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Whatever happened to baby Mei?
A phenomenological study of adoption appraisal in midlife

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

Although there is now accumulating evidence on the experiences and outcomes for internationally adopted adults, and recent findings suggest an association between outcomes and individuals' views of their own adoption, there has been little systematic examination of the adoption appraisal process beyond childhood. This study focuses on adopted women's perceptions of how being internationally adopted in early childhood has affected their subsequent lives.

68 women of Chinese ethnicity in their 40s and 50s, adopted as young girls in the 1960s from orphanages in Hong Kong to the UK, participated in face-to-face interviews. Based on a phenomenological analysis of the resulting data, I argue that appraisal of adoption (including adjustment to adoption-related losses and gains) is a multi-faceted and dynamic process that continues long beyond childhood and adolescence. Particular attention is paid to how women describe talking about adoption to strangers and loved ones and how they frame their responses in the context of the research interview.

Out of this work emerges a clearer picture of the importance of understanding individual perceptions of what constitutes a 'positive' adoption outcome. By adding to and extending the (mainly US-based) emerging body of literature on internationally adopted adults, the results of this study provide a starting point for thinking about the future development of a model of understanding adoption appraisal in adulthood: one that builds on, but is distinct from, models of children's adoption appraisal.

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1   INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1   Introduction

On 21 December 1962, the *Daily Telegraph* published an article about a group of young girls from Hong Kong who were to be adopted by British families. The accompanying photograph showed eight dark-haired, solemn-faced toddler girls sitting on the laps or held in the arms of smartly dressed adults at Heathrow airport. Some of the adults were airline staff who had accompanied the girls on their flights from Hong Kong; others had been approved as prospective adoptive parents and were photographed moments after meeting their new daughters for the first time.

This image documents a key early moment in the Hong Kong Adoption Project carried out by International Social Service United Kingdom (ISS UK). ISS UK brought just over a hundred children, nearly all girls, from orphanage care in Hong Kong to be placed for adoption with families in the UK during the 1960s and early 1970s.

Some of the families had come forward as a result of media coverage of the conditions in Hong Kong orphanages, and may have seen notices like the following one from *The Times* in February 1964. 'Mei'[1] seems not to have been a real child, but rather a pseudonym used in generating publicity for the project:

> *Abandoned in a Hong Kong Alley, 18 months-old Mei Lee ("lovely flower") needs only an air ticket to bring her to specially chosen parents in Britain. Will you give something towards the £127 required? Donations quickly please, to International Social Service.*

What happened to the girls in the photograph after they left the airport and went home to live with their new families? Now women aged in their 40s and 50s, how do they – and the others adopted via the same international project – look back on the impact of this turning point on their subsequent lives?

1.2 Research aims

This study builds up a systematic picture of how 68 women adopted via the ISS adoption project describe their experiences of being adopted and the effect on their subsequent lives into adulthood. Using a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007), I analyse and reflect on the events and experiences that the women in this study define as the salient aspects – whether positive, negative or ambivalent – of being internationally adopted. The main research question that drove the design and development of this study was:

When internationally adopted adults describe their experiences of adoption, what are the most important factors from their viewpoint?

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[1] This dissertation's title was chosen to echo the title of the book *Whatever Happened to Adam? Stories of Disabled People Who Were Adopted or Fostered* (Argent, 1998), as well as the film *What Ever Happened to Baby Jane?* (Aldrich, 1962).

This study aims to:

- Explore the events and experiences described as meaningful in the context of international adoption
- Document the process of appraising adoption in midlife
- Evaluate the implications for future research in this small but developing field – studies of ex-orphanage internationally adopted adults in midlife

One of the challenges of starting this study was to distinguish it clearly from the British Chinese Adoption Study (BCAS), a larger project exploring the lives and outcomes for this group of women, which I carried out with my colleagues Julia Feast, OBE, and Dr John Simmonds, OBE, at the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)[2] and Professor Alan Rushton, OBE, at the Institute of Psychiatry, King's College London.

The BCAS work is described in detail in a number of previous publications. Appendix 1 presents a complete list of related publications. In Chapter 2 (section 2.3), I review the key findings to date from the BCAS research, to provide a context for the current study. To mark the distinction between the two projects, throughout the following chapters the work I carried out with colleagues is labelled clearly as being part of the BCAS research to separate it from the work I have carried out for this thesis.

1.3 Rationale for my study

Designing and carrying out an independent study within a larger research project brought some restrictions, but also provided a number of benefits (as will be discussed in Chapters 3 and 4). The principal factors that led me to

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[2] BAAF unexpectedly went into administration on 31 July 2015, at which point some staff, including the BCAS research team, were transferred to a newly established organisation, CoramBAAF Academy of Adoption and Fostering. I have used 'BAAF' throughout this thesis because the main BCAS work was completed and reported before this change.

use the opportunity of conducting my study as part of BCAS, rather than recruit a separate sample, were as follows:

- The UK has relatively few international adoptions each year, and thus opportunities for research are rare, particularly with a cohort sharing similar early experiences and a defined age group (Selman, 2000; Selman, 2016). This cohort is the only group of internationally adopted adults to have participated in a major UK research study.

- Most research on international adoption involves children and young people, and data are often collected primarily from adoptive parents or generated from professionals' assessments of the children, rather than directly reporting adopted people's views (McGinnis, Smith, Ryan and Howard, 2009; McCall, 2011).

- Although a limited number of studies of international adoption in midlife have been carried out in other countries (see Chapter 2), findings may differ due to substantial differences in the historical, political and social context of adoption.

- The interview participation rate of 68 women out of an original group of 100 adopted girls was higher than initially predicted, particularly as it involved tracing women with whom there had usually been no contact since the early 1970s, when they were young children (Feast, Grant, Rushton and Simmonds, 2013a). This recruitment method also differed from other previous studies of internationally adopted adults (Brodzinsky, Schechter and Henig, 1993), most of which had used advertisements or adoption networks to gather their participants (see Chapter 2).

Research with internationally adopted adults has accumulated in recent years but it remains a developing rather than an established field. None of the other 11 studies (including BCAS) identified in my review of empirical literature to date used a phenomenological approach, and only four of these studies used a primarily qualitative approach (see Chapter 2). As will be described in Chapter 3, I chose to undertake a qualitative study as this offered the most

appropriate approach to address my research question and also offered an alternative perspective from the work undertaken for BCAS, by placing the women's perspectives on being adopted at the centre of the analysis. Phenomenological studies strive to arrive at '*a composite description that presents the "essence" of the phenomenon*', to explicate the underlying structure of the shared experience (Creswell, 2007: 58). By embedding two sections within the BCAS interview schedule, I collected responses to 17 open-ended questions about how being adopted has shaped their lives at different points into mid-adulthood. The interview data document their accounts of being internationally adopted in a country where this experience is relatively uncommon.

1.4 Background

1.4.1 Adoption: a brief overview

Adoption was first legalised in England and Wales in 1926, in Northern Ireland in 1929 and in Scotland in 1930, in order to regulate the placement of children with adoptive families and to offer such children a secure and legitimate status within those families (Feast et al, 2013a). Subsequent legislation has sought to address a range of concerns, from the pressure in previous decades on unmarried mothers to relinquish their children for adoption to the rights of adopted people to have access to information and records about their adoptions (Howe and Feast, 2000; Keating, 2009). Over time, many of the debates about adoption have been polarising and featured heavily contested arguments (Feast et al, 2013a).

Adoption is the act of creating a new legal and permanent bond between a child and an adoptive parent or parents (Cullen and Lane, 2006; Simmonds, 2009; Plumtree, 2014). Once an adoption order has been granted by the relevant court system, the child's legal link with its birth family is severed[3] (see Adoption Act 1976 in England and Wales; Adoption Act (Scotland) 1978).

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[3] Except in the case of step-parent adoptions (not applicable to my sample), where the new adoptive mother or father becomes an additional legally recognised parent alongside the remaining birth parent.

Through adoption, any siblings born or adopted into the same family also become legally recognised relatives of the child, as do extended family members such as grandparents (Argent, 2014). The child's adoptive parents commit to undertaking all the expected parenting tasks: providing for the adopted child's basic requirements such as food and shelter and meeting more complex demands such as emotional support, nurturing and discipline (Fahlberg, 2008). Adoptive family life shares many of the same characteristics as that of any other family, but parents may have to deal with additional needs related to the pre-adoption experiences of their child(ren), as expressed in the concept of providing a 'family for developmental recovery' (Quinton, 2012). In many cases, particularly as the years pass, other people may be unaware that the child was adopted – although as most of the women in the current study were adopted transracially, this was not their experience.

1.4.2 The UK within an international context

Adoption policy and practice vary around the world, and the UK's history sets it apart from many other Western countries. The UK has a notably greater focus on and higher rates of domestic adoption than most other countries, except the US and Canada (Smith and Donaldson Adoption Institute staff, 2014). For most of the past decade, UK figures for children adopted from the domestic care system have fluctuated between 3,000 and 4,000, in comparison to around 200–300 children adopted from overseas (Selman, 2009; Boéchat, 2013; CoramBAAF, 2015a). Therefore, although there has been a recent dip in domestic adoptions in England, for many years international adoptions have typically represented only 10% or less of all adoption orders granted in the UK annually.

Internationally, these proportions of domestic and international adoptions are unusual. By contrast, for example, an increase in the 1990s and early 2000s in Ireland meant that nine out of ten adopted children were born overseas, in Romania, Russia and an increasingly diverse range of countries (Greene, Kelly, Nixon, Kelly, Borska, Murphy, Daly, Whyte and Murphy, 2007). Although numbers of international adoptions have started to decline globally (Selman, 2006; Selman, 2009; Selman, 2016), many countries including

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Sweden, Norway, Italy, France and, until recently, Spain and the Netherlands have had sustained periods of relatively high rates of international adoption and corresponding low rates of domestic adoptions (Boéchat, 2013). In these countries, alternatives such as residential or foster care tend to be favoured for local children who cannot live with their birth families, except in very 'straightforward' cases for abandoned or relinquished babies (Selman, 2000). Domestic adoption is used minimally in many European countries – for example, on average 15 cases per year in the Netherlands and in 2007, fewer than 30 in Norway (Smith and Donaldson Adoption Institute staff, 2014). Sweden offers a particularly stark example: 48,000 children were internationally adopted between 1969 and 2007, compared to fewer than 20 cases of domestic adoption per year, excluding adoption by family members (Lindblad and Signell, 2008).

1.4.3 Adoption practice in the UK

Although domestic adoption has a long history in the UK, it has changed substantially over the years. While in previous decades it mainly involved relinquished babies, whose birth mothers were often young and unmarried (Keating, 2009), the vast majority of children in the care system nowadays are more likely to have been removed from their birth families after experiencing difficulties such as neglect, abuse or pre-natal exposure to drugs or alcohol (Quinton, 2012; Thomas, 2013). In contrast to countries that only use domestic adoption for small numbers of very young children, the profile of children put forward for adoption in the UK is relatively diverse and has been described as 'almost unique' in Europe (Ward and Smeeton, 2016). Adoptions in recent years in the UK include a high proportion of older children (Rushton, 1998; Selwyn, Wijedasa and Meakings, 2015), sibling groups (Saunders and Selwyn, 2011), children from some minority ethnic groups (Selwyn, Quinton, Harris, Wijedasa, Nawaz and Wood, 2010) and children with disabilities (Cousins, 2009; Grant and Thomas, 2013; Bunt, 2014) or complex health needs (Forrester, 2012).

Those children who go on to be adopted are, however, a minority of children looked after by the state in the UK: most children removed from their birth parents go into foster care, which includes both long- and short-term placements (Biehal, Ellison, Baker and Sinclair, 2010). Some children return to live with birth parents after a period of being looked after (Farmer and Wijedasa, 2013). Where reunification is not possible, alternative forms of care for looked after children include long-term or 'permanent' foster care (Schofield, Beek and Ward, 2012), residential care (Berridge, Biehal and Henry, 2012; Connelly and Milligan, 2012) and, increasingly, placing children with extended family or other adults previously known to them ('kinship', 'family and friends' or 'connected persons' placements) (Hunt and Waterhouse, 2012). Legal orders used to secure kinship placements vary, but commonly involve Special Guardianship orders in England and Wales (Wade, Dixon and Richards, 2010; Wade, Sinclair, Stuttard and Simmonds, 2014) and permanence orders in Scotland (Plumtree, 2014). All of these arrangements transfer day-to-day parenting responsibility and different degrees of decision-making powers to the carers. The unique aspect of adoption, in contrast to other placement types, is that it involves the legal termination of the parental rights and responsibilities of the birth parent(s) (Cullen and Lane, 2006; Plumtree, 2014).

There is little robust evidence as to *why* the UK has low international adoption rates. It is likely that the strong commitment to domestic adoption that marks out the UK (Smith and Donaldson Adoption Institute staff, 2014) plays a role by offering potential adopters a greater likelihood, in comparison to potential adopters in other European countries, of being able to adopt locally. Similarly, local authorities may be reluctant to support international adoption when they are responsible for finding families for large numbers of children from the UK care system, including older children and sibling groups, who cannot return to their birth families. But this does not explain why the US, for example, has high rates of both domestic *and* international adoption.

Another possible influence specific to the UK is a lingering disquiet after the child migrant generation of children sent to Commonwealth countries and the

'particular shame of that episode' (Selman, 2000), which may translate into unease at the thought of children who need alternative care being moved between countries.

The myriad possible influences make it difficult to do more than speculate, but it is clear that in the UK, adoption legislation is designed primarily in response to concerns about the needs of children in the domestic care system and the belief that for many children adoption offers the best possibility for meeting those needs (Thomas, 2013). Policy and guidance that arise from this legislation are developed for domestic adoption, with additional or separate provision for international adoption where relevant (CoramBAAF, 2015a).

1.4.4 Legislation and policy context in the UK

Current policy and practice are relevant to this study because they shape and are shaped by public perceptions of adoption, and therefore perceptions of adopted people. Adoption, whether domestic or international, represents one of the most dramatic interventions the state can make in a child's life. For good or for ill – and extensive efforts focus on making sure it is the former – the decision to place a child with a new family has major implications that continue long past the point at which social services are involved. The long-term implications of adoption are enshrined in current legislation: '*the paramount consideration of the court or adoption agency must be the child's welfare, **throughout his life***' (Adoption and Children Act 2002, part 1, section 1 (2), emphasis added). Where a child is born in one county, then adopted and raised in another, this brings additional elements.

Despite some variation in practice in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, the aim of achieving permanent alternative family care for children who cannot live with their birth families unites legislation across the four nations (Cullen and Lane, 2006; Long, 2013; Plumtree, 2014). Legislative change relating to adoption is a relatively common occurrence in the UK. Both Tony Blair (Prime Minister of the UK 1997–2007) and David Cameron (the present Prime Minister of the UK) carried out reviews within a short time of

being elected (leading to first the Adoption and Children Act 2002, then the Children and Families Act 2014, in England and Wales).

Most policy changes relate to the same goal: trying to improve the likelihood of children awaiting adoption being placed, without undue delay, with families who can meet their needs, and trying to improve the likelihood of those adoptions lasting. But defining what the needs of looked after children are and their relative importance in relation to each other is far more contentious. Adoption touches on important issues – family, the role of the state and, in transracial adoptions, 'race' and ethnicity – and therefore 'punches above its weight' in public policy terms (Kirton, 2000: 3). As a result, numerous stakeholders seek to influence decision-making. A clear example was found in the debates regarding transracial adoption during the passage of the Children and Families Act 2014 (see, for example, *Hansard,* HL Deb, 9 December 2013, c596).

1.4.5 Factors influencing perceptions of adoption

As in all countries, a wide variety of sources affect how adoption is perceived in the UK. Widespread media coverage of extreme failures in child protection – infamous cases such as 'Baby Peter' Connolly (Department for Education, 2010), Victoria Climbié (Lord Laming, 2003), Maria Colwell (Committee of Inquiry into the Care and Supervision Provided in Relation to Maria Colwell, 1974) – has resulted in important changes in child protection policy but also risks creating a somewhat skewed picture of the processes and professionals involved.

Several adopted writers have drawn from their experiences: Jeanette Winterson recounts life with a domineering adoptive mother in 'Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit' (Winterson, 1991) and 'Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal?' (Winterson, 2012); Jackie Kay reflects on meeting her Nigerian birth father after growing up with white parents in Glasgow in 'Red Dust Road' (Kay, 2011); journalist Kate Adie's adoption prompted her to explore the lives of people abandoned as children in 'Nobody's Child' (Adie, 2006).

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More broadly, interest in genealogy, not only for adopted people, has generated websites, books and television programmes, including the BBC's popular series *Who Do You Think You Are?* Ideas about 'nature' and 'nurture' derived from any of the above or from making sense of one's own personal experiences may be more powerful than empirical research in shaping public perceptions about adoption.

The contextual, political and social aspects described in this chapter relate directly to the research described in this study in two ways in particular. First, they may inform general attitudes in the UK towards transracial and international placements. Other people's assumptions about adoption trigger specific experiences such as adopted people having to 'explain' their families to other people, particularly when there are visible differences between them and their family members (Docan-Morgan, 2010; Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010; Baden, 2016;). Second, adoption research plays an important role as a balance against other sources of information. Policy and practice must be able to draw on robust, systematically tested evidence, especially when political, media or public pressures come into force.

1.5 Previous work related to this study

Below I describe two periods of work that relate directly to my study: first, a feasibility study based on analysing the women's adoption files from ISS UK, and second, my role as one of four members of the BCAS research team.

I also present a brief summary of the Hong Kong Adoption Project that brought the girls to the UK, the girls' pre-adoption experiences and their lives immediately after joining their new families in the UK. This information was gleaned from the ISS UK files, which provided records and official documents related to the girls' adoptions.

1.5.1 Documenting the origins and early lives of participants

In 2007, I was employed by BAAF to carry out a review of the records of 100 international adoptions held by the ISS UK. The aim was to establish whether enough information was available to make a subsequent research study of their current outcomes in mid-life viable. Over a period of six months, I built up a database of variables extracted on each case, including dates of entry into and exit from orphanage care; which orphanage the child was in; health data; information about adoptive family members and their applications to become adopters.

As will be discussed in the next chapter, access to pre-adoption data is unusual in international adoption research but, where available, helps to strengthen the findings and interpretations in any subsequent research of later outcomes (McCall, 2011). Selected findings from the feasibility study are therefore reported below in order to explain the background to my study. I completed this background work prior to my decision to start the current study and have reported the results in detail elsewhere (Feast et al, 2013a; Feast, Grant, Rushton and Simmonds, 2013b).

1.5.2 The British Chinese Adoption Study

The BCAS research project started in 2009 after a long gestation period. An adoption consultant from BAAF (Julia Feast) first heard about the existence of the files relating to the Hong Kong Adoption Project in 2002. ISS UK, who held the records, were supportive of the idea of a research study, but permissions and funding for such an unusual project took time to secure. A full grant was received from the Nuffield Foundation in late 2008, following the six-month feasibility study (outlined above) carried out in 2007.

Access to data from the ISS UK adoption records offered a relatively rare advantage compared to other studies of internationally adopted adults (see Chapter 2): the study could match individual data recorded contemporaneously on the women's early lives with self-reported information gathered 40–50 years later. This form of research, which follows groups who

have experienced events that create a 'break' in normal patterns – in this case, a significant change in rearing environment – is sometimes referred to as a 'natural experiment' (Rutter, 2012; Feast et al, 2013a).

The study's aims were to explore the links between early institutional care, international adoption, subsequent experiences and mid-life outcomes. A mixture of quantitative and qualitative data were collected but the research design was a hypothesis-testing model which used quantitative data and statistical analysis, with qualitative data used to illustrate and elaborate on the main findings (as opposed to my own phenomenological approach, described in detail in Chapters 3 and 4). A full description of the BCAS cohort and findings from the primary phase of analysis was published in 2013 (Feast et al, 2013a). Further information is included in Appendix 1.

1.5.3 The Hong Kong Adoption Project 1959–1970

In June 1958, the United Nations launched the World Year of the Refugee, which had a particular focus on raising awareness of the situations facing refugees in Hong Kong, Palestine and Eastern Europe. Migrants fleeing political struggles and a severe famine in southern China had been arriving in Hong Kong for many months, and shanty towns had sprung up and then grown rapidly in some parts of the islands. Poverty and overcrowded living conditions were common, often leading to poor health. With many families struggling, the numbers of children abandoned or 'left to be found' rose sharply, resulting in increasing pressure on the small number of orphanages in Hong Kong that could care for such children. Newsletters written by ISS UK and ISS Hong Kong during that period refer to some months when abandoned children were found on a daily basis.

At the same time, World Refugee Year publicity in the UK and other western countries led some families to wonder whether they could offer their respective homes to these abandoned children. Hong Kong was a British Crown Colony, with the handover to Chinese sovereignty still some 40 years away. As part of the international philanthropic efforts to 'solve' the problems

highlighted by World Refugee Year, children began to leave Hong Kong for international adoption, starting with families in the Chinese communities in the US. Soon a project was started in the UK. ISS UK, working in conjunction with two domestic adoption agencies, Dr. Barnardo's (now Barnardo's) and National Children's Homes and Orphanages (now Action for Children), initially planned to bring no more than 50 children from Hong Kong to be placed for adoption. Adverts, such as the one quoted in the opening section of this chapter, were placed in national newspapers.

By the early 1960s, 104 girls and two boys had been adopted by mainly white British families living in the UK. Relatively complete data were available on 100 cases (all girls) of completed adoptions by non-relatives. Although not clearly stipulated in policy, reports from some of the ISS UK files suggest that local families were more likely to consider adopting boys, and hence the focus on placements overseas as an option for abandoned girls. (The well-known 'One Child Policy' in China did not play a role: it was not introduced until 1978 and Hong Kong remained a British Dependent Territory until 1997.) Exact figures for how many children were adopted overseas are not known, but estimates gleaned from ISS newsletters suggest that 500 children went to the US and smaller numbers to Holland and New Zealand, making this one of the first large-scale international adoption projects.

In Hong Kong, childcare workers visited the orphanages and wrote reports about the characteristics of the children deemed available for adoption and their daily routines in the orphanage. In the UK, family assessments were carried out by childcare workers from Barnardo's and Action for Children and, as with domestic adoption assessments at the time, were less intensive than current practice. For example, reports focused on adopters' descriptions of their morals and altruistic motives, and potential challenges were explored only in general terms in comparison to more rigorous preparation and approval procedures today. However, potential adoptive parents were often visited more than once and had to provide at least two references about their suitability to be adopters (as well as long-standing family friends, members of the clergy featured heavily among the referees). The adoption agency's

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recommendations were sent to ISS UK, who granted final approval and would then forward the prospective adopters' records to ISS Hong Kong.

1.5.4 Pre-adoption care experiences

For most of the children no information was available about their birth parents. The majority (88%) were abandoned, although this pejorative description is softened slightly by the fact that many were left in public places where it was likely they would be found quickly. Very occasionally a note with some information, such as the child's name or date of birth, was left tucked into their clothes or blanket. A few children were left in more isolated circumstances.

From both a research perspective and for those women who have gained access to their records, the careful recording of dates of entry into and exit from orphanage care is highly valuable, as are the descriptions of daily life in the orphanages. The children all arrived in the orphanages between September 1957 and June 1968, and left between May 1960 and August 1969. The mean age at which the girls entered orphanage care was three months (ranging from under one month to 27 months).

Apart from a small number of children who spent time in hospital or very short periods in local foster care (usually about two weeks), their early lives followed a specific pattern: unknown pre-orphanage care of varying lengths, followed by an unbroken period in orphanage care. The total time spent in orphanage care for each of the girls in my study varied between five months and 82 months (mean 20 months, standard deviation (SD) 13.5 months). Almost half of the children (49%) spent between one and two years in orphanage care. Only a few individuals moved from one orphanage to another. This is in marked contrast to children currently in the care system in the UK, who may experience several moves between different foster homes. Such instability is, unfortunately, relatively common and has been linked to poorer outcomes, including behavioural and other difficulties (Biehal et al, 2010).

The term 'placed for adoption' refers to the date the child joined their new family rather than the later date when the adoption order was granted. The youngest child was placed for adoption at eight months and the oldest at six years 11 months (mean = 23 months, SD 14 months). Nearly all the children left orphanage care, flew overnight and arrived in the UK to join their adoptive parents the next day; therefore the age at exit from orphanage care is usually equivalent to the age at placement for adoption. It is notable that they all left orphanage care *after* the age of six months. As will be discussed in Chapter 2, longer exposure to orphanage care has been found to create more risks for poorer developmental outcomes (McCall, 2011). For example, being placed before six months has been identified as a significant predictor of reduced risk for poorer outcomes in an influential longitudinal study of children adopted from Romanian orphanages to the UK (Rutter and Sonuga-Barke, 2010).

