interesting investigations. For example, Harold Grotevant and Lynn Von Korff (2011) conclude that international adoptees' journey to construct a coherent identity includes: making sense of looking different from one's adoptive family, reconciling differences in language and cultural traditions that might exist between one's birth and adoptive families, and coming to terms with the circumstances surrounding one's relinquishment for adoption. The family and community contexts are important in determining an adoptee's sense of acceptance, despite actual or perceived differences (Brodzinsky, 2011); identity coherence is associated with how comfortably adoption is discussed and how peers respond (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). In addition, adopted children overall may encounter challenges constructing their identity when they are older and participate in increasingly diverse social contexts beyond home and school. In terms of forming a coherent identity, this means revisiting one's narratives about their adoption on an ongoing basis to integrate parts whose meaning has shifted as a result of participating in new social contexts.

Fortunately for domestic adoptees, the majority of adoptions are increasingly open (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013), allowing the adopted child a certain degree of access to information about their adoption. In some instances, too, birth parents may not want ongoing contact early on but are readily found when the adoptee is older and is able to find them via

internet search, hiring professionals, or using search engines like adopted.com. This reality or even possibility for contact appears to have positive consequences for identity development (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). Such opportunity to learn about and meet birth families stands in stark contrast with the reality of PI international adoptees. It is most common that PI international adoptees know next to nothing about how their story begins and, depending on the orphanage, usually have very limited means for finding out anything more that would help them in developing a richer identity narrative about their earliest experiences and the circumstances surrounding their birth parents' decision to relinquish them.

      Application of the framework. The segments of the population primarily affected by issue of adoptive identity are both international and domestic adoptees, the people that live with and care about them over the course of their lives, and those they turn to for help, including therapists. Grotevant and colleagues (2017) demonstrated that adoptees' identity narratives in adolescence predicted psychological adjustment in emerging adulthood. These researchers conducted interviews with adopted teens to determine whether the concepts of adoptive identity theory—depth, salience, internal consistency, flexibility—in conjunction with positive and negative feelings related to one's adoption could be used to categorize participants according to the characteristics of their adolescent adoptive identity narrative. Participants were sorted into four groups: (a) unexamined, (b) limited, (c) unsettled, and (d) integrated narratives. Investigators then repeated the interview with the same adoptees eight years later, when most of them were emerging adults.

      Participants who had been sorted into the unsettled group based on their adoptive identity narrative as adolescents were significantly more likely to encounter internalizing problems as emerging adults, when compared to participants in the limited or unexamined groups (Grotevant

et al., 2017). The predictive power of this finding suggests internalizing problems faced by adoptees do not abate with age. Interestingly, no significant differences existed among comparisons of internalizing behavior between the integrated and unsettled group and between the limited and unexamined group. Negative affect in adolescence correlated with participants in the unsettled group, but not with participants in the integrated group. Participants' group assignment in adolescence generally did not predict their externalizing behaviors in emerging adulthood, although the unsettled group of adolescents had the highest scores for externalizing behavior as emerging adults (Grotevant et al., 2017). The evidence suggests adoptive identity theory—and the interview of adoptees with a focus on one's meaningful reflection and integration of identity narrative—can help predict psychological adjustment in emerging adulthood. It is fair to conclude that adoptive identity theory is of practical importance to therapists, and arguably pediatricians, educators, and other professionals who work with internationally adopted children, adolescents, and adults.

The role of pediatricians. Pediatricians continue to be the primary source of early identification and intervention or referral for a variety of conditions pre- and post-adoption (Schwarzwald, Collins, Gillespie, & Spinks-Franklin, 2015b). Reasons for relying on pediatricians include their universal engagement and broad capacity to identify and diagnose. In this vein, Schwarzwald and colleagues point out international adoptees are at an elevated risk for a myriad of medical and developmental conditions. Pediatricians may be called upon to review medical records of international adoptees although such records are frequently incomplete and outdated (Schwarzwald et al., 2015b). Since many conditions, including those of psychological origin, may not be identified among international adoptees before adoption, the pediatrician will likely need others on an intervention team to identify problems post-adoption.

International adoptees may face numerous medical and developmental challenges. For example, Schwarzwald and colleagues (2015b) discuss prevalence statistics for several of the most common conditions. They note that, in one study, 78% of Eastern European adoptees had significant vision problems (Gronlund, Aring, Hellstrom, Landgren, & Stromland, 2004). Notably, comorbid hearing and vision deficits among international adoptees are associated with greater risk for social and attentional problems (Eckerle et al., 2014). PI international adoptees are at a greater risk for mental health problems, but it is not clear whether this is the case regardless of what country the child was adopted from. Moreover, the risk of tuberculosis among adopted individuals born outside the United States is 13 times higher than for individuals born in the United States (Alami et al., 2014). Different countries pose different kinds of medical challenges for adoption. For example, intestinal parasites may occur in up to 48% of adoptees from Africa (Staat, Rice, Leach, & Rawlings, 2012).

Early screening and intervention are clearly important first steps post-adoption. However, Schwarzwald and colleagues (2015b) note developmental screenings performed before an infant or child has had a chance to adjust to their adoptive culture may yield results that do not reliably inform later catch-up growth. While the information gleaned from this research (Schwarzwald et al., 2015b) is useful, the focus is largely on physical health. It is notable that the mental health of international adoptees—including development of a coherent adoptive identity—has been granted significantly less attention in the research literature.

Adoption-competent professionals. In recent years, there has been a greater focus on clinical support for those working with children and families post-adoption, with an aim to support adoption competency among mental health professionals. For example, Anne Atkinson and colleagues (2013) sought to establish a unified definition for an "adoption-competent"

professional, based on a definition created by adoption experts, through surveying adoptees and adoptive parents about their agreement with components of the proposed definition (p. 156). These researchers found that there was an overall strong agreement among adoptees and adoptive parents across the 14 components of the definition, with a range between 90.9% and 97.5% positive agreement. The components of the definition were classified into three broad categories: (a) the approaches the professional uses, (b) aspects of adoption the professional understands, and (c) skills the professional demonstrates. Interestingly, among the top six components with the highest percent agreement adoptees and parents agreed most with components in category (b): aspects of adoption the professional understands (Atkinson, Gonet, Freundlich, & Riley, 2013). This research underscores the primary importance for both pediatricians and mental health clinicians to have knowledge about the unique developmental challenges faced by PI international adoptees that include recognition of their unique physical *and* mental health concerns.

Importance of the framework to adoptive parents. Adoptive identity theory offers additional language for parents to engage in deeper conversations about the meaning of adoption with their children. To this end, David Brodzinsky (2011) created a developmental framework to assist parents in navigating adoption conversations as their adopted children grow up. One noteworthy recommendation for parents is to avoid dishonesty about the circumstances surrounding the adoption. Another recommendation encourages open conversations, which enable parents to be with and understand their adopted child's feelings. Open conversations in turn support later coherence of adoption narrative and identity integration (Brodzinsky, 2011).

The developmental frame provided begins with the preschool years when the adoptee "learns the language of adoption" and repeats this information with a limited sense of what it

means on a deeper personal level (Brodzinsky, 2011, p. 201). Brodzinsky recommends that parents avoid the temptation to overestimate their child's understanding of adoption and remain attentive to requests for additional information or space to make sense of confusing aspects of their adoption. In the elementary years, adoptees' capacity to problem-solve renders them able to grasp that their birth parents may have had choices about relinquishing them for adoption. Elementary age adoptees may wonder about their status as a family member in their adoptive family, and, as the capacity for reasoning grows, they may express feelings of loss over the separation from their birth parents. Adoptees may also become curious about whether their birth parents think about them. Parents are urged to cultivate openness surrounding the adoptee's curiosity, as this buffers against invalidating or disenfranchising their grief and other complex feelings and loyalties that may surface.

During adolescence, peers may ostracize adoptees about their status as a non-biological family member. At this stage of development, personal factors, family factors, and extra-familial factors collectively influence one's adoptive identity (Brodzinsky, 2011).

This developmental frame provides parents with guidance for approaching otherwise difficult and uncertain conversations about adoption. Such an approach might be enhanced by underpinning it with the framework of adoptive identity theory. Awareness of the ingredients of a coherent identity narrative would enable parents and other caregivers to attend to the language and concepts that will help PI adopted children and adolescents develop integrated narratives that are associated with significantly better adjustment over time (Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011; van IJzendoorn et al., 2011).

Open adoptions as a catalyst for adoptive identity development. The advantages of open adoptions for identity development have been studied in the US and abroad. In one

fascinating project, researchers explored identity development among adoptees between ages 9 and 23 years in open, domestic adoptions in New South Wales (Luu, de Rosnay, Wright, & Tregeagle, 2018). Findings from this investigation illustrate how openness in the adoptive family, in addition to some form of contact with birth parents, assists adoptees in learning about their adoption and to comfortably integrate it with other aspects of their post-adoption identity. Openness acts as part of the scaffolding that allows for the emergence of a coherent narrative about who one is as an adoptee. Openness also offers the child greater opportunities for recognizing, validating, and working through disenfranchised grief (Doka, 1989) that may arise due to having been separated from birth parents (Brodzinsky, 2011).

However, in the case of open domestic adoptions, there are both benefits and challenges; negotiating one's sense of identity as an adoptee remains a complex process even with access to birth parents. Developmental maturity is another key factor in integrating an identity narrative. Perhaps not surprisingly, children in Luu and colleagues' (2018) study were less able to describe the facts surrounding their adoption compared to adolescents and emerging adults. For domestic adoptions, factors such as the adoptee's developmental maturity and the family's degree of openness surrounding the adoption both play a role in adoptees' identity development. International adoptees, particularly those who begin life in institutional care, face additional challenges to developing a coherent identity narrative. Even if international adoptions were to become increasingly open, there remain challenges including language barriers between families, coming to terms with the circumstances surrounding one's placement in an orphanage, compensating for unattained catch-up growth, and feeling different from one's adoptive family and friends.

Knowledge Gap

Before this century, we did not think about emerging adulthood as a distinct developmental period with significant implications for adult identity and functioning (Arnett, 2000). Thus, it might not be surprising to find so little research on adoptive identity development in emerging adulthood; indeed, most studies consider the impact of adoption on children and teens and end there. Much less is known about what happens after early childhood and adolescence post-adoption, especially with regard to how international adoptees who lived in an orphanage go on to integrate their adoptive identity as young adults.

Research to date reveals some persistent struggles among adoptees more generally. For example, a recent systematic review (Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017) indicates that adults who were adopted as children compared with their non-adopted peers reported greater psychological problems in areas of adjustment, depression, anxiety, and personality. Adopted women tended to struggle with depression, whereas adopted men reported struggling with substance abuse.

Melero and Sánchez-Sandoval (2017) further note that affective expressiveness and educational attainment in adoptive families acts as a protective factor against mental health issues among adult adoptees. Notably, domestically adopted adults who report poorer adjustment were more likely to go on to search for their biological parents.

However, review of the international adoption literature yields inconsistency among mental health outcomes of young adults adopted internationally as children, with results both supporting and disconfirming increased risk for psychopathology (Schwarzwald, Collins, Gillespie, & Spinks-Franklin, 2015a). Although meta-analytic and longitudinal findings from infancy through 14 years of age support the conclusion that international adoptees generally

experience substantial catch-up growth in a variety of developmental areas in the years following adoption, international adoptees may not able to catch-up across all of their developmental challenges and may evince selective lags compared to their same-age peers (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2009). Such persistent lags have been found in domains of coordination, memory, and executive functioning (Bos et al., 2011; Bos, Fox, Zeanah, & Nelson, 2009; Roeber, Tober, Bolt, & Pollak, 2012).

As demonstrated by the literature considered so far, a lot is known about the institutional environments often experienced by international adoptees and the emotional sequelae that follow in the first decade or so after adoption. We also know a little about resilience factors and some of the long-term outcomes among adults who were adopted as children.

However, hardly anything is known about *how* international adoptees overcome the early adverse experience of institutionalization as it relates to their adoptive identity. What are the pathways from institutionalization in early life to coherent adoptive identity narratives in emerging adulthood? The answer to this question would assist clinicians, adoptive parents, and the emerging adults themselves in understanding how international adoptees integrate and grow, perhaps not in spite of—but because of—their humble beginnings. Understanding the ingredients of a coherent narrative that emerges out of the experience of severe early life deprivation might help us better grasp how it is that people find a way to make meaning out of unfathomable trauma and sorrow.

Research Questions

This study was designed using a phenomenological approach to investigate adoptive identity narratives among emerging adult international adoptees who lived in orphanages prior to

their adoption in early life. Through conducting qualitative interviews, I examined the following broad questions:

1. How might contextual factors including understanding of the institutional environment, adoptive family composition and functioning, and the community resources available to the adoptee, relate to an internationally adopted person's degree of narrative coherence achieved as an emerging adult?

2. What experiences among previously institutionalized international adoptees might account for narratives containing depth, salience, internal consistency, flexibility, positive affect, and negative affect in connection with Grotevant and Von Korff's (2011) overall adoptive identity classifications of *unexamined, limited, unsettled, and integrated* adoptive identity narratives?

Method

Research Paradigm and Study Design

I used a constructivist paradigm for this study because it allows for an understanding of international adoptees' lived experience (i.e., how they developed or struggled to develop a coherent adoptive identity when interviewed in emerging adulthood). Furthermore, this paradigm enabled me to explore the effects of institutional deprivation among international adoptees and how early orphanage experience relates to international adoptee's degree of narrative coherence as emerging adults. Within this paradigm I employed a qualitative methodology that relied on delving deeply into qualitative questions. This methodology allowed me to tap into the essence of institutionalized international adoptees' experience as emerging adults who may be constructing adoptive identity narratives of varying coherence.

Qualitative Design

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) was used in the current study as a data collection and analytic strategy for "capturing" and "reflecting on" the essence of one's current identity related to being an international adoptee who lived in an orphanage as a child. The focus included the factors considered to be relevant in the eyes of adoptees and the meanings and "interpretations" associated with a coherent adoptive identity in life following adoption (Larkin & Thompson, 2011, p. 101). The rationale for using an IPA approach in the current study was that it allowed us to better comprehend international adoptees' unique experiences that help or hinder them from establishing a coherent adoptive identity in emerging adulthood and perhaps overcome the deprivation effects of early institutional care.

In addition, the qualitative nature of this study followed from previous qualitative research that sought to establish whether adoptive identity theory as a measure of narrative coherence could predict subsequent adjustment among adoptees in a general sample; this study homed in on PI international adoptees' experiences.

Participants. A purposeful sampling strategy was used, since the goal of qualitative research is not to generalize based on results that represent the broader population (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The rationale for this sampling strategy was based on the literature that international adoptees who have spent time living in an orphanage environment at an early age are a specific population and are in the best position to provide informative answers to the proposed research questions. In addition, to produce the desired sample size of four to six individuals, snowball sampling was used to recruit additional international adoptees who have lived in an orphanage. Inclusion criteria consisted of individuals between 18 and 30 years of age, who indicated that they spent time living in an orphanage in another country.

Interview protocol and data sources. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with individual participants via videoconference. Interviews were audio recorded, following informed consent procedures, for later transcription and analytic purposes. Interviews via videoconference enabled me to observe and note non-verbal behaviors. For interviews conducted by videoconference, GoToMeeting, a secure platform was used. I also took note of behavior and voice changes throughout the conversation.