The girls were cared for in four main Hong Kong orphanages, overseen by a mixture of local and international staff, mainly British or North American. Their diet seems to have been mainly adequate although repetitive, based on rice-based porridge called 'congee'. In the orphanage environment, they were constantly surrounded by other young children, as opposed to the intimacy and small scale of family life. The carer:child ratio ranged from 1:8 and 1:22 but efforts were made to provide regularly scheduled, structured play activities or opportunities for fresh air. However, with limited staff, it is unlikely carers would have been able to provide the type of one-to-one, consistent, attentive care-giving known to promote the best chance of optimal development (Bowlby, 1953; McCall, 2011).

After flying several thousand miles, each girl was handed directly to her new parents at the airport in London. Some families already had birth children or had previously adopted, whereas for others this was their first child. Only two women in the study went on to grow up without siblings. The families lived all around the UK, from rural farms to large cities. All of the adopters were married couples, aged mainly in their thirties and early forties. Although a minority of mothers were working at the time of application, the ISS UK

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records show that all planned to be full-time carers once their daughters arrived.

The same records include reports from Childcare Officers on how the girls fared with their new families – usually from one to three visits in the first six months, but one family was visited 18 times amidst concerns about whether the parents could meet the needs of their new daughter. All the girls in this cohort were legally adopted by their families and none of the adoptions was known to have 'disrupted' – that is, been dissolved by the court on evidence that the placement had broken down irrevocably. Some parents reported initial difficulties with the child's eating or sleeping, but most issues were recorded as having been adequately resolved.

1.6 Positional statement

In keeping with the phenomenological approach of this study (Creswell, 2007; see Chapter 3), I include here a statement of my 'position' in relation to the topic explored in this research. By describing the professional and personal background I bring to this research my aim is to provide the reader with a context in which to assess the decisions I have made in relation to collection, analysis and interpretation of the data from this group of internationally adopted women (Malterud, 2001; Creswell, 2007).

From early 2007, as noted above, I worked at BAAF first as a research assistant and then senior researcher in London, and subsequently as a research and policy coordinator based in Edinburgh. BAAF was a charity and membership organisation; members included all local authorities and the majority of independent adoption and fostering agencies across the UK. Its activities included national 'finding family' services (identifying adoptive or foster families for several hundred children each year), providing advice and information for professionals and the public through a UK-wide general enquiries service, and publishing and selling a wide range of books on adoption and fostering. It was a multi-disciplinary organisation for all those

working in the social care, legal and health professions, and had strong links to a range of adoption researchers across the UK.

In terms of adoption, BAAF's primary focus was on domestic adoption of children from the care system. Apart from the work involved in research with the women in this study, the bulk of my research has related to adoption and fostering from the UK care system. Through my role I worked on occasion with colleagues from the Intercountry Adoption Centre (www.icacentre.org.uk) and other organisations that work directly with internationally adopted children and their parents. I also attended meetings of the Network on InterCountry Adoption, whose members predominantly have a personal connection to international adoption (many are adoptive parents who run small country-specific information and support organisations). The discussions and exchanges at such meetings have informed my thinking by making me aware of developments in policy and practice and the wider issues around international adoption, such as efforts to ensure systems are ethical and that the welfare of the child is the principal concern during all stages of the process.

Working as a researcher, I have interviewed children, young people and their carers/parents in a range of family placement arrangements: adoption, fostering, special guardianship and kinship care. Usually this has involved visiting research participants in their homes and often discussing very personal experiences, such as their feelings related to being currently or previously in care and both the positive and the negative aspects of their placement and family life. Through this work I have observed dozens of adoptive families (or other family arrangements) and the ways that that family members interact with each other.

The majority of research participants I have interviewed described their current arrangements positively and this has been in tune with my observations. However, there have been exceptions where children or young people have expressed unhappiness or distress at being unable to live with their birth families. On three occasions I have come back from interviews with

concerns about the behaviour or reports of carers or children that I have discussed with social work colleagues. In each case, senior colleagues made the decision that no further formal action was required, but information was provided to the relevant families about sources of support and advice. Through other parts of my role, such as identifying and disseminating research, preparing briefing papers and providing information for colleagues dealing with enquiries from professionals and the public, I have become familiar with other related issues, such as the scope and prevalence of abuse and neglect that children face and the long-term impact of early adversity.

A number of personal relationships have also informed my interest in this topic, in particular my relationship with my younger sister, who was adopted from Colombia when I was five and she was nearly two years old. I therefore grew up with international adoption as a feature in my own family life. I do not consider it to be the defining feature of my relationship with my sister, but we have had particular experiences, such as other people commenting on our relationship (querying whether we are 'really' sisters, seeking to reassure us that it is 'exactly the same' as their own sibling relationships or simply asking a lot of questions about her origins) that are common to other 'visible' adoptive families, as will be discussed in Chapter 2. In 2008 I joined her for two weeks in Colombia during her two-month trip travelling around the country, and we visited the orphanage she had been adopted from together.

The topic of international adoption and its long-term effects is therefore of both personal and professional interest to me. Nevertheless, I approach this study as an 'outsider' in the sense that I was not internationally adopted myself. My ethnicity is white British and I have not yet reached midlife, so my perspective on the data may differ from that of a researcher who shared the ethnicity and age of the participants in this study.

A highlight of working on my study and the BCAS has been seeing that a network of adults adopted from Hong Kong has developed, which has enabled many of the women in the study (and others) to meet each other. From their reports, there is a clear and distinctive value in the opportunity to

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meet others adopted in similar circumstances (see
www.hkadopteesnetwork.com/uk/). Discussions with members from this
network have also informed my thinking on the topic of international adoption
both generally and in relation to the data in my study.

1.7 Summary

In this introductory chapter I have sketched out the background to my study
including an overview of adoption policy and practice in the UK and how this
differs from other countries, particularly in rates of international adoption. I
have described the central question, aims and rationale that drive this piece of
research.

The women at the centre of this research shared early experiences marked by
abandonment or relinquishment, orphanage care in Hong Kong and
international adoption to the UK. Data on their pre-adoption experiences and
adoptive families were available from records held by ISS UK, which were
made available to BAAF. I have reported relevant information that I extracted
from those files prior to starting work on this thesis.

I have noted that my study uses a phenomenological approach to explore the
experiences of this group of women several decades later, in mid-adulthood.
In this chapter, I have also described my personal and professional
background in relation to this topic.

Before turning to the empirical work, the next three chapters fill in some more
of the foundations, starting with the evidence that has built up through
previous research on orphanage care and international adoption.

2   LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1   Introduction

This chapter examines the literature relevant to internationally adopted adults and adoption appraisal. Although much of the research on international adoption focuses on children and adolescents, the number of studies examining the experiences and outcomes of adults has grown in recent years. The overall aim of this review is to provide a context for my study and an overview of current knowledge by:

- Summarising key findings from studies of child/adolescent ex-orphanage internationally adopted cohorts
- Critically examining studies of internationally adopted adults, with particular attention paid to studies that have used qualitative approaches
- Considering conceptual frameworks related to (a) adoption appraisal and (b) mid-adulthood

2.1.1   Order of chapter

The literature in this review is presented in four main parts. I start with a brief summary of the main findings on the effects of orphanage care (section 2.2). Although this evidence base derives mainly from studies of children and adolescents, its scope and relatively long history has been influential in shaping research with ex-orphanage internationally adopted adults, such as the women in my study.

Next, I focus on studies of internationally adopted adults. I provide a brief summary of findings from the British Chinese Adoption Study (BCAS) to give a context for my own study (section 2.3). After describing my strategy for identifying literature on internationally adopted adults (section 2.4), I then examine in detail four studies that use predominantly qualitative methods to explore internationally adopted adults' experiences (section 2.5). As the number of studies using qualitative approaches in this field is limited, those

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that exist are given particular prominence in this review in light of my own methodological approach. I provide a critical view of both the findings and the methodological issues related to these studies.

Following this, I consider the full range of evidence on the outcomes and experiences of internationally adopted adults, this time drawing on studies from across the methodological spectrum including epidemiological and cross-sectional studies (section 2.6). This section focuses on findings, and reports on methods only in relation to how these affect the results, rather than as potential models for my own research design. For this reason, the sub-sections here are organised by topic rather than by study. However, a short overview of methods is given at the beginning to set the context for those findings and further detail is given for individual studies where relevant.

Finally, I focus on conceptual frameworks in relation to adoption appraisal in midlife. As there are no existing theoretical models specifically developed for adoption appraisal in midlife, I draw on concepts from adoption research with younger cohorts.

2.1.2 Definitions

In this review, the following definitions apply:

- **International adoption** means a child born and separated from his or her birth family in one country, then adopted by a family living in another country.
- **Pre-adoption experiences:** in the case of international adoption, this often involves orphanage care but may also include time spent living with birth family members or in temporary foster care (see, for example, Mohanty, Keokse and Sales, 2006). Evidence from childhood studies has identified the importance of pre-adoption experiences and quality of care as potential predictors of subsequent outcomes (McCall, 2011).
- **'Early' and 'late' adoptions** relate to the child's age when they join their adoptive family. Studies take different approaches to demarcating

early and late placements. Generally, children over two years are considered to be 'late-placed', although in some studies 'early-placed' groups are limited to babies (for example, under six months (Rutter, Beckett, Castle, Colvert, Kreppner, Mehta, Stevens and Sonuga-Barke, 2007) or under four months (Audet and Le Mare, 2011)). The significance of age at placement derives from evidence that later-placed children have higher risks for a range of poorer outcomes (McCall, 2011). The cut-off between categories is reported for individual studies where relevant.

- **Post-adoption experiences** are defined here as any events in the child's life which take place after the date on which they joined their adoptive family, as opposed to the date of the adoption order, which is generally a few months post-placement.

- **Adulthood** usually refers to any events or experiences after the adopted person has turned 18.

2.2 Orphanage care and internationally adopted children

2.2.1 'Atypical rearing' and children's development

A substantial body of literature has developed on the effects on children of being separated from their birth families, including those adopted from orphanage care. As this literature has influenced subsequent research with internationally adopted adults, selected findings are reviewed here.

The effects of what is known as 'atypical rearing' were first brought to wide attention by John Bowlby's work in identifying that depriving a child of attentive, individualised and consistent care in early life '*may have grave and far-reaching effects on his character and so on the whole of his future life*' in the form of delinquency, poor mental health and patterns of broken adult relationships (Bowlby and Ainsworth, 1953: 53). Orphanage care, such as that experienced by the participants in my study, is one such form of 'atypical rearing', where circumstances are unlikely to enable carers to offer the type of optimal care usually best provided in family environments.

Compared to the literature on adults, studies of children and adolescents who have experienced orphanage care followed by international adoption are relatively numerous. Although a detailed review is outside the remit of this chapter, the main patterns of findings that influence thinking across the field are outlined here: the risks associated with orphanage care and the evidence for recovery following international adoption. (For a more comprehensive analysis, see two reviews with a focus on quantitative studies: McCall, 2011; The Leiden Conference on the Development and Care of Children without Permanent Parents (hereafter The Leiden Conference), 2012).

2.2.2 Risks

While in institutional care, children typically display delayed physical growth, cognitive development and behavioural development; on average such children are 1 SD below expected levels for non-institutionalised children's development in each of these domains, and results of 2 SD below are not uncommon (The Leiden Conference, 2012). However, substantial variation in the quality of orphanage care has been recorded across cohorts followed up after international adoption. For example, the Romanian orphanages in the early 1990s were classed as 'globally depriving', that is, '*severely deficient in every physical and psycho-social respect*' (McCall, 2011: 225). In this situation, children not only lacked opportunities for individualised, sensitive care from adults, but basic needs such as safe sanitation, medical care and nutrition were not consistently met (Rutter et al, 2007). This is in contrast to institutional care labelled as 'psycho-socially depriving', where basic physical needs are safely met, but opportunities for stimulation and interaction with caregivers are limited, in some cases severely so (McCall, 2011).

For children who go on to be internationally adopted, these risks for poorer outcomes persist (McCall, 2011; The Leiden Conference, 2012). For example, following the path laid by Bowlby (1953), relationships have remained a particular area of interest in this field. A pattern of elevated rates of two particular behaviours has been identified: disorganised attachment (where

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children both seek comfort from and show anxiety in relation to their caregivers, leading to them displaying confusion and fear at moments of distress) and indiscriminate friendliness (where children show similar friendliness towards all adults and a marked lack of fear or caution towards strangers) (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Steele, Zeanah, Muhamedrahimov, Vorria, Dobrova-Krol, Steele, van IJzendoorn, Juffer and Gunnar, 2011). Across domains, risks are greater for children who have experienced either longer exposure to orphanage care or very poor quality of care (Rutter and Sonuga-Barke, 2010).

2.2.3 Recovery

As well as identifying risks, studies have produced evidence of recovery across different domains – sustained over periods of several years – for ex-orphanage children after they have moved into adoptive families (St. Petersburg-USA Orphanage Research Team, 2008; Rutter and Sonuga-Barke, 2010). Not all children in 'high-risk' categories (placed at a later age from orphanages with the poorest quality of care) do poorly and the level of individual problems differs substantially within groups (Rutter, 2012). In all cohorts, some children are found to recover more quickly than others, and to a greater extent (Rutter and Sonuga-Barke, 2010; McCall, 2011; The Leiden Conference, 2012).

The age at which a child leaves orphanage care and joins their adoptive family explains some of the difference in subsequent outcomes (McCall, 2011; The Leiden Conference, 2012). This is consistent with the evidence of looked after children adopted domestically from care in the UK and US (Simmonds, 2009; Smith and Donaldson Adoption Institute staff, 2014). However, the relationship between duration of orphanage care and risk of poor development is not linear. For example, children from institutional care in Romania have been found to have a greater risk of poorer outcomes when removed after six months (Rutter et al, 2007) or even four months (Audet and Le Mare, 2011). On the other hand, studies of children from Russian orphanages and mixed cohorts have found the cut-off between better and

poorer outcomes to lie between 18 and 24 months of age (The Leiden Conference, 2012). These contradictory findings suggest that quality of orphanage care also influences outcomes, although most studies rely on retrospective reports from adoptive parents, rather than data collected on individual children during their time in orphanage care.

Beyond broad characteristics (such as age and ethnicity of adopters), differences in adoptive family environments remain unspecified in many studies, partly due to lack of variation on factors such as socio-economic status (The Leiden Conference, 2012). In addition, the measures used have not always been sensitive enough to pick up subtle yet potentially important differences (Castle, Rutter and Beckett, 2006). The evidence on family risk factors (such as parental mental health or marital dissatisfaction) is sparse and results are inconsistent (McCall, 2011). However, parental warmth, sensitivity and stimulation have been found to be associated with better outcomes: for example, the reduced likelihood of inattention/over-activity found in a follow-up (at age ten) of Romanian children adopted into Canada after at least eight months of severely depriving orphanage care (Audet and Le Mare, 2011).

2.2.4 Strengths and limitations of childhood evidence

Although studies have accumulated in recent years, there are a number of limitations to the existing evidence on children and adolescents, many of which are relevant in reviewing studies with adults. The possible influences – genetic and perinatal factors; pre-orphanage experiences (often undocumented); duration and quality of orphanage care; post-adoption environmental variables – are numerous and vary greatly across cohorts (McCall, 2011). Data on pre-adoption experiences may be inconsistently or only partially recorded. Therefore, establishing which components of orphanage care predict which outcomes, or whether there is an overall effect detectable across several domains, is extremely challenging (Rutter and Sonuga-Barke, 2010). The interplay between genetic and environmental influences has generated great interest, but at this stage remains an area for

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further exploration, not a source of definitive answers (McCall, 2011; The Leiden Conference, 2012).

Despite these limitations, the evidence outlined here identifies that children who have experienced orphanage care – particularly for long periods or involving global deprivation – are at greater risk for a range of later difficulties. For individual children and their families, these 'raised risks' can translate into significant challenges in daily life, some of which may take time to emerge. For practitioners, these findings underline the importance of sensitive, appropriate post-adoption support. For research, this evidence establishes a paradigm defined by one overarching question: can international adoption erase – or at least reduce – the negative effects of orphanage care? As will be discussed, this model of risk and resilience, particularly in mental health, is also widespread in research with adults (for example, Hjern, Lindblad and Vinnerljung, 2002; Tieman, van der Ende and Verhulst, 2005; van der Vegt et al, 2009a).

2.2.5 Benefits of a long-term perspective

As previously noted, the literature on internationally adopted adults is sparse in comparison to research involving younger cohorts. Neither of the major reviews of childhood outcomes completed in recent years (McCall, 2011; The Leiden Conference, 2012) refers to evidence from internationally adopted adults, except for noting that two studies suggest problem behaviours are not simply a passing adolescent phase. (One reference is to an unpublished PhD manuscript from the US (Julian, 2009), the other to the sole longitudinal study to mid-adulthood, reviewed later in this chapter (van der Vegt et al, 2009a)).

Yet many questions remain that cannot be answered by studies of children and adolescents alone. A long-term perspective is also needed, not least to take account of major life events such as moving out of the parental home, finishing full-time education and starting families. Only studies involving adults can trace how people shift out of the influence of their family household to

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establishing new identities as parents, workers or, following parental death, the oldest generation of their family.

2.3 British Chinese Adoption Study

BCAS was a mixed methods study based on the same cohort as the current study, as described earlier. Comprehensive data were collected from women in their 40s and 50s who had been adopted from Hong Kong to the UK in the 1960s and 1970s (Feast et al, 2013a). The study explored the links between early institutional care, international adoption, subsequent experiences and mid-life outcomes. The hypothesis to be tested was that adverse early experiences would result in poorer outcomes for this group compared to age-matched UK peers. Results from the main phase of this study have been reported, as listed in Appendix 1 (Rushton et al, 2012; Rushton et al, 2013; Feast et al, 2013a; Feast et al, 2013b; Rushton, 2013). Further work has been carried out to explore associations between adult life events and psychological adjustment, and results are currently being prepared for publication (Grant and Rushton, in preparation; Rushton and Grant, in preparation).

Access to contemporaneous data from the records, as reported in detail in Chapter 1, offered a relatively rare opportunity in matching individual data recorded on the women's early lives with self-reported data gathered around 45 years later. From the original group of 100 girls, 99 adult women were traced and 72 agreed to participate in the research study (Feast et al, 2013a; four women were excluded from the current study as they completed questionnaire packs but did not participate in interviews). The questionnaire pack was comprehensive (48 pages) and included standardised mental health measures and scales designed specifically for the study (as reported in the results below). The interview schedule, apart from the two sections related to the current study (see Chapter 4), was based on the Adult Life Phase Interview Schedule (ALPHI; Bifulco, Bernazzani, Moran and Ball, 2000) and designed to explore life events across a range of adult life domains: partnerships, parenting, adoptive family relationships and friendships,

work/education and a mixed domain including health. A separate section related to childhood was developed by the BCAS research team, with some items adapted from the childhood experience of care and abuse (CECA) questionnaire (Bifulco, Bernazzani, Moran and Jacobs, 2005). Details of gaining ethical approval, recruiting the sample, collecting and verifying the data that overlap with the current study are reported in Chapters 3 and 4.

Key findings from the BCAS analysis are reviewed here in order to provide the reader with a context for understanding findings from the current study. The central finding, which did not support the original hypothesis, was that psychological adjustment was comparable for women adopted internationally from Hong Kong and their UK-born peers. Using standardised measures (General Health Questionnaire (GHQ12; Goldberg, McDowell and Newell, 1996); Malaise Inventory (Rutter et al, 1970); Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire (Rosenberg, 1965)) and an index of whether women had ever sought professional help for anxiety, depression or other mental health problems, no significant differences were found on comparisons with either non-adopted women (n = 5,115) or domestically adopted women (n = 50) drawn from the National Child Development Study (Rushton et al, 2013). This suggests that where institutional care is not globally depriving, and where adoptive families provide, for the most part, support and care for the remainder of childhood and adolescence, the timing and exposure of orphanage care does not necessarily predict midlife outcomes (Rushton et al, 2013).

Similarly, the internationally adopted women (n = 72) were no less likely than UK comparison groups (non-adopted n = 5,115; domestically adopted n = 50) to report having a confidant(e) they could talk to about worries or problems (over 97% in each group). Nevertheless, talking to family members or others about adoption-related experiences was difficult in some cases. Non-significant differences were found in the likelihood of being married or cohabiting. Relationships with adoptive parents were reported, in the main, to be functioning well or satisfactorily most of the time. Retrospective reports indicated change in both directions over the life course: relationships with

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parents and/or siblings could deteriorate or ameliorate over time (Rushton et al, 2013).

We developed a composite adult outcome index, based on the four scales described earlier (GHQ12 (Goldberg et al, 1996); Malaise Inventory (Rutter et al, 1970); Rosenberg Self-Esteem Questionnaire (Rosenberg, 1965)) and an index of whether women had ever sought professional help for anxiety, depression or other mental health problems) in order to test whether variables related to childhood were associated with psychological functioning in midlife. As reported earlier, reports from Childcare Officers who visited the orphanages in Hong Kong were available to help categorise the early experiences of the women, which was an unusual asset for a retrospective study in this field (Rushton et al, 2013). As children, they had been cared for in four main orphanages which, when compared to available information on other institutions, seem to have provided a reasonable quality of basic care within the constraints of group care (ranging from 65 to 450 children depending on the orphanage). None of the orphanage-related variables that were tested (including a binary variable singling out the smallest orphanage as potentially providing a better standard of care) proved to predict mid-life outcomes. In particular, the hypothesis that age at adoption would predict midlife functioning was not supported in the statistical analysis (Rushton et al, 2013).

Overall, therefore, the BCAS analysis identified midlife outcomes that were better than predicted for this group of ex-orphanage, internationally adopted women in midlife. For a forthcoming paper, we summarised the main points as follows (Grant, Rushton and Simmonds, 2016):

> *Despite early years in orphanage care, followed by international adoption, this did not appear to raise the risk of poor outcome [in midlife]. These of course were by no means extremely depriving institutions and the adoptive homes were largely – although not always – supportive, consistent and loving. As a group, the women's lives at nearly 50 were reported as mainly positive: they had mostly led settled*

lives, with good educational and career achievements. Many had enjoyed becoming parents themselves. Well-being and life satisfaction scores were commensurate with those of a large, sex and age matched, UK comparison group. However, a retrospectively-reported poorer quality adoptive home was associated with poorer outcome. The knowledge of an atypical start to life, the experience of feeling different in appearance, and being treated differently were a lifelong preoccupation for some (to a greater or lesser extent for individuals) but, as a group, this did not appear to have compromised their current psychological and social status.

As alluded to in this summary, two statistically significant associations were found between adoption-related experiences and adult outcomes. Where women recalled 'low care' (Parental Bonding Instrument: Parker, Tupling and Brown, 1979; Collishaw, Pickles, Messer, Rutter, Shearer and Maughan, 2007) by both adoptive parents – that is, parental care lacking in warmth, support and acceptance – this was statistically associated with poorer psychological adjustment in midlife (parental care: difference in means = 0.76, 95% confidence interval (CI) 1.33–0.19, p = 0.01).

Most of the women recalled their adoptive experience positively: 86% said they felt loved by their adoptive mother and the same proportion felt wanted by their adoptive family. This was not true for all however. One in five women (n = 14) felt unsure, unhappy or very unhappy about being adopted. This finding was derived using a scale developed for the Adoption Search Reunion study in the UK (Triseliotis, Feast and Kyle, 2005), which included a list of six questions about the participant's feelings about adoption and their adoptive family. Due to overlap between scale items, we selected the item with the highest correlation (agreement or disagreement with the statement 'I feel happy about being adopted') and tested for association with the composite adult outcome index described earlier. Using t-tests, the analysis identified that women who strongly disagreed, disagreed or were not sure whether they felt happy about being adopted (n = 14) had significantly lower scores on the outcome index than women who agreed or strongly agreed that they felt

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happy about being adopted (n = 58) in midlife (difference in means = 1.2, 95% CI 0.68–1.73, p = 0.01, respectively). Therefore, of all the independent variables tested, the women's views of their own adoptions was one of the only factors to emerge as statistically significantly associated with current psychological adjustment.