Open-ended questions were first used to allow the interviewee to answer in their own way. Open-ended questions at the beginning of the interview focused on the extent that early life factors were believed by the participant to have affected them and included:

1. Tell me in as much detail as possible what your life in the orphanage was like?

   A follow-up question might be used to learn about parent's memory of the orphanage as either a source of collateral report or as an alternative if the participant is unable to remember or describe their orphanage experience: How do you remember your parents talking about the orphanage environment you came from?

2. What has life been like for you after being adopted until today?

   A follow-up question might be used to encourage expansion of participants' answers: You said that life has been . . . since your adoption. Can you say more about that to help me understand your life experiences since being adopted?

3. What do you believe has significantly influenced your journey in life since your adoption and why?

   A follow-up question might be used to understand whether the participant links a particular significant influence as relevant to their adoption: Do you view the influence of . . . as related to the fact that you were adopted? Why?

Questions asked later in the interview were borrowed from Grotevant's adoptive identity theory (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011) and expanded so I could explore identity coherence in emerging adulthood. Questions included:

1. Who are you as an internationally adopted person?

   A follow-up question might be used if the participant does not understand the initial question or a more developed response is needed: What factors or events in your life influenced your answer?

2. What does being an international adoptee mean to you?

   A follow-up question might be asked to differentiate respondents' sense of the meaning of their adoption and the meaning of their adoption described by others: What does your status as an international adoptee mean to others in your life (e.g., parents, friends, or significant other)? How is this the same or different as what it means to you?

3. In what ways is your understanding of your self, others, family, and culture influenced by your adoption?

   A follow-up question might be: In what ways is your understanding of yourself, others, family, and culture separate from the influence of your adoption? The interview questions are also listed in the appendix (see Appendix A).

Procedure

Recruitment. The invitation to participate (see Appendix B) was first e-mailed to three acquaintances, who were known to meet the inclusion criteria. I asked these prospective participants to pass along the study opportunity to their acquaintances who met the inclusion criteria. The invitation to participate included the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, the opportunity to receive an Amazon gift card in exchange for being a study

participant, and the researcher's contact information. The invitation to participate was then shared by my advisor with PI international adoptees from her professional network, asking participants to provide their email if they were interested in my study and met the inclusion criteria. It was also sent out to former students of my advisor's known to have connections with adoptees until six individuals accepted the opportunity to take part in the study.

Informed consent. Upon demonstrated interest in this study, six international adoptees were e-mailed individually to coordinate a time to conduct the qualitative interview. In this e-mail, participants were provided an informed consent form (see Appendix C), which included the purpose of the study, the amount of time expected for the interview and follow-up contact, the use of audio recording, the risks and benefits associated with participation, contact information for the researcher, and additional resources for participants who seek support around the topic of the study. Grotevant and Von Korff's (2011) adoptive identity theory questions (see Appendix D) were sent along with the consent form for the participant to begin reflecting on before the interview. Participants completed the informed consent form and e-mailed a copy to me, because all of the interviews were conducted via videoconference.

Data collection. Individual videoconference interviews were conducted with participants via GoToMeeting, a secure video communication platform. I asked participants to look over Grotevant and Von Korff's (2011) adoptive identity theory questions before the interview; these were then discussed as part of the interview protocol.

After reviewing my plan for the hour and answering any questions the participant had, I asked the interview questions before collecting verbal responses after the interview to the demographic data (see Appendix F). Demographic data included: (a) age, (b) gender, (c) race, (d) occupation or student status, (e) years of education, (f) age at time of adoption, and (g) adoptive

parent and sibling information. In addition, previous counseling, relevant community or school experiences, and a preferred e-mail address for follow-up contact were gathered as part of the demographic data collected. The interview was designed to spend between five and 10 minutes per question (Appendix A), with the total interview time not exceeding an hour. I reminded participants about follow-up contact at the end of the interview.

Limitations. There are a couple of limitations inherent within this study's design. First, the sample of participants was very small and fairly limited in regard to diversity—for example, participants were primarily recruited from my own and my advisor's networks which included a handful of international adoptees who, in two cases, lived in the same orphanage I did. Second, participants were chosen from a very small convenience sample, which was also fairly limited in regard to other intersectional identities, such as race, religion, and socioeconomic status. For these reasons, the study's generalizability and transferability may be compromised. Consequently, I aimed to provide the reader with thick descriptions that enabled them to determine whether the data collected applies to their research or treatment context.

Ethics. Three ethical considerations ought to be mentioned with respect to participants' informed consent, any foreseeable harm or benefits that might be incurred as a result of participation in this study, and confidentiality. As discussed previously in the interview protocol section, informed consent (Appendix C) was obtained at the beginning of the interview through electronic signature of the consent form. There also existed the potential for the topics of international adoption, the depriving circumstances of orphanages, and adoptive identity to generate emotionally distressing feelings for some participants. To address the risk that the individual may experience discomfort discussing some of these topics, I did not require participants to speak about or elaborate on any aspect of their adoption experience that created

observable discomfort for them. I checked in over the course of the interview if I determined at any time a participant was experiencing feelings of distress to determine whether a break, transition to another question, or discontinuation of the interview was appropriate.

Preventative efforts were taken to minimize the potential for harmful or adverse psychological consequences from being experienced by participants due to discussing emotionally salient information about one's adoption. Clinical judgement and sensitivity were prudent throughout the interviews in order to respond effectively to any distress that arose for participants. This allowed me to adjust the questions as needed and prevented undue psychological distress as a result of participation in the study.

I offered a small Amazon gift certificate in the amount of $25 as an incentive; it was a small enough sum not to create coercion. There was a very limited chance of coercion in this study since a nominal participant reimbursement was offered in exchange for participation. While this did not eliminate the chance that someone could have felt compelled to engage against their own interest, it minimized chances of coerced participation.

One potential benefit of participation in this study was participants' having the opportunity to reflect about their adoption. I briefly shared with all participants my own history of being internationally adopted from an orphanage. This was with the understanding that doing so would help establish rapport with the interviewees and allow them to benefit from the opportunity to connect with another international adoptee.

The qualitative interview method used in this study prohibited the data from being anonymous. However, the only individuals with whom I shared the deidentified interview data included my dissertation advisor, members of my dissertation committee, and as necessary members of my doctoral research seminar for purposes of collaboration and feedback. Data was

solely discussed with these individuals in the form of deidentified quotes from the interview

transcripts, which nearly eliminated any risk of exposing participants' identities. Consent forms

were kept separately from the numerical codes associated with transcriptions of the data to

further ensure participant's confidentiality. The data was stored on my password-protected

personal computer. Federal law (Office for Human Research Protections, 2018) requires I retain

the data for three years, at which point it will be destroyed and purged from my personal

computer. While direct quotes appeared in the manuscript for this study, they were presented

anonymously and I removed identifying information. These important ethical considerations

were initially addressed in the informed consent form and remained of ongoing concern to me

throughout the study.

Data Analysis

  Transcription and coding. I reviewed Larkin and Thompson's (2011) step-by-step

guidelines for analyzing data within IPA. First, I transcribed the interviews, line-by-line, into

typed text with line numbers. Second, I used "free or open coding" to explore each interview

transcript and to record my reactions and preconceptions upon review of the data (Larkin &

Thompson, 2011, p. 106). Third, I used "phenomenological coding" to begin with a fresh copy of

each interview transcript to understand what stood out for participants about their international

adoption after having lived in an orphanage and what this meant to them. I used "objects of

concern" to comprehend the aspects that stood out to the participant and the meanings they

associated with these "experiential claims" (Larkin & Thompson, 2011, p. 106). Fourth, I

evaluated the coded data for similar and dissimilar patterns or themes; in other words,

experiences related to international adoption and experience living in an orphanage that appeared

to cluster together and those that appeared disparate among the individuals interviewed. The

fourth step involved a "dialogue," between myself as the researcher and the transcribed interview data, to combine "emergent themes" from the data with across-transcript "cumulative patterns" (Larkin & Thompson, 2011, pp. 107–109). This ongoing step bridged the phenomenological aim of IPA to understand participants' personal experience with its interpretive aim to draw together the findings in a coherent manner useful for clinicians working with this population. Fifth, an organizing structure was developed that illustrated the relationships among the clusters and themes expressed across the interviews of international adoptees from orphanage contexts; this was a time-consuming step that accounted for the numerous ways in which the coded data were similar and the ways particular data depicted unique experiences.

Once semi-structured interviews were conducted, I followed Jonathan Smith and colleagues' (2009) seminal text for conducting IPA research. In their approach, step one entailed reading and re-reading each interview transcript to understand the overall structure or flow of the interview. Step two—like Larkin and Thompson's (2011) open coding—consisted of making exploratory notes in the right-hand margin of each printed transcript and included: (a) descriptive comments about what participants said, (b) linguistic comments about how the participant used particular syntax or grammar to share about their experiences as an adoptee, and (c) conceptual comments in the style of Godamer that connected my "pre-understanding" with my newly developed understanding of each participant's lived experience (Smith et al., 2009, p. 89). Step three—Larkin and Thompson's phenomenological coding—relied on my exploratory notes to create themes in the left-hand margin of each printed transcript linking the participant's first-hand experience and my second-hand understanding of their experience as an international adoptee. Step four mimics Larkin and Thompson's procedure for locating themes within the transcript and organizing themes throughout the transcript into super-ordinate themes or clusters.

Smith and colleagues wait until step six to begin looking across all of the interview transcripts for the most potent themes, while Larkin and Thompson begin doing so in the second part of their fourth step. I elected to follow Smith and colleagues' interpretation of steps one through four, since this allowed new themes and clusters to surface in each transcript before looking at all of the transcripts together. Finally, I added Mertens' (2015) additional step of following up with each participant to ensure they felt my themes and clusters sufficiently captured their sentiments expressed in the interview (which I discuss further in the following section on quality assurance). The most potent clusters and themes are presented in Table 2 alongside supporting quoted text from interviewees, with participant numbers listed in parentheses (see Appendix G).

       Quality assurance. Sixth, I checked to assure the quality of the data. Internal validity was accounted for by follow-up contact or "member-checks" that entailed returning to participants three months later to share the findings from the aggregated interview data and how they were organized to ensure the participants' intended meaning was understood (Mertens, 2015, p. 269). From the analyzed data, noteworthy quotes or sentiments expressed in the interviews were collected to help enrich my articulation of the essence of the lived experience of participants. My advisor checked my themes with quotes from the interview transcript. I then e-mailed participants their quotes from the interview to see if they seemed accurate or wished to add anything.

       External validity was accounted for by *transferability*—in other words, in-depth description of the participants' demographic data and the interview situations to allow readers to determine for themselves whether the findings from this study apply to their work with international adoptees. *Reliability* is mentioned here as well as in the discussion section of this paper via dependability of documentation, where no particular explanation is needed because the

IPA procedure was not adjusted for any reason in the course of carrying out this study. *Objectivity* was accounted for by my making explicit how the outlined steps for the data analysis actually turned out, specifically with respect to my own reactions and preconceptions of the data (Mertens, 2015).

   Reflection journal. A reflection journal was kept throughout all steps of the interview and data analysis phases of the current study. This was a systematic way for me to record my reactions and preconceptions before and after each interview, which were later used to ensure the data remained true to the participants' experience as opposed to my own (Larkin & Thompson, 2011). For example, my pre- and post-interview reflections allowed me to highlight important similarities and differences between my adoption story and that of the participants interviewed. As another example, my adoptive mother's health declined over the course of this research and my reflection journal helped me bracket this experience from unduly influencing my attention paid toward themes related to the role of adoptive parents throughout the interviews. A continuous task was for me to include reflections about how my own international adoption experience could influence the study. Follow-up contact with participants, providing detailed descriptions, documenting changes that occurred in carrying out the study procedure, keeping a reflection journal, and including how my personal experience as an international adoptee could have influence the study were steps necessary for quality assurance of results.

Results

   This dissertation highlighted the voices of six international adoptees who began life in an orphanage, exploring their post-adoption experience from the vantage point of emerging adulthood. It is well established that no orphanage can provide the quality of care found in most homes; such early deprivation and attachment insecurity often—but not always—leads to

fragmented identity narratives post-adoption. Within the framework of adoptive identity theory, I further examined the degree of narrative coherence in participants' descriptions of the meaning and role of adoption in their lives. I sought to answer two overarching research questions:

1. How might contextual factors including understanding of the institutional environment, adoptive family composition and functioning, and the community resources available to the adoptee, relate to an internationally adopted person's degree of narrative coherence achieved as an emerging adult?

2. What experiences among previously institutionalized international adoptees might account for narratives containing depth, salience, internal consistency, flexibility, positive affect, and negative affect in connection with Grotevant and Von Korff (2011) overall adoptive identity classifications of *unexamined, limited, unsettled, and integrated* adoptive identity narratives?

In an effort to shed light on these questions, I interviewed six international adoptees who had been adopted from orphanages as children. Three female participants were adopted from China, one female participant was adopted from Russia, one female participant was adopted from Bulgaria, and one male participant was also adopted from Bulgaria. The sample had a racial and ethnic composition of three Asian American and three White or Caucasian individuals. Participants were between 23 to 28 ($M = 25.16$) years of age. Participants were adopted as young as 10 months and as old as 5 ($M = 3.22$) years of age. Everyone interviewed completed two or more years of college education, while two individuals reported dropping out of college sometime thereafter.

Today the six participants have found themselves in a variety of life, work, and romantic circumstances. Although not part of the demographic data collected, living arrangements

consisted of two participants residing in a multi-bedroom apartment together, three cohabitating with parents, and the final participant living on the other side of the world with the parents of their significant other. Participants reported the following occupations: (a) full-time student and part-time triage counselor, (b) assistant event coordinator in the restaurant industry, (c) full-time college student, (d) behavioral therapist for people with autism and babysitter, (d) graphic designer, and (e) mental health professional with a masters in social work. Although demographic information related to romantic relationships was not gathered as part of this study, one participant lived outside the United States with their boyfriend and his parents; other participants mentioned dating relationships.

Analysis of the interview data collected led to the development of four super-ordinate clusters: (a) Missing Pieces of the Adoption Story; (b) Influential People in an International Adoptees' Life; (c) Complexities Faced by International Adoptees; and (d) The Meaning of Shared Culture, Family, and Friends for International Adoptees. Each of the clusters contained several themes, shown in Table 1 (see Appendix G). Selected excerpts are presented in the pages that follow to demonstrate these clusters and themes; a comprehensive table of super-ordinate clusters, themes, and examples can be found in the appendix (see Appendix G).

Missing Pieces of the Adoption Story

The first super-ordinate cluster revolved around the memories of participants' adoption, the depriving orphanage environment from which they came, and their questions about what would have happened if they were not adopted. The data in support of this cluster was organized into the themes that follow.

Missing memories: Parents' stories, pictures, and videos of the orphanage. Adoptees typically did not have much of any memory about the orphanage or their preadoption life

circumstances. This code was used whenever participants indicated a lack of memory about the orphanage environment. Instead, adoptees generally discussed their adoptive parents' recollections of what their life in the orphanage had been like. The memories shared focused on the details around how participants came to be in institutional care, the photos and video adoptive parents had of the orphanage and sometimes of the adoptee her or himself as an infant in the orphanage, and stories about how the participant had been cared for in the orphanage. For example, one participant emphasized the benefit of seeing video and photos of what their life in the orphanage was like:

> So, for me, I personally don't remember it as much. But thanks to my parents for
> videotaping part of it, and actually having photos of it—it actually is very helpful to
> actually go back and re-watch it. I mean, we re-watched it when we were younger, but
> then we re-watched it about 10 years ago and it is a huge difference for a kid to
> experience that as their childhood—that you get to literally visualize with where you
> grew up . . . I mean, that's what I was told . . . I really don't remember the first three
> years of my life being in an orphanage as much.