These BCAS findings emerged only after the current study had started, but add weight to the argument for focusing in greater depth on the women's adoption appraisal processes. As noted earlier, the term adoption appraisal refers to how adopted people view and understand their adoption experiences. In statistical analysis, this has been translated into whether adopted adults view their adoption experiences positively or not, in a global sense rather than in relation to specific experiences such as racial derogation. 'View of adoption' was included in the BCAS data collection following the findings of a study of 53 Greek-born Dutch adopted adults, which identified that those participants who rated their retrospective view of adoption negatively (as opposed to neutrally or positively) on a five-point scale had significantly poorer mental health (β = −0.37, p < 0.01; see section 2.6.1 for further details).

The current study was designed to explore how the women's perspectives on being internationally adopted had developed by midlife, when their adoptions had occurred many decades earlier and been followed by a wide range of subsequent experiences. The aim is to identify what factors the women had in mind when describing themselves as unhappy or happy about being adopted. In Chapters 3 and 4 I describe the development and process of carrying out the current study. Before then, the remainder of Chapter 2 focuses on other research that relates to internationally adopted adults, adoption appraisal and midlife.

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2.4 Orphanage care, international adoption and midlife

2.4.1 Identification of studies

The following section reviews the available empirical research on the topic of internationally adopted adults in midlife. I followed Aveyard's (2010:45) definition of empirical research as that which involves *'research that is undertaken through the observation and measurement of the world around us'.* By this I mean papers that report directly the results of analysis of data and derived findings, in this case about the lives of internationally adopted adults. So while I focus on theoretical, conceptual and other literature in other parts of this chapter, the current section examines papers that report directly on research studies and their findings.

To identify other studies of internationally adopted adults I used a combination of strategies:

- Generated an initial list of studies I was aware of from working at BAAF and in particular on the BCAS project.

- Searches on the internet-based bibliographical databases PyscINFO in August 2013, June 2015 and up to July 2016 and SCOPUS up to July 2016 (described in detail below)

- Attending the International Conference for Adoption Research in Leiden, the Netherlands in 2011; Bilbao, Spain in 2014 and Auckland, New Zealand, 2016 and discussing current or recent literature with researchers from several countries (including the US, Spain, Italy and Norway). I presented a literature review based on the work in this chapter at 2016 conference and asked attendees to alert me to any additional literature. Two suggestions were made, both of which fell outside of my specific criteria.

- Regularly checking with experts in the UK by asking colleagues about relevant studies or developments at the thrice-yearly meetings of the BAAF Research Group Advisory Committee (comprised of senior adoption and fostering researchers, including Professors of Social Work, from universities across the UK) and twice-yearly meetings of the British Chinese Adoption Study Advisory Group (discussed earlier

in Chapter 1). Professor Peter Selman (an erstwhile member of both
groups

- Additional regular discussions with Professor Alan Rushton about any
  new literature, particularly in the psychiatric and psychology fields, that
  colleagues at the Institute of Psychiatry had brought to his attention.

- Hand-searching of key journals by checking contents lists of *Adoption
  and Fostering* and *Adoption Quarterly,* then accessing abstracts for any
  articles related to international adoption that might include adult
  participants. Although this process did not yield any additional studies
  for inclusion in the review (as the relevant articles had already been
  brought to my attention via other routes), it did reveal some important
  articles outlining theoretical perspectives and studies involving younger
  cohorts.

- Checking reference lists in the articles included in this review (and
  others I used for contextual information) for any additional relevant
  studies. Several leads that initially appeared relevant to this review
  turned out to relate to younger cohorts but were helpful for gaining a
  broader perspective of the available literature.

The work for the review presented here, particularly in section 2.6, also
formed the basis of a co-authored paper examining the outcomes for ex-
orphanage internationally adopted adults (Grant, Rushton and Simmonds,
2016).

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Although the cohort in this study all experienced early orphanage care, my
focus is on women's perspectives in midlife on being internationally adopted.
Therefore, studies of internationally adopted adults with mixed or unknown
early experiences were also included. Cohort age ranges varied substantially,
and many studies included some adults in midlife along with younger
counterparts. Because of my focus on midlife, I included only those studies
with a mean participant age of 26 years or older in order to exclude studies of

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emerging adulthood, commonly defined as the period between 18 and 25 years (Arnett, 2007). If mean age was not specified, the decision was based on whether the age range and reported findings suggested it was likely that the sample would meet this criterion. Studies with very large age ranges where results were not disaggregated to show mid-life outcomes were excluded.

Inclusion criteria:

1. Investigated outcome or experiences of internationally adopted adults
2. Mean age of sample over 25 years
3. Published in peer-reviewed journal

Exclusion criteria:

1. Full text not published in English
2. Papers not reporting original research results (for example, theoretical, practice and policy papers)

Three further points are worth clarifying. First, these inclusion and exclusion criteria fit all papers described in this section, with one exception: the *Beyond Culture Camp* study (McGinnis et al, 2009), which was published not in a peer-reviewed journal but as a report on the Evan B. Donaldson Institute (now the Donaldson Adoption Institute) website. My bibliographic search strategy focused on peer-reviewed literature, but through the other activities (discussion with experts, hand-searching, attending conferences) I also became familiar with relevant 'grey literature' (literature that is unpublished or published in non-commercial form, such as government reports), including the *Beyond Culture Camp* study. The decision to include this study, despite not fitting my criteria of peer-reviewed journal publication, was taken following my own critical examination of the quality of the research and extensive discussions of this study at the BCAS Advisory Group and within the BCAS research team, including the strengths and weaknesses of the research. My view, in line with senior colleagues in those discussions, is that the report reaches the quality standards in methodology and reporting that would usually be demanded in the journal peer review process, although the length and

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detail of the full report would preclude journal publication. The study fits my other inclusion criteria: it is a comprehensive examination of data collected from Korean-born and white US-born adopted adults. Given the small number of studies that meet these criteria and the significance of this study (which was discussed at a number of adoption conferences/meetings I attended during the period of the current study), I chose to include it in my review.

Second, as the women in this study were raised in the UK – a country in which as girls adopted from Hong Kong they were from an ethnic minority group – racism, prejudice and stereotyping featured among the experiences described in their interviews. Extensive literature is available that examines issues of race, ethnicity and race-based mistreatment but which is not explicitly linked to international adoption (for a recent study of Chinese people in the UK, see Adamson, Chan, Cole, Craig and Law, 2009). For my sample, it was as the result of being adopted that they also became members of an ethnic minority group: their adoptive and ethnic minority status are therefore inseparably interlinked. Previous BCAS publications have considered findings related to this cohort and broader literature on race and ethnicity in greater depth (Rushton et al, 2012; Feast et al, 2013a). I have therefore selected to review here only that literature which addresses the topics of race and ethnicity in the context of adoption, although references to additional literature appear in later chapters to compare or illuminate specific aspects of the findings. In keeping with a bottom-up, data-driven approach, I sought out wider literature only once my own data analysis was well underway in order to contextualise and reflect more deeply on the emerging findings.

Third, studies with the main aim of examining the processes or outcomes of searching for birth parents were excluded, on the basis that this is not pertinent to the experiences of the women in the current study. I had initially speculated that such studies should be included. However, closer reading revealed that their specific focus on search experiences limited their relevance to my study, despite the robustness of the methods and findings of some studies (for example, Tieman, van der Ende and Verhulst, 2008). Similarly, two studies that focused entirely on specific topics unrelated to the

current cohort were excluded (how people adopted following the Vietnamese 'airlift' responded to international aid workers' accounts of that period; and comparing (for men only) army conscription cognitive test results for adopted and non-adopted men in Sweden).

Searching of bibliographic databases

PscyINFO

For the PsycINFO database searches, I entered the following search terms: [adopt* AND intercountry (all text)]; [adopt* AND orphanage (all text)]; [adopt* AND institutional care (all text)]; [adopt* AND ex-institutional (all text)]; [adopt* and international (abstract)]. I did not use terms such as 'adulthood' and 'adult', as I had found previously that these terms resulted in papers being overlooked.

The PsycINFO searches returned a combined total of 590 abstracts. A number of papers were excluded on the basis of title alone, if it was clear that they were not relevant (for example, papers about the adoption of a new technology, not adoption of children). Then I viewed each remaining abstract individually and screened for inclusion using the criteria outlined above.

Initial screening based on titles and abstracts identified that a large volume of papers did not relate to the adoption of children, but rather to the adoption of a policy or initiative. After initial screening, between the three searches I had identified 81 papers that potentially or clearly fitted my criteria, and accessed the full text of these articles to assess their eligibility for my review. Some abstracts, for example, did not specify whether the participants experienced international or domestic adoption, in which case accessing the full article was necessary to gain further information. This process revealed three additional articles not identified through previous means and which met my criteria (Mohanty et al, 2006; Docan-Morgan, 2010; Docan-Morgan, 2011). I added these to the fourteen articles that I had previously identified (some of which also appeared in the PsycINFO search results).

SCOPUS

I also carried out an additional search on SCOPUS in January 2017 (for literature up to July 2016) to identify any further studies, particularly in the previous decade, not identified via other means. The following search terms were entered into the database: [(title) 'international adoption' OR 'intercountry adoption' OR 'adopted adults' OR 'orphanage' OR 'adopted people' (title)] AND [(title/abstract/keywords) 'adult' OR 'adulthood' OR 'midlife' OR 'middle age' OR 'men' OR 'women'] AND [(year of publication) 2005 – 2017].

This search returned a total of 212 results. As with the PsycINFO search I screened papers initially based on title and abstract alone. (As it was not possible to set a limit to month of publication, articles published after July 2016 were also excluded individually during screening). After this process, 10 papers remained. I accessed the full text for these 10 articles and identified one additional recent paper which was included in this review (Reynolds, Ponterotto and Lecker, 2016).

As shown in the PRISMA diagram on the following page, the main reasons for rejection were: (a) age of sample did not fit criteria, (b) related to domestic adoptions (c) not relevant to topic, (d) not directly reporting research study (for example, policy papers) and (e) full text not published in English

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PRISMA Flow Diagram

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┌──────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────┐
│ Records identified through│        │ Additional records        │
│ database searching        │        │ identified through other  │
│ (n =902)                  │        │ sources (n = 15)          │
└──────────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────┘
            │                                    │
            └──────────────┬─────────────────────┘
                           ▼
            ┌──────────────────────────────────┐
            │ Records after known duplicates     │
            │ removed (n =917)                   │
            └──────────────────────────────────┘
                           │
                           ▼
            ┌──────────────────────┐         ┌──────────────────────┐
            │ Records screened      │────────▶│ Records excluded      │
            │ (n = 917)             │         │ (n = 833)             │
            └──────────────────────┘         └──────────────────────┘
                           │
                           ▼
            ┌──────────────────────┐         ┌──────────────────────────────┐
            │ Full-text articles    │────────▶│ Full-text articles excluded   │
            │ assessed for          │         │ (total n =66; some articles   │
            │ eligibility (n =84)   │         │ met more than one exclusion   │
            └──────────────────────┘         │ criteria)                     │
                           │                  │                              │
                           ▼                  │ Reasons:                     │
            ┌──────────────────────┐         │ Sample age outwith criteria   │
            │ Studies included in   │         │ (n=47)                       │
            │ this review           │         │ Related to domestic adoption  │
            │ (n= 11 studies,       │         │ (n=12)                       │
            │ n = 18 articles)      │         │ Not relevant to adoption of   │
            └──────────────────────┘         │ children (n=8)               │
                                             │ Policy or review paper, not   │
                                             │ directly reporting research   │
                                             │ study (n=10)                 │
                                             │ Full text not available in    │
                                             │ English (n=2)                │
                                             └──────────────────────────────┘
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Results of literature search

Apart from the BCAS publications, this search strategy – including all activities listed in section 2.4.1 – identified a total of 18 papers, which reported findings from eleven studies, which are reviewed below and summarised in Tables 2.2 and 2.3.

Additional studies that are relevant but do not fall within the scope of this review are cited for contextual information where selected findings or concepts relate closely to studies that are reviewed (for example, to compare findings in midlife with evidence from younger adults).

In the process of identifying literature for this review, a number of other literature and theoretical reviews appeared in the initial search results (for example, Castle, Knight and Watters (2011) on ethnic identity among internationally adopted children and adolescents; McCall (2011) on internationally adopted children's outcomes, discussed above in section 2.2). However, my search did not identify any reviews that focused on midlife, either in domestic or international adoption.

2.4.2 Overview of selected literature

The research question for my study, as outlined in the preceding chapter, is:

When internationally adopted adults describe their experiences of adoption, what are the most important factors from their viewpoint?

This question therefore shapes the focus of the following literature review. Given the emphasis in this study on participants' lived experiences, evidence from other qualitative studies where participants are able via open-ended questions to describe events in their lives and their reactions to these is particularly relevant (Aveyard, 2010). However, the limited number of studies on this topic means it is important to examine evidence not just from narrative data, but also other modes of data collection. Drawing on research from

across methodologies provides a more complete picture of the lives of internationally adopted adults.

After undertaking this review, the lack of methodological range in this field is notable. Underlining the alternative perspective of my own study, no other phenomenological studies of internationally adopted adults were identified. Neither were any ethnographic studies found. Only one longitudinal study currently exists that has reported on mid-adulthood (van der Vegt et al, 2009a). The criteria of my review exclude longitudinal studies whose cohorts are currently adolescents (notably, the English Romanian Adoption Study (Kreppner, Kumsta, Rutter, Beckett, Castle, Stevens and Sonuga-Barke, 2010), the Greek Metera orphanage study (Vorria, Papaligoura, Sarafidou, Kopakaki, Dunn, Van IJzendoorn and Kontopoulou, 2006; Vorria, Ntouma & Rutter, 2015) and a sample of Chinese girls adopted to the US (Tan and Jordan-Arthur, 2012)). No systematic reviews or meta-analyses of studies of internationally adopted adults were available.

As described in section 2.1.1., this review of midlife studies progresses in order of relevance to my own study. It starts with the findings from the BCAS, then turns to qualitative research involving other cohorts and finally draws together the full range of evidence from all identified studies of international adoption in midlife.

Although the four other qualitative studies use thematic analysis rather than phenomenological analysis, they are based on interview data and therefore are the closest in structure and design to my own study. The decision about which studies should be considered 'qualitative' was made after close scrutiny of their methodological approaches. For example, Song and Lee (2009) adopted a mixed methods approach: they used a standardised measure of ethnic identity (Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure, Phinney, 1992) but their findings were dependent on a comprehensive thematic analysis of interviews of adopted adults' reports of ethnic and cultural socialisation experiences. Therefore, this study is included in section 2.5 as I examine their approach to the treatment of the qualitative data as well as their findings and conclusions.

By contrast, Irhammar and Bengtsson (2004) used adult attachment interviews, but it is the quantitative categorisation of interview responses that form the bulk of the analysis and reported findings and therefore is addressed in section 2.6.

In order to compare results across studies, three tables provided at the end of this chapter present the samples, methods and findings systematically and following the order in which they are discussed in this review.

Table 2.1 presents all previously published results from the BCAS: analysis of the women's experiences of community connectedness (Rushton et al, 2012), the key findings on comparisons with age-matched adopted and non-adopted women in the UK and childhood predictors of later outcomes (Rushton et al, 2013) and a book which drew out in more detail the main findings in relation to orphanage care, adoptive family life in childhood and adulthood, adult life experiences and reflections on the impact of adoption (Feast et al, 2013a). In order to show the differences between previous work and the current study, the full list of BCAS publications are included in Appendix 1.

Table 2.2 presents the five studies (published in six papers) of internationally adopted adults in midlife based primarily on in=depth analysis of qualitative data, derived from semi-structured interviews (n=4 studies) or open-ended survey questions (n=1 study; Song and Lee, 2009). These studies all explore related topics: internationally adopted adults' experiences of degrading attitudes (Lindblad and Signell, 2008); cultural socialisation (for example, attending organised Korean events; Song and Lee, 2009), feelings about intrusive reactions from strangers towards them and their families (Docan-Morgan, 2010) and, from the same dataset but reported separately, racial derogation and parental coping strategies (Docan-Morgan, 2011); dealing with racism in everyday life (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010) and, finally, displacement, identity and belonging (Reynolds, Ponterotto and Lecker, 2016).

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Table 2.3 presents the remaining six studies (published in 12 papers) of internationally adopted adults identified for this review, which use predominantly quantitative and mixed methods. In contrast to studies reviewed in the previous section, most of these studies share an emphasis on across-group comparisons with non-adopted adults and, in most cases, mental health as the primary outcome domain.

Results related to the same cohort are grouped together in the table: seven papers for a large Dutch cross-sectional study (Tieman et al, 2005; Tieman et al, 2006; Tieman et al, 2008; van den Berg et al, 2008; van der Vegt et al, 2009a; van der Vegt et al, 2009b; van der Vegt et al, 2010). The remaining studies are all reported in single papers: a study of adult attachment based on a sample of 40 internationally adopted adults in Sweden (Irhammar and Bengtsson, 2004); a very large-scale Swedish epidemiological study (von Borczyskowski, Hjern, Lindblad and Vinnerljung, 2006); a US-based study that uses a Web-based survey and focused on ethnic socialisation (Mohanty et al, 2006); a mixed methods cross-sectional US study (McGinnis et al, 2009) and a Dutch cross-sectional study that uses standardised measures such as mental health symptom checklists (Storsbergen, Juffer, van Son and Hart, 2010).

2.5 Qualitative research: findings and methods

2.5.1 Dealing with degrading attitudes (South Korea and Thailand-born female cohort in Sweden)

One Swedish study was based on interviews with 17 young women adopted from South Korea and Thailand (Lindblad and Signell, 2008). Participants were asked about their experiences of '*degrading attitudes related to their geographic origin and physical appearance*' (Lindblad and Signell, 2008: 46). South Korea and Thailand were selected as countries of origin on the basis that these two countries were two major Asian countries for Swedish international adoptions during the period this group were adopted. The authors note the high rate of international adoption into Sweden: 48,000

children born in other countries were adopted by families in Sweden between 1969 and 2007 (Lindblad and Signell, 2008).

The women were aged 25–30 years, with half reported to be aged over 30 years. The majority of participants had been born in South Korea (n = 15) and most (n = 11) lived in the capital city of Stockholm. Age at adoption was mixed: the oldest child was age four years, but the majority (n = 10) arrived before their first birthday. Participants were recruited via adverts on 'adoptee web pages' in Sweden; the adverts explicitly stated the research related to experiences of 'violations' related to geographical origin and appearance. This recruitment strategy fitted the aims of this study, as it specifically aimed to explore difficult experiences. In total, 28 women responded to the advert and 17 chose to participate in the study.

The interview schedule focused on experiences of degrading attitudes and sought details about the people who expressed such attitudes; participants' reactions and strategies for dealing with such attitudes and how they communicated about these experiences (for example, talking to friends or family). The structure was relatively flexible so each individual interview differed depending on the participant's experiences. Interviews were audio-taped and a summarised version of their interview was sent to each participant to add revisions or additional information. These annotated versions formed the dataset used in the analysis (Lindblad and Signell, 2008).

Analysis was carried out by both authors (Lindblad and Signell, 2008). Each started by developing descriptors for parts of the data separately, following 'open coding' procedures. Concepts were then developed through discussion and categories adapted and restructured until a final version was agreed by both researchers. These hierarchical categories were discussed in the paper, with extended quotes by participants or short summaries prepared by the researchers used to illustrate each category.

Three categories of degrading attitudes were described. Degrading sexual attitudes included Asian women being an object of sexual fantasy or assumed

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to be sexually available. Examples included comments but also being touched in public without invitation. Non-sexual degrading attitudes related to ethnicity involved racist comments, even from extended family members, or witnessing hostility expressed about immigrants. Although such incidents were less common in the workplace, more than half the women reported experiences in situations such as job interviews or when visiting clients for work. Other degrading attitudes related to adoption: expectations that they should be 'grateful' for being adopted to Sweden or excessive questions from strangers about their origins or adoptive family (Lindblad and Signell, 2008).

Although most of the people who displayed such attitudes were described as middle-aged men, older adults also used insulting language ('yellow woman' being one example). Remarks from children were usually assumed to be a reflection of their parents' attitudes (Lindblad and Signell, 2008).

The women's emotional reactions were described as varying '*from sadness, surprise and shame through to discomfort or anger*' (Lindlad and Signell, 2008: 52). One woman found such experiences made her feel that her Asian appearance was such a 'heavy burden' that at one point she removed all the mirrors from her house to avoid seeing her own reflection. Some women reported that their ability to form or maintain relationships with men was affected by wondering about their assumptions about Asian women. Most of the women felt able to confide in other people about these experiences, but reactions were not always supportive. Some women felt hesitant to discuss the issue with their adoptive parents.

The article also explored strategies for dealing with displays of degrading attitudes and how the women communicated with friends or family about these experiences. Four strategies were identified. First, and less commonly, women reacted passively in order to minimise the interaction. Second, they tried to minimise the emotional impact, for example by thinking about other positive aspects of their lives or taking a 'matter of fact' attitude. Third, they focused on the perpetrator, for example, by responding '*Well, that's how **you** look upon it*' (Lindblad and Signell, 2008: 52, emphasis in original). Fourth,

some women actively avoided being exposed to such attitudes, by making choices about how they dressed or where they spent their time (avoiding nightclubs, for example). Other avoidance strategies included talking loudly in order to be overheard: to make it clear they spoke Swedish, or that the older man they were having dinner with was their adoptive father.

2.5.2 Ethnic identities and cultural socialisation (mixed cohort in the US)

A study of 67 adopted Korean American adults used a mixed methods approach to examine ethnic identity and retrospectively recalled 'cultural socialisation strategies' (Song and Lee, 2009). Cultural socialisation (sometimes referred to as 'ethnic and cultural socialisation') undertaken by adoptive families includes activities such as celebrating the birth culture of their adopted children or finding opportunities for children to develop relationships with others who share their racial or ethnic origins (McGinnis et al, 2009; Song and Lee, 2009).

The participants (55 women, 11 men, one unidentified) were aged between 18 and 49 years (mean = 27 years, SD = 6.57). Their average age at adoption was 22 months (median = 9 months; range = 0–195 months); 60% had only one placement prior to adoption and 28% had two pre-adoption placements (which proportions of these were placements in orphanage care is not specified) (Song and Lee, 2009). This cohort of adopted adults was a highly educated group, as the majority had an undergraduate degree or higher (61%) or 'some college' (33%; presumably a degree not completed at point of study). Sampling was based on convenience (participants recruited via adoption agencies or adoption conferences) and snowballing (participants recruited via Korean American students who passed on information to Korean adopted adults they knew) (Song and Lee, 2009).

Participants completed a demographics form and the Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure, which includes items about ethnic self-identification and sense of belonging to and pride in one's ethnic group (Phinney, 1992). The

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data were collected by survey, although the mode of collection (for example, paper or internet) was not specified. The survey comprised open-ended questions across four developmental periods: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and adulthood, plus a final question:

> *In all of the efforts that your adoptive parents have made to teach/share with you about your birth culture, what was the most important? And why?* (Song and Lee, 2009: 24)

These survey responses provided the researchers with retrospective and current accounts of cultural socialisation practices within participants' families, which were thematically analysed to produce seven different categories of cultural socialisation. Although extended extracts from the survey data were not presented, concrete examples that emerged from the data (rather than being suggested by the researchers) were given throughout the paper.

Three of the seven categories were found to be positively correlated with ethnic identity: living in diverse, heterogeneous communities (categorised as 'diverse milieu'), developing an awareness of what it means to be a racial and ethnic minority and an adopted individual ('racial awareness'), and visiting Korea and searching for one's birth/foster families ('birth roots'). A significant positive correlation was also found between cultural activities experienced during young adulthood (ages 18–21 years) and ethnic identity (Song and Lee, 2009). Participants showed an increasing interest over time in 'lived experience' activities, such as socialising with Korean people or visiting Korea as they entered adulthood, as opposed to cultural activities such as eating Korean food or learning a Korean martial art (Song and Lee, 2009).

Wide-scale organised ethnic and cultural socialisation activities are a relatively recent development. For example, summer 'culture camps' have become popular in the US for internationally adopted children (McGinnis et al, 2009), but were not available when the women in my sample were growing up. Even today, such activities in the UK tend to be on a smaller scale; for example, one-day/half-day events rather than activities involve children

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spending extended periods of time together away from their adoptive parents (UK Network for Intercounty Adoption, personal correspondence).