Insufficiencies of the orphanage environment. This theme captured adoptees' discussion of the deprivation that was characteristic among five of the six institutional environments described. This theme was coded whenever participants mentioned any of the inadequate conditions of the orphanage they lived in prior to adoption. For example, one participant compared their orphanage to a conveyor belt:

> It was just kind of bleak and, you know, there was just kind of minimal toys. And my
> mom said she used the adjectives of like, it was kind of like a conveyor belt. So, like they

had a number of kids and they just pushed him through whatever the activity was and then, you know, use the next set of kids.

As a counter example, one adoptee explained that the institution they lived in was not consistent with the notion of deprivation often associated with orphanages around the world:

And I think especially in [Deidentified country in Asia]. I think there's a lot of like. A lot of um, you know, rumors. And just, you know, like true stories too. That some of the orphanages are not well kept; there's a lot of babies there and they don't get taken care of the way that they need to. And I don't ever feel like that was my story. You know, I know some girls they were like malnourished when they were in in the orphanage. And I, we clearly were not malnourished.

Unanswered questions about the adoption. Adoptees frequently mentioned having numerous questions about how their life might be different if they had not been adopted or had been adopted by a different family. This code was used whenever participants brought up questions they could not answer related to their adoption. For example, one of several participants expressed having unanswered questions in the form of doubts about their memory of the facts surrounding their adoption:

So, like it's, it's weird because there's only little things that I remember but then at the same time, it's like did that actually happen or is that something that I fill in to kind of bring myself to a place of like, "Okay, this is. This is no longer a void because this is actually what happened, and this is." If that makes sense?

Similarly, another participant discussed having unanswered questions about how their life would be different if they had not been adopted:

You know, there's is a lot of, not a lot of days—but especially when I was younger—but not so many where I would think like: What would my life look like if I was still in [Deidentified country]? Or, what would my life look like if I was just adopted by a different family? So, there's a lot of questions that, you know, remain unanswered and I don't know if I'll be able to ever answer those.

Influential People in an International Adoptees' Life

This super-ordinate cluster highlights the people—biological and adoptive parents, caregivers, and psychotherapists—who had an integral impact on international adoptees' experiences post-adoption; these relationships supported the formation of a participant's coherent adoptive identity. Themes in support of this cluster are addressed below.

Positive and negative feelings toward biological and adoptive parents. Four of the six participants expressed positive feelings when asked about what people and experiences they felt had significantly influenced their journey in life since adoption. One of those four adoptees revealed that they had positive feelings toward their adoptive parents; however, they also noted that their adopted sibling, actually went through a period of feeling strong negative emotions toward both their adoptive and biological parents. Notably, that sibling, whom I also interviewed, did not report such negative feelings toward either biological or adoptive parents in their interview. The remaining two participants expressed negative emotions toward their adoptive parents or toward an adoptive parent, but one of them stated that they believed this critical assessment was unrelated to their adoption. This code was used whenever participants discussed positive or negative feelings toward their biological or adoptive parents. For example, one adoptee expressed positive feelings toward both of their adoptive parents:

I think definitely my parents. Um. [Pause] Well, because first of all, like being adopted at

such a young age you don't really have a say in who you go to. Correct? So, I quite. I feel

quite fortunate to have my parents pick me up. Right? Which is quite lovely and then I.

Having them give me the support, the education, the love, for all of those years. I think

it's been the biggest influence of who I've become today.

As a counterexample, another participant expressed negative feelings toward their

adoptive mother:

The adopted family that I grew up in, not ideal in any way, shape, or form . . . it was

really hard to kind of process my own adoption and just bring up things like my

biological mom and be like, "Hey, I really miss my biological mom." These guys, every

time I did it was like, "Oh! You think she's better than me?" And I would always be like,

"No, I didn't say that. I just said that I miss her."

The pivotal role of caregivers for international adoptees. Every participant discussed

impactful connections with caregivers—an adoptive parent or psychotherapist—and emphasized

the influence these relationships had on who they have become as individuals. This theme arose

as each of the adoptees interviewed, without being prompted, spoke at different points about

people who cared about them. These instances were coded when participants described the

impactful connection they have or had with a caregiver growing up and how the relationship has

affected their development. For example, one adoptee described their close relationship with

their adoptive father:

Yup, definitely my parents, especially my dad. My dad's always been supportive and

encouraging . . . and he would always, always find a way to help me out. I think having a

very secured person behind you—and he was always supporting me—was very, very

helpful. And it gives you encouragement to try and jump into situations that you would

normally wouldn't do. You know? Like there are certain situation [sic] that I would take

the risk and not see what's going to happen. But, my dad would always be there to

support me. And I think he is a big, big reason for where I am today.

Another participant, in the absence of a more supportive adoptive family, described the

role their psychotherapist has had throughout their life over the past 10 years:

The reason why I've been with this one therapist for so long is because, you know, I

sensed the imperfection, you know. And I appreciate her willingness. And I appreciate

that she's able to hold herself accountable—because by how she responds and how she

handles things—like it's, it's a model for what I want to try to view and be for other

people and myself . . . Yeah, and love. Like, she's loved me through like everything . . .

And I think I am the person I am today and I think a lot of that is due to her. And I just

am so appreciative.

Life lessons from influential people in the lives of international adoptees. In addition

to deeply caring people in their lives, several adoptees brought up memorable life lessons they

were taught by the important individuals in their lives. This theme was coded when participants

may not have expressed a positive feeling toward a caregiver, but explicitly articulated a life

lesson or something they learned from that influential person. For example, one participant

explained how their adoptive mother taught them life lessons that did not necessarily feel like

life lessons at the time:

What she was trying to do was essentially guide me making sure that, you know, I make

the best decisions for myself and this sense of like autonomy. So, like I've learned so

many life lessons from her, you know. In the moment it didn't seem like a life lesson, but

after reflecting on it, it definitely is a life lesson.

It is also worth noting that not all of the life lessons adoptees brought up were positive,

although they were still memorable and influential. For example, one participant listed the ways

in which various experiences in their adoptive family have taught them, "I think from all of the

hardship and all of the pain that was kind of projected onto me, I learned how to love people

unconditionally. . . how to set boundaries. I learned how to detect, you know, toxic behavior."

Complexities Faced by International Adoptees

This super-ordinate cluster encompasses the more nuanced experiences unique to

international adoptees as they contend with a lifetime of experiences trying to fit in and belong.

The data in support of this cluster was organized into the themes that follow.

Possessing a unique identity versus feeling normal. Three participants felt either their

adoption made them unique or just like everyone else, while the other three reported feeling a

combination of unique and similar to others who are not internationally adopted. This theme was

coded typically when adoptees responded to Grotevant and Von Korff's (2011) adoptive identity

theory question about who they are as an international adoptee. The first example illustrates a

more either-or view:

> Because you see things from a different perspective than others do, being like, as in being
>
> a U.S. citizen at first. Like being born in the United States you can see some things, but
>
> then, you can see it, like black and white. But, being adopted you can also see the grays
>
> and the other colors that play into other things. That you are more. You can actually be
>
> more broad with things, in that sense. If that makes sense?

The second example illustrates a more integrated view of one's perspective as both unique and similar to other non-adoptees:

So, I think obviously for me being adopted is a very big part of who I am, but I don't think it makes me who I am . . . And while [Long pause] I don't attribute everything—all my issues—to my adoption, I feel like the reason I have all those issues and the reason I have all the views I have is because I was adopted.

The meaning of international adoption for adoptees. Two adoptees linked the meaning of being adopted to having a second chance or a second life, while the remaining participants related the meaning of their adoption to culture and ethnicity over adoption itself. This theme was coded when participants responded to Grotevant and Von Korff's (2011) adoptive identity theory question about the meaning of their international adoption. For example, one participant related their international adoption to having a second chance:

I see it as a kind of a second chance because I was adopted at three, but I had heart surgery when I was two . . . and with that mentality, I kind of use that to kind of motivate me as well as push me forward . . .

As a second example, another adoptee explained the meaning of their adoption vis-à-vis ethnicity and culture, "So, for me I think it's just [Pause] being born in another country, living with another family in another country. Um. [Pause] I think it brings culture though into the story. I think it brings a more dynamic person . . ."

Feelings of difference and finding one's voice as an international adoptee. Five of the six adoptees reported instances of feelings different, particularly from a young age, and three participants specifically described the process they went through to find their voice as an international adoptee. This code was used when participants spoke about feeling different at

school from a young age, becoming increasingly confident about their adoption history and, greater experiences using their voice for advocacy of self and others. For example, one adoptee discussed feeling different at school as a child, "So, when I first grew up [Laughs]. Or when I first went to school, um, I realized at a very young age that I and my siblings were one of the few different ethnicities in our school . . ."

As another example, one participant shared they would never use their own voice to bring up their adoption in a conversation, "And then again it can be a great intro . . . But, you know, that that's the only way I would bring it up. If someone else brought it up . . ."

Finally, one adoptee explained the process of finding their own voice as an international adoptee:

I think it took a long time for me to get to that point. Because as an adoptee like—I'm not sure if you felt the same way—but it took a long time to find my voice and to really be okay with having others hear my voice, and have like my opinions and like what I wanted to do. And it was kind of like, "Oh, I'm no longer invisible." So, people see me and people hear me. And like that's so strange.

Microaggressions toward international adoptees. The last theme within the cluster of Complexities Faced by International Adoptees was comprised of potentially offensive slights directed at international adoptees and usually made by strangers. All six participants provided at least one, and sometimes several examples of microaggressions they have experienced as an international adoptee. This theme was coded when a statement from the interview was judged to either explicitly or implicitly demean international adoptees. For example, one adoptee shared about a common exchange they have experienced that suggests their adoption is something to be sad about:

Because once they hear the word adopted, they—from my experience, I don't know

about yours or my brother's—but from my experience they say, "Oh really?" Like they

don't like. Like, I don't know, they suddenly feel sadness for me.

Similarly, another participant mentioned people inquiring about why they look different

from their adoptive parents, "Until, you know, you get into this society and people question,

'Why you Asian? Why your parents White? Why do you have a last name that's not very Asian

name? Or a very, um, typical name, right?'"

The Meaning of Shared Culture, Family, and Friends for International Adoptees

The final super-ordinate cluster highlighted the value among international adoptees for

communal and familial experiences of shared culture and social connection. Themes in support

of this cluster were as follows:

Connecting about adoption, culture, and ethnicity with other adoptees. Four of the

six adoptees interviewed in this study discussed being part of an organization intended to bring

international, and sometimes domestic, adoptees together to form cultural and social connections.

The remaining two adoptees did not mention interest or experiences sharing about their adoption

in a group setting with similar others. This code was used when participants discussed group

gatherings or social interactions that indicated an appreciation for connecting culturally and

socially with other adoptees. For example, one adoptee discussed the positive experience they

had in an adoption group as part of their time in middle and high school:

I was a part of an adoption group for other adoptees that were adopted from [Deidentified

country]. I think that's where I felt most comfortable at times is because, you know, they

had a very similar story, they kind of understood like what where I was coming from, my

perspective, my challenges and things like that . . . and the group itself was like a place

for all of us to come and get to be yourselves and, you know, laugh and enjoy each other's company, as well as like learning our culture, learning how to like cook traditional [Asian] food and some of the traditions around, you know, weddings and whatever it may be. So, it was a place where I could learn but also enjoy the company that was there.

As another example, one participant shared about the adoption club they led at their high school:

[T]here was one club in particular, we had an adoption club . . . So whether you were adopted from the States, internationally, or anywhere else . . . I actually became president of our group. And what I loved was we were all able to talk about our adoption, but also what it meant to us specifically.

Family is not about blood. The last theme drawn from the interviews conducted with international adoptees focused on how these individuals come to define family and friends, as well as what their expanded definitions offer beyond the traditional notion of family and friends. This code was used when adoptees responded to Grotevant and Von Korff's (2011) adoptive identity theory question about how their own understanding of themselves, others, family, and culture may be influenced by adoption. For example, one participant explained how the concept of family for international adoptees is not related to biology or genetics:

[F]amily is not about blood, but rather the people who put in the time to get to know you, get to support you, who love you unconditionally . . . I think you don't necessarily have to be blood-related to the person that you call mom or dad or your brother. And I think it just shows overall that, you know, anybody can be that person you can lean on if you allow them. I guess if you're allowed to be vulnerable with them.

It is worth noting not all participants felt their adoptive family was a sufficient substitute for a sense of family. For example, one adoptee articulated how others along their journey in life have become like family:

> But I think had I been put in a family that was more emotionally intelligent and more attuned to their own emotions . . . I think things would have gone a lot smoother . . . But I think having the people in my life that I've chosen to keep in my life and how they respond to cultural differences. And like their heart and their values, like I think that's been like a huge point of reference. And that's been so helpful for me to navigate and to learn.

Elements of Adoptive Identity

I will first depict high and low examples for each element of adoptive identity theory (Grotevant, 1997) and later apply these elements using Harold Grotevant and colleagues' (2017) model for sorting participants' narratives by their overall level of coherence. The elements below were originally developed by Grotevant and used in his adoptive identity research. I have included a paraphrased description for each element, followed by a rationale for why the segment of interview data was chosen to illustrate the high or low aspect of that element, and offer an illustrative excerpt from one of the interviews. Complete quotations can be found in the appendix (see Appendix G).

Depth. This element refers to the degree of reflection one has pursued with regard to exploring the personal meaning of their adoption. The interview excerpt that demonstrated a high degree of depth was chosen because the participant not only indicated they reflected about their adoption after seeing a video when they were younger, but had also done so more recently and

recognized the value in doing so. For example, "[W]e re-watched it when we were younger, but then we re-watched it about 10 years ago and it is a huge difference for a kid to experience that . . . you get to literally visualize with where you grew up."

The interview excerpt that demonstrated a low degree of depth was chosen because this adoptee indicated a lack of interest in details about their adoption or reflecting upon it. For example, "Okay, well [Pause] they told me stories about it. But, I guess I wasn't really interested in them or wanting to know about it." This individual had pursued little reflection about their adoption and therefore had not developed much of any personal meaning related to their international adoption.

Internal consistency. Internal consistency or narrative coherence is how clearly one supports themes in their narrative with examples drawn from their life. The interview excerpt that demonstrated a high degree of internal consistency was chosen because the participant clearly and with an example explained, in a discussion about the theme of family, the experience of how people would look at their family because they did not all look the same. For example, "[T]hat was overall very positive because I never felt like I didn't belong in my family because I wasn't white; because I look [like] my other family who was blood-related, who were like half black or something."

The interview excerpt that demonstrated a low degree of internal consistency or narrative coherence was chosen because the participant discussed their adoptive and extended family, but did not include any clear examples from their life to include in the discussion. For example, "Like aunts and uncles and cousins. They're all wonderful, and they all love me very much and I love them very much." Although adoptive and extended family could be considered an example in support of this element of adoptive identity theory, it was not clearly or coherently explained.

Flexibility. Flexibility is one's capacity to take others' perspectives and integrate opposing views. The interview excerpt that demonstrated a high degree of flexibility was chosen because the participant was able to take their adoptive mother's perspective or think about her reasoning behind having them join an adoption group led by local college students. For example, "I think essentially what they were trying to do with the group is help me be aware of who I am, ethnically . . . They did it in a way so they didn't push me that I had to."

The interview excerpt that demonstrated a low degree of flexibility was chosen because the participant did not articulate any thoughts about their friend's perspective when they experienced the microaggression being described. For example, "Like they've had your 'adoptive parents,' . . . They're like, 'No, my parents!' Like I appreciate it because it's actually great to just be able to catch up with them." Instead of flexibly holding their friend's perspective or experience in mind, the participant ended the statement with a fairly superficial commentary about enjoying catching up with them.

Salience. Salience is the amount of emphasis one places on their adoption and its role in their life choices. The excerpt that demonstrated a high degree of salience was chosen because the participant placed a considerable emphasis on their adoption for having influenced their life choices. For example, "So, adoption has really changed—since the age of three and a half—has changed the whole path of my life today."

The excerpt that demonstrated a low degree of salience was chosen because the participant placed no emphasis on the meaning of their adoption, which implies being adopted has little to no role in their life choices. For example, "What's it mean to me? I, I guess nothing? [Laughs] I guess . . . Or, for the most part I don't really see anything that my adoption has hindered me to certain things." The individual's sentiment that their adoption does not hold

much of any meaning for them or influence over their decisions in life was repeated a number of times throughout the interview and further supports the low degree of salience adoption has in their life at this time.

Positive affect. Positive affect refers to favorable evaluations of particular aspects of one's adoption. The excerpt that demonstrated a high degree of positive affect was chosen because the participant expressed having a particularly favorable evaluation of their adoptive mother. For example, "We had a really good childhood. My mom stayed at home with us. She didn't work for most of our lives and I think that was really good."

The excerpt that demonstrated a low degree of positive affect was chosen because the participant expressed having a less than favorable evaluation of their adoptive family. For example, "The adopted family that I grew up in, not ideal in any way, shape, or form . . . it was really hard to kind of process my own adoption . . ." It should be mentioned that the adoptive identity element of low positive affect may overlap at times with low or high negative affect discussed next.

Negative affect. Negative affect refers to unfavorable evaluations of particular aspects of one's adoption. The excerpt that demonstrated a high degree of negative affect was chosen because the participant expressed a highly unfavorable evaluation of their adoptive mother. For example, "'No, this is my daughter. Like yeah, we look so much alike . . . [I]sn't that great? Like, she got my blue eyes!' And it's like, 'No, I didn't get your blue eyes because I didn't come from you!'"

The excerpt that demonstrated a low degree of negative affect was chosen because the participant indicated an unfavorable evaluation to their adoptive father and specifically stated

this sentiment did not extend to their adoption. For example, "I think the issues I have with like feeling like abandonment is from him. It's not from being adopted. I don't think, personally."

Groups: Unexamined, limited, unsettled, and integrated. It was not possible to systematically sort participants interviewed into particular groups, since the procedure for doing so has not been revealed in Harold Grotevant's publications to date. Nevertheless, given the general distribution of high and low aspects for the elements of adoptive identity across the interviews, it was possible to approximate how participants might be sorted. Table 3 represents an estimation, rather than an exact approach to sorting participants into groups of varying degrees of adoptive identity integration (see Appendix G).

Although participant interviews could not be definitively sorted into groups by varying degree of narrative coherence, Table 3 provides a range of high and low examples for each element of adoptive identity theory from the interviews in the current study. Participant four's interview resembled the elements of low depth, low salience, low positive affect, low negative affect, as well as low to moderate internal consistency and flexibility characteristic of the unexamined group. Participant two's interview exemplified the elements of low negative affect, low to moderate depth and salience, moderate internal consistency, flexibility, and positive affect characteristic of the limited group. Participant three's interview was moderately high for all six elements of adoptive identity theory, with negative affect being the highest among the other participants and representative of the unsettled group. Participants one, five, and six exemplified a moderate degree of depth, salience, and positive affect; these individuals also included high internal consistency and flexibility, coupled with low negative affect across their interviews all characteristic of Grotevant and colleagues' (2017) integrated group.

Discussion

In this dissertation, I explored the adoptive identity narratives of six emerging adults all of whom began life in orphanages abroad. These post-institutionalized (PI) international adoptees described the role that their early experiences and subsequent adoption played in how they understand who they are today as they make the transition to adulthood. Based on Grotevant's (1997) model, I sought to explore participants' identity narratives to establish a clearer understanding of the experiences that shaped their level of adoptive identity coherence and integration.

In this section, I discuss the four super-ordinate clusters that emerged from the interview data considering how these findings compare with the extant international adoption and adoptive identity literatures; describe the clinical implications for mental health professionals working with PI international adoptees and their families; note some of the limitations of the study; identify several directions for future research; and conclude with a personal reflection on the process of conducting this dissertation study.

Four Super-Ordinate Clusters

The interviews conducted led to the creation of four super-ordinate clusters: (a) Missing Pieces of the Adoption Story, (b) Influential People in an International Adoptees' Life, (c) Complexities Faced by International Adoptees, and (d) The Meaning of Shared Culture, Family, and Friends for International Adoptees.

Missing pieces of the adoption story. My study found international adoptees generally did not recall much of anything about the orphanage or their life before adoption; participants relied almost entirely on stories, memories, as well as photos and videos provided by their adoptive parents to discuss memories related to their adoption. This finding is consistent with

previous international adoption research. For example, international adoptions that take place during wartime or in the context of child trafficking often leave adoptees with unanswered questions about the legal and familial circumstances surrounding their relinquishment; they seldom know the identity of their biological parent or basic facts about their birth story (Nolan, 2019).

My study found PI international adoptees tended to remember little about their early months and years before being adopted. Their difficulty trusting and self-regulating may well be attributable to considerable deprivation at the start of their lives. This missing piece interferes with developing a coherent narrative that takes into account the insufficiencies of the orphanage environment, such as: large group sizes and caregiver-to-child ratios, homogenous play groups of like children, constant change in caregivers, other adults frequently entering and leaving the child's life, little staff training, and mechanistic caregiving (van IJzendoorn et al., 2011). This missing piece can offer insight not only into the tough story about the challenges faced by PI international adoptees but also provides evidence for the heroic story of their survival and resilience. Integrating this missing piece into the identity narrative also helps us attend to personal, familial, and environmental resilience-promoting factors such as, earlier age at adoption, higher quality institutional care, and child effects—attractiveness, intelligence, personality or temperament that have been known to counter balance insufficiencies of the orphanage environment (McCall, 2013; van IJzendoorn et al., 2011).

Influential people in an international adoptees' life. My study found despite missing information, PI international adoptees could still develop coherent identity narratives. For them, adoptive identity integration was facilitated by an understanding of relationships with birth family and orphanage caregivers, and adoptive family members (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011;

McKail et al., 2017); adoptive parents as well as one participant's psychotherapist played a central role through the creation of loving connections with the adopted participants.

The cluster of influential relationships between international adoptees and their birth and adoptive parents, as well as adoptees and their therapists is not new to the international adoption literature. Family and community relationships are key determinants for an adoptee's sense of acceptance, regardless of whether any differences actually exist; identity coherence has been related with how comfortably adoption is discussed (Brodzinsky, 2011; Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011).

One of the six participants in my study spoke extensively about the importance of their relationship with a therapist. Notably, previous research into the role of the relationship with their therapist suggests adoptees and adoptive parents placed the highest value on aspects of adoption the mental health professional understands, as opposed to the particular approach or skills used by the therapist (Atkinson et al., 2013). More recent research into preferences among foster, domestic, and international adoptees indicate the therapist's adoption competence and emphasis placed on adoption were the most important criteria when choosing a clinician (Baden, Kitchen, Mazza, Harrington, & White, 2017). Although the majority of participants discussed the importance of their relationship with one or both adoptive parents, the one participant who lacked a close relationship with either adoptive parent relied heavily on their ongoing connection with a therapist—thought to be in place of loving familial relationships.

Complexities faced by international adoptees. My study found evidence in support of issues of ethnic identity and microaggressions faced by international adoptees that have gained attention from scholars lately. All six of the adoptees in the current study reported at least one, if not several examples of microaggressions they have encountered throughout their lives related to

adoption. Microaggressions included comments about why participants looked different from their adoptive parents, why participants spoke poor English or did not look like other individuals from their birth country, as well as being treated as though they did not belong in America. In addition, two of the six participants described the influence of their ethnic identity as more important to them than their adoptive identity. This highlights the point in the adoptive identity literature for international adoptees, who must confront making meaning of their adoptive and ethnic identities in order to obtain a coherent sense of identity.

It has been suggested within adoptive identity theory that a coherent narrative includes: (a) making sense of looking different from one's adoptive family, (b) reconciling differences in language and cultural traditions that might exist between one's birth and adoptive families, and (c) coming to terms with the circumstances surrounding one's relinquishment for adoption (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011).

However, more recent literature reviewed suggests international adoptees ought to be especially intentional about exploring their adoptive as well as their ethnic identities and the potential benefit of learning the details about one's birthday as this can fortify identity development (Darnell, Johansen, Tavakoli, & Brugnone, 2017).

Adoption-specific microaggressions—often in the form of well-meaning comments made by others—fail to recognize the complexities inherent in traversing multiple forms of identity formation for adoptees and particularly international adoptees. Researcher, Amanda Baden (2016), notes scholars have previously connected "oppression, stigma, and perceived discrimination" with "identity concerns . . . and behavior problems for internationally adopted children and adolescents" (p. 2). Mary O'Leary Wiley (2017) points out part of the ongoing issue is adoptive parents are instructed to focus on involving their culturally diverse adopted children

in culturally enriching activities, but tend to neglect openly discussing experiences of racial and ethnic discrimination faced by these adoptees. Based on the frequent occurrence of microaggressions experienced by adoptees in this study as well as literature from recent years, adoption-competent therapists need to be ready to support PI internationally adopted children, emerging adults, and their families with intersectional identity exploration experiences.

   The meaning of shared culture, family, and friends. My study revealed the meaning of shared culture, family, and friends—discussed before returning to the overarching research questions—was highly valued by PI international adoptees. Four of the six participants directly addressed the priority they place on connecting with others about their ethnic and adoptive origins; one of the remaining participants also seemed to enjoy connecting with a fellow adoptee over the course of the interview, though they did not directly relate it to this cluster. The current findings overlap with previous research to clearly indicate: Adoptees seek meaningful connections with family, friends, and notably other adoptees. This finding echoes the results of many previous studies (e.g., Brocious, 2017; Brodzinsky; 2011; Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). For international adoptees who are left to disentangle multiple fragmented identities over the course of their childhood and into emerging adulthood, there may be a coherency creating power offered by social connections with other adoptees—particularly since it appeared not to matter in the current study or other literature if adoptees were from similar pre-adoption backgrounds. That is, international adoptees have more complex and intersectional identities to make meaning of and doing so in the context of relationships with specific others is facilitative of overall identity development.

Review of the Research Questions

Overall, participant interview responses yielded rich data in support of the utility of Grotevant's (1997) adoptive identity theory to understand PI international adoptees' narratives about the meaning and role of adoption in their lives as emerging adults. The rationale for conducting qualitative interviews using adoptive identity theory was to gather information that answered the questions, "Who am I as an [internationally] adopted person? What does being [internationally] adopted mean to me? And, how does this fit into my understanding of my self, relationships, family, and culture" (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011, p. 586)? The purpose of this research was to address the knowledge gap of how PI international adoptees go about constructing a coherent adoptive identity as emerging adults. This study applied the elements of adoptive identity theory—depth, salience, internal consistency, flexibility, positive affect, and negative affect—in connection with Grotevant and Von Korff's adoptive identity classifications—unexamined, limited, unsettled, and integrated adoptive identity narratives—to PI international adoptees.

Question one: How might contextual factors including understanding of the institutional environment, adoptive family composition and functioning, and the community resources available to the adoptee, relate to an internationally adopted person's degree of narrative coherence achieved as an emerging adult? Factors like the orphanage environment, adoptive family composition, and the available community resources appeared to partially correspond with internationally adopted participants' degree of narrative coherence as emerging adults. Five of the six participants reported they did not remember details about the institutional environment from which they came to the United States; however, their adoptive parents provided various means—stories, pictures, and videos of the orphanage—to assist their

children with filling in these missing pieces of their adoption story. The one participant who did not mention stories and other memorabilia from their adoption discussed having a poor relationship with their adoptive family, whereas the remaining five participants reported close relationships with their adoptive families; this might explain why that participant had a paucity, if any positive memories related to their adoption and the orphanage environment. Without a close adoptive relationship, this participant may have endured a double hardship: no conscious memory of early years and no parental support to help bridge life experiences that were surely held as body memories.

In short, the capacity and willingness among adoptive parents to provide stories, photos, and videos of the orphanage environment was related to more coherent adoptive identity narratives among PI international adoptees. One participant expressed how instrumental photos and videos were at different times throughout their post-adoption life in constructing a visual narrative of their early years:

But thanks to my parents for videotaping part of it, and actually having photos of it—it actually is very helpful to actually go back and re-watch it. I mean, we re-watched it when we were younger, but then we re-watched it about 10 years ago and it is a huge difference for a kid to experience that as their childhood—that you get to literally visualize with where you grew up.

Adoptive family composition and functioning was not necessarily related to narrative coherence among PI international adoptees in emerging adulthood. Two sibling participants each discussed the characteristics of warmth and responsiveness in their adoptive family that would suggest healthy family functioning, but both were categorized in the limited and unexamined groups with regard to their degree of narrative coherence as emerging adults. The sibling with

the less coherent narrative described their adoptive family in the following terms, "I consider myself very lucky being adopted to wonderful, wonderful parents and being a part of a family group. Like aunts and uncles and cousins . . . and they all love me very much and I love them very much." The participant who reported a particularly negative relationship with their adoptive family was categorized in the more coherent unsettled group with regard to their degree of narrative coherence as an emerging adult; this participant explained how their therapist seemed to act as a substitute for the poor functioning that existed in their adoptive family, "The adopted family that I grew up in, not ideal in any way . . . The reason why I've been with this one therapist for so long is because . . . she's loved me through like everything." Due to the variability in family composition and functioning across the individuals interviewed, I can only conclude that family composition and functioning alone do not determine identity integration. While families can play an instrumental role in helping PI international adoptees gain narrative coherence, it is quite likely that caring others—including therapists—can also support this higher level of functioning in emerging adulthood.

Community resources available to international adoptees post-adoption appeared to be related to the degree of narrative coherence achieved in emerging adulthood. This relationship was particularly noticeable among the three participants who engaged in cultural exploration activities with their families or in their neighborhood. The three participants also happened to have the most coherent and integrated narratives among the six interviews conducted. One of these participants discussed the comfort they felt from being a member of a community adoption group:

> I was a part of an adoption group for other adoptees that were adopted from China. I
> think that's where I felt most comfortable at times is because, you know, they had a very

similar story, they kind of understood like what where I was coming from, my

perspective, my challenges and things like that.

Another of these participants discussed their experience of community when they

engaged in cultural exploration activities with their adoptive family:

So, um, they wanted to teach us the culture, but they didn't quite know how I guess.

Because, you know, they weren't Asian American themselves. But, we would go to a few

museums to learn about Asian history. We'd go out to some restaurants, just to

understand the culture and get a taste of it. Because that's kind of where we came from.

Which is, I think was excellent for them to do that because at least we didn't lose what

we came—Kind of like the heritage of where we came from.