2.5.3 Dealing with other people's reactions (Korean-born cohort in the US)

This study of 34 adults (26 women, eight men) adopted from South Korea by white American parents examined their experiences of 'intrusive interactions' from strangers (Docan-Morgan, 2010). Participants were aged 18–40 years (mean = 26 years; SD 6.57) and just over half (53%) grew up with another sibling adopted from Korea (including three participants who were adopted with a biological sibling). Only two participants (6%) grew up as only-children. Twenty-six (76%) described the areas they grew up in as mostly white communities, as opposed to three people (9%) raised in racially diverse areas (with the remainder somewhere in between).

Interview participants were recruited via emails sent to student groups and an organisation for Asian adopted adults (15 participants) and via an international gathering for Korean-born adopted people held in Seoul in 2007 (eight participants). Subsequently, an email sent to attendees from the gathering elicited a further 11 responses to an online survey. The inclusion criteria were that participants were internationally adopted from Korea by white parents and were aged over 18 years (Docan-Morgan, 2010). From the description of the study and the examples of questions, it appears that the term 'intrusive interactions' was not used during data collection, presumably to avoid introducing bias into the interviewees' responses. Instead questions were phrased more neutrally to elicit information about previous interactions and how these made the participants feel (Docan-Morgan, 2010).

A written interview schedule of open-ended questions was developed, which the interviewer adapted for each interview according to the participants' responses. The questions in the survey were based on the interview schedule (but without adaptation for individual participants) (Docan-Morgan, 2010). In the analysis, themes were first identified via the interview data (using three

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criteria: (1) recurrence of reported experiences, (2) repetition of key words/phrases and (3) forcefulness (for example in volume or voice inflection). Initial analysis by the author was followed by independent examination by a trained coder, with broad agreement and any discrepancies were resolved via discussion. Survey data were then analysed according to the themes identified in the interview data; no additional themes emerged from the survey data (Docan-Morgan, 2010).

Docan-Morgan (2010) used discourse dependency theory to informed her analysis, which is defined as having two dimensions: 'internal boundary management' (how family members communicate with each other and thus create a family identity) and 'external boundary management' (how families explain and describe themselves to people outside of the family).

Nearly all the participants (n = 31 of 34) could recall examples of intrusive interactions, although the nature of these experiences varied and nearly one-third (n = 10) reported such incidents to be rare. Five types of interactions were identified as intrusive: relational comments/questions (such as 'Is she your *real* sister?'), compliments ('Asian babies are so cute!'), stares, mistaken identities (such as a brother being mistaken for his adoptive sister's boyfriend) and adoptee-only interactions (comments made only to the adopted person, not within earshot of family members). Across all types of interactions, adopted people described feelings of being objectified and that these interactions were based on other people's assumptions about what constitutes a 'real family' (Docan-Morgan, 2010).

The participants reported different strategies employed by their adoptive parents, with mixed views about which approaches were experienced as the most helpful. Sometimes parents used humour to deflect unwanted attention, while pride and occasionally defensiveness were also displayed (Docan-Morgan, 2010).

Docan-Morgan theorises that interactions based on mistaken identities and relational questions/comments touch on particularly sensitive concepts:

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>*These two identities – ethnic and familial – are central to one's self-perception, and it is therefore unsurprising that this type of intrusive interaction [mistaken identities/relationships] was particularly challenging for participants. Similar to relational questions/comments, mistaken identities/relationships highlight the discourse dependent nature of adoptive family members' bonds. Rather than being unquestionable, these bonds were the source of others' confusion and had to be reaffirmed through language.* (2010: 148)

Some participants reported feeling uncomfortable when faced with situations in which they lacked information (for example, questions about birth families) or had to provide private information (for example, in filling in a 'family tree' during a primary school project). However, questions were not always experienced as intrusive. Some participants described memories of sharing information with friends as '*not a big deal*' (Docan-Morgan, 2010: 148), although as the majority of the article focuses on dealing with negative situations, this point is not elaborated in detail.

Only a small number of adults recalled no or very few intrusive interactions, and this appears to have been linked to location (Docan-Morgan, 2010). Such participants either grew up in small communities where most people already knew their 'story', or grew up in areas with significant Asian populations (adopted or not). One participant reported that Korean adoptions were common enough in her large multi-cultural city that '*People just recognise the relationship*' (Docan-Morgan, 2010: 149).

Two reasons for the feelings being uncomfortable were identified: participants preferred to 'blend in' and also wanted to reject any sense of pity. Docan-Morgan refers briefly to 'several' participants (numbers were not specified) who reported that they viewed themselves as white while growing up, a finding that echoes other research with Korean-American adopted adults (McGinnis et al, 2009).

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Although more and more families are being formed through adoption (Volkman, 2005) and families are being defined more broadly, narrow expectations of family still persist, defining adoptive families as second best. Intrusive interactions serve as tangible evidence of these definitions. (Docan-Morgan, 2010: 154)

In a separate paper, the author reports on additional analysis with the same data and following the same procedures, which examined participants' experiences of 'racial derogation' (Docan-Morgan, 2011). A shift in tone is perceptible here. While the first paper supported relatively positive conclusions about parental responses to intrusive reactions (Docan-Morgan, 2010), accounts of how well parents were able to deal with racial derogation were more ambivalent (Docan-Morgan, 2011).

Three main types of racial derogation were identified from the interview and survey data: appearance attacks (comments or gestures mocking their physical appearance), perceived ethnicity attacks (ethnic stereotyping such as racist name-calling or gestures such as mock karate) and physical attacks (including throwing of rocks, being tripped up or fighting). Docan-Morgan highlights the commonalities across interviews, stating:

> *Perhaps the most striking finding… [related to types of racial derogation] is the repetition across adoptees' experiences. There was very little variation, in terms of the names adoptees were called, the ways in which their appearance was mocked, or the gestures that they received.* (2011: 344)

Of particular relevance to my studies is the suggestion that there may be gender differences in types of racial derogation and reactions to these:

> *Male participants were more likely to report being involved (or being expected or tempted to be involved) in physical attacks or fights than were female participants, although female participants were not exempt from these types of interactions. It remains unknown whether male*

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> *adoptees are more likely than female adoptees to receive physical attacks due to their race, whether they tend to respond with physical attacks when provoked, or both.* (Docan-Morgan, 2011: 349)

In contrast to the first paper, in this later paper parental responses were described more critically. Some adopted adults recalled talking openly with their parents about their experiences of racial derogation, and found it helpful, for example, when parents were able to discuss what they had experienced without minimizing it, even if they could not suggest solutions. Others avoided raising the topic with their parents: a category Docan-Morgan subdivides into 'perceived parental unresponsiveness' (where the adopted person did not disclose such experiences because they assumed their parents would be unwilling or unable to help) and 'past parental unresponsiveness' (where non-disclosure resulted from feeling that parents had previously given unhelpful responses or not taken the issue seriously). A related theme was adopted people exercising 'self-protection' and avoiding the subject because of the desire to 'blend in' and not draw attention to difference (Docan-Morgan, 2011).

In her later paper (Docan-Morgan, 2011), the author justifiably claims the study contributes new evidence by focusing not on ethnic identification development or adjustment but on racial derogation, and notes the limitation of a study on child–parent interactions based on data from one party only. Although the author grounds her findings in discourse dependency (a theory not specifically related to adoption research), the conclusions do chime with evidence from domestic adoption research and theory that open communication about adoption is associated with better outcomes (for example, Kirk, 1964; Neil, 2009).

2.5.4 Dealing with racism (mixed cohort in Sweden)

From Sweden, a study with some overlap was also published in 2010, entitled '*Adoption with complications: conversations with adoptees and adoptive parents on everyday racism and ethnic identity*' (Tigervall and Hübinette,

2010). Twenty internationally adopted adults and eight parents of internationally adopted children participated in face-to-face interviews, which were taped and transcribed.

The adopted adults were aged between 21 and 48 years (mean age not given); ten were adopted from Korea, while the other half were from a range of African (n = 3), Latin American (n = 2) and other countries of origin (n = 5). The parents who were interviewed had adopted children aged between 0 and 35 years (mean age not given) and the examples given of countries of origin were mainly in Asia. Distribution of gender was not specified by the researchers (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010).

The interview schedule is described only as 'semi-structured' and covering a range of topics (including images of different ethnic minority groups; feelings of belongingness to Swedish society), with the data on dealing with racial discrimination forming the focus of this paper (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010; other papers have been published in Swedish). Although explicit description of research methods is an important criterion in producing high-quality qualitative research (Silverman, 2010), there is no detail given of the processes involved in analysing the data, which makes it difficult to give a critique of the methodology; neither is there any discussion of the strengths and limitations of the study. Instead the authors describe their approach as based on 'social-constructivist' concepts, meaning that it starts from the point that:

> *Concepts like Swedishness and whiteness are continually (re)produced, and have never had any authentic or original essence from the beginning. Concepts like ethnicity and race are likewise always relational and embedded within different historicized power relations and structures, and ethnic and racial identities are always negotiable and under construction, and never finished or final.*
> (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010: 493)

Participants described day-to-day experiences of discrimination, for example being followed in shops or facing heavy scrutiny at border and customs controls in comparison to their white Swedish peers (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010). Adoptive parents in the study discussed seeing their children excluded in the playground or sandpit, but that other parents' reactions and behaviour sometimes changed when they realised the children were internationally adopted by white Swedish parents and were not the children of recent immigrants. According to the authors, the high rates of international adoption to Sweden – 50,000 children by the early 2000s – make the status of internationally adopted people relatively recognisable to people in Sweden (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010).

The authors also described how the adopted people and their families faced regularly being asked questions about their background. Participants' views varied; some put such questions down to 'mere curiosity' while others reported feeling regularly harassed (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010).

In general, the study seems to adhere to the principles of constructivist approaches, which are based on underlying assumptions that the relationship between researchers and participants is interactive and realities are therefore co-constructed and multiple (see Guba and Lincoln, 2005; or the five-paradigm model in Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008). A corollary of this approach is that only ideographic statements are possible: in other words, conclusions are – to lesser or greater extents – context-bound rather than generalisable 'facts' (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008) but the authors' claims in this article do not always fit within this approach.

Two examples below show where findings of great interest – and which offer a potentially very helpful addition to existing research – lead to more generalised statements that strayed somewhat from the data presented in the article:

> *When the child in question is recognised and identified as a transnationally adopted child, the [other] parents start to 'behave*

normally' and the democratic principle of equal treatment is suddenly reactivated and reinstalled. This playground situation can be seen as an allegory for how a discriminating society is structured and functions: only white children/people are allowed in the sandbox/Sweden, and children/people of colour can be excluded by way of surveillance coming from Swedish people/authorities. On the other hand, then a non-white person is acknowledged as a legitimate Swedish subject by way of adoptive parents/judicial documents. (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010: 497)

The original experience is clearly described and backed up by interview data: a memorable example of discrimination in daily life, where internationally adopted children are unfairly excluded because of the colour of their skin and the assumptions projected onto them. Yet in creating an extended metaphor from this experience, the authors do not cite other migration research in Sweden to help clarify and offer evidence of this link (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010). The introduction to the article notes briefly that race-based discrimination is documented in Swedish migration research and suggests that migration research and adoption research have yet to learn substantially from each other. As Sweden produces much of the research on internationally adopted adults, this is a potentially valuable contribution to understanding and interpreting this research. However, without further elaboration, the link above between experiences in the sandbox and immigration/legal processes feels somewhat unsubstantiated.

Similarly, towards the end of the paper the authors conclude that:

In spite of a compact belongingness to Swedishness and Swedish culture, having a Swedish citizenship, a Swedish language, a Swedish and Christian name, and above all, being fully integrated within a white Swedish family network, adoptees are obviously constantly racialized in everyday life, as their non-white bodies are localized to a certain geographical origin, connected to a certain ethnicity, nationality, language, religion and race, and sometimes also linked to certain

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> *cultural and mental characteristics.* (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010:
> 504)

Here, it is the words '*obviously constantly*' that feel somewhat out of proportion in an otherwise useful summary of the participants' experiences. The above comment suggests the authors view their findings as widely generalisable, and indeed the results echo many of the experiences in Docan-Morgan's (2011) study from the US. However, where Docan-Morgan explicitly noted the need for further research with other samples (for example, comparing those who grew up in racially homogeneous and racially diverse areas), here the authors appear to suggest that their sample is representative of internationally adopted adults across Sweden (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010). A much clearer description of the sample and how this relates to the overall population of internationally adopted adults in Sweden would be needed to enable the reader to assess whether results could be extrapolated in this way.

Despite these criticisms, the authors make two important points that deserve attention in future research. The first is that participants report feeling they have to 'explain' themselves to other people: an experience that chimes with adoptive parents' reports of strangers' questions about their children (for example, Suter and Ballard, 2009) as well as evidence from other internationally adopted adults (Docan-Morgan, 2010, above). In particular – and potentially different from ethnic minority Swedes raised within their birth families – many internationally adopted people have Swedish first and last names. One participant, adopted from Korea, was described as follows:

> *He feels that every time he meets a new white Swede, he has to*
> *explain the dissonance between why he inhabits a non-white body, and*
> *why he in spite of that speaks fluent Swedish, and has a Western and*
> *Christian name.* (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010: 504)

The second point relates back to the gap between adoption and migration research, in particular the almost complete absence of discussions about race

and prejudice in Swedish international adoption research described in the opening to the article (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010: 489):

> *Race has to be taken into consideration by Swedish adoption research and the Swedish adoption community, to be able to fully grasp the high preponderance of psychic ill health among adult adoptees as found by quantitative adoption research*.

This is a valid criticism. For example, I examined three widely cited and large-scale epidemiological studies of internationally adopted adults in relation to this issue. Among the three studies – all of which focus on mental health – only one attempted to engage with these issues in its discussion by citing research on identities and racial prejudice in the labour market (von Borczyskowski et al, 2006). The two other papers (not reviewed in this chapter due to the mean age of the cohort being under 26 years) included only passing references to this potentially important aspect of internationally adopted adults' experiences (Hjern et al, 2002; Hjern, Vinnerljung and Lindblad, 2004). Because the research designs relied on information recorded for other purposes (such as health and welfare records), it would not have been possible for the authors to add new questions about racism or related experiences, but it is striking that these topics feature very little in the discussions and interpretation of the findings.

2.5.5 Displacement, identity and belonging (Korean-born cohort in the US)

The most recently completed study was the only one to use a phenomenological approach in examining the lived experiences of fourteen Korean-born, US-raised transracially adopted young adults (Reynolds et al, 2016). As with the current study, this study used a psychological phenomenological mode of inquiry (Moustakas, 1994; see chapter 3) in order to focus on *'the subjective lived experience of participants in relation to a psychological concept or construct, in this case exploring the essence of what*

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it means to be a transracial Korean American adoptee' (Reynolds et al, 2016: 232). In line with the phenomenological approach (see chapter 3), the authors explicitly worked to 'bracket out' their pre-existing knowledge and kept memos throughout the interview process, which provided an additional source of data.

The participants (nine women and five men) were aged between 26 and 30 years (mean age 27.6 years). The initial recruitment strategy was to identify participants adopted before the age of 2 years; during recruitment the researchers decided to include one additional participant who had come forward but was adopted at the age of four. Six participants had returned to visit Korea as adolescents or adults, of whom four had searched for birth family and, at the point of the research, three had met with birth family members. All participants were college graduates, and the majority had completed or were undertaking post-graduate study. Twelve participants had grown up in North-eastern America. There were greater differences in their adoptive families, in particular family constellations: eight participants had at least one other Korean adoptive sibling, two participants were only children, three had siblings who were the children (or in one case, the niece of) the adoptive parents, one had step-siblings (Reynolds et al, 2016).

The lead author was also a participant, and was interviewed by one of the other authors to elicit his perspective as a Korean-born transracially adopted adult. This was justified on the basis of using a 'heuristic' approach, which '*draws explicitly on the intense personal experiences of the researcher'* (Patton, 1990: 172) and uses these as a starting point for collecting data from others who share the same experience. In their conclusion, the authors clearly signpost that this position may have brought advantages as an 'insider' researcher (for example, some participants may have viewed this as a benefit) and also limitations in that *'the findings may have been filtered through a biased lens'* (Reynolds et al, 2016: 246). This commitment to openness and reflexivity (see Chapter 3) aids the reader in understanding the context of the research and therefore the findings.

The researchers conducted semi-structured interviews, starting by asking participants to share their life story and then, if not addressed already, further questions were asked about *'identity and identity over time; childhood and upbringing; and decision to return to Korea and search for birth family search as it affects their family, partners and friends'* (Reynolds et al, 2016: 235). Brief demographic information was also collected via pre-interview questionnaire.

The interview data were analysed by all three authors and the presentation of this analysis included a well-defined figure outlining the main 'clusters of meaning' identified via the phenomenological analysis and a comparison of participants' identity navigation against existing models of identity development for Asian Americans (Kim, 1981, cited in Reynolds et al, 2016) and adopted people (Grotevant, 1997, cited in Reynolds et al, 2016).

The participants' reported experiences echo findings in other studies described above, in particular in relation to feelings such as the following:

> *Participants indicated that others often made inaccurate assumptions about how they would identify or label themselves (assuming that they are culturall Asian/Korean, or assuming that they are culturally White once adoptee status is declared), in part due to the invisible nature of their adoption status* (Reynolds et al, 2016: 236)

An additional area of exploration in this study adds a new dimension: considering transracially adopted people's experiences alongside those of 'bi-racial' or mixed raced people. The authors draw parallels between these experiences of having dual (or more) influences on ethnic identity development:

> *Similar to biracial individuals, adoptees may experience racism for being Asian and simultaneously feel discriminated against by the Asian/Asian American community. Participants shared that their*

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> *experiences were often confusing because the dominant and Asian communities both were rejecting of adoptees, and adoptees were often seen as "not really Asian" or "not Asian enough"* (Reynolds et al, 2016: 242)

Exploring these parallels offers a useful and alternative starting point for considering the experiences of transracially adopted people. The authors do not discuss the potential differences (for example, mixed race people may grow up with at least one parent and/or extended family members who share and reflect part of the individual's racial or national heritage, which is not usually the case in transracial adoption). The interview data cited in this section, however, includes one participant who explicitly makes these links himself and considers the similarities and differences himself: *'It's very akin to the biracial experience, and it's like their division manifests itself on their face … whereas ours is subsurface'* (Reynolds et al, 2016, 242-243).

The authors are careful to highlight the potential limitations of a study that focuses more on understanding and less on generalisability. In addition, as the authors note, early adulthood is not the end of the story: *'negotiating identity and processing the experience of adoption may be a challenging lifelong endeavour, a relationship adoptees must continually navigate and renegotiate'* (Reynolds et al, 2016: 236). The current study offers an opportunity to test this notion of the 'lifelong endeavour' empirically by gaining the perspectives of 68 women in their mid-40s to mid-50s on how they appraise their experiences in midlife.

2.6 Review of additional evidence on internationally adopted adults in midlife

In this review so far I have concentrated on the research that relates most closely to this study: first, previous findings in relation to the same cohort and, second, other studies that have used qualitative methods to explore internationally adopted adults' experiences in midlife. Below I present a synthesis of the findings from all the studies of internationally adopted adults

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identified via my literature search. This section provides a broad picture of the evidence from across a range of methodologies. Findings reported in the previous sections are briefly revisited where relevant.

I start with the topics most relevant to my study: adoption appraisal and ethnic, racial and adoptive identities in midlife. Next I consider adult outcomes related to psychological adjustment and social relationships. Then I summarise the limited findings to date on childhood factors as predictors of midlife outcome: pre-adoption experiences, age at placement and adoptive family environments.

2.6.1 Adoption appraisal

Apart from BCAS, only one study has specifically collected data on adoption appraisal (Storsbergen et al, 2010). The outcomes of 53 Greek-born adults adopted into Holland were compared with those of a Dutch-born general population sample. After across-group comparisons on psychological health, the within-group part of the study measured two '*aspects of the adoption experience that may be related to the psychological adjustment of internationally adopted adults*' (Storsbergen et al, 2010: 192) as follows:

1. Search status was categorised by whether the adopted person had ever undertaken, was currently undertaking or had never undertaken a search for information about their birth parents.

2. Two questions asking people how they rate their adoption experiences on a five-point scale from very positive to very negative (these items were used in the BCAS and will be discussed further in Chapter 5). The researchers predicted that a negative appraisal of adoption would be associated with poorer outcomes.

Search status was initially found to be associated with poorer mental health, well-being and self-esteem. People who either *had* searched or *were currently* searching for birth parents reported higher rates of difficulties. For example,

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mean scores on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965) were significantly lower for these two groups (non-searchers = 36.0 (SD 2.6); searched in the past = 30.9 (SD 5.8); searchers = 32.1 (SD 6.1); $F_{(2,50)} = 5.13$, $p = 0.04$). Subsequent multivariate analysis using hierarchical regression showed that after socio-demographic variables and current life situation had been taken into account, 'adoption variables' (search status and adoption appraisal taken together) helped to explain 19% of the variance for mental health problems, 28% of the variance for well-being and 10% of the variance self-esteem (Storsbergen et al, 2009).

One finding is of particular interest to the current study: whether someone rated their adoption negatively (rather than neutrally or positively) was a better predictor of psychological adjustment than whether they had engaged in a search for their birth parents. A negative appraisal of adoption was associated significantly with both more mental health problems ($\beta = -0.37$, $p < 0.01$) and lower well-being ($\beta = 0.47$, $p < 0.001$). The association between adoption appraisal and self-esteem also approached significance ($\beta = 0.26$, $p = 0.06$) (Storsbergen et al, 2009).

2.6.2 Ethnic, racial and adoptive identities

Whether white families can enable children from ethnic minorities to develop a positive, cohesive sense of self is at the core of debates about transracial adoption, whether domestic or international. The specific experiences that arise from being transracially adopted have been referred to as 'disjointedness' (Rushton and Minnis, 1997) or the 'transracial adoption paradox' (Lee, 2003). Most research evidence comes from domestic transracial adoptions, particularly in the US. One recent literature review of nine studies examining the relationship between ethnic identity and psychological adjustment across transracially adopted cohorts (both domestic and international) found mixed results, with some studies identifying significant associations and others not (Castle, Knight and Watters, 2011).

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In looking at evidence from studies of internationally adopted adults, one cross-sectional study is particularly rigorous and therefore merits close attention: a US-based Web survey exploring self-esteem, ethnic identity and cultural socialisation attracted 82 responses (Mohanty et al, 2006). Detailed background information that might impact on findings is reported. This includes not only age of participants (mean 29 years; range 18–44; SD 5.96); median age at adoption (10 months; range 1–156 months) and country of adoption (60% Korea, 23% Vietnam, 17% other countries) but also self-reported ethnic group (38% Korean, 22% Vietnamese, 19% Asian American/Korean American, 15% other groups; percentages from the original publication). Pre-adoption settings are also categorised: 67% orphanage, 22% foster care, 5% multiple placements and 5% other settings. Relatively high levels of education and adoptive family income are noted (Mohanty et al, 2006).

Data were collected via three scales: (1) the commonly used Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), (2) a 22-item ethnic identity scale developed for the study that comprised two sub-scales (sense of belonging to one's adoptive family and ethnic self-perception) and (3) a 14-item cultural socialisation scale including adapted versions of items from a scale created for adoptive parents (Massatti, Vonk and Gregoire, 2004).

The limitations section in their study is also particularly comprehensive, and particularly strong on noting methodological factors: for example, the authors stress that cross-sectional studies cannot identify causal pathways and that retrospective self-reported data '*might be due to elevated due to method variance, such as socially desirable reporting of kind, sensitive parenting and positive feelings about oneself*' (Mohanty et al, 2006: 168). However, the issue of national context is overlooked: 79% of participants were from the US and the remainder from 'other Western countries', yet the potential differences within this group and in comparison to groups from other countries are not addressed.

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On average the adopted adults reported good self-esteem (Mohanty et al, 2006). The majority agreed that their adoptive parents did not provide many opportunities for cultural socialisation: for example, few had experienced '[including] traditions from my birth culture, such as ethnic holidays, in my family celebration' or '[living] in an integrated neighbourhood with neighbours who reflect my race' ('not at all' responses were 79% and 81%, respectively).