The remaining participant of the three with the most coherent narratives discussed the

communal sense of pride they witnessed at a young age and how this influenced their adoptive

identity development:

And I think that did help a lot, because even though they weren't Asian I saw people

being truly unapologetically proud to be where they're from . . . That, the events that led

up to me moving to [Deidentified city] is what made me so proud and has influenced who

I feel like I am as an adoptee. Because I feel like my identity formation wouldn't have

started at such a young age. And even though I went through a lot, a lot of it in college, I

think it started from when I was in high school. Because I saw a lot of people up there rep

their flags and be very, very, very, very proud. And before, I never seen it before; no one

would really want to wave the [Deidentified country] flag.

The three participant accounts collectively demonstrate the power of culturally-salient

community resources—regardless of whether a sense of community is experienced with one's

adoptive family or in their neighborhood—and that this related to participants with the highest

degree of narrative coherence and integration. The attention to ethnic origins by communal

setting varied from an adoption group, visiting museums and restaurants with one's adoptive

family, to witnessing at a young age neighborhood pride in one's heritage. Nevertheless, it seems

a multitude of culturally salient community resources or qualities were related to a higher degree

of narrative coherence among PI international adoptees in emerging adulthood.

Adoptive identity coherence is clearly supported when adoptees have a more thorough

understanding of the circumstances of their institutional care and their adoption journey. This is

also fostered by an ongoing respect for the adopted person's culture and ethnicity through family

and community interest in the food, history, and traditions practiced by the child's country of

origin. Adoptive family composition and functioning was not as clearly related to narrative

coherence; however, in the absence of supportive adoptive parents, a caring therapist might be

able to offer sufficient developmental scaffolding.

Question two: What experiences among previously institutionalized international

adoptees might account for narratives containing depth, salience, internal consistency,

flexibility, positive affect, and negative affect in connection with Grotevant and Von Korff's

(2011) overall adoptive identity classifications of *unexamined, limited, unsettled, and*

***integrated* adoptive identity narratives?** The combination of having a pivotal relationship with

a caregiver, learning life lessons from adoptive parents, and close experiences with friends and

family seemed to constitute a common set of necessary experiences; the cumulative effect of

which among PI international adoptees led to narratives containing higher degrees of the six

elements of adoptive identity theory in connection with Grotevant and Von Korff's (2011)

overall adoptive identity classification for placement in the integrated group as an emerging

adult. Participants sorted into the unsettled, limited, and unexamined groups either had some and not all of the experiences listed or their discussion about these experiences was not sufficient to produce a more integrated narrative. Each experience that helped account for narratives sorted into the integrated group as emerging adults will now be explained.

One participant discussed the close relationship they had with caregivers in the orphanage:

We have some pictures—and from what my mom told us and stuff like that and what the nannies had told them—I think we were really, really loved . . . And when you look at pictures of us in the orphanage, we were like the biggest babies. I think that we were like one of the, some of the favorites. And I think we would like get fed more . . . So, I think that they would put the other babies down to go to bed. But then they would keep us up and then like play with us.

The same participant described the close relationship they had with their adoptive mother, although they did not explicitly connect this with a specific life lesson:

We had a really good childhood. My mom stayed at home with us. She didn't work for most of our lives and I think that was really good . . . I remember, just my, you know, my mom always being there and stuff and playing with us. So, it was really good up until a certain point.

Finally, this participant recalled the connected experience of attending an Asian American association with friends and family that appeared to contribute to the coherent and integrated features of their adoptive identity:

And then there was a [sic] Asian American association where we were at and we would like go to the—you know it's mostly older people—we would go to their thing and go to

their events and stuff like that . . . And I mean, ever since then I was I think, I always

had a positive outlook on [Deidentified country].

Another participant shared about the close relationship they had with their adoptive

mother:

I think my mom was the person who really created like an open discussion about like my

adoption. She would be the one who I would always, you know, go to to ask questions

about because she kind of created that line of communication . . . So, she always made

that space to, you know, make sure that we could speak what was on our mind. Whether

it was school-related or even if it was just the challenges we face as being adopted.

The same participant discussed the life lessons they learned from their adoptive mother

and how they have realized the importance of these teachings even more so over time:

What she was trying to do was essentially guide me making sure that, you know, I make

the best decisions for myself and this sense of like autonomy. So, like I've learned so

many life lessons from her, you know. In the moment it didn't seem like a life lesson, but

after reflecting on it, it definitely is a life lesson.

Lastly, this participant shared about a close friendship they had with a non-adopted peer

and how this experience with a friend who was like family contributed to the coherent and

integrated features of their adoptive identity:

I think whenever I felt confused or uncertain, and if I didn't have the chance to go to my

mom, I was going to my friend. And like even though she wasn't completely

understanding of what was going on . . . She knew both. She knew the stress that I was

facing as a teenager or as a kid, but also the situation that I was in which was the

challenges that I faced as being an adoptee and not really, you know, fitting in per se.

In returning to the second research question, there appear to be a set of common necessary experiences that collectively led to narratives containing Grotevant's (1997) elements of adoptive identity theory and subsequent sorting into the integrated group as an emerging adult. Although, even having negative versions of several of these experiences improved the coherency of PI international adoptees' identity narratives; participants may have learned life lessons from their adoptive parents, including negative ones, or had close relationships with peers that did not result in being sorted into the integrated group. One participant learned the life lessons of how she did not want to be like her adoptive family:

> So, it's been a really difficult upbringing. But, I'm really determined not to turn out like them, which is why I stuck with therapy and I keep trying to understand myself better. And I think from all of this—and it sounds really cliché—but I think from all of the hardship and all of the pain that was kind of projected onto me, I learned how to love people unconditionally. I learned how to set boundaries. I learned how to detect, you know, toxic behavior.

Another participant shared extensively about the close relationship with their adoptive father:

> My dad's always been supportive and encouraging . . . and he would always, always find a way to help me out. I think having a very secured person behind you—and he was always supporting me—was very, very helpful. And it gives you encouragement to try and jump into situations that you would normally wouldn't do. You know? Like there are certain situation [sic] that I would take the risk and not see what's going to happen. But, my dad would always be there to support me. And I think he is a big, big reason for where I am today . . . From the beginning, we've had this unspoken bond . . . And that's

what it felt like with my dad. We were just naturally like together and we became best friends instantly . . . Maybe I felt like "Yes, somebody's got me!" . . . So yeah, I guess in some way and form my dad was like a safety net . . . But, you know, having somebody who's officially there for you. And it just happened to be my father.

The two examples presented are provided to illustrate examples of necessary, but not sufficient experiences among PI international adoptees to be sorted into the integrated group as an emerging adult. The participant in the first case still learned a life lesson from the negative experiences in their adoptive family and the participant in the second case went into detail about the close relationship with their adoptive father, but neither of them had the other necessary experiences of a pivotal relationship with a caregiver and connections with family and friends that when taken together seemed to lead to an integrated adoptive identity narrative. These examples remind us to also attend to the examples of difference throughout the interviews that may not necessarily constitute a coherent narrative among PI international adoptees, but remain an important part of IPA analysis.

Recommendations for Working with International Adoptees

1. **Promote catch-up growth and resilience.** The current study confirms catch-up growth continues to take place for some PI adoptees across many areas of development and arguably for adoptions at a later age this may extend into the period of emerging adulthood, when prefrontal regions of the brain are thought to reach maturation. For example, this was the case for the participant with the least integrated narrative who was also the participant with the oldest age at the time of their adoption.

2. **Become adoption competent.** There are numerous reasons mental health professionals should be encouraged to obtain specialized graduate or post-graduate training in working

with PI international adoptees: (a) there is a strong preference among adoptees and adoptive parents for therapists who understand adoption; (b) there is a need to navigate around missing information about one's adoption and the often unshared language between the adoptive family and an adoptee's country of birth; (c) there is an emerging recognition of the intricacies of societal stigma surrounding adoption; and (d) there is the need to understand constellations of behavior among PI international adoptees that do not conform to any one diagnosis or treatment.

3. **Ask adoptive identity questions.** Grotevant and Von Korff's (2011) adoptive identity questions, in addition to the broader interview questions used in this study are excellent jumping off points for therapeutic conversations about a client's adoption history. These questions can be revisited throughout psychotherapy to assess an individual's degree of narrative coherence and integration. The frequency of asking these questions is less important than the importance of developing coherent adoption narratives in an informed and systematic way.

4. **Facilitate connections, especially with other adoptees.** The voices of PI international adoptees in this study stress the value of social connections with family, friends, particularly other adoptees. Exposure to opportunities for these connections ought to be a priority among anyone who supports PI international adoptees in the years and decades following adoption. With the availability of support groups and communities of interest readily accessible online, even children living in communities that have few members sharing ethnic or cultural backgrounds have ample opportunities to connect with others like themselves.

5. **Create open discussion of racial and ethnic discrimination.** Openness in the adoptive family and sensitivity to matters of adoption are essential pieces to facilitating coherent adoptive identity development. But PI international adoptees also deal with racial and ethnic discrimination; identity conversations need to include consideration of adoption-specific microaggressions, the lingering stigma around adoption, and marginalization due to having multiple minority identities as a PI international adoptee.

6. **Engage adoptees in cultural exploration.** Participants in the current study expressed a unanimous interest in the culture of their birth country or in travel and learning about other cultures more broadly. Cultural exploration might include the more daily integration of ethnic and cultural traditions into family life, including, for example, cooking meals from an adoptee's birth country or attendance at meetings of an ethnic or cultural association in the community or when available at school.

7. **Include key adoption stakeholders.** This refers to (a) adoptees; (b) adoptive and biological parents, adoptive and biological siblings, and extended family as appropriate; (c) developmental pediatricians, teachers, and any others who an adoptee believes will best support them. The advantage of involving all adoption stakeholders throughout a PI international adoptee's development is that this creates a team around the individual from which they may feel most empowered to tackle the complexities of intersectional identity formation.

8. **Explore emerging adult adoptees' identities in psychotherapy.** Young adult international adoptees may present for psychological services with varying levels of interest in their adoption history. The developmental tasks unique to emerging adulthood—exploration of different worldviews, career choices, and romantic

relationships—may be complicated for PI international adoptees. Therapists should encourage exploration of adoptees intersectional identities, while respecting each adoptees' level of interest in their adoption history.

Limitations

Multiple identities of the researcher. This dissertation was designed and carried out by a PI internationally adopted, clinical psychology graduate student. Although I have lived experience as a PI international adoptee and I am also an emerging adult, my own lived experiences as well as my professional identity and membership in the field of clinical psychology inevitably affect a number of aspects of the research. The reflection journal I kept throughout this study may have helped me bracket my reactions and preconceptions, particularly as I reflected before and after each interview to minimize the chances of my own perspectives from being confused with that of participants.

However, I still possess my own life experiences and retain the professional lens of a clinician, despite whatever quality assurance measures are taken. Internal validity was accounted for by conducting member-checks by e-mail with participants to ensure I coded and understood their interview data in the way they intended. No revisions were made to the super-ordinate clusters or themes as a result of member-checks. It is possible my professional identity as a clinician-researcher influenced participants' level of engagement in the study and disclosure during their interviews; hopefully, sharing my status as a fellow PI international adoptee at the beginning of each interview decreased the chances of my identity as a clinician-researcher from negatively impacting how participants shared about their experiences.

Constraints of the recruitment strategy. The snowball and convenience sampling strategies used for recruitment were initially believed to limit the diversity of participants, since

my social network of PI international adoptees was almost exclusively comprised of individuals from the same orphanage I was born in. I expanded the search by asking for advisor and colleague connections and was able to recruit the six desired participants for this study. As it turned out, participants were adopted from three different countries and all but two adopted siblings began their lives in different orphanages. The inclusion of participants in this study from several different social networks beyond my own may have added to the institutional and intersectional diversity among the sample.

Methodological limitations. The qualitative interview methodology used in this study prevents the results from being generalized to all PI international adoptees. However, adherence to principles of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) ought to allow for reasonable transferability of results that apply to particular international adoptees and help mental health professionals better understand how to support their clients' adoptive identity development.

Notably, the circumstances of a global pandemic that unfolded in the midst of this research may have helped to normalize the use of videoconference software for the interviews. I had grappled with the question of whether interviews conducted in person might yield a different qualitative experience. This was not an option. I believe that the interviews with Millennial and Generation Z emerging adults who were uniformly comfortable with online conversations further support this online interview methodology.

Future Directions

The dwindling number of international adoptions taking place in the United States in recent years creates an uncertain need for future inquiry into international adoption ("Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption," 2019). The border shut-down in the global pandemic has brought international adoptions to a screeching halt. Nonetheless, there are PI- and non-PI

international as well as domestic adoptees already in the United States who tend to present with a confusing constellation of behaviors, are disproportionately referred for mental health services, and have a strong preference for therapists who understand matters of adoption.

As mentioned in the introduction, issues of immigration and foreign policy are subject to change and create a need for adoption-competent mental health professionals without warning. This was the case in 2018 when the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced its Zero-Tolerance Criminal Illegal Entry policy that subsequently separated almost 3,000 children from their families ("Q&A: Trump Administration's 'Zero-Tolerance' Immigration Policy," 2018); mental health professionals with training in treating the effects of early traumatic separation and loss among children were quickly needed.

Future adoption researchers ought to consider investigating the effects of adoptive identity among PI- and non-PI international and domestic adoptees with adopted versus non-biological siblings and how these aspects of family composition impact one's development. Interestingly, five of the six participants in the current study had biological and/or non-biological adopted siblings; unfortunately, an exploration of the impact of family composition on PI adoptee identity coherence was beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Another route for further adoption research is a longitudinal study that follows PI international adoptees' identity development over a number of years; or a cross-sectional design, where varying age cohorts of PI international adoptees are interviewed to develop an understanding of adoptive identity construction at different points in time across the lifespan. One advantage of these study designs is an opportunity to look at the intricacies involved in the process of identity construction and the journey to narrative coherence at different life stages,

since we now know adoptive identity theory can be meaningfully used with PI international adoptees.

Though there is now preliminary qualitative evidence that adoptive identity theory is applicable with PI international adoptees, a quantitative approach for expanding the generalizability of the findings from the current study might follow in the form of a partial replication study. This would require translating the qualitative aspects of more and less coherent adoptive identity narratives into a survey instrument, provided reliability and validity were established with a pilot sample, that would eventually be distributed to several hundred participants via the internet. The results could be correlated to find the most effective experiences that lead to coherent adoptive identity formation and increase the reach of the findings so they can more broadly be applied to clinical work with PI international and non-PI domestic adoptees. Although an exciting prospect for subsequent research, this dissertation remained focused on the qualitative accounts of identity construction among PI international adoptees.

Clinical Implications

I believe there is a vital need for a greater number of mental health professionals who understand the subtleties involved in working with all adoptees and their families, but especially PI international adoptees. My focus on Grotevant's (1997) adoptive identity theory is by no means intended to limit how adoption is incorporated into psychological practice, but instead can be thought of as a starting point for clinicians who interface with adoptees—whether that be through domestic foster care, transnational adoption, or PI international adoption. It is my sincere hope the recommendations for working with PI international adoptees that were developed as a result of this dissertation inform clinical practice with this population.

Although it was not directly stated, the sentiment was undeniable throughout the interviews: Adoptees need someone to believe in them, be it parents, extended family, teachers, people from the community, or of course, therapists. The clinical implication here is that therapists working with this population would do well to help them hold onto hope whenever their traumatic legacies try to rob them of believing in themselves. The participant in the current study who reported a poor relationship with their adoptive family, but a loving relationship with their therapist is just one case in point that a psychotherapist can be the person who believes and hangs on when the adoptive family or community is, for any reason, unable to fulfill this role.

Researcher Reflection

My interest in working with adopted individuals and their families comes from my own PI international adoption experience, when I was adopted from Eastern Europe at a young age. In addition, my study of clinical psychology has reinforced my desire to work with people affected by adoption and other circumstances that disrupt early attachment relationships. My experience with mental health professionals is that just a minority have the knowledge and skills to effectively work with international adoptees, despite the literature demonstrating this population's varied psychological needs particularly in the aftermath of orphanage experience.

In the decades since my adoption, I have seen PI international adoptees follow a vast number of life paths—more or less consistently with those of our nonadopted peers. This observation led me to wonder whether international adoptees who had lived in an orphanage in early life might be able to help psychologists and other mental health professionals better understand what aspects of this experience influence the formation of a coherent adoptive identity in emerging adulthood. I wanted to hear their voices, to find out how to understand their lived experiences to guide and inform the work of therapists treating adoptees. So I turned to

international adoptees' own stories to understand how the experience of having spent early life in an orphanage influenced participants' construction of adoptive identity in emerging adulthood.

Looking back and reflecting on the findings from this study, I am struck by both the variability as well as the consistency of PI international adoptees' needs in the years and life stages following adoption in order to create coherent identity narratives. On the one hand, PI international adoptees in this study demonstrated individual needs—from when or if they wish to receive information related to their biological parents and adoption to the ways in which PI international adoptees believe their adoption history influences them today. Paradoxically, PI international adoptees in the current study also collectively benefitted from a handful of shared experiences—from connecting deeply with an adoptive parent or therapist to social engagement with other adoptees more generally. The findings leave me with a deep appreciation for the intrinsic complexities that confront therapists working with PI international adoptees and I remain committed to viewing these nuances as opportunities to be a more responsive and competent psychologist.

Conclusion

The purpose of the current study was to better understand *how* international adoptees might overcome the early adverse experience of institutionalization and develop an integrated adoptive identity. I explored six participants' pathways of experience from institutionalization in early life toward more or less coherent adoptive identity narratives in emerging adulthood. Personal, familial, communal, and cultural factors all contribute to identity integration; sustained loving connections provide the scaffolding for identity coherence. That is, PI international adoptees more often than not are remarkably hardy when given the necessary support to allow for catch-up growth in the short and long term following adoption. Previously institutionalized

children and young people have a long life ahead of them; given ample love, social connection

with other adoptees, and someone to believe in them, they are more than capable of developing a

coherent identity story filled with unfathomable loss and unimaginable resilience.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

1. **Tell me in as much detail as possible what your life in the orphanage was like?**

    Follow-up question: How do you remember your parents talking about the orphanage environment you came from?

2. **What has life been like for you after being adopted until today?**

    Follow-up question: You said that life has been . . . since your adoption. Can you say more about that to help me understand your life experiences since being adopted?

3. **What do you believe has significantly influenced your journey in life since your adoption and why?**

    Follow-up question: Do you view the influence of . . . as related to the fact that you were adopted? Why?

4. **Who are you as an internationally adopted person?**

    Follow-up question: What factors or events in your life influenced your answer?

5. **What does being an international adoptee mean to you?**

    Follow-up question: What does your status as an international adoptee mean to others in your life (e.g., parents, friends, or significant other)?

6. **In what ways is your understanding of yourself, others, family, and culture influenced by your adoption?**

    Follow-up question: In what ways is your understanding of yourself, others, family, and culture separate from the influence of your adoption?

Appendix B

Invitation to Participate

Were you adopted from another country?

Did you live in an orphanage before you were adopted?

Are you between 18 and 30 years of age?

If you said "Yes" to these questions, I want to invite you to be in a research project.

My name is Samuel Highland (Vladi). I am a student working on my doctoral dissertation in the department of clinical psychology at Antioch University New England, under the supervision of Professor Martha Straus.

- o **This interview project is about your experiences as an adoptee from an orphanage**
- o **It will take about 2 hours of your time**
- o **You will get a $25 Amazon gift certificate for your participation**
- o **I am curious about how your experience of international adoption has shaped how you see yourself today.**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and confidential. You may choose to leave the study at any point, and may choose not to answer any questions in the interview.

Please consider sharing this invitation with any of your friends between the ages of 18 and 30, who were internationally adopted from an orphanage!

To participate—and if you have any questions or concerns about the process or how the information will be used, please e-mail me at vhighland@antioch.edu or call (609) 577-2158.

Appendix C

Consent Form

Study Title: Adoptive Identity: Emerging Adult International Adoptees' Narrative Coherence Following Early Institutional Care
Student Researcher: Samuel Highland (Vladi)

Introduction. This consent form provides you with the following information: the purpose of this study, what is involved if you choose to take part, and any risks or benefits you may encounter while participating. Please feel free to ask questions you may have at any time. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and a copy will be provided for you.

Purpose. The purpose of this study is to understand how international adoptees' life experiences shape their identity as young adults. You are invited to participate if: you were adopted, are between the ages of 18 to 30, and lived in an orphanage for any amount of time prior to adoption. Please feel free to discuss with your family or friends whether participating in this study is for you.

What is Involved. I am asking you to be in this study by agreeing to an interview with me, which should take about 1 hour. I will e-mail you in 4 to 6 months after the interview to follow-up, where I will share my understanding of your responses and make sure I have understood them the way you intended. The total time for being in this study is 2 hours.

Risks. Because the questions are about your personal experience as an international adoptee who lived in an orphanage, you may feel some level of discomfort. Participation is completely voluntary. You may pause the interview to take a break and you may leave the study at any time. You can choose not to answer any questions you do not wish to speak about. Resources are provided if you would like to speak with someone after taking part in this study.

Benefits. It is possible to experience benefits as a result of your participation in this study. For example, you may enjoy the experience of sharing about your international adoption experience from an orphanage with another international adoptee who lived in an orphanage. However, I cannot guarantee you will benefit from your involvement in this project. In addition, you may have the benefit of knowing that your responses will help others including, for example: orphaned international adoptees, psychologists, and other mental health providers, adoptive parents, teachers, and adoption workers.

Confidentiality. All research data collected in this interview is confidential. Your name will not be connected to your responses. I will use quotations from your responses in the final paper; however, I will not use your name or any identifying information in the report. I will audio record and transcribe the interviews, assign a number (participant 1, 2, 3, to the transcription) and destroy the recording. All study materials will be stored on my password protected personal computer in the United States of America, only accessible to me. The interview data will be used purely for research purposes and will only be accessed by me.

Your Rights as a Participant. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You may choose to leave the study at any time or not answer any questions you do not wish to speak about. Your relationship with the researcher or Antioch University New England will be unaffected by the decision to leave the study.

Incentive. You will receive a $25 Amazon.com gift card as a token of appreciation for your participation.

Resources. *Any questions about human rights issues should be directed to the Antioch University New England IRB Chair. If you feel distressed after the interview for any reason, you may also contact Antioch University New England's Psychological Services Center: (603) 352-1024.*

Contact Information. Any questions about this study can be shared with the Student Researcher, Samuel Highland.

Please choose among the options below and sign your name and date in the spaces provided.

[ ] I consent to participate in this study, understand the voluntary nature of my participation, and would like to continue on to schedule the interview.

[ ] I would like to leave this study and do not wish to participate.

Signature of Participant_____   Date_____

Appendix D

Grotevant and Von Korff's (2011) Adoptive Identity Theory Questions

Instructions: Please read over the questions below <u>before</u> the interview and be prepared to speak about your reflections or elaborate on them as requested.

1. **Who am I as an adopted person?**

2. **What does being adopted mean to me?**

3. **How does this fit into my understanding of myself, relationships, family, and culture?**

Appendix E

Request for Permission

ANTIOCH UNIVERSITY

Request for Permission

Dear   Thanks for your email, and I am happy for you to include Appendix D in your dissertation. I'm glad our work was helpful to you in formulating your dissertation. I wish you well with your final steps. Have you already defended? If so, congratulations! If not yet, sending you good energy for that! I look forward to reading it once this busy time in the semester slows down a bit.

Given your topic, you might be interested in the virtual conference series that we at the UMass Rudd program are producing.

Session 1, in particular, featuring 4 internationally adopted adults who are all involved in building global connections within the adoption community, might be of interest to you. We will be posting new sessions throughout the year, since our in-person conference scheduled for last April had to be cancelled.

Best wishes,

****

Rudd Family Foundation Chair in Psychology
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Dept of Psychol. & Brain Sciences

Appendix F

Demographic Data

Age:

Gender:

Race/ethnicity:

Occupation or student status:

Years of education:

How long did you live in the orphanage?

Was there a process by which you were selected or matched with your family for adoption?

How old were you when you were adopted?

What influenced your parent's decision to adopt?

What led your parents to ultimately choose to adopt you?

Do you have biological or adoptive siblings and where did or do they live?

What kinds of support have you had in school, the community, previous therapy/counseling

(either directly related to your adoption or otherwise)?

Relevant community or school experiences (e.g., special education or medical conditions):

E-mail address for follow-up contact:

Appendix G

Table 1

Four Super-ordinate Clusters and Themes

Super-ordinate clusters	Missing pieces of the adoption story	Influential people in an international adoptees' life	Complexities faced by international adoptees	The meaning of shared culture, family, and friends for international adoptees
Themes	Missing memories: Parents' stories, pictures, and videos of the orphanage	Positive and negative feelings toward biological and adoptive parents	Possessing a unique identity versus feeling normal	Connecting about adoption, culture, and ethnicity with other adoptees
	Insufficiencies of the orphanage environment	The pivotal role of caregivers for international adoptees	The meaning of international adoption for adoptees	Family is not about blood
	Unanswered questions about the adoption	Life lessons from influential people in the lives of international adoptees	Feelings of difference and finding one's voice as an international adoptee	
			Microaggressions toward international adoptees	

Table 2

Super-ordinate Clusters and Themes with Supporting Quotes from the Interviews

Super-ordinate Cluster	List of Themes and Text to Support Themes
Missing pieces of the adoption story	Missing memories: Parents' stories, pictures, and videos of the orphanage • I was adopted when I was three, but I don't really remember the first three years of my life. But for my adopted mother's perspective, my mom said that my biological mother tried to keep me for 6 months, but then unsure of like what the reason was. But kind of dropped me off at a farm and then I guess the people at the farm brought me to an orphanage . . . So, you know, that's all for my mother's perception . . . I can't really recall any memories from the orphanage, really any memories before I think four or five years old. (Participant 1) • So, for me, I personally don't remember it as much. But thanks to my parents for videotaping part of it, and actually having photos of it—it actually is very helpful to actually go back and re-watch it. I mean, we re-watched it when we were younger, but then we re-watched it about 10 years ago and it is a huge difference for a kid to experience that as their childhood—that you get to literally visualize with where you grew up . . . I mean, that's what I was told . . . I really don't remember the first three years of my life being in an orphanage as much. (Participant 2) • Okay, well [Pause] they told me stories about it. But, I guess I wasn't really interested in them or wanting to know about it . . . Um, but they told me, what was the location? It was either in [Deidentified city] or [Deidentified city]. One of the two. I don't remember which one. Um, that [Chuckle], that's where it's located and that's to the extent of my knowledge . . . Um, but I remember in my early teens my dad showed me a picture of the orphanage and that's. And what the building looked like. And that was it. But I still had no interest in it, at all. (Participant 4) • Um, unfortunately I can't answer that because I don't remember. But, my parents told me that. So, I was adopted around the age of about three and a half to four years old, I believe. They actually aren't quite sure how old I am, but they've guessed that I am around my age [Redacted age] . . .

	It's bad because I can't, I can't even remember much from when I was really adopted. (Participant 5)
	• They have two images of me, photographs of me . . . One in a place where it looked like an orphanage. I guess there were more, um, people, more children. I'm not quite sure. And then the second one, definitely was the house. The home of I think perhaps the grandmother. (Participant 5)
	• I have an image: It was me and, um, I was like this short, little baby. Probably four or five years old. Uh, or younger. And I had a can of soda and like a little teddy bear that I would carry around. Um, and I believe the teddy bear came from either the orphanage or the family that I was with. Um. But, yeah it traveled with me from when I came from [Deidentified country] to the U.S. So, that's kind of nice. I remember the image. It's like my leg is on the wall, I have a soda can, I'm holding my teddy bear. (Participant 5)
	• So, I don't know too much. I was adopted at nine months or 10 months. We have some pictures—and from what my mom told us and stuff like that and what the nannies had told them—I think we were really, really loved . . . And when you look at pictures of us in the orphanage, we were like the biggest babies. I think that we were like one of the, some of the favorites. And I think we would like get fed more . . . So, I think that they would put the other babies down to go to bed. But then they would keep us up and then like play with us. (Participant 6)
Missing pieces of the adoption story	Insufficiencies of the orphanage environment • [A]nd my mom said that the orphanage was really small. It was just like cribs lined up, you know, right next to each other . . . she said it wasn't like colorful or anything. It was just kind of bleak and, you know, there was just kind of minimal toys. And my mom said she used the adjectives of like, it was kind of like a conveyor belt. So, like they had a number of kids and they just pushed him through whatever the activity was and then, you know, use the next set of kids. (Participant 1) • It was not the best place. I mean, I was actually wearing girl's clothing when I was younger, which is fine. But like, that's all that we could afford for clothing. But I do remember that we actually ate very well for a diet, like, I mean we had a lot of fruits, a lot of yogurt . . .And I remember, my parents did

	actually tell me that I did have a quote–unquote girlfriend in the orphanage and that I would steal her food. (Participant 2)
	• So, I was in one of the most overpopulated baby homes in [Deidentified country] . . . And so, being in the orphanage, it was kind of like *The Hunger Games* basically. And you had to really fight for, you know, food and things. So basically, like when there was food on the table or like they brought food, you had to like fight to get it. And there would be times when you wouldn't necessarily have an adequate meal. And being kind of mixed in with like older adoptees. Like of course, the younger ones didn't really get a whole lot of say or I guess privileges in a way. And there, it was extremely understaffed too. So, I didn't get a lot of like contact that kids need at that age. But people, my therapist is convinced that there was a caregiver who was like really attuned to me and like really took me under his or her wing. Because like how I was, how I behaved. (Participant 3)
	• It was a white building with a roof on top. That's [Laughs], that's it. Again, I wasn't really interested in it. I was not impressed or I guess I didn't see the fit to remember it in my brain, you know. It's probably somewhere in my files in my brain, but I just don't care. (Participant 4)
	• And I think especially in [Deidentified country in Asia]. I think there's a lot of like. A lot of um, you know, rumors. And just, you know, like true stories too. That some of the orphanages are not well kept; there's a lot of babies there and they don't get taken care of the way that they need to. And I don't ever feel like that was my story. You know, I know some girls they were like malnourished when they were in in the orphanage. And I, we clearly were not malnourished. (Participant 6)
Missing pieces of the adoption story	Unanswered questions about the adoption
	• You know, there's is a lot of, not a lot of days—but especially when I was younger—but not so many where I would think like: What would my life look like if I was still in [Deidentified country]? Or, what would my life look like if I was just adopted by a different family? So, there's a lot of questions that, you know, remain unanswered and I don't know if I'll be able to ever answer those. (Participant 1)
	• I have multiple ideas of what could have perpetuated the adoption. So, like you know, was it because I was a female and

	they didn't want a female? Was it because they already had a kid and, you know, [Deidentified country] enforced a one-child policy? Was it because I had a lot of medical issues and they couldn't afford supporting that? (Participant 1)