Several significant correlations were identified. Cultural socialisation correlated positively with belongingness and negatively with marginality (a dimension of ethnic identity). Self-esteem also correlated strongly with belongingness and marginality (in the same directions as before) and less strongly with ethnic identity (Mohanty et al, 2006). Regression analysis identified that belongingness and marginality mediated the relationship between cultural socialisation and self-esteem. In other words:

> *Intercountry adoptees' self-esteem was related to a feeling that they belonged to their adoptive family as well as believing that they are not marginal in the majority culture, both of these qualities arising from the opportunities to get involved with their birth culture.* (Mohanty et al, 2006: 167)

As noted earlier, one of the qualitative studies from the US found that Korean-born adopted adults whose parents had encouraged ethnic and cultural socialisation activities when they were younger were more likely to have developed a positive ethnic identity in adulthood (Song and Lee, 2009).

Although not based on adult samples, results that concur with this have been found in quantitative studies with *adolescent* cohorts adopted into the US by white families: for 241 Korean-born adolescents, adopters' support of ethnic socialisation predicted positive ethnic identity, which in turn was associated with better subjective well-being (Yoon, 2000), and for 234 Chinese-born adopted adolescents, greater ethnic socialisation predicted better self-esteem (Tan and Jordan-Arthur, 2012).

However, a survey-based study of internationally adopted adults published by the influential Donaldson Adoption Institute in the US (see www.adoptioninstitute.org) notes even in its title the potential limits of such cultural socialisation activities: *Beyond Culture Camp: promoting healthy identity formation in adoption* (McGinnis et al, 2009). This study used a mixed methods approach. Selective findings relevant to the current study are presented here.

The study examined 179 Korean-born internationally adopted adults' self-reported adoptive and ethnic identities and views of their own experiences, compared with 156 white US-born domestically adopted adults (McGinnis et al, 2009). Of the Korean-born participants, 82% were female (18% male) and their mean age was 31 years (range and SD are not specified, although all participants were aged over 18 years). The comparison group was similar in gender distribution but mean age was significantly older at 44 years (again, range and SD not reported) (McGinnis et al, 2009). Mean income for the domestically adopted group was also significantly higher than their internationally adopted counterparts, but the authors speculate this may be linked to the differences in mean age. Both groups were well-educated, with more than half (52%) of the Korean-born participants holding an undergraduate degree (McGinnis et al, 2009).

Participants responded to an online survey and were recruited, as with the studies outlined above, via adoption groups and networks. Given the involvement of the Donaldson Adoption Institute, the resulting sample represents a greater geographical spread as well as larger numbers than those in other studies (McGinnis et al, 2009).

One of the most notable findings from this study was that being adopted became an increasingly important issue with age for both the Korean-born and the white US-born groups (McGinnis et al, 2009). This finding contradicts the assumption that the greatest difficulties will be faced when an adopted person enters adolescence, as adoption is seen to add an additional layer of complexity to normal processes of identity development (McGinnis et al,

2009). For the Korean-born group, race/ethnicity was of central importance at all ages, peaking in adulthood (when 81% agreed it was important) and 22% agreed with the statement 'I wish I was a different race than I am'.

Qualitative responses to open-ended questions indicated that coping with discrimination was a major aspect of coming to terms with their racial/ethnic identity for those participants adopted from Korea. A majority (78%) reported that they had either considered themselves to be white or wanted to be white when they were children (McGinnis et al, 2009). As with Song and Lee (2009), the 'lived' experiences of cultural socialisation were reported as most meaningful to participants: travelling to Korea, having role models who reflected their racial/ethnic origins and living/working/studying in ethnically diverse areas (McGinnis et al, 2009).

The study also found that higher self-esteem, along with gender (being female) and higher levels of life satisfaction were associated with feeling more comfortable with their adoption identity for the Korean-born adults in their sample (McGinnis et al, 2009). These patterns were different from those of the white domestically adopted participants, for whom higher life satisfaction and living in a more ethnically homogeneous area were associated with feeling more comfortable with their adoption identity (McGinnis et al, 2009). For the Korean-born respondents, self-esteem was the most significant predictor of feeling comfortable with their racial/ethnic identity (McGinnis et al, 2009).

2.6.3 Psychological adjustment

Across the quantitative studies, mental health or well-being was explored in the majority, but only four studies used across-group comparisons based on standardised mental health measures or indicators. Previous studies with younger cohorts had identified raised risks for serious mental health problems: for example, one study using different combinations of data extracted from the Swedish national registers (including clinical hospital records and national court statistics) found internationally adopted adults aged

between 13 and 27 were at greater risk than a general population group for a range of poorer outcomes: suicide, suicide attempts, psychiatric admissions, drug/alcohol misuse and having a criminal record (Hjern et al, 2002). Rates of problems for the internationally adopted groups were more comparable with those for second-generation immigrants (Hjern et al, 2002), although the study was limited to data collected via the national registers, which means variables that might provide some context cannot be explored to unpick this finding further.

von Borczyskowski et al (2006) used a similar design to Hjern et al's (2002) study to extend this approach to mid-adulthood. In a Swedish study based on national health discharge and 'cause of death' registers, they found higher risks for suicide attempts and suicide death among internationally adopted adults (n = 6,065) than domestically adopted adults (n = 7,340) as well as the Swedish-born general population (n = 1,274,312). The confidence intervals for these results are notably narrower, although with a smaller sample, than in previous Swedish epidemiological studies (suicide attempt, risk ratio 4.5 (95% CI 3.7–5.5 times); suicide death (risk ratio 3.6 (95% CI 2.6–5.2)). The relative risk was higher for women than for men, meaning that the gap between internationally adopted and non-adopted women was higher than the gap between the two male groups (von Borczyskowski et al, 2006).

The size of these very large-scale samples may help to explain why infrequent behaviours such as suicide are picked up in these but not other studies. Closer examination of the data serves as a reminder that, overall, the proportion of internationally adopted people with such severe poor outcomes is a small minority. For example, in the earliest of the Swedish epidemiological studies, 92% of the internationally adopted young adults had no record of severe mental health problems or social maladjustment on any of the measures used (Hjern et al, 2002).

It is important to ensure that both aspects of results like these are recognised. It is a positive finding that the majority of internationally adopted adults do not experience pronounced mental health problems, but even a small increase in

risks must be taken seriously when the outcomes under examination are as serious as suicide and psychiatric admissions, given the enormous impact for the individuals and families involved. Article titles and abstracts, which cover only brief 'headlines', can obscure some of the complexities, for example, by focusing only on the ratio of raised risks without clarifying the proportions of those affected in relation to the overall sample. However, the tight word limits allowed by most journals often make it difficult to include very detailed explanations.

Moving away from Sweden, in a large Dutch study, Tieman et al (2005) found that internationally adopted adults from a range of countries of origin (n = 1,484; age range 24–30 years) were more likely than an age-matched general population sample to meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder or substance misuse or dependence. Adopted and non-adopted women were more likely to have an anxiety disorder than men; men were more likely to meet the criteria for a disruptive disorder or substance misuse. Adopted men, however, showed greater prevalence of mood disorders than non-adopted men. No such evidence was found when comparing the female groups. An earlier finding, based on data collected from the same cohort aged 14–18 years, had shown an increased risk for a disruptive order, but this was not replicated in the data from adulthood (Tieman et al, 2005). The availability of data collected from parents on mental health problems in childhood and adolescence, combined with data from the adopted people in adulthood, was a significant advantage in this study. A separate paper, as part of the same longitudinal study, compared biologically related and non-related adopted siblings and found that both adopted adult and adoptive parent reports indicated that genetic factors had greater influence on internalising problems, while environmental factors had more influence on externalising problems (van den Berg et al, 2008). Subsequent papers reporting on the same Dutch sample explored the within-group links between early childhood adversities and adulthood anxiety, and are reported later.

A different approach is demonstrated in a separate Dutch cross-sectional study that compared adults adopted from orphanage care in Greece (n = 53;

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30 men, 23 women; mean age 29 years, range 25–36 years) with an age-matched non-adopted general population sample. The adopted men were found to have elevated rates of depression, but no other statistically significant differences in psychological adjustment on the selected measures (Storsbergen et al, 2010). The authors note that their overall findings of 'adequate adjustment' for the adopted adults as a group may be influenced by the relatively high quality of care in the Greek orphanage. Mean age at adoption was also relatively young at 9 months (SD 8.58; Storsbergen et al, 2010).

The range of samples and the lack in most cases of pre-adoption data make it difficult to draw strong conclusions on the long-term relationship between orphanage care, international adoption and psychological adjustment. Looking across the studies that employ measures of mental health, results are heterogeneous, but with a pattern of particularly poor outcomes for small sub-samples in larger studies. While the evidence of elevated risks of severe mental health problems is limited to a minority of the internationally adopted groups in all the studies discussed here, it cannot be dismissed. As with younger cohorts (McCall, 2011), enduring effects were found in the majority of samples, although the extent, domains and proportion affected vary.

2.6.4 Social relationships

Irhammar and Bengtsson (2004) used the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (George, Kaplan and Main, 1985) with a sample of 40 internationally adopted adults raised in Sweden (mean age 28 years; 57% adopted after the age of 18 months). The AAI involves specialist interviews, based on which researchers assign participants' attachment styles to pre-defined classifications: dismissive (inconsistent, contradictory reports of attachment-related relationships), preoccupied (confused, angry or passive preoccupation with attachment figures) or autonomous (balanced reports of attachment figures delivered coherently, consistently and plausibly). Dismissive and preoccupied styles are categorised as insecure and autonomous styles as

secure. In addition, any interviews can also be categorised as unresolved in relation to previous traumatic experiences or loss.

Results for the internationally adopted adults in this Swedish study were classified as: secure (47.5%), preoccupied (25%), dismissing (27.5%) and unresolved (17.5%). In comparison to a female non-clinical group of mothers, although the proportions of adopted adults with dismissive or preoccupied classification were higher, differences were not statistically significant. Within-group analysis identified that factors including later age at adoption and a desire to know more about one's origins were significant predictors of insecure attachment styles in adulthood (Irhammar and Bengtsson, 2004). As this is a single study measuring adult attachment styles, and with a small sample size, caution should be exercised in extrapolating these results to all internationally adopted adults.

Tieman et al (2006) took a broader approach to measuring adult social functioning. They used a 115-item Dutch scale (Groningen Questionnaire about Social Behaviour), which includes subscales on family functioning and relationships with partners, parents, friends and siblings, to compare internationally adopted adults (n = 1,417) to a general population sample (n = 713) (Tieman et al, 2006). Although the adopted group were less likely to be in a partnership, live with a partner or be married, they reported better functioning without a partner than the comparison group. After adjusting for socio-economic differences, the adopted group were as likely as their non-adopted peers to have children. Some indication of poorer functioning in relationships with parents and siblings was found for the adopted group, but also better functioning than non-adopted peers for functioning in friendships. The authors conclude that there was no evidence of widespread difficulties with social adjustment among the adopted group (Tieman et al, 2006).

As reported earlier, in their smaller-scale qualitative studies, Lindblad and Signell (2008) and Docan-Morgan (2011) and included questions about confiding in parents and others about experiences such as dealing with derogatory comments, hostile reactions or other adversity in relation to visible

ethnic minority status or adoptive status. Docan-Morgan (2011) found that among 34 Korean-born adopted adults in the US, some talked openly with their parents about 'racial derogation' experiences and found it helpful, for example, when parents were able to discuss what they had experienced without minimising it, even if they could not suggest solutions. Others avoided raising the topic with their parents, either because they assumed their parents would be unwilling or unable to help, or because they had experienced their parents' response in the past as unhelpful or dismissive (Docan-Morgan, 2011). Lindblad and Signell (2008) also reported that in their sample of internationally adopted women (n = 17), worries about their parents' feelings often prevented detailed discussions on these topics.

In summary, the evidence on social functioning and relationships is mixed, although studies so far do not suggest widespread difficulties at a group level. With limited studies to draw from, all using different measures or approaches, conclusions on social functioning and relationships among internationally adopted adults remain somewhat tentative.

2.6.5 Pre-adoption experiences

Very few studies of internationally adopted adults address the issue of pre-adoption experiences, although, as noted earlier, childhood studies have identified quality of institutional care as an influence on later outcomes (McCall, 2011). Many adult studies simply lack the option to collect such data, particularly if they are based on national records or other pre-collected data sources (for example, von Borczyskowski et al, 2006).

Only one adult study collected comprehensive data via parental reports on children's early care; this study is also the only longitudinal study (van der Vegt et al, 2009a). Data were collected from 1,364 internationally adopted adults (mean age 26 years; SD 1.5), following two earlier rounds of data collection mainly from adoptive parents, including standardised measures of children's mental health (mean age of children = 12 years at baseline and 15 years at time two). Adoptive parents were originally identified via central

national records of international adoptions in the 1970s; the baseline cohort represented 65% of all adoptions across a three-year period and the adult follow-up was 64% of the baseline (van der Vegt et al, 2009a). Participants were adopted from a range of countries including Korea (31%), Colombia (13%) and India (10%); mean age at adoption was 28 months (range 1–115 months; SD 24.1).

This study asked adoptive parents to rate their children's pre-adoption experiences on a three-point scale of adversity (none, somewhat, severe) and also to report whether they were certain of these experiences (van der Vegt et al, 2009a). Only information reported as 'certain' was included. At follow-up (aged between 22 and 32 years, n = 1,364), those participants who had experienced multiple early adversities (defined as a combination of physical neglect and/or abuse and multiple placements prior to adoption) were more likely to have mood or anxiety disorders or substance misuse/dependence in adulthood (van der Vegt et al, 2009a). Comparing these results to the two earlier follow-ups of the same group, the researchers found this pattern remained relatively stable over time. In other words, those adults with disorders in adulthood were more likely to have been reported by their adoptive parents as having mental health problems during adolescence. However, for some participants, disorders only emerged in adulthood (van der Vegt et al, 2009a).

In within-group analysis from the same study, the researchers examined the associations between parent-reported data on early experiences and cortisol levels among a sub-sample (n = 623) of the adopted adults, based on the hypotheses that extreme stress in early childhood may affect changes in the hypothalamic–pituitary–adrenocortical (HPA) axis. Saliva samples were collected four times over a single day. Lower morning cortisol levels were found for those who had experienced severe neglect or abuse compared to those who did not. Severe early neglect was associated with a flatter diurnal curve; moderately severe early abuse was associated with high cortisol levels and a steeper cortisol diurnal slope. In other words, parent-reported early neglect and abuse appeared to predict alterations to cortisol levels among

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adopted adults several decades later, despite the experience of a substantial change of environment following early maltreatment (van der Vegt et al, 2009b). The researchers subsequently identified that childhood adversity modified the relationship between adulthood anxiety disorders and cortisol secretion, but these results were not replicated for mood disorders (van der Vegt et al, 2010).

Two studies had access to information about the specific orphanages that their samples had lived in prior to adoption (Storsbergen et al, 2010; Rushton et al, 2013). Storsbergen et al (2010) drew on contemporaneous observations from previous research and reported that the orphanage made efforts to limit the child:caregiver ratio (10–12 infants per 2–3 caregivers) and ensure consistency of caregivers. Only one significant difference in psychological adjustment (mental health, well-being and self-esteem) was reported in comparisons to a Dutch-born general population sample: adopted men were more likely to report problems with depression (Storsbergen et al, 2010).

In the distinction between 'globally depriving' and 'psycho-socially-depriving' quality of care, this group's early experiences would fit the latter category (and thus the same category as the experiences of the women in the current study). Consistent, personalised attention from familiar caregivers was in short supply but physical care, adequate nutrition and other basic needs appear to have been met. Other studies reported more briefly on the pre-adoption circumstances of their cohorts (see Tables 2.2 and 2.3), but did not use these as potential predictors of adult outcomes.

2.6.6 Age at placement

Evidence on whether later age at placement – a finding replicated in studies of younger cohorts (McCall, 2011) – continues to predict poorer outcomes into adulthood proved inconsistent across the studies reviewed here. The evidence base is particularly limited because age at adoption was not usually explored, either because data were not available or because they were not tested as a potential predictor of later outcomes.

The only study to use adult attachment classifications as its outcome measure found that insecure attachment classification was associated with later age at placement, although the sample was relatively small (n = 40) (Irhammar and Bengtsson, 2004). However, within-group tests for predictors of psychiatric diagnoses on the 1,484 internationally adopted Dutch adults (described earlier) found no association with age at placement (males, mean = 27.7 months, SD = 23.5; females, mean = 29.1, SD = 24.2) (Tieman et al, 2005). This analysis was carried out prior to the longitudinal analysis that focused on quality of early experiences, as opposed to age at placement (van der Vegt et al, 2009a).

2.6.7 Adoptive family environments

In childhood studies, differences in adoptive family environments beyond broad characteristics usually remain unspecified, partly due to lack of variation on factors such as socio-economic status or the use of measures too broad to pick up subtle yet important differences (Castle et al, 2006; The Leiden Conference, 2012). The evidence on family risk factors (such as parental mental health or marital discord) is also relatively sparse and results are inconsistent. However, parental warmth, sensitivity and stimulation have been found to be associated with better outcomes (Audet and Le Mare, 2011).

In the studies reviewed here, data on adoptive family environments were also restricted, but some relevant findings did emerge. Tieman et al (2005) found some indication that adults adopted into higher socio-economic status families might be more likely than those adopted into less affluent circumstances to have poorer outcomes. The authors speculated that families with higher socio-economic status might place greater emphasis on academic and other achievements, but data to test this hypothesis further were unavailable (Tieman et al, 2005). This echoed similar speculation in an epidemiological study of younger adults in Sweden, which found that risks for poor mental health were higher among those internationally adopted adults in higher socio-economic Swedish families (Hjern et al, 2002).

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Overall, only limited conclusions can be drawn on early predictors. Although van der Vegt et al's (2009a) cross-sectional sample, which identified an association between early adversity and later outcomes, was large (n = 1,364), the authors are appropriately cautious in concluding that this offers partial, rather than conclusive, evidence of persistent effects for children who had experienced a combination of early adversities, given the lack of studies to date to replicate such analysis. In addition, across studies, not all cohorts were purely ex-orphanage samples, and data on quality of orphanage care were absent in all but one study, which, like the BCAS, relied on information collected for service delivery rather than research purposes (Storsbergen et al, 2010; Rushton et al, 2013).

2.7 Critical overview: methodological quality

The range of methodological approaches (as outlined in the first column of Table 2.1, Table 2.2 and Table 2.3) has implications for evaluating methodological quality, as critical appraisal tools vary according to research design (Bryman, 2008; Aveyard, 2010). For this review, I drew on a range of sources that explore issues related to research methodological quality, including the researchers' approach (and to what extent their aims were achieved) in relation to sampling/recruitment; ethical issues; data collection, validation, analysis and interpretation; and presentation of findings and conclusions (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2007; Bryman, 2008; CASP, 2013).

As the current study uses a qualitative approach, in the following section (2.7.1) I focus in detail on the methodological quality of the studies presented in Table 2.2, using a framework designed specifically for critical appraisal of qualitative research. In the subsequent section (2.7.2), I highlight some key points in relation to the overall methodological quality of the studies reviewed in this chapter, including those in Table 2.3

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2.7.1 Critical overview: qualitative research

As Aveyard (2010) notes, there are particular challenges in systematically approaching a critical review of qualitative literature. The researcher's values and experience shape the process and, for example, the collection of interview data relies inherently on the researcher's skills and expertise (Aveyard, 2010). In addition, methodologists disagree on the most appropriate evaluation criteria for qualitative research and the extent to which these should mirror the criteria applied to quantitative studies (see Chapter 4, section 4.5.3).

In the following section I evaluate the six studies described in section 2.5, using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2013) framework for qualitative research. This framework was developed for use with a range of qualitative methodologies rather than one specific approach (CASP, 2013).

All of these papers were published in peer-reviewed journals and met the first three quality criteria identified by CASP: 1) inclusion of a statement of aims of the research, 2) qualitative methods were appropriate to addressing those aims and 3) the authors justified their approach to selecting the particular methods for the study. The remaining seven questions in the CASP qualitative framework are addressed below.

Recruitment strategies: All of the papers explained their recruitment methods (public adverts, adoption networks and gatherings). These strategies fitted the researchers' aims to explore and illuminate lived experiences, rather than produce representative findings. Docan-Morgan (2010, 2011) and Reynolds et al (2016) highlighted particularly clearly the limits of generalisability in light of sample size and recruitment methods; as noted earlier, Tigervall and Hübinette (2010) did not address this issue. While the recruitment methods were appropriate to the aims of each individual study, the similarity in strategies may have lead to over-representation of certain characteristics in the body of literature as a whole. For example, those adopted people with a greater interest in talking about and reflecting on their

experiences, whether positive or negative, may be more likely to participate. This issue is discussed further in the methods chapter (section 3.4.1).

Data collection: Each of the studies included an explanation of how data were collected, why the methods were appropriate, the mode of data collection (for example, semi-structured interviews), mode of data (for example, interviews transcribed verbatim) and an indication of the topics covered. Docan-Morgan (2010, 2011) and Song and Lee (2009) provided the most detailed descriptions of questions/topics; Lindblad and Signell's (2008) outlined the five main topic areas and described a more 'participant-led' approach that meant each interview developed differently. These descriptions helped to contextualise the resulting findings and conclusions.

Researcher-participant relationship: Perhaps surprisingly given that all studies except Song and Lee (2009) involved collecting interview data (and therefore, direct interpersonal contact between researchers and participants), most papers did not reflect in depth on the researcher-participant relationships. In line with their phenomenological approach, Reynolds et al (2016) was the only paper in which each author outlined his/her experience in relation to international adoption and how this might affect their interpretation of the data. In addition, it was the only paper in which one of the authors was also a participant: in terms of quality, what is important is that the paper clearly outlined the rationale for this inclusion and addressed how this may have influenced the analysis and findings. Docan-Morgan (2010, 2011) and Lindblad and Signell (2008) carried out 'member-checking' by sending transcripts or papers to participants for approval or comment. Some studies also used a range of methods to facilitate participation: for example, Reynolds et al (2016) offered telephone interviews if a face-to-face meeting was not possible and noted that this method might offer the participant greater anonymity but less opportunity to develop participant-researcher trust.

Ethics: This group of papers diverged in the level of explicit attention paid to discussion of ethical issues, although most stated that their studies had been approved by an ethical review board (Song and Lee, 2009; Docan-Morgan,

2010, 2011; Reynolds et al, 2016). There was little discussion of potential issues related to consent and confidentiality (although these may have been addressed fully in the ethical review process, where such a process was mentioned). In general, a sensitive approach to the experience of sharing highly personal information in the context of a research interview was demonstrated in description of study procedures: for example, contacting participants after interviews for feedback and to check that no issues of concern had arisen due to participation (Reynolds et al, 2016).

Rigour in data analysis: Most papers included a full description of how the data were analysed, including the identification of themes and how these were verified. However, with the exception of Reynolds et al (2016), there was limited critical discussion of the role of the researcher and potential bias or influence on the analysis and reporting. As has been discussed, the lack of detail about the analytical method in Tigervall and Hübinette (2010) limits the reader's ability to assess the quality, and as a result the links between the data presented and the researchers' interpretations were less clear in some cases. Other papers were particularly rigorous: for example, in Song and Lee's (2009) study, for each analytical step, researchers worked first independently and then collaboratively, plus an independent 'auditor' (not involved in other aspects of the research) examined the main domains to ensure data were represented accurately. Despite some weaknesses, as an overall body of literature, the indicators described in CASP (2013) were mostly well addressed: judiciously selected data to illustrate themes; attention paid to counter-examples and alternative explanations; and wide range of participants' views represented.

Clear statement of findings: In addition to the points raised above, Docan-Morgan (2010, 2011) and Reynolds et al's (2016) description of findings included particularly rigorous attention to alternative explanations and discussion of evidence for and against their own interpretations. A number of indicators of research credibility (CASP, 2013) were identified across the studies including respondent validation (Docan-Morgan, 2010, 2011; Lindblad and Signell, 2008) and use of more than one analyst (Song and Lee, 2009;

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Reynolds, 2016). In general (and the limitations described so far notwithstanding), the papers were also clearly written, which helps the reader to 'follow' the links between research design, data, analysis and interpretation.

Value of the research: With such a limited body of research, it is possible to argue that all of the studies are valuable; each illuminates a different area of the experience of being an internationally adopted adult. Each author also discussed the contribution of their findings to policy, practice or future research: for example, Docan-Morgan (2010, 2011) on the conceptualisation of boundary management in family communication, and Song and Lee (2009) on adopted people's perspectives on, and preferences among, different types of cultural socialisation activities. As discussed earlier, while Tigervall and Hübinette (2010) suffers from some limitations, their point about the lack of integration between migration research and adoption research, and the lack of understanding of lived experiences of international adoption in Sweden, makes a particularly strong argument for the necessity of qualitative research in this area.

2.7.2 Critical overview: full range of research

Throughout the narrative in section 2.6 I have highlighted issues related to methodological quality in individual studies. In the current section, it is worth re-visiting three key points.

First, whether researchers discussed adequately the strength and limitations of their own research varied considerably across the papers reviewed here (Bryman, 2008). For example, Mohanty, Keoke and Sales (2006) provided a more comprehensive review than other studies of the limitations of their own study. They highlighted that cross-sectional studies cannot identify causal pathways and that retrospectively recalled data may be subject to distortion, such as socially desirable reporting of parental behavior. This offers the reader a thorough context for understanding the results of the study. While most other studies did briefly address strengths and limitations, a more

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thorough discussion can help tease out how these limitations could be addressed in future research (for example, see McGinnis et al, 2009).

Second, studies varied in how thoroughly they explored their own findings in relation to existing literature and alternative explanations for their results (Patton, 2002; Bryman, 2008; Aveyard, 2010). For example, von Borczskowski et al's (2006) secondary study of national Swedish datasets considered alternative explanations for their results, including the impact of racial prejudice (which they were not able to measure directly). However, while they referenced literature on racial prejudice in general, they did not explore the literature on how these issues might be experienced by internationally adopted people. In their (quantitative) survey, Mohanty, Keokse and Sales (2006) displayed a particularly thorough knowledge of the previous _qualitative_ research that had been conducted in relation to cultural socialisation, which they used to develop the items for measuring exposure to cultural socialisation activities among their participants (Mohanty, Keokse and Sales (2006).

Third, research designs have intrinsic strengths and weaknesses. Thus, in considering these studies as a body of literature, there is an additional issue related to variations in research design, even when individual studies are carried out to a high standard (Bryman, 2008). For example, studies that use national datasets have the advantage of large numbers (enabling them to a) pick up infrequent behaviours that may nevertheless indicate excess risk associated with international adoption and b) have the statistical power lacking in some smaller samples). However, they also face the limitations of using data collected for other purposes such as health or welfare systems (thus limiting the variables to those related to the original purpose and not those that may be highly relevant to adoption research specifically). As discussed in the beginning of this chapter, the number of studies of international adoption in adulthood is small compared to those focused on childhood. As a result, there have been fewer opportunities to test for comparable results across cohorts in studies using similar designs: for example, there is only one longitudinal study (see Table 2.3 Tieman et al,

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2005; van der Vegt et al, 2009) and only one study exploring the important topic of adult attachment (Irhammar and Bengtsson, 2004). This creates some caveats in the overall strength of the research evidence about internationally adopted adults.

2.7.3 Critical overview in relation to my study

Considered in the context of the current study, three aspects signifying gaps in this body of literature stand out. First, as discussed earlier (section 2.7.1) and in greater detail in the next chapter (section 3.4.1), reliance on public adverts or access via adoption networks or professional settings creates difficulties in capturing the full variability of adopted people's experiences:

> *Since the majority of adoptees are so hard to find, their points of view may be poorly represented in discussions of what it is like to be adopted. We don't know if the members of this vast "silent majority" are truly content about being adopted, or simply silent.* (Brodinzksy et al, 1993: 154)

The recruitment methods used for my study – identifying and tracing a complete cohort adopted through a single project and achieving a 68% participation rate – are unique amongst the qualitative studies described here, and more similar to recruitment methods used in some quantitative studies explored earlier (for example, Storsbergen et al, 2010). This may allow a greater variety of perspectives to emerge from the data.

Second, my study explores adoption appraisal in midlife. The participants in the current study (aged 42 – 53 years, mean = 46 years) are the oldest group amongst the studies discussed here, with a mean age more than a decade older than most other studies. Therefore, this study may reveal new aspects when compared to research with younger cohorts. In particular, it offers the opportunity to explore how perspectives change into mid-adulthood, as participants reach and even pass the age of their own birth and adoptive parents at the time they were adopted.

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The only other phenomenological study, for example, was with participants aged 26 – 30 years (Reynolds et al, 2016). Overall, this study – and in particular, the detailed and nuanced interpretation and explanation of findings, grounded in a wide range of theoretical literature, described earlier – highlight the advantages of using an in-depth phenomenological approach to understanding the lived experiences of internationally adopted adults. My study will add perspectives from this group of women in mid-adulthood, seen through the prism of a different life stage.

Third, the cohort in my study (recruited via the British Chinese Adoption Study) are the only sample from the UK, where international adoption rates have remained low. Due to the being a particularly unusual experience in this country, their experiences are likely to differ from the US (for example, Song and Lee, 2009; Docan-Morgan, 2010, 2011; Reynolds et al, 2016) and Sweden (for example, Lindblad and Signell, 2008; Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010), where most of the papers reviewed here were conducted, and where rates of international adoption have been markedly higher over a sustained period (see Chapter 1).

2.8 Summary of current evidence

The limited number of studies means there are not yet enough data and findings to draw many strong conclusions on ex-orphanage, internationally adopted adults. Thus, this summary is offered with the caveat that new and forthcoming studies may change the picture substantially. One striking pattern in the studies to date is that while qualitative studies generally explore issues related to race and identities, quantitative studies focus more heavily on mental health.

The qualitative studies currently available provide compelling evidence of how concepts such as 'difference' and 'belonging' impact on individual lives. With such small numbers it is important that most demonstrate robust approaches to data collection, analysis and interpretation, although some do not explicitly

address aspects that would aid the reader, such as describing how their samples are similar to or different from other groups of internationally adopted adults.

The quantitative studies are greater in number but somewhat limited in variation: for example, with the exception of the BCAS, the other studies are all based on samples drawn predominantly from Sweden, Holland and the US. This body of literature does, however, offer evidence of how widespread certain outcomes are (at least in some national contexts), and has started to produce some early indications of which variables may predict (or, more accurately, given the lack of prospective longitudinal studies, be associated with) those outcomes. In particular, as noted earlier, there is a pattern of very poor outcomes for a minority of internationally adopted adults, mostly in relation to mental health.

2.8.1 Variation in methodological approaches

Clearly, all methods bring some benefits at the expense of losing other possibilities: this is not unique to studies of international adoption. But in a field with relatively limited literature, the fact that few researchers have published studies that explicitly breach the 'methodological divide' seems like a wasted opportunity. While qualitative and quantitative researchers may mention each other's findings, this tends to be in passing, while the bulk of what shapes their own studies – treatment of data, which variables data are collected on – seems to stem very much from studies that use similar methods.

One notable exception is Mohanty et al (2006), who used a quantitative methodology but had clearly incorporated learning from qualitative studies. For example, the ethnic identity measure developed for the study was '*based on a content analysis of family belongingness and ethnic identity experiences of international adoptees that were described in the literature*' (Mohanty et al, 2006: 159), which they note elsewhere were mainly 'descriptive and qualitative' (ibid.: 154). In the studies reviewed in this chapter, this is a

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relatively rare direct transfer of findings derived from qualitative approaches into the design of a quantitative study.

Overall, a far stronger position would be gained if more studies, regardless of their own methodological approach, built on previous findings from across the field. Epidemiologists, for example, could take more seriously the challenge from qualitative studies that, while it may be difficult to find the data for empirical evidence, 'race', ethnicity and race-based mistreatment may be important factors in explaining the findings from their quantitative studies (as advocated by Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010). In return, small-scale interview-based studies could engage more critically with the idea that their samples – particularly those recruited via adoption groups or networks – may represent a particular sub-group of internationally adopted adults, especially in light of the heterogeneous outcomes that are a recurring feature of the larger-scale quantitative studies (Hjern et al, 2002; Tieman et al, 2005).

2.8.2 Future developments

Over time, it is to be hoped that opportunities for a greater variety of research designs will increase. For example, missing completely from the current picture of research with adults are studies that compare the experiences and outcomes of those who stayed in orphanage care versus those who were internationally adopted, or cross-national comparisons of internationally adopted adults raised in different countries. There is also only very limited evidence of the role gender may play, which is particularly relevant for my single-gender study. Little attention has been paid to family composition (for example, growing up with or without adoptive siblings, and whether those siblings are birth children or also adopted), or the influence that post-adoption support services may play in shaping outcomes. In addition, some important topics have yet to be studied more than once, for example adult attachment (Irhammar and Bengtsson, 2004).

However, it is important to observe that the picture has improved substantially in the last 20 years, as evidenced in the studies reviewed in this chapter.

Although literature has been slow to accumulate, this has accelerated in recent years and there are examples of very high-quality research being carried out in this field. In addition, if the longitudinal studies of cohorts who are now in adolescence (Vorria et al, 2015; Kreppner et al, 2010; Tan and Jordan-Arthur, 2012) continue on to adulthood, they will offer rich data for exploring how internationally adopted people's lives change over time. Such studies have the potential to provide a substantial boost to the existing body of research, which mainly provides either a current or a retrospectively recalled picture of international adoption in adulthood.

2.9 My study in relation to existing literature

In the meantime, my study aims to tackle one of the gaps in the current picture. As discussed, there are only a small number of existing studies that focus on adopted adults' lived experiences, and these tend to have a relatively narrow focus dictated by the researchers' topic of interest (such as racial derogation). This allows the researchers to explore in depth a specific type of experience they have identified as potentially important. The research tools they use are therefore designed to elicit responses on relevant events and participants' reactions to these.

A broader framework, such as that in my study, may allow for additional experiences to emerge. In keeping with a phenomenological approach (see Chapter 3), the open-ended questions I developed touch on a range of topics identified in previous literature and via piloting the research tools with internationally adopted adults, but also include more general questions about what the positive and negative aspects of being internationally adopted have been and where being adopted fits in their lives in relation to other experiences. This approach aims to identify aspects of their experiences that are meaningful to the participant but may not have not been addressed in studies that examine specific aspects of internationally adopted adults' lives.

The characteristics of the women in the current study are also relevant to the findings. They participated in this research in midadulthood (mean age 48

years, range 42–53 years, SD 2.4), and as a group were older than the average age of participants in the other studies reviewed in this chapter, often by a decade (see Table 2.2 and Table 2.3). As identified previously, just over one third of the women (36%) had completed an undergraduate degree or equivalent qualification (Feast et al, 2013a). While internationally adopted cohorts are often relatively highly educated (for example, nearly all of Song and Lee's (2009) cohort had some university-level education), this is likely to have an influence on the women's capacity to reflect on the interview questions. As will be shown in the quoted extracts, many of the responses were presented thoughtfully and articulately. In contrast to other samples, the majority of participants (71%) had children, ranging in age from babies to young adults. Nearly all had experienced at least one significant partnership and three-quarters (76%) were currently in a partnership, marriage or civil partnership (Feast et al, 2013a). These relationships and their status as parents were often cited in relation to their sense of identity in midlife.

2.10 Conceptual models

2.10.1 Overview

Efforts to translate empirical evidence on orphanage care and international adoption into theory have been hampered by methodological differences and limitations in studies completed so far: as one widely cited review of childhood studies describes it: '*the literature in this domain is essentially an atheoretical basket of empirical threads that are not yet woven into a conceptual fabric*' (McCall, 2011: 224). Many of the studies reviewed refer to non-adoption-specific models such as development theory that have been applied in international adoption (for example, Erikson (1950) cited in Mohanty et al (2006)) but, given the strict word limits for most journals, are often described only very briefly. One notable exception is the thorough review of conceptual frameworks reported as an appendix to McGinnis et al's (2009) study of identity development among their sample of Korean-born and white US-born adopted adults.

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Below I discuss three selected frameworks for understanding adopted people's views of their adoption-related experiences that are particularly relevant to the current study.

2.10.2   Stress and coping model

From the empirical literature with internationally adopted children, only one specific model of adoption appraisal was identified, which also informed the study of Greek-born, Dutch adopted adults reviewed above (Storsbergen et al 2010). Developed by the experienced and influential adoption practitioner and researcher David Brodzinsky, the 'stress and coping model' is based on his observation that '*adoption is experienced as stressful by many children and parents*' (Brodzinsky, 1990: 4) and that adopted children's adjustment to adoption '*rests on their appraisal of, and efforts to cope with, a host of subtle, but pervasive adoption related losses*' (Brodzinsky, 1990: 24). In this model, both biological factors (such as genetic and perinatal factors) and environmental factors (such as social support, family environment, placement history) influence 'person variables' (including cognitive level, self-esteem and interpersonal trust).

These 'person variables' shape how children view their adoptions, a process for which he created the term 'adoption appraisal' (Brodzinsky, 1990). The adoption appraisal process leads children to try different approaches to 'cope' with adoption-related losses, and these efforts change over time as children develop and their perspective on being adopted alters. Thus, it is an interactive process: difficulties or success in 'coping' can affect both person variables and also environmental factors if family dynamics are altered (Brodzinsky, 1990: 11). In short, adoption creates stress, which has to be coped with, and how the person approaches this varies among individuals. From the perspective of the current study, perhaps the most important limitation in this model is that it describes the adoption appraisal process in childhood. For a cohort in midlife, childhood experiences related to adoption are only one part of the picture.

As Brodzinsky (1990) acknowledges, the model is somewhat speculative and incomplete due to lack of empirical testing, and also assumes that adopted people perceive adoption as an experience involving loss. In addition, although not discussed in the original definition, the model presupposes that adoptive care is warm and supportive, which, unfortunately, may not always be the case (although, as noted earlier, few studies collect data on quality of care within adoptive families). However, despite some difficulties, the author deserves credit for this work that bridges the gap between research-led definitions of adjustment and what adoption workers observe in their daily contact with children and families (Brodzinsky, 1990).

2.10.3   Positive affect, negative affect and preoccupation with adoption

Beyond the stress and coping model, one further study offers neither a theory nor a conceptual framework but an alternative way of considering adoption adjustment. The most recent results from a longitudinal study of 234 Chinese-born adopted adolescent girls in the US found that feelings about adoption (specifically, positive affect towards adoption) predicted self-esteem (Tan and Jordan-Arthur, 2012). The authors report on using the Adoption Dynamics Questionnaire (Benson, Sharma and Roehlkepartain, 1994) – a 44-item questionnaire that unfortunately appears to be out of print. However, Tan and Jordan-Arthur's (2012) summary of this scale describes three dimensions:

- positive affect towards adoption (for example, '*I think my parents are happy that they adopted me*')
- negative affect towards adoption (for example, '*My parents told me I should be thankful they adopted me*')
- preoccupation with adoption (for example, '*It bothers me I may have brothers or sisters I don't know*')

Two notions are of particular interest and relate to internationally adopted adults as well as other groups. First, this approach includes positive affect in its own right, as opposed to an absence of negative affect. As shown above,

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most of the interview-based studies were designed to explore negative experiences: for example, 'intrusive interactions' (Docan-Morgan, 2010) or racism (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010). Both of these studies note a minority of participants who did not have extensive negative experiences, but it is not clear whether participants were asked about more positive experiences (for example, having people in their lives who helped to promote their ethnic and cultural identities).

Second, 'preoccupation with adoption' offers a dimension that could accommodate a wide array of feelings about and interest in different aspects of one's adoption experience. For my study in particular, this is a helpful move beyond singular events such as searching for birth parents (Storbergen et al, 2010). The term 'preoccupation' also allows for feelings that may not be experienced as problems that affect psychological functioning at the levels of measures used in studies to date (for example, psychiatric diagnoses or suicide, Hjern et al, 2002; van der Vegt et al, 2009a; Mental Health Symptom Check-list, Storsbergen et al, 2010; Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965) in Westhues and Cohen, 1997; Mohanty et al, 2006). Thus, 'preoccupation with adoption' suggests a more nuanced model of adoption adjustment, where a person could be preoccupied about certain aspects of being adopted while still scoring highly on standardised measures of well-being.

In considering their findings on the Chinese-born adopted adolescents, Tan and Arthur-Jordan (2012) draw parallels between this three-dimensional approach and the results of an interview-based Swedish study of 211 internationally adopted adolescents/young adults which found that those who thought about their birth families (somewhat resembling 'preoccupation with adoption') or who felt uncomfortable about their adoptive status (somewhat resembling 'negative affect towards adoption') had lower self-esteem, although this finding held true only for participants aged between 13 and 17 years, not those aged 18 or over (Cederblad, Höök, Irhammar and Mercke, 1999, cited in Tan and Jordan-Arthur, 2012). The age categories as described in the original paper are somewhat unclear: the authors report the range as

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13–27 years, of whom 60% were 13–16 years and 10% were over 20 years, but not the exact number aged over 18 (Cederblad et al, 1999). Most results were not delineated by age, which is why this study was excluded from review in the main body of this chapter.

The three-dimensional approach has not been widely tested and the original scale was developed for adoptive parents, then adapted for use with the Chinese-born adopted adolescents (Tan and Arthur-Jordan, 2012). However, this approach offers additional features lacking in the stress and coping model (Brodzinsky, 1990). In particular, it offers a balance of losses and gains by adoption and introduces the concept of pre-occupation in addition to adoption appraisal.

2.10.4   Ecological model of adoption

At the broader level of adopted children's development, Palacios (2009) draws on Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological systems theory to present an ecological model of adoption. Studies that draw on Bronfenbrenner's model often map out the relevant systems as a series of concentric circles. At the centre is the 'developing person' (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) or, in Palacios' (1990) model, the adopted child. Next is the microsystem: the immediate settings in which the child participates most often, such as family, peers and schools (Palacios, 2009). The mesosystem comprises the relation between any two microsystems, such as family and peers: for example, an adopted child's behaviour in one setting might be influenced by experiences in the other (Palacios, 2009). The exosystem is a setting in which the adopted child participants less frequently, and Palacios (2009) uses the example of grandparents or other kin, with whom the child may have regular but not everyday contact. The macrosystem includes broader cultural attitudes and ideologies, such as those described in Chapter 1 in relation to adoption. As Palacios (2009) points out, adoption researchers and professionals contribute to shaping the macrosystem.

As Palacios' (2009) paper focuses on adopted children, he mentions only briefly a final system (the outermost circle in the ecological systems model) that is highly relevant to the current study: the chronosystem, which comprises changes resulting from either a single event or *'cumulative effects of a sequence of developmental transitions over time'* (Bronfenbrenner, 1986: 733). Although empirical studies that draw on ecological systems theory often focus on the development of children or young people, the inclusion of the chronosystem gives it greater potential for use in studies with older cohorts by *'designating a research model that makes possible examining the influence on the person's development of changes (and continuities) over time in the environments in which the person is living'* (Bronfenbrenner, 1986: 724). In Chapter 8, I return to this model and consider the findings from my study alongside Palacios' application of this model to adopted children's development.

2.10.5 Lifespan development and midlife

Although a number of distinct conceptualisations of midlife have been put forward, they tend to converge on the idea that '*while life trajectories become more varied as we move across the lifespan, two domains – family and career, or love and work – are important for most individuals at midlife*' (Staudinger and Bluck, 2001: 11). An early influential theory was described in Erikson's psychosocial stages model, which drew on Freud's psychosexual stages (Erikson, 1963). One of the largest and most detailed studies to apply Erikson's theory to empirical data is the US-based Study of Adult Development (Vaillant, 2002). This study brought together cohorts from previous studies including 268 'socially advantaged Harvard graduates born about 1920', 456 'socially disadvantaged Inner City men born about 1930' and 90 'middle-class, intellectually gifted women born about 1910', who were studied continuously for between 60 and 80 years (Vaillant, 2002: 16–17). The findings from the Study of Adult Development strongly emphasised the role of individual lifestyle choices in determining outcomes, and built on Erikson's (1963) theory that adults moved through phases marked by a focus on identity (including separation from parents), intimacy (developing close adult relationships and reciprocal sense of responsibility), career consolidation

(building a social identity through work, including raising or supporting other family members), generativity (being a guide for the following generation) and, crucially, added a further stage: 'keeper of the meaning' (passing on culture and meaning for future generations) (Valliant, 2002). By including women, this study also addressed a major criticism of previous theoretical work: that it had failed to take account of women's experiences (Gilligan, 1982).

A broad range of general midlife population studies and developmental psychopathology studies have been conducted, yet so far attempts to integrate findings across these two areas are limited (Rushton, 2013). For example, the general population Midlife in the United States (MIDUS) study presents midlife as *'a pivotal period in the life course in terms of balancing growth and decline, linking earlier and later periods of life, and bridging older and younger generations'* (Lachman, Teshale and Agrigoroaei, 2014: 20). In contrast, models of risk and resilience in life course development, which draw on developmental psychopathology traditions, tend to focus on the impact of childhood experiences: from this perspective, early adversity initiates pathways, which are then influenced by the balance of life challenges and the availability of social supports (Sroufe, 2005). It is the latter approach that is evident in the design of the majority of adoption studies in middle adulthood, particularly in quantitative research, as described earlier in this chapter (for example, von Borczyskowski et al, 2006).

2.10.6   Summary of conceptual models

Although the conceptual frameworks and models related to adoption described here (Brodzinsky,1990; Tan and Jordan-Arthur, 2012; Palacios, 2009) were not developed specifically for use in research with internationally adopted adults, they do shed some light both on existing research and on my own study. Brodzinsky (1990) underlines the complex interactions between social, psychological and biological factors that influence adopted children's perceptions of adoption. Tan and Jordan-Arthur's (2012) approach offers a broad range of possible reactions to adoption, including both negative and positive aspects. Palacios (2009) maps out a broad and flexible framework for

understanding the interplay between adopted children and the environments in which they participate and develop. For each of these examples, their adoption focus is highly relevant to the current study, although all would require some adaptation to encapsulate the experiences of adopted adults.

More broadly, the theories on lifespan development highlight that the perspectives of adults in midlife – in this case, on adoption – are shaped by the layers of development that have occurred earlier, as well as by more recent events and factors in their current lives. In addition, adults' circumstances, relationships and preoccupations are likely to differ in midlife from earlier life stages. As noted earlier, this is particularly important in the current study given that the mean age (48 years) is the oldest among the studies reviewed in this chapter.

2.11 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented the existing research related to internationally adopted adults to provide a context for my study. I identified findings from research with children and adolescents on outcomes following institutional care. Next, I described, analysed and reported on the findings of studies of internationally adopted adults and, in particular for those studies using qualitative approaches, the methods employed in this research. I have described concepts that have the potential to be linked to research in this field and how these relate to my study. In the next two chapters, I will describe in detail my own methodological approach and how this was applied in my study of internationally adopted adults.

Table 2.1 – British Chinese Adoption Study

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Author(s) and year of publication	Sample size and characteristics	Pre-adoption circumstances	Age of participants	Methods including main measures/interview topics	Comparison group	Main findings
Rushton et al 2012 (a) Feast et al 2013a (b) Rushton et al 2013 (c) Mixed methods / cross-sectional and comparative: quantitative survey data compared to age-matched data from national cohort study; qualitative data from semi-structured interviews used to illuminate and interpret quantitative findings.	n = 72. Hong Kong ex-orphanage girls adopted into the UK in the 1960s. Duration of orphanage care: mean 20 months (range 5–83 months, SD 13.5). Age at placement for adoption: mean 23 months (range 8–83 months, SD 14) Participants were from an original group of 100 women traced individually nearly 50 years later and recruited to the study.	Relatively well-run orphanages with adequate physical care and nutrition but over-crowding and lack of opportunity for selective attachment to adult carers.	Mean age 48 years, range 42–53 years, SD 2.4.	Orphanage/adoption records. Questionnaires covering mental health (General Health Questionnaire and Malaise Inventory), self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965), life satisfaction, personality profiles, community connectedness, partnerships and adoptive family relationships. Interviews on life history and current circumstances (usually 2–3 hours).	5,115 age- and sex-matched general population sample (National Child Development Study) and a domestically adopted sub-sample (n = 50) drawn from the same dataset.	(a) Ethnic and social identification not found to predict psychological adjustment (b) Most but not all of the women recalled nurturing adoptive homes; reactions to visible differences from family varied between participants. Majority of women were currently married or in partnerships (71%); had one or more child (76%) and were employed (75%). Relationships with adoptive families were mostly good or satisfactory but one in ten had ceased contact with at least one family member. (c) Outcomes were commensurate with the comparison groups in terms of mental and physical health measures. Serious psychiatric and social difficulties were largely absent. Timing and extent of exposure to orphanage care did not influence outcome, but self-reported poorer quality adoptive experience and a negative view of their adoption were significantly associated with poorer mental health.

Table 2.2 – Studies based primarily on in-depth analysis of qualitative data

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Research design/methodologies	Sample size and characteristics	Pre-adoption circumstances	Age of participants	Topics/questions covered	Mode of analysis	Main findings
Lindblad and Signell 2008 Qualitative: Grounded theory-informed open coding of interview data.	n = 17 Women adopted from South Korea (n = 15) and Thailand (n = 2); all raised in Sweden.	Age at adoption ranged from a few months to four years; most (n = 10) adopted within first year.	Range 18–35 years; half the group were aged over 30 years.	Interviews focused on 'experiences of degrading attitudes with probable relation to Asian appearance'; the perpetrators; subjective reactions and strategies for coping with such attitudes; communication about them.	Open coding based on grounded theory. Final categorisation agreed following extensive dialogue and discussion between the two authors.	Degrading attitudes were reported in relation to both Asian appearance and adoption, including comments about their perceived sexual availability/libido or general hostility expressed towards immigrants. Perpetrators came from all age groups, and events were reported as repeated experiences, not one-off events. These experiences provoked a wide range of feelings, from anger to sadness.
Song and Lee 2009 Mixed methods (qual-quan): Grounded theory-informed coding of survey responses to open-ended questions; categories derived from qualitative analysis tested against quantitative survey data	n = 67. 55 female, 11 male, one unidentified. Korean American adopted adults recruited via adoption agencies, conferences and snowballing. Described as generally highly educated (61% had completed undergraduate degree or higher).	Mean age at adoption 22 months (range 0–195 months; SD 29.46). 60% had one and 28% had two pre-adoption placements (proportion of orphanage vs other placements not specified)	Mean 27 years, range 18–49 years, SD 6.6.	Survey included Multi Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992) and open-ended questions about cultural socialisation in childhood, adolescence and adulthood, including adoptive parents' strategies and participants' own interest/effort.	Grounded theory analysis of qualitative responses. Resulting categories were then compared with MEIM scores to identify correlation between cultural socialisation and ethnic identity.	Factors that correlated positively with ethnic identity were: living in multicultural community, racial awareness (developing an awareness of being part of racial minority group and an adopted person) and visiting Korea/searching for birth/foster family. Significant positive correlation between cultural activities during ages 18–21 years and ethnic identity. Increasing interest over time in 'lived experience', e.g. visiting Korea, socialising with Korean people.

Table 2.2 – Studies based primarily on in-depth analysis of qualitative data

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Docan-Morgan 2010, 2011 Qualitative: thematic coding of data from semi-structured interviews (n=23) and survey responses to open-ended questions based on interview schedule (n=11)	n = 34 26 women, eight men. All adopted from Korea into white US families. 53% had Korean-born adoptive siblings. Recruited via Asian American university clubs and International Korean Adoptee Gathering 2007. 23 participants were interviewed and 11 participants responded to online survey.	No information given about pre-adoption experiences, except in passing in vignettes from interview reports.	Mean age 26 years, range 18–40 years, SD 6.6.	Qualitative interviews/online survey: questions about intrusive interactions from strangers (e.g. excessive personal questions, being stared at when with adoptive family members) and dealing with race-based mistreatment.	Thematic analysis of interview data then survey data. Member-checking by sending initial research paper to participants.	Participants reported frustration and defensiveness as a result of obvious intrusions, such as strangers' stares or comments about not being a 'real' family, but also with excessive compliments ('*Asian babies are so cute!*'). Racist experiences included name-calling, appearance mocking, stereotyping and physical attacks. Strong similarities between participants' accounts were noted. Range of adoptive parents' reactions reported (responding defiantly; using humour; displaying pride in family). Not all participants confided in parents.
Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010 Qualitative: analysis based on social-constructivist concepts (analytical procedures not specified)	n = 20 Adopted from Korea (n = 10) and other countries (n = 10). Gender distribution not given. (Interviews were also conducted with eight non-related adoptive parents; results not described here.)	No information given.	Range 21–48 years (mean, SD not given)	Semi-structured interviews about experiences of race-based mistreatment, including discrimination and exclusion.	Analysis based on 'social-constructivist' concepts (i.e. emphasis on concepts such as 'race' as relational and identities as fluid and negotiable).	Day-to-day experiences of discrimination described, such as being followed in shops or facing heavy scrutiny at border/customs controls in comparison to white Swedish peers. Also regularly facing questions about their family and origins. Participants' views varied; some saw questions as 'mere curiosity'; others felt regularly harassed.

Table 2.2 – Studies based primarily on in-depth analysis of qualitative data

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Reynolds et al (2016) Qualitative: phenomenological analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted in-person (n=8) or by telephone (n6)	n = 14 All adopted from Korea. Nine women, five men. Recruited via 'snowballing'. All except two participants grew up in same area of USA (North-east).	Adopted by age 2 years (n=13) or age 4 years (n=1). Researchers did not have access to information recorded pre-adoption.	Ages 26 – 30 years (mean 27 years).	Semi-structured interviews based on topic guide, starting with overview of life story, then questions about identity/identity development, childhood and upbringing, returning to Korea and birth family searches.	Phenomenological analysis carried out by three co-authors. Iterative analysis identified an overall framework and paper reported narrative summary of phenomenological findings.	Identity development and decision to return to Korea were identified as over-arching 'clusters of meanings': identity development related to experiences of racism, shame around other Asian individuals, belongingness and shared experiences with mixed race individuals. Decision to return to Korea was intertwined with desire to 'protect' adoptive parents.

Table 2.3 – All other studies

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IC = intercountry, OR = odds ratio, R = risk ratio, gen pop = general population, i/v = interview, DSM = Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

Research design/methodologies	Sample size and characteristics	Pre-adoption circumstances	Age of participants	Methods including main measures/interview topics	Comparison group	Main findings
Irhammar & Bengtsson 2004 Mixed methods cross-sectional study: Comparative analysis of categorical data derived from semi-structured Adult Attachment Interviews.	n = 40 All adopted between 1970 and 1977 and brought up by families in southern Sweden. Two-thirds were female. This group was formed of the oldest participants from a previous study of 152 adolescents.	88% born in Asia (mostly India, Thailand and Sri Lanka) and the remainder mostly Latin America. All except one had spent some time in orphanage care prior to adoption.	Mean 28 years, range 25–34 years.	Measures included Adult Attachment Interview (AAI, semi-structured), mainly about relationships with adoptive parents during childhood. Transcripts coded to adult attachment classifications: autonomous, dismissive or preoccupied.	Compared to AAI results of a 'norm group' of non-clinical mothers from a meta-analysis.	Adopted group's AAI scores were not found to differ significantly from non-clinical comparison group. Revisiting country of origin and ethnic self-identity not related to attachment classification, but later age at adoption predicted greater likelihood of dismissive or preoccupied attachment classification.

Table 2.3 – All other studies

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von Borczyskowski et al 2006 Quantitative / cross-sectional and comparative: statistical analysis of data from national records	n = 6,065. Born between 1963 and 1973. Two-thirds female. Age at immigration available for 90% of sample, of which 54% <2 years; 26% 2–3 years and 20% >4 years. Identified via National Swedish Registers. Main areas of origin were Far East Asia (54%) and South Asia (18%).	No specific information on this cohort – general discussion of possible pre-adoption adversity.	Range: 29–39 years.	Suicide attempt and suicide death data taken from national hospital discharge and cause of death registers.	1. 7,340 Swedish-born age-matched domestically adopted adults. 2. 1,269,318 age-matched non-adopted Swedish-born adults. 3. 3,616 siblings (adopters' birth children)	IC adopted group had higher suicide attempt (RR 4.5) and suicide death (RR 3.6) rates than general population and sibling samples. IC adopted women's risk compared to other female groups was elevated to a greater extent than men's. Domestically adopted adults also had higher risks than general population but less than IC adopted.
Mohanty et al 2006 Quantitative / cross-sectional: statistical analysis of survey data from standardised and newly derived scales	n = 78 79% of participants from US, remainder 'other Western countries'. Adopted from Korea (60%), Vietnam (23%) and elsewhere. Median age at adoption 10 months (range 1–156 months).	67% in orphanage care, 22% foster care, 5% multiple placements, 5% other settings.	Mean age 29 years, range 18–44 years, SD 5.96.	Web-based survey including self-esteem measure (Rosenberg, 1965) and ethnic identity and cultural socialisation scales developed by the research team. Statistical analysis involved using path analysis models.	No comparison group; within-group analysis only.	Most reported little cultural socialisation and did not grow up in areas 'with neighbours who reflect my race'. Cultural socialisation and self-esteem both correlated positively with feelings of 'belonging' within adoptive family and negatively with feelings of 'marginality' in majority culture. Belonging and marginality mediated relationship between cultural socialisation and self-esteem.

Table 2.3 – All other studies

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Tieman et al 2005 (a) 2006 (b) 2008 (c) Quantitative / longitudinal and comparative: statistical analysis of data from adoption records, data collected from adoptive parent during adopted person's childhood, adolescence and early adulthood.	(a) n = 1,484. (b) and (c) n = 1,417 Adopted into Holland 1972–1975 at mean age of 28 months. 55% female. Accessed through central records of adoption (sample (a) = 72.5% of original sample at earlier sweep). Attrition rate higher for men with higher scores (and therefore more problems) on Child Behaviour Checklist.	Approx. 47% experienced neglect and 12% abuse pre-adoption. Rates based on data reported by adopters, using pre-defined scales of level of adversity; only information parents reported as being 'certain' of was included.	Range 22–32 years at most recent time of data collection.	(a) Composite International Diagnostic Interview (standardised psychiatric interview that generates DSM-IV diagnoses). Some items from National Institute of Mental Health Diagnostic I/v Schedule. (b) Social functioning assessed via standardised 115-item interviews. (c) Measures included: questions about searching for birth parents; DSM-IV diagnoses; Child Behaviour Checklist.	(a) 695 age-matched general population sample. (b) Sub-sample of 713 adults from the above general population sample, on whom additional data were available (c) Within-group only	(a) Adopted group at higher risk than control group to meet criteria for: anxiety disorder (1.52 times), substance misuse or dependence (2.05 times) and, for men only, mood disorder (3.76 times). No significant difference for disruptive disorder, which differs from earlier follow-up with same cohort. (b) Adopted group less likely than non-adopted to be living with a partner or have had a relationship lasting more than a year. But adopted people without partners functioned better than their non-adopted single counterparts. Authors conclude that groups were similar in social contacts. (c) 32% had searched for birth parents. Greater likelihood to search was associated with country of origin, older age at placement, greater interest in searching during adolescence, more problematic behaviour and psychiatric diagnoses.
van den Berg et al 2008 (same sample and research design as Tieman et al studies)	n= 1,475	As above.	As above.	Adopted adults' self-reported ratings of internalising and externalising problems on standardised scales. Parent-reported Young Adult Behaviour Checklist.	Within-group only: compared biologically related siblings, non-related siblings and singles.	Only study to explore genetic and environmental influences on adult outcomes. Both data sources (self- and parent-report) indicated that genetic influences were greater for internalising problems and environmental influences were greater for externalising problems. This result was the reverse of findings from the same sample during adolescence.

Table 2.3 – All other studies

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| van der Vegt et al 2009 (a) 2009 (b) 2010 (c) (same sample and research design as Tieman et al studies) | n = 1,364

n = 623

n = 429

(b) and (c) both sub-samples from (a).

Sample (a) = 64% of baseline sample. As above, selective attrition at follow-up was noted; non-participants had higher levels of mental health problems in childhood and adolescence. | As above. | (a) Mean age 26.3 years, range 22–32 years, SD 1.4.

(b) and (c) both sub-samples from (a). | (a) Measures included interviews generating information on DSM-IV codes of mental disorders. Recorded individual diagnoses plus 'any disorder' variable. Also parent reports on early abuse, neglect and multiple pre-adoption moves.

(b) Parent reports on pre-adoption adversity (as above) Cortisol levels collected four times per day via saliva samples.

(c) As above, plus Child Behaviour Checklist. | Within-group only. | (a) Multiple early adversities associated with increased risk of adulthood anxiety (OR = 2.22; 95% CI 1.11–4.45); mood disorders (OR = 2.20; 95% CI 1.00–4.86) or (OR = 3.81; 95% CI 1.62–8.98). After controlling for childhood onset of mental health problems, differences remained. Level of de novo onset suggests that consequences of early adversity can appear many years later.

(b) Early neglect and abuse both predicted altered cortisol levels compared to non-neglected/non-abused groups.

(c) Severe early maltreatment found to modify the relationship between anxiety disorders and cortisol secretion, but not mood disorders and cortisol secretion. |

Table 2.3 – All other studies

McGinnis et al 2009 Mixed methods / cross-sectional and comparative: statistical analysis of survey data; responses to open-ended questions used to help interpret findings.	n = 179. Korean-born adults adopted into white US families. 18% men, 82% women.	Majority of time prior to adoption spent in orphanages (35%), foster families (39%), birth family (13%), unknown (11%) or other (2%).	Mean age 31 years. All over 18 years.	Online questionnaire, including Family of Origin Scale, Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure (Phinney, 1992), Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965), Satisfaction with Life scale. Also questions about (1) changes in self-identification and (2) support services.	156 white US-born adopted adults, from same total sample as Korean-born group. Mean age: 44 years (13 years older than Korean-born group).	Adoption increasingly significant aspect of identity across lifespan for both groups; 'race'/ethnicity increasingly important for Korean group, peaking in adulthood. For Korean-born group, feeling more comfortable with adoptive identity was associated with higher life satisfaction and higher self-esteem and was more likely for women than for men. For the white US-born group, feeling more comfortable with adoptive identity was associated with higher life satisfaction only.
Storsbergen et al 2010 Quantitative / cross-sectional and comparative: statistical analysis of survey data collected from adopted cohort, compared to normative data (general population matched for age).	n = 53. Children adopted in infancy from Greece into the Netherlands before 1970. 30 men and 23 women (of 60 randomly selected from 121 traced; total potential sample was 400).	Authors characterise this as a group who did not suffer severe deprivation as the orphanage provided relatively consistent standard of care.	Mean age 29 years, range 25–36 years.	General questionnaire about adult life circumstances and adoption, plus mental health (Symptom Check-List 90), well-being (Satisfaction with Life scale) and self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965).	Normative data on Dutch-born young adults; taken from different sources for each measure.	Only significant difference from comparisons on mental health, well-being and self-esteem was higher rate of depression for adopted men compared to non-adopted men. Within-group: those who searched for birth parents reported more difficulties in mental health, well-being and self-esteem. Further analysis identified that negative appraisal of adoption was a stronger predictor than search status for mental health outcomes and well-being.

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3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The methodology outlined here forms the background to the methods used in my study. As stated previously, I am using a phenomenological approach to analyse women's narrative accounts of their lives as internationally adopted adults, using data elicited via open-ended questions. Phenomenological research integrates psychological, interpretative and ideographic components (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Although research procedures vary, phenomenology is defined by the extent to which it explores questions of lived experiences rather than aiming for theoretical explanations.

In line with my approach to this study, phenomenological researchers '*attempt to approach a lived experience with a sense of* "*newness*" *to elicit rich and descriptive data*' (Anderson and Spencer, 2002: 1341). Phenomenology is ideally suited to research that explores complex experiences shared by participants. As Creswell highlights:

> *A phenomenology provides a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by several individuals. Knowing some common experiences can be valuable for groups such as therapists, teachers, health personnel, and policy-makers. (2007: 62)*

In this chapter, I start with two background aspects: first, the rationale for using a qualitative, interview-based approach for this study and, second, two concepts which derive from *narrative* research approaches but that have informed my thinking as I developed my study. Then I turn to phenomenology and distinguish between different schools of thought and specify the approach I use in this study. Finally, I explore the role of reflexivity and describe an additional step in the analysis designed to situate my phenomenological findings within a broader context.

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3.2 Using a qualitative approach

3.2.1 Methodology and research paradigms

Qualitative and quantitative approaches to research typically differ not only in methods but also in underlying beliefs about epistemology (assumptions about the nature of knowledge), axiology (assumptions about ethics) and ontology (assumptions about the nature of reality) (Leech, Dellinger, Brannagan and Tanaka, 2010; Mertens, 2010). Some key differences are explored here to build the case for why a qualitative approach is best suited to my research question.

Much qualitative research tends towards a 'constructivist' approach (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008). The assumptions underlying constructivism are that the relationship between researchers and participants is interactive and realities are therefore co-constructed (epistemology); inquiry is value-bound (axiology) and realities are multiple and constructed rather than external (ontology) (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008). Accordingly, cause and effect are deeply intertwined. At the extreme end, constructivists argue that only ideographic statements are possible: in other words, conclusions can only be drawn about that particular participant at that particular time in that particular context (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). In line with my study, qualitative researchers tend to favour bottom-up approaches and open-ended research tools to '*facilitate study of issues in depth and detail*' (Patton, 2002: 14). This is not to say that qualitative researchers do not engage with hypotheses, but rather that '*the qualitative researcher's task is to explain, and maybe question, the hypotheses as ingredients of the preconceptions and as reflections, rather than applying procedures for testing them*' (Malterud, 2001: 484). As a result, analysis is often based on an inductive 'data-driven' approach as opposed to a deductive or hypothetico-deductive 'theory-driven' approach (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008).

These assumptions stand in contrast to those underpinning quantitative research based on a 'positivist' or 'post-positivist' methodological paradigm, where researchers and research participants are independent (epistemology);

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research inquiry can be value-free (axiology) and reality is singular, tangible and external (ontology) (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008). Within this worldview, causal relationships are understood to be truthfully identified, meaning that nomothetic statements (such as scientific laws) are believed to be possible and not necessarily bound by time or context (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008). In adoption research, a shift towards 'post-positivism' has involved recognising that causal mechanisms are often probabilistic rather than deterministic (Rutter, 2012). For example, research has identified that children exposed to institutional care have an increased likelihood of poorer subsequent development, but the developmental pathways of individual children vary. Quantitative studies are frequently – although not always – designed using hypothesis-testing, top-down processes and methods that elicit numerical or categorical responses that can be used in statistical analysis (Patton, 2002; Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008).

Considering these two paradigms in relation to my research question, a qualitative approach better suited the aim of gaining a nuanced and detailed understanding of the lived experience of international adoption in mid-adulthood, as opposed to examining the women's current outcomes and the relationships between the binary, categorical or continuous variables associated with these. In addition, qualitative approaches offered a framework for examining my pre-existing personal and professional knowledge, and re-visiting this throughout different stages of the research process to see how it shaped and was (re)shaped by the emerging data and findings, and vice versa (Macbeth, 2001; see section 3.5 for a discussion of interpreter bias and reflexivity).

Therefore, as will be discussed in the next chapter, I developed my two sections of the interview schedule to include open-ended questions, in order to elicit data that describe experiences from the participant's viewpoint (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2007). With the agreement of the other members of the British Chinese Adoption Study (BCAS) team, these sections were embedded within the overall interview schedule used with each of the

participants (as will be described in Chapter 4). The questions in these two sections elicited the data analysed for this PhD.

3.2.2 Using interviews

Using interview data brought a number of advantages pertinent to this study, as described eloquently by Patton below.

> *We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. … The fact is that we cannot observe everything. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts, and intentions. We cannot observe behaviours that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organised the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things. … The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective. Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories.* (2002: 340)

The interview sections I developed fit what Patton describes as the 'standardised open-ended interview' (2002). This means the wording of each question was carefully and fully constructed beforehand and developed – via three rounds of piloting – into a printed interview schedule used for all interviews. Such an approach is distinct from other more loosely structured, participant-led style approaches, where researchers usually develop a topic guide or broad over-arching themes to explore, but the wording and sequence of questions may diverge substantially across interviews (Chase, 2008). Patton (2002) notes four advantages to the standardised open-ended interview, summarised here in relation to my study. First, when interviews are carried out by more than one researcher, this approach ensures a level of consistency across interviews. This was particularly important for the

purposes of my study, as I carried out one-third (n = 21) of the interviews and seven research interviewers carried out the remainder (see Chapter 4, section 4.5.1, for full details). Developing a standardised open-ended interview meant that the questions I had designed were, broadly speaking, asked of each participant, even if I did not conduct the interview. Second, the exact instrument could be tested beforehand with people who shared the central experiences of the participants (five similarly aged, internationally adopted women). Third, as the order of sections for the full interview was also pre-set, in most cases I could quickly locate and extract the sections for my analysis from within the extended interview transcript, which covered a greater range of topics. Defining the relevant data within more loosely structured interviews that did not follow a general sequence would probably have been problematic and made it more difficult to draw a clear line between my study and other analysis on the BCAS. Finally, standardised open-ended interviews tend to be focused and time-efficient (Patton, 2002). However, part of the approach in my study was to ensure the interview sections were also flexible enough to allow participants opportunities to spontaneously raise new or unexpected points.

Methodologists who advocate a strict 'constructivist' approach sometimes object to research that involves structures pre-defined by the researcher, and suggest this means 'forcing' data to fit with the researcher's pre-existing views (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Strauss and Corbin, 1990). By contrast, and in line with my approach, other methodologists argue for a balance between consistency and flexibility in data collection, depending on the research question.

> *Being systematic and orderly … is not antithetical to qualitative research. There may well be times when what we want to learn is best learned by rigorously structured perceptual means; in this way, we can obtain frequencies to undergird our speculations and interpretations.*
> (Peshkin, 2001: 241)

Following this approach, I refer to statistical or numerical findings from the BCAS (clearly marked as distinct from my independent analysis for this study) where relevant in the following chapters of this thesis. This additional information was integrated into the report only after the phenomenological analysis was complete (see section 3.6).

The term 'thick data', widely used in phenomenological research, emerged from the ethnographer Clifford Geertz's use of a term that originates from philosophy (Geertz, 2003; reprint of his 1973 essay). He described ethnographic data as follows:

> *A multiplicity of complex conceptual structures, many of them superimposed upon or knotted into one another, which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he [the ethnographic researcher] must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render*. (Geertz, 2003: 150)

In phenomenological research, the textural and structural descriptions that are part of providing a 'thick' description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; see section 3.3.2) anchor the findings firmly in the inductive, primary analysis at the core of this study. In my approach, I ensured the phenomenological analysis was clearly delineated before integrating the findings into a broader context provided by other research and theory.

3.2.3 Concepts drawn from narrative research

Phenomenological research – discussed later in this chapter – was the primary influence on my research design. But two concepts from within *narrative research* also influenced my approach. Narrative studies tend to be based on small samples, often as few as five or six participants, to allow researchers to analyse in depth not only the content (what was told) but also the structure (how it was told) of participants' stories (Creswell, 2007; Chase, 2008; Mason, 2010). Narrative researchers have explored issues ranging from how women brought up in care homes (re)construct their identities and

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life stories (Edwards, 2012) to how different age groups of adults describe key autobiographical memories (Singer, Rexhaj and Baddeley, 2007)*.

In contrast to the methods employed in this study, narrative research focuses on linguistic 'moment by moment utterances' to identify indications of psychological, social and cultural meanings (Chase, 2008; McAdams, 2012). However, familiarity with the main principles of narrative research – particularly the form described by McAdams in his psychological research – provided a useful primer to understanding (a) differences within qualitative approaches and (b) different layers of story-telling (Chase, 2008; McAdams, 2012).

The context of discovery

The first concept is the distinction within qualitative research between studies conducted in the 'context of discovery', as opposed to studies that test existing ideas in the 'context of justification' (McAdams, 2012). McAdams describes the former as:

> *[Exploring] a particular phenomenon in detail in order to develop new ways of describing and understanding the phenomenon... The researcher aims to address the problem or question by examining the stories in depth. The researcher does not have ready-made answers for the problem or question. (If the answers already existed, there would be no need to research in the context of discovery.) Based on past reading and experience, however, the researcher probably has a few hunches.* (2012: 17)

While not unique to narrative research, this definition sums up the space within qualitative traditions for studies that do not seek to start from a blank slate. Instead of striving to push aside one's previous knowledge base, the researcher openly addresses how this led to undertaking the study and examines how this might influence their decision-making (see also Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2007). The researcher remains alert to these pre-conceptions

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throughout the research cycle, and open to their ideas being challenged or discarded in the face of evidence from the analysis (McAdams, 2012). This marks a different perspective from methods that demand researchers should strive for a process that suspends pre-existing ideas, such as grounded theory approaches (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) or some phenomenological approaches (Smith et al, 2009; Giorgi, 2011; see section 3.4). Reflexivity – the process by which the examination of one's own position in relation to the research occurs – will be discussed later in section 3.5.

Telling stories

The second influence that narrative research approaches had on my study relates to the role of stories in making sense of one's own lived experiences: that '*people construct and internalize stories to make sense of their lives [and] these autobiographical stories have enough psychological meaning and staying power to be told to others as narrative accounts*' (McAdams, 2012: 15). I drew on this influence in particular in Chapters 6 and 7, but the twinned beliefs McAdams describes underpin the research design. First, that the women's descriptions of the impact of being internationally adopted represent their way of making sense of these earlier experiences, and how they have knitted these and subsequent experiences together into a life history. Second, that analysing their accounts will enable me to identify core aspects of the lived experience of being an adult who was, at an earlier stage of life, adopted from one country to another.

The centrality of story-telling to presenting one's life to others has been explored in prior work in adoption and fostering, notably in Simmonds (2007: 3–4) account of how unaccompanied asylum seeking young people in foster care express information about their earlier lives prior to coming to the UK:

> *Stories are precious to people because they define who they are, where they are from and what they are connected to. … Stories rely on facts but their meaning is in the imagination they conjure up and the emotions they provoke.*

In my study, the 'facts' about the women's pre-adoption experiences were largely unknown, yet talking about adoption remained a form of story-telling. My interview schedule explicitly addressed the role of story-telling in questions that tapped into the idea of 'self-defining' memories that change over time: those stories which are told and re-told and become part of the way people reveal themselves to others (Singer et al, 2007; McAdams, 2012). For example, I developed questions about the extent to which participants talked to other people about their adoption, or whether they had ever sought out experiences to do so (such as joining a post-adoption support group). These elicited accounts of the emotions attached to 'talking and telling' about adoption (Feast and Howe, 2003) and the effects of other people's reactions on which information they shared in subsequent re-tellings.

3.3 Phenomenology

3.3.1 Philosophical origins

Phenomenology's roots lie within the discipline of philosophy, and different approaches to analysis draw on competing interpretations of these philosophical roots (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2007, 2013). German mathematician Edmund Husserl's early abstract definitions of phenomenology as the study of lived experiences posed new challenges to positivist traditions of science (Laverty, 2003). Husserl's thesis was expanded, refuted and modified by later theorists, including a student of his: Martin Heidegger (Smith et al, 2009) and others such as Sartre and Merleu-Ponty (Creswell, 2013).

Husserl aimed to transcend the dominant scientific approaches, derived from natural sciences, that failed to take account of the conscious experiences of individuals. He argued that researchers should study the subjective action and perceptions of participants. Husserl's original conception of phenomenology was *'a method that attempted to give a description of the ways things appear in our conscious experience'* (Gallagher, 2016: 8). In contrast to the dominant methodologies in psychology at the time, Husserl asserted the need to advance knowledge by returning to *'the grounding of truths in human experience'* (Caelli, 2001: 274).

Philosophers whose work have come to be associated with phenomenology are far from united in their approach, and methodologists disagree on the precise philosophical sources that underpin the current use of phenomenology (Creswell, 2013). According to Moustakas (1994), Husserl's early influences included the philosophers René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, particularly on his notion of 'Epoche', or the suspension of pre-existing beliefs in order to study phenomena as they are originally perceived in the consciousness:

> *Epoche requires the elimination of suppositions and the raising of knowledge above every possible doubt. For Husserl, as for Kant and Descartes, knowledge based on intuition and essence precedes empirical knowledge. Although the doubt of Descartes was transformed into the Epoche of Husserl, both philosophers recognised the crucial value of returning to the self to discover the nature and meaning of things as they appear and in their essence.* (Moustakas, 1994: 127)

Husserl's work is underpinned by the theoretical perspective that people do not simply observe the world around them but that their consciousness is directed towards and actively constructs the objects of experience. As Creswell (2013: 77) notes, one of phenomenology's underpinning philosophical perspectives is that *'consciousness is always directed towards an object'* (intentionality of consciousness).

This position results in the refusal of the subject-object dichotomy (Creswell, 2013). Descartes' work on 'objective reality', which denotes subjective and objective knowledge as intertwined, as the subject is integral to the perception of the reality of an object, was also integrated into Husserl's work (Moustakas, 1994). Husserl's argument for the interconnectedness of mind and body in human experience refuted the notion of 'mind-body dualism': the notion that an objective reality exists 'out there' and separate from the individual (Sloan and Bowe, 2014), in line with the positivist traditions in quantitative research described earlier (section 3.2.1).

Although Heidegger's (1962) subsequent work overlapped with Husserl's, he also shifted the focus to include the concept of 'Dasein', which can be translated as 'there-being' or 'being in the world'. Individuals exist within a 'lived world' where their history, cultural context and interactions with others shape and are shaped by their own worldview (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, Heidegger emphasised the process by which individuals make sense of the world (and, subsequently, researchers make sense of the participants' worldview). One prominent aspect of his theory was the role of language as inseparable from sense-making and thus Heidegger's approach focused on interpreting the 'texts of life' (hermeneutics) (Creswell, 2013).

Translating the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology into methodological approaches is complex and how to categorise different approaches is still under debate (Sloan and Bowe, 2014; Gallagher, 2016). Phenomenologists can disagree vehemently over the underlying philosophical justification for their approaches: for example, Giorgi's (2011) criticism of Smith et al's (2009) widely used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach as having only a 'superficial' basis in hermeneutics. Confusion can also arise when researchers use different terms interchangeably (Laverty, 2003).

However, broadly speaking, two schools have emerged. 'Interpretative' or 'hermeneutic' phenomenology is associated with Heidegger's work, while 'descriptive' phenomenology is associated with Husserl's earlier transcendental tradition. Hermeneutic phenomenology concentrates more closely on the researcher's interpretation of the meaning of experience, with less formal 'rules' for analysis (Sloan and Bowe, 2014), although some approaches such as IPA have developed guidance to assist novice researchers in particular (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009). Descriptive phenomenology does not ignore the role of the researcher in interpreting the data collected for any phenomenological investigation, but uses the process of 'bracketing' out previous knowledge in order to consider the phenomenon with a sense of 'newness' (Creswell, 2013). The focus for descriptive

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phenomenology is *'the correlation of the noema of experience (the 'what')*
and the noesis (the 'how it is experienced')' (Sloan and Bowe, 2014).

Creswell (2013) juxtaposes Moustakas' (1994) procedures for *psychological*
phenomenology (a particular approach within the transcendental/descriptive
school)*,* with alternative procedures for *hermeneutic* phenomenology. The
latter advocates an approach with greater emphasis on the researcher's
'mediation' between different meanings of the phenomenon under study. By
contrast, Creswell (2013) sets out a shortened version of the Moustakas'
(1994) steps for carrying out a psychological phenomenological study, one
which focuses *'less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a*
description of the experiences of the participants' (Creswell, 2013: 80).

This aspect was one of the advantages of using a descriptive approach (and
specifically a psychological approach) for my study. Given the size of my
sample, I wanted to ensure I could pay adequate attention to each case in
both the analysis and the phenomenological report. As described earlier,
interpretative/hermeneutic approaches tend to advocate for small sample
sizes (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Giorgi, 2009) in order to achieve, for
example, the task of moving between parts of the text and the whole of the
text (the 'hermeneutic circle', Sloan and Bowe, 2014).

A second advantage for my study in using Creswell's approach relates to the
structure of the phenomenological report. Moustakas clearly sets out two
steps to the phenomenology: describing *what* participants experienced
(textural description) as well as *how* they experienced it (structural
description); the combination of these descriptions form the description of the
essence of the phenomenology (Creswell, 2013). For this study, that meant
focusing on both the experience of adoption appraisal (see Chapter 5) and the
contexts in which adoption appraisal occurred (for example, in talking about
adoption with others, see Chapter 6, or in describing adoption within the
research interviews, see Chapter 7).

Where a strictly Husserlian approach to descriptive phenomenology would
strive to suspend all pre-existing knowledge (Giorgi, 2009), the procedures set

out in van Moustakas (1994) acknowledge that a state of pure 'newness' is unlikely to be achieved, but nevertheless the researcher must examine and articulate her own experiences in relation to the phenomenon under study. In this thesis my approach to 'bracketing' out pre-existing experience and knowledge takes the form of a personal statement near the start of the research report (following Creswell's procedures), rather than the extensive mediation that would be expected in an interpretative/hermeneutic phenomenological report (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009; Creswell, 2013).

3.3.2 Psychological phenomenology

My approach follows the steps set out in Creswell's (2007, 2013) description of phenomenology, which is a modified version of earlier forms of 'psychological phenomenology' (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell acknowledges that researchers vary in how closely such procedures are followed, but the key steps are:

- Identifying phenomenology as the best approach for the research problem, and defining the phenomenon of interest.
- Recognising the philosophical underpinnings of phenomenology.
- Collecting data – often, but not always, in the form of interviews – that openly describe the phenomenon, and explore the situations or contexts that influence the individual's experience of the phenomenon.
- Going through the data highlighting 'significant statements', sentences or quotes that build up a picture of how each individual experiences the phenomenon.
- Developing 'clusters of meanings': going over the statements and creating links between them that develop into common themes.
- Textural description: using the statements and resulting themes to write a description of what it is the women experienced.
- Structural description: writing a description of the context or situation that influences how the participants experienced the phenomenon.
- Reflexivity (see section 3.5): earlier approaches advocate this as a final step of the description process, but one of Creswell's main adaptations is that the researcher should begin examining and articulating their own

experiences at an earlier stage *before* describing the analysis. Creswell's modification fits the general tenet of other qualitative approaches that reflexivity should be maintained throughout the research process (Macbeth, 2001). In line with this, I described my own experiences in Chapter 1.

- Finally, the researcher uses the textural description and structural description to write '*a composite description that presents the "essence" of the phenomenon*', to explicate the underlying structure of the shared experience (Creswell, 2007: 58). The reader should come away with the sense that they have gained a better understanding of what it might be like to have experienced the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2007).

3.4 Sample

3.4.1 Sampling strategy

The selection process for choosing this group of women fits the definition of a 'criterion' strategy, which has been described as a typical approach to sampling in phenomenological research (Kuzel, 1999). In this case, all of the women were adopted via a particular international adoption project, which formed the key inclusion criteria for entry to the study. The benefits of this were two-fold: first, they shared certain early experiences (described in Chapter 1) and, second, administrative and descriptive data were available that related to those early experiences. In the BCAS, this meant key quantitative data were available for statistical tests. In my study, these data provide a detailed picture of the background to these women's lives, offering an independent and alternative source to the interview data about those early experiences.

My recruitment methods were in contrast to a more typical pattern for qualitative studies involving internationally adopted adults. All of the qualitative studies reviewed in Chapter 2 used adverts as a primary means to recruit their samples, which were generally circulated through adoption

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networks or publications or via internet adverts (Lindblad and Signell, 2008; Song and Lee, 2009; Docan-Morgan, 2010; Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010; Docan-Morgan, 2011). The same applied in some of the quantitative and mixed methods studies (Mohanty et al, 2006; McGinnis et al, 2009). For my study, a cohort was identified via records of their adoptions, and then all members who could be located were invited to participate (see Chapter 4 for further details). By using an alternative sampling strategy to those used previously, the data in my study may offer an increased chance to '*look at the periphery for surprises and for disconfirming evidence*' (Kuzel, 1999: 44; drawing on Miles and Huberman, 1994) by including participants who might not have been recruited via the more common method of using adoption networks. Many of the participants in my study, for example, had had no previous contact as adults with adoption networks or services.

The potential impact of using an alternative sampling strategy to most adult adoption studies is described in a chapter exploring identity searches for adopted people in midlife, in Brodzinsky et al's (1993: 154) *Being Adopted: The Lifelong Search for Self*:

> *The variability of adoptees' coping strategies is difficult to capture in empirical research. Unhappy adoptees are relatively easy to find; satisfied adoptees are not. Content adults do not tend to join adoptees-in-search organisations, which is where most researchers begin when looking for adoptees to study. They do not tend to answer ads, which is where we found many of our own subjects. And they do not tend to be in psychotherapy, another handy spot for seeking out adopted adults to interview.*

> *Since the majority of adoptees are so hard to find, their points of view may be poorly represented in discussions of what it is like to be adopted. We don't know if the members of this vast "silent majority" are truly content about being adopted, or simply silent.*

This description underlines both an advantage to my sampling strategy and the rational for including all participants who were interviewed. Using the full range of 68 interviews inevitably restricts the depth in which I could examine each individual narrative, but chimes with Patton's suggestion that '*less depth from a larger number of people can be especially helpful in exploring a phenomenon and trying to document diversity or understand variation*' (2002: 244). Selecting a sub-set of interviews to analyse would risk impairing the sample and missing out on such opportunities.

3.4.2 Sample size

Sample sizes vary in phenomenological research; there is no direct equivalent of the power calculations used in quantitative research to determine ideal numbers for carrying out statistical analysis (Dupont and Plummer, 1990). Although most descriptions of phenomenological analysis emphasise that there is not one 'right answer' to the question of how many participants is enough, some particularly in-depth methods are generally viewed as only effective with small samples (Smith et al, 2009). For example, reviewing a selection of back issues (2012–2014) of the *Journal of Phenomenological Research* – founded and edited by Amedeo Giorgi, an influential proponent of Husserlian phenomenology – all the studies described involved samples of four or fewer participants.

However, the diversification of phenomenological approaches mean a particularly wide range of sample sizes have been used in phenomenological studies compared to, for example, narrative research. A survey of 560 PhD theses submitted in Great Britain and Ireland compared sample sizes across 22 different qualitative research approaches, from case studies to ethnography (Mason, 2010). The phenomenological studies had on average 25 participants, but ranged from seven to 89 participants. Creswell (2007) has also identified phenomenological studies involving from one to 325 participants. In comparing five different approaches to qualitative research, the exemplar he selected to illustrate phenomenological research was a study of 59 patients diagnosed with AIDS (Anderson and Spencer, 2002; cited in

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Creswell, 2007). My sample size is therefore at the larger end of the spectrum, but not exceptional.

3.4.3 Characteristics of sample

The participants in my study shared certain characteristics, although there were also variations in their childhoods. They differ to a certain extent in their age at adoption; in whether they grew up with siblings or not; whether those siblings were also adopted or not; the towns, cities and villages they grew up in; and their adult social characteristics (Feast et al, 2013a). But they also have a number of shared characteristics. They are all female. They share a country and region of origin, experiences of orphanage care and being adopted from one country into another (Hong Kong to UK). They were all adopted during one ten-year period – pertinent given the substantial changes in adoption policy and practice over time. They were also of similar age at the time of being interviewed (mean age 48 years, SD 2.4, range 42–53 years when data collection was undertaken in 2010–2011; Feast et al, 2013a).

A sample that shares similar characteristics beyond the core experience – and has, as in this case, been purposively sampled on the basis of those characteristics – allows the phenomenological researcher to '*examine in detail psychological variability within the group, by analysing the pattern of convergence and divergence which arises*' in relation to the phenomenon being studied (Smith et al, 2009: 49–50).

3.5 Interpreter bias and reflexivity

> *We are never free of lenses through which to perceive. … Researchers are replete with shaping if not determining values, attitudes, preferences, and experiences – all lenses of a sort – through which they apprehend the world around them. We bring this abundance with us wherever we go. It contains unplanned ways of perceiving in that we tend not to knowingly select one or another of these personal*

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> *orientations and commitments by which to view the world.* (Peshkin,
> 2001: 242)

Phenomenological researchers are divided in their approach to dealing with the issues outlined above. Strictly Husserlian approaches advocate the necessity of 'bracketing' out one's own experiences (sometimes referred to as the process of 'epoche') to avoid 'contaminating' the analysis (Hycner, 1985; Giorgi, 2011). More interpretative approaches, associated with the philosophy of Heidegger rather than Husserl, adhere to a belief that to completely bracket one's own experiences is unachievable and even undesirable, as it would mask contextual information that helps the reader follow the researcher's logic and conclusions (Creswell, 2007).

My approach is situated firmly within this latter camp. Examining the knowledge and experience one brings to studying a particular topic can provide a valuable resource for achieving 'relevant and specific' research: the process known as 'reflexivity' (Malterud, 2001). Specifically, positional reflexivity '*leads the analyst to examine place, biography, self, and other to understand how they shape the analytic exercise*' (Macbeth, 2001: 35).

Using a reflexive approach addresses the issue of whether researchers can ever fully suspend pre-conceptions. Malterud (2001: 484) sums up the issue neatly:

> *The question is neither whether the research affects the process nor whether such an effect can be prevented. This methodological point has been turned into a commitment to reflexivity. The illusion of denying the human touch is countered by establishing an agenda for assessment of subjectivity.*

In line with a Heideggerian commitment to positional reflexivity – as opposed to Husserlian bracketing – in the introductory chapter I set out my professional and personal background, and how these informed my approach to this study. I outlined my interpretation of how these experiences inform my research

approach, and in doing so enabled the reader to use this information to judge the validity and trustworthiness of my analytical process and subsequent findings and conclusions (Macbeth, 2001; Patton, 2002). Positional reflexivity is maintained by describing and reflecting on the interpretative processes by which the findings were constructed, and acknowledging that alternative interpretations may be valid (Malterud, 2001).

3.6 Situating the phenomenological findings

The phenomenological approach described above forms the heart of the analysis for this study: exploring the 'essence' of the adoption appraisal process as perceived from mid-adulthood. To help ground and situate my phenomenological account, in the discussion (Chapter 8) I examine the findings in the light of the conclusions of other research with internationally adopted adults, including the BCAS.

The aim of this secondary stage is not to try to force the findings together into a tidy but over-simplified message, which some qualitative researchers argue is a potential weakness of using inductive and deductive findings together (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). To do so would be at odds with the rationale for my study, in which I seek to explore some of the ambivalence that risks being masked in a hypothesis-testing approach such as that taken in the BCAS (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008; Feast et al, 2013a). Instead, this additional stage is included to aid the reader in understanding the phenomenological analysis in context. In other words, what do these findings add to what was 'known' previously about the phenomenon of international adoption and in particular the process of adoption appraisal?

I also explore how my findings – from a sample of women raised in the UK – resonate with or differ from findings from other qualitative studies, and then how this relates to the full range of evidence, including quantitative research. In doing so, I do not lose sight of a central strength of qualitative research: that it allows for reporting '*representations characterised by contingency and instability*' (Søndergaard, 2002, cited in Halkier, 2011: 788). This approach

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suits my aim to study adoption appraisal as a process, as opposed to a static outcome.

The core of my approach is the phenomenological, qualitative analysis of the interviews. But for my study to add to the existing knowledge base about international adoption, making links with the broader context is important. I have argued in Chapter 2 that stronger connections between studies using different methods in international adoption research would be beneficial. A key argument of proponents of mixed methods research is that it '*provides the opportunity for presenting a greater diversity of divergent views*' (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2003: 674). Applying that logic on a wider scale, using a qualitative approach in a field dominated by quantitative studies offers an alternative and potentially valuable way of understanding the long-term impact of international adoption (Lee, 2016).

This approach also has a history within 'pure' forms of phenomenology (Smith et al, 2009). The core principle is that any secondary questions should not be about seeking to prove or disprove a hypothesis, although they may engage directly with theories and alternative empirical work: '*such analyses do need to be grounded in a more phenomenological account, which should be established **first**'* (Smith et al, 2009: 49–50, emphasis in original). By undertaking the analysis in this order, I am keeping with the 'bottom-up' approach of phenomenological research. If the aim of my study is to arrive at a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the phenomenon of international adoption, this means not just examining my own data, but considering the implications of my findings. Situating the phenomenological findings in a broader, multi-methods context provides the opportunity to start to map out potential 'meta-inferences', without undermining the phenomenological results (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008).

3.7 Conclusion

This chapter has described the methodological background to my study: a qualitative, phenomenological account of the experience of being an internationally adopted woman and how such experiences are appraised in midlife. I followed psychological phenomenology procedures (Creswell, 2007) and draw on Heidegger's philosophical thesis to consider how my pre-existing knowledge and experiences influence my approach to this study. As noted, my sample offers an unusual opportunity to understand international adoption from a UK, midlife perspective and because the sampling strategy enabled the inclusion of women who would not have been included via adoption networks or support services. In the following chapter, I move on to describe how my approach translated into the specific tasks involved in carrying out each stage of this study.

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4 METHODS

4.1 Introduction

While the previous chapter described the methodology – the thinking behind developing my approach to this research – here I describe the methods: the practical application of this approach in my study. This chapter covers issues related to securing ethical approval, recruiting and gaining consent from participants, developing and piloting the interview schedule, collecting and analysing the data and, finally, interpreting the results.

Throughout this chapter I distinguish between tasks I carried out independently and those conducted in collaboration with others. What follows is a short overview: I coordinated the work to trace the sample; co-developed all research materials (introductory letters to participants, all research tools), developed the sections of the interview schedule relevant to my study, carried out 21 of the 68 interviews (more than twice as many as other interviewers) and independently planned, carried out and reported on all aspects of the analysis described here.

As well as the three other members of the research team, six additional independent research interviewers were employed by the British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF) and an advisory group was set up for the study, comprising academics specialising in child and lifespan development, epidemiology and longitudinal studies, and practitioners from the three agencies involved in the adoption project. Their roles will be outlined throughout this chapter.

4.2 Research ethics

4.2.1 Ethical approval and other permissions

Permissions for this study were sought via a three-stage process: first, two stages that covered data collection for my study as part of the British Chinese Adoption Study (BCAS), and then a third stage to meet City University's requirements.

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For the BCAS, we (the BCAS research team) began seeking permissions in 2007. BAAF and International Social Service United Kingdom (ISS UK) had already made an agreement that the research should go ahead if BAAF could secure funding. Due to the highly personal nature of adoption, gaining access to child welfare records usually requires permission from the Secretary of State at the relevant government Ministry. Therefore, in 2007, we sought and were granted permission from the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) to gain access to the ISS UK files for the purposes of research. The files were then transferred to BAAF's office in order to document and categorise data from the records. As noted earlier, I carried out this work and built up a database that included detailed information about each case. This was the starting point for identifying the 100 girls who went on to be invited (as adults) to participate in the study.

Next, we applied to the Ethics Committee for Psychiatry, Nursing and Midwifery at King's College, London, as the research study was a collaboration between BAAF and King's College, London (BAAF did not have a formal research ethics committee). The BCAS principal investigator Professor Alan Rushton was charged with the responsibility of ensuring ethical standards were met throughout the process of data collection and analysis. I coordinated our submission and was named in the application as one of the four members of the research team. Ethical permission was granted in March 2009.

Third, after enrolling as an MPhil/PhD student, in January 2011 I completed a Research Registration Form for the School of Health Sciences (SHS) Ethics Committee, to show that my study would meet the requirements of City University's ethical standards, including that:

- Issues relating to data collection had been appropriately dealt with (for example, contacting all participants after their interviewers to ensure it had not raised feelings or concerns they felt they needed support to deal with)
- Participants gave written permission for the interview data to be analysed for the BCAS or any further research
- I had permission from BAAF to access the data for my PhD

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- Data were codified and stored by numerical ID with participants' names removed

The SHS Ethics Committee decided that a full application was unnecessary, given the rigour of the original ethics approval process at King's College, London and my statement that I would follow the same procedures regarding data security and participant confidentiality as the BCAS research. Julia Feast, Professor Rushton and I agreed that I would give Professor Rushton an update every six months about my PhD progress, or sooner if any new ethical issues arose.

4.2.2 Dealing with ethical issues

A detailed information leaflet about the research was prepared and sent to each potential participant along with an introductory letter (see section 4.3.2). As explained in the leaflet and again at the start of each interview, the only exception to maintaining confidentiality would be if the participant disclosed an incident of abuse or other harm, either past, present or intended in the future, to self or others.

When information of this nature was disclosed, in each case the research team considered whether this constituted a safeguarding issue that would require alerting other professionals. No cases requiring further action were identified. However, for some women additional information was provided about support services. In two cases this involved a number of telephone calls/emails. At the end of the main part of the British Chinese Adoption Study, in 2013, Professor Rushton reported back to the ethics committee at King's College, London, to confirm that no ethical problems had arisen.

Finally, in terms of anonymity in reporting my results, I have used pseudonyms for the women and have selected names that start with different letters from the real name in each case. Given their unusual early lives, potential identification of individuals is more likely