• Because if we weren't adopted roughly at the age of 18, you are kind of kicked out of the orphanage. Um. So literally I'd be scrounging around the streets of [Deidentified country] right now. Whether I would have survived or no? I mean, that's besides the point . . . I mean if I wasn't adopted, I do not know what would have happened. (Participant 2)

• So, like it's, it's weird because there's only little things that I remember but then at the same time, it's like did that actually happen or is that something that I fill in to kind of bring myself to a place of like, "Okay, this is. This is no longer a void because this is actually what happened, and this is." If that makes sense? (Participant 3)

• Well in luck, I'm very lucky that I didn't stay at the orphanage and be in a very bad situation. Like, you know, not having a home, not having food. I guess security in a way. Because there are times where I do imagine, you know, if I never had the opportunity to get adopted I could be out in the streets to this day. And that's what I mean by being really lucky. And it's a very scary thought to even think about, even as an adult. (Participant 4)

• I don't know if it's myself kind of [Pause] forgetting that memory? Or, if I'm just too young to remember it? Or, if. You know, it's like I don't think about it so often that it's kind of almost faded away now. (Participant 5)

• Just like I don't know that what if I was still in [Deidentified country] . . . Like, if I was not adopted, I would still be, I may still be in [Deidentified country]. You know, not living with a family, probably working on a farm or something. Right? (Participant 5) |
| | |
| Influential people in an international adoptees' life | Positive and negative feelings toward biological and adoptive parents

• [U]ltimately what I want to do is make my parents proud, both my biological and my adopted parents, you know, I want them to feel proud of their daughter. And as weird as this sounds: Like it's like not wasting their money [participant chuckled] in |

a sense because all the money that they put forward to, you know, essentially get me. So, ultimately like I really want them to feel happy and proud and that, you know, they were able to give this child who kind of had a bleak, bleak future an opportunity to better herself and become something of herself. (Participant 1)

- But, I mean they literally have given us every single opportunity to do what we want. I am grate- eternally grateful. Grateful to my parents for that, that they were able to spend so much time on worrying about our education. (Participant 2)

- Because, like I know, [Deidentified name of participant 4], when you actually talk to her, I don't know if she'll bring it up. I'm going to be the one to bring it up right now. When she was adopted she kind of resented our mother, our biological mother. But also, our mother who adopted her for quite some time. (Participant 2 discussing Participant 4)

- The adopted family that I grew up in, not ideal in any way, shape, or form . . . it was really hard to kind of process my own adoption and just bring up things like my biological mom and be like, "Hey, I really miss my biological mom." These guys, every time I did it was like, "Oh! You think she's better than me?" And I would always be like, "No, I didn't say that. I just said that I miss her." (Participant 3)

- I consider myself very lucky being adopted to wonderful, wonderful parents and being a part of a family group. Like aunts and uncles and cousins. They're all wonderful, and they all love me very much and I love them very much. (Participant 4)

- I think definitely my parents. Um. [Pause] Well, because first of all, like being adopted at such a young age you don't really have a say in who you go to. Correct? So, I quite. I feel quite fortunate to have my parents pick me up. Right? Which is quite lovely and then I. Having them give me the support, the education, the love, for all of those years. I think it's been the biggest influence of who I've become today. (Participant 5)

- I think the issues I have with like feeling like abandonment is from him. It's not from being adopted. I don't think, personally. I'm sure it's both, but me consciously I feel like it's more him because I feel like he just [Pause], just doesn't care. (Participant 6)

Influential people in an international adoptees' life	The pivotal role of caregivers for international adoptees
	• I think my mom was the person who really created like an open discussion about like my adoption. She would be the one who I would always, you know, go to to ask questions about because she kind of created that line of communication. I think my dad and my brother were a little more, I don't want to say closed off, but I think. They kind of left it up to my mom in that regard. (Participant 1)
	• She was definitely the leader of the discussion, but she made it a point to make sure that there was a space that we could talk about it . . . So, she always made that space to, you know, make sure that we could speak what was on our mind. Whether it was school-related or even if it was just the challenges we face as being adopted. (Participant 1)
	• Like, my mother says the first 30 seconds that I met my mother. Like, that I met [Deidentified name]—my mother—I immediately fell in love with her. Like, she knew. There was no way she was getting rid of me. And that she would do anything to have this adoption finalized for both my sister and I. And I really grew close to my mother. (Participant 2)
	• The reason why I've been with this one therapist for so long is because, you know, I sensed the imperfection, you know. And I appreciate her willingness. And I appreciate that she's able to hold herself accountable—because by how she responds and how she handles things—like it's, it's a model for what I want to try to view and be for other people and myself . . . Yeah, and love. Like, she's loved me through like everything . . . And I think I am the person I am today and I think a lot of that is due to her. And I just am so appreciative. (Participant 3)
	• Yup, definitely my parents, especially my dad. My dad's always been supportive and encouraging . . . and he would always, always find a way to help me out. I think having a very secured person behind you—and he was always supporting me—was very, very helpful. And it gives you encouragement to try and jump into situations that you would normally wouldn't do. You know? Like there are certain situation [sic] that I would take the risk and not see what's going to happen. But, my dad would always be there to support me. And I think he is a big, big reason for where I am today. (Participant 4)

	• From the beginning, we've had this unspoken bond . . . And that's what it felt like with my dad. We were just naturally like together and we became best friends instantly . . . Maybe I felt like "Yes, somebody's got me!" . . . So yeah, I guess in some way and form my dad was like a safety net . . . But, you know, having somebody who's officially there for you. And it just happened to be my father. (Participant 4) • We had a really good childhood. My mom stayed at home with us. She didn't work for most of our lives and I think that was really good. I think. My, my dad worked and he made a good amount of money and we were very comfortable . . . I remember, just my, you know, my mom always being there and stuff and playing with us. So, it was really good up until a certain point. My dad was not really around. (Participant 6)
Influential people in an international adoptees' life	Life lessons from influential people in the lives of international adoptees • So, my mom has always been my cheerleader from the start. Even before she met me she knew that she wanted to love and support me and I think that idea of love and support has gone a long way . . . What she was trying to do was essentially guide me making sure that, you know, I make the best decisions for myself and this sense of like autonomy. So, like I've learned so many life lessons from her, you know. In the moment it didn't seem like a life lesson, but after reflecting on it, it definitely is a life lesson. (Participant 1) • I fought him tooth and nail on it, but he obviously won, which is fine. But like, it also taught me how to appreciate the value of life. That you can't always have everything you want, but you can work to getting it. (Participant 2) • So, it's been a really difficult upbringing. But, I'm really determined not to turn out like them, which is why I stuck with therapy and I keep trying to understand myself better. And I think from all of this—and it sounds really cliché—but I think from all of the hardship and all of the pain that was kind of projected onto me, I learned how to love people unconditionally. I learned how to set boundaries. I learned how to detect, you know, toxic behavior. (Participant 3) • And so, I think her push for growth and her push for further healing. And she, she gives us those choices. Like she doesn't like project that onto us. She's like, "No you get to make those

choices, but I'm just here to remind you that there is light. Not at the end of the tunnel, but where you're standing right now that you can use to get through this tunnel right now." (Participant 3)

- He would just be open-minded. And he would listen. And if I ever asked for help or I needed help on a certain subject or situation, he would give me guidance. And then, at the end he would ask me, "What would you do?" And he would really make me think about reflecting on myself. You know? Like really think about, see what my inner person I guess would do or say. (Participant 4)

- I think they are very, uh, unique in the way that they think and. Especially the way they raised us, I think. Because, um, they had discipline, but they also had freedom for what we could do. They had our best interest, but they also let us, you know, they never put down the hammer that hard. But, I think the way of their parenting and their way of thought was because, um, we were their child. I think they thought of us as their own, right? As almost their biological, but not. (Participant 5)

| Complexities faced by international adoptees | Possessing a unique identity versus feeling normal

- I think my adoption piece is very unique, you know. And I get to carry that narrative with me and I get to, you know, share my own stories and my own personal perspectives of like growing up in a very rural town, being adopted, and also being a minority. (Participant 1)

- As an adoptee, I am who I am. So, essentially saying I am the person who I became with all the support and guidance that is near whoever is near me . . . So, yes I am adopted, but I guess my Chinese identity doesn't really impact me. (Participant 1)

- So, the idea that my environment, you know, the people around me, the school system that I attended and everything. I think that has impacted me and kind of shaped me into who I am . . . So, I think there's some genetics played into it, but I think for the most part my environment has definitely shaped me into who I am today. (Participant 1)

- Because you see things from a different perspective than others do, being like, as in being a U.S. citizen at first. Like being born in the United States you can see some things, but then, you can |

	see it, like black and white. But, being adopted you can also see the grays and the other colors that play into other things. That you are more. You can actually be more broad with things, in that sense. If that makes sense? (Participant 2) • It means I have a wealth of knowledge and a wealth of experiences that a lot of other people may not know or have themselves. And so, I feel like in this lifetime it is my duty to bring awareness in ways that make sense and that align with my own values as a human being. (Participant 3) • I'm a person, just like everybody else. I don't feel special. I don't feel unique. I'm just a person who's on this planet, just like everybody else. Living their best lives, you know, making connections with people and doing what they can for their family . . . It just feels normal. (Participant 4) • I almost want to say that adoption has mended into. Like, I'm living with the fact—that I've lived my whole life—that I'm adopted. But, I found security in my family that, by my parents, that I don't need to like go out and tell everyone. Like, "Hey, I'm adopted!" . . . So, for me being. Who am I as an adopted person, um, I think I'm still me. Right? (Participant 5) • So, I think obviously for me being adopted is a very big part of who I am, but I don't think it makes me who I am . . . So, I think some of it comes from like the way that your parents raised you . . . And while [Long pause] I don't attribute everything—all my issues—to my adoption, I feel like the reason I have all those issues and the reason I have all the views I have is because I was adopted. (Participant 6)
Complexities faced by international adoptees	The meaning of international adoption for adoptees • But, I think now I see it as, not like a thing that holds me back, but a thing that can help me in the future in some way. I think that's a good way to put it. Like when I was younger, still trying to understand things, I felt like it was pulling me down. But, now it's I think lifting me or raising. (Participant 1) • But like so from my perspective, I see it as a kind of a second chance because I was adopted at three, but I had heart surgery when I was two. So, there was a lot of like medical issues I was going through when I was younger before I got adopted. So, in a way like I feel this opportunity that I have is a second chance

and with that mentality, I kind of use that to kind of motivate me as well as push me forward . . . (Participant 1)

- For me, being adopted is amazing because it really gave myself the ability to have a second life . . . I mean, really being adopted gives you a second life. And that is one thing I do treasure. (Participant 2)

- But adoption, at the core of adoption is grief and loss . . . And I have this like internal flame that is like within me that like burns. Sometimes more intensely than other days. So, like that flame comes from like the loss that I experienced. It like pushes me to keep looking and to keep finding answers and to keep bettering myself. (Participant 3)

- What does it mean to me. What's it mean to me? I. What's it mean to me? I, I guess nothing? [Laughs] I guess. Um, I guess. I guess it's a good way to start, to start an introduction. [Laughs] That's pretty much it . . . Its made me very open. Very, very open . . . Or, for the most part I don't really see anything that my adoption has hindered me to certain things . . . I don't see it . . . As a, as a problem. (Participant 4)

- So, for me I think it's just [Pause] being born in another country, living with another family in another country. Um. [Pause] I think it brings culture though into the story. I think it brings a more dynamic person . . . Because coming from [Deidentified country] and then to the U.S., I'm now almost categorized as Asian American. But, I also don't quite feel very Asian American because I don't have, I kninda don't have the roots or the connection . . . I feel that my parents didn't immigrate, they don't know [Deidentified language]. I don't know [Deidentified language], I don't know much history of the culture of that. It's not a part of my normal day. Or, um, yeah beliefs. So, I feel that it's, uh, [Pause] that's why I feel like it's dynamic. (Participant 5)

- I'm not quite sure how much of my life has been influenced by adoption. But, I think most of it? . . . So, adoption has really changed—since the age of three and a half—has changed the whole path of my life today . . . I think adoption has created that friendship I had in high school . . . I think it has helped me find my partner. I think its kind of helped me, uh, find friends in university that I probably would never have met or thought of speaking to. (Participant 5)

	• I think me personally my journey with like adoption has been more related to my like identity as like being like Asian American. I think that was more of a thing than being adopted, you know . . . I think it's like being part of two different worlds and cultures. (Participant 6) • And I think that did help a lot, because even though they weren't Asian I saw people being truly unapologetically proud to be where they're from . . . That, the events that led up to me moving to [Deidentified city] is what made me so proud and has influenced who I feel like I am as an adoptee. Because I feel like my identity formation wouldn't have started at such a young age. And even though I went through a lot, a lot of it in college, I think it started from when I was in high school. Because I saw a lot of people up there rep their flags and be very, very, very, very proud. And before, I never seen it before; no one would really want to wave the [Deidentified country] flag. (Participant 6)
Complexities faced by international adoptees	Feelings of difference and finding one's voice as an international adoptee • I knew I was different from like the get-go, partially because I grew up in a very white family . . . I think I was one of the two only minorities in the town in my school. So, like I stuck out and I think especially for my middle school years where I was trying to find my own self. I kind of, you know, tried to forget I guess. Like tried to blend in by like trying to get as westernized as possible, because I didn't want to stick out . . . I used to joke and kind of, you know, not a funny joke, but it's like how I describe myself: I kind of describe myself as a Twinkie. You know, I'm yellow on the outside, but I'm very white . . . I tried my best to kind of just like fit in and so that nobody would really see me. (Participant 1) • Like everybody knew that I was different, but I never really brought it up into discussion . . . And yeah, I guess I've kind of kept my adoption identity separate from my other identities in a way. (Participant 1) • I think with my family, if they had been more willing to accept that, you know, I'm not their biological kid. And therefore, I'm going to be different. And I'm going to struggle at other things that they may not. And that it would have been helpful if they didn't like try to like shove me into a box of like expectations and be like, "No, this is my daughter. Like yeah, we look so

much alike. Oh yeah, like isn't that great? Like, she got my blue eyes!" And it's like, "No, I didn't get your blue eyes because I didn't come from you!" (Participant 3)

- I am an advocate . . . I think for advocacy. I think it took a long time for me to get to that point. Because as an adoptee like—I'm not sure if you felt the same way—but it took a long time to find my voice and to really be okay with having others hear my voice, and have like my opinions and like what I wanted to do. And it was kind of like, "Oh, I'm no longer invisible." So, people see me and people hear me. And like that's so strange. So, I think a lot of the advocacy comes from I don't want other people to feel like they're invisible. (Participant 3)

- And then again it can be a great intro. I think that's the only way I would ever use it as. As an introduction to [Unintelligible]. And if people were even more curious about it, I'll give them more information. And if not, it's not a big deal. Because to me, it's not a big deal . . . But, you know, that that's the only way I would bring it up. If someone else brought it up . . . I guess in a way I want it as a secret, rather than tell everybody. (Participant 4)

- So, when I first grew up [Laughs]. Or when I first went to school, um, I realized at a very young age that I and my siblings were one of the few different ethnicities in our school . . . And then moving forward from that, I think my ethnicity played a huge part in, um, my self-image . . . But, it was interesting because it only affected me outside of my family. So, I thought that because I was being raised by two Caucasian people that at home it felt very comforting, loving. Um, nothing was different. There was no difference between us. (Participant 5)

- And I try not to. I know it's part of my identity and who I am, but I try not to um make it a bold trait about myself. And I think that might be because I'm either like hiding it, you know, a little bit. Or, I'm, I don't know. Like I. Or, maybe I'm not recognizing that it's not that important to me? I'm not quite sure . . . Like, I might just be pushing it aside, pretending it's not a part of who I am. Or, it's either I'm just kind of like [Pause]. It's like a small part of who I am. And I'm, you know, still a much bigger person. [Laughs] I don't know. (Participant 5)

	• So, when we got to [Deidentified city], we got there, then the summer, and then we started eighth grade there. And it was really hard. Like, we hated it there. We were bullied a lot for being Asian. Because it was a lot more diversity than where we were before, but just not with Asian people . . . When we were back in, um, [Deidentified city] we would get bullied a lot still for being Asian and for being adopted. (Participant 6) • So, I started doing more research. And I think once you know where you're from and your history of where you're from, you can know like who you truly are . . . And when I research that, that makes me even more proud . . . And yes, like it takes work to be proud, to have, to research on where I'm my from. But, I would rather do the research and go through that then be ashamed of who I am because I'm literally never gonna hide it. (Participant 6)
Complexities faced by international adoptees	Microaggressions toward international adoptees • So, you know, my friends would always ask questions and try to figure out like how I got here essentially and whatnot. (Participant 1) • I mean, I don't mind them asking about birth parents. That's fine, but then when they say your "adoptive parents," I'm like, "No, they're not my adoptive parents. They are my parents. They are the ones who raised me." I do have birth parents. But I also have parents themselves. (Participant 2) • And like it was also like: You should be grateful that you're not in an orphanage and that you have a family. Their mindset was like, "We compensated for the loss. So now, like you should be ok." . . . Yeah, and then going up with the message of like "I have to be grateful." And then when I'm not, like having to deal with like, "What is wrong with me? Why can't I be grateful for x, y, and z?" You know? (Participant 3) • And throughout my life people would, you know, ask me, "Where do you live?" Or, "Where did you come from?" Or, you know, stuff like that. I'd say, "Oh, yeah, you know, I live in [deidentified name of town], you know, I came from [deidentified name of town]." (Participant 4) • I mean, I don't like to tell everybody that I was adopted from [Deidentified country]. Because once they hear the word adopted, they—from my experience, I don't know about yours

or my brother's—but from my experience they say, "Oh really?" Like they don't like. Like, I don't know, they suddenly feel sadness for me. (Participant 4)

- Well, to my parents. They're just like, "Whatever, you're my daughter, doesn't matter where you're from." . . . But to people that I'm interested in dating or in a relationship with, they'll be like "Wait, What? What, you're so exotic!" And I'm just like, "Oh, thank you?" (Participant 4)

- We're having a good time. And then this guy comes up to me and starts speaking Spanish to me [Laughs]. Because he automatically assumed that I was Spanish. Or, Hispanic. Or, somewhere, you know, maybe Mexico? . . . It was shocking, very shocking. Cuz I wouldn't expect a stranger to come up and speak Spanish to me . . . And, and that kind of made me wonder about my DNA history. So, so I would of course talk to my dad about it and then I would ask him questions. Like, "What do you think? Do I, do I look you know Hispanic? Do I look Indian? Do I look whatever?"
(Participant 4)

- Until, you know, you get into this society and people question, "Why you Asian? Why your parents White? Why do you have a last name that's not very Asian name? Or a very, um, typical name, right?" (Participant 5)

- And there would be this kid who would constantly tell us that like, "Women in [Deidentified country] wanted the girls to die. So, they would like put them in the trash cans!" And he would say that to us . . . Like, when I was 14 some girl—who's like 16—said to me that, "She would feel like crap if she was adopted because no one wanted her." (Participant 6)

- And like even some other adoptees, like the Asian male adoptees, which is not many . . . but I see some of the men talk on our Facebook pages and it's very clear they were raised by like white men. (Participant 6)

- They ask me, "Where I'm really from and they tell me I speak really good English." And they always see me as someone who's not American. (Participant 6)

The meaning of shared culture, family, and friends for international adoptees	Connecting about adoption, culture, and ethnicity with other adoptees • I was a part of an adoption group for other adoptees that were adopted from [Deidentified country]. I think that's where I felt most comfortable at times is because, you know, they had a very similar story, they kind of understood like what where I was coming from, my perspective, my challenges and things like that . . . and, you know, there were moments where I hated going to it . . . but like now looking back at it retrospectively, I think those were really like the best times and I'm actually still in touch with a good chunk of the kids that were part of the groups. (Participant 1) • . . . and the group itself was like a place for all of us to come and get to be yourselves and, you know, laugh and enjoy each other's company, as well as like learning our culture, learning how to like cook traditional Chinese food and some of the traditions around, you know, weddings and whatever it may be. So, it was a place where I could learn but also enjoy the company that was there. (Participant 1) • I think essentially what they were trying to do with the group is help me be aware of who I am, ethnically, but they didn't. They did it in a way so they didn't push me that I had to . . . So it's kind of like that idea of like we want to, you know, expose you to who you are ethnically, but ultimately when you get older you can choose whether or not if you want to engage in that. (Participant 1) • Actually, this was in high school was that there was a bunch of clubs. Ironically, there was one club in particular, we had an adoption club . . . So whether you were adopted from the States, internationally, or anywhere else . . . I actually became president of our group. And what I loved was we were all able to talk about our adoption, but also what it meant to us specifically. (Participant 2) • It doesn't even have to be international adoption. It can be just any adoption. Like I mean I've had friends that are adopted in the United States themselves. They've had issues. Some of the issues that we've had. Like they've had your "adoptive parents," I'm like. They're like, "No, my parents!" Like I appreciate it because it's actually great to just be able to catch up with them. (Participant 2)

- And I found myself, um, joining a [sic] Asian American sorority that I was not going to do when I was a freshmen . . . But that experience taught me so much about the Asian American culture. And, how I could fit in or be accepted. Um, I think that played a large part of figuring out what this identity was to me. (Participant 5)

- You know, we we didn't do many, uh, Asian activities when we were younger. So, um, they wanted to teach us the culture, but they didn't quite know how I guess. Because, you know, they weren't Asian American themselves. But, we would go to a few museums to learn about Asian history. We'd go out to some restaurants, just to understand the culture and get a taste of it. Because that's kind of where we came from. Which is, I think was excellent for them to do that because at least we didn't lose what we came- Kind of like the heritage of where we came from. (Participant 5)

- And they, the club asked families around the school who had Asian children to come in and play with us, the college students. Just to like hangout and, um, create a [sic] Asian community and talk . . . And they wanted to take a next step in the club and create this group for university students of adopted Asian American adoptees to talk to little kids who also are in that situation, but are at a young age . . . At first, it was interesting to actually say it out loud for once. I don't think my siblings and I really. I don't think we really ever talked about it much. (Participant 5)

- And then there was a [sic] Asian American association where we were at and we would like go to the—you know it's mostly older people—we would go to their thing and go to their events and stuff like that . . . And I mean, ever since then I was I think, I always had a positive outlook on [Deidentified country]. (Participant 6)

- And, but then after I got involved in like one of those—it's like only for adoptees—like the page for that had really helped me. And I've formed other bonds with people and I think like the way they were raised and the people that we grew up around is so, is so like influential. (Participant 6)

The meaning of shared culture, family, and friends for international adoptees	Family is not about blood • I think whenever I felt confused or uncertain, and if I didn't have the chance to go to my mom, I was going to my friend. And like even though she wasn't completely understanding of what was going on, she still provided that space of like, you know, "I'm here. I'm here to listen. I'm here to help you through this challenging obstacle, whatever it may be. And you'll come out stronger." (Participant 1) • So, I think to answer your question: She knew both. She knew the stress that I was facing as a teenager or as a kid, but also the situation that I was in which was the challenges that I faced as being an adoptee and not really, you know, fitting in per se. You know, that whole cultural component that I kind of discussed earlier. Is that even though I looked vastly different, she still accepted me, you know, for who I am. I think it just shows that your beliefs, your traditions, you know, your personality can go, is much bigger as how you present or who you are ethnically. Ethnicity-wise. (Participant 1) • [F]amily is not about blood, but rather the people who put in the time to get to know you, get to support you, who love you unconditionally . . . whoever will be there by my side regardless of, you know, what decisions I make or what choices I made . . . I think you don't necessarily have to be blood-related to the person that you call mom or dad or your brother. And I think it just shows overall that, you know, anybody can be that person you can lean on if you allow them. I guess if you're allowed to be vulnerable with them. (Participant 1) • He [The nanny] actually went through the adopt-, the entire process with my parents of getting us to come over to the States. He lived with us for a good two years, and he was, in a sense, the big brother to both [Deidentified name] and I. And he was the translator to my parents, so that he could easily communicate things that, well, what we wanted . . . But like, we really could not have done it without [Deidentified name] coming into the picture and also my mother actually having the ability to learn the language, which is not easy. (Participant 2) • And I really treasure that ability of being adopted to the nth degree because it really has given me the sense of humanity. And actually when I was younger, my mother told me this: One year we went for Thanksgiving down to [Deidentified place], because we used to go all the time. We went around the table,

and everyone asked, "What are you thankful for?" And I specifically said, "family," because, as being an adoptive kid, at the age of three, having a sense of family is such a huge thing. (Participant 2)

- But I think had I been put in a family that was more emotionally intelligent and more attuned to their own emotions, and could've coped better, and wasn't all like Type A and, you know, had this mindset of academia. I think things would have gone a lot smoother . . . But I think having the people in my life that I've chosen to keep in my life and how they respond to cultural differences. And like their heart and their values, like I think that's been like a huge point of reference. And that's been so helpful for me to navigate and to learn. And so, I'm really grateful for that. (Participant 3)

- I consider myself very lucky being adopted to wonderful, wonderful parents and being a part of a family group. Like aunts and uncles and cousins. They're all wonderful, and they all love me very much and I love them very much. (Participant 4)

- And I, I became friends with this girl a couple streets down my street. And she actually was also adopted. So, that's kind of helpful in my life because we got to go through high school together, kind of figure out who we were, connect in different ways . . . And kind of listening to her story and her life versus my story and my life. It just helped me figure out like it's not, we weren't alone. I think that was the most important part. To figure out being adopted, being Asian American, um, but living with Caucasian parents can still being part of a family. (Participant 5)

- For some reason, I feel like, uh [Pause], we kind of all act like normal children. We kind of all act like, "You're my mother because you do this. And if you have a fight, it's because." Like, I don't know an example. I guess I'm just saying it's quite normal I think our influences [Pause] and our connections. But, I don't think they see us in a different way that's maybe special. Special, maybe because yes, they adopted us. But, I don't know. (Participant 5)

- [I] saw everyone looked at my family and we didn't look the same. You know? And I think that was overall very positive because I never felt like I didn't belong in my family because I wasn't white; because I look [like] my other family who was

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<td>blood-related, who were like half black or something. You know what I mean? . . . We all just look different . . . At a very young age I was very aware that like, you don't have to look the same to be a family. (Participant 6)

And I think being adopted and seeing people who don't look the same and—you know we're not blood-related—I think that has really influenced the way I see family because It doesn't like. Not all families have a mom and a dad and, you know, are like blood-related. And even after my parents got divorced, you know, my uncle was a very big part of my life. (Participant 6)

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Table 3

Elements of Adoptive Identity Theory by Degree Present in Selected Interviews

Adoptive Identity Element	Text to Support Classification within Elements
Depth	High • So, for me, I personally don't remember it as much. But thanks to my parents for videotaping part of it, and actually having photos of it—it actually is very helpful to actually go back and re-watch it. I mean, we re-watched it when we were younger, but then we re-watched it about 10 years ago and it is a huge difference for a kid to experience that as their childhood—that you get to literally visualize with where you grew up . . . I mean, that's what I was told . . . I really don't remember the first three years of my life being in an orphanage as much. (Participant 2)
	Low • Okay, well [Pause] they told me stories about it. But, I guess I wasn't really interested in them or wanting to know about it . . . Um, but they told me, what was the location? It was either in [Deidentified city] or [Deidentified city]. One of the two. I don't remember which one. Um, that [Chuckle], that's where it's located and that's to the extent of my knowledge . . . Um, but I remember in my early teens my dad showed me a picture of the orphanage and that's. And what the building looked like. And that was it. But I still had no interest in it, at all. (Participant 4)
Internal consistency	High • [I] saw everyone looked at my family and we didn't look the same. You know? And I think that was overall very positive because I never felt like I didn't belong in my family because I wasn't white; because I look [like] my other family who was blood-related, who were like half black or something. You know what I mean? . . . We all just look different . . . At a very young age I was very aware that like, you don't have to look the same to be a family. (Participant 6)
	Low • I consider myself very lucky being adopted to wonderful, wonderful parents and being a part of a family group. Like aunts and uncles and cousins. They're all wonderful, and they all love me very much and I love them very much. (Participant 4)

Flexibility	High
	• I think essentially what they were trying to do with the group is help me be aware of who I am, ethnically, but they didn't. They did it in a way so they didn't push me that I had to . . . So it's kind of like that idea of like we want to, you know, expose you to who you are ethnically, but ultimately when you get older you can choose whether or not if you want to engage in that. (Participant 1)
	Low
	• It doesn't even have to be international adoption. It can be just any adoption. Like I mean I've had friends that are adopted in the United States themselves. They've had issues. Some of the issues that we've had. Like they've had your "adoptive parents," I'm like. They're like, "No, my parents!" Like I appreciate it because it's actually great to just be able to catch up with them. (Participant 2)
Salience	High
	• I'm not quite sure how much of my life has been influenced by adoption. But, I think most of it? . . . So, adoption has really changed—since the age of three and a half—has changed the whole path of my life today . . . I think adoption has created that friendship I had in high school . . . I think it has helped me find my partner. I think its kind of helped me, uh, find friends in university that I probably would never have met or thought of speaking to. (Participant 5)
	Low
	• What does it mean to me. What's it mean to me? I. What's it mean to me? I, I guess nothing? [Laughs] I guess. Um, I guess. I guess it's a good way to start, to start an introduction. [Laughs] That's pretty much it . . . Its made me very open. Very, very open . . . Or, for the most part I don't really see anything that my adoption has hindered me to certain things . . . I don't see it . . . As a, as a problem. (Participant 4)
Positive affect	High
	• We had a really good childhood. My mom stayed at home with us. She didn't work for most of our lives and I think that was really good. I think. My, my dad worked and he made a good amount of money and we were very comfortable . . . I remember, just my, you know, my mom always being there and stuff and playing with us. So, it was really good up until a certain point. My dad was not really around. (Participant 6)
	Low
	• The adopted family that I grew up in, not ideal in any way, shape, or form . . . it was really hard to kind of process my own

	adoption and just bring up things like my biological mom and be like, "Hey, I really miss my biological mom." These guys, every time I did it was like, "Oh! You think she's better than me?" And I would always be like, "No, I didn't say that. I just said that I miss her." (Participant 3)
Negative affect	High • I think with my family, if they had been more willing to accept that, you know, I'm not their biological kid. And therefore, I'm going to be different. And I'm going to struggle at other things that they may not. And that it would have been helpful if they didn't like try to like shove me into a box of like expectations and be like, "No, this is my daughter. Like yeah, we look so much alike. Oh yeah, like isn't that great? Like, she got my blue eyes!" And it's like, "No, I didn't get your blue eyes because I didn't come from you!" (Participant 3)
	Low • I think the issues I have with like feeling like abandonment is from him. It's not from being adopted. I don't think, personally. I'm sure it's both, but me consciously I feel like it's more him because I feel like he just [Pause], just doesn't care. (Participant 6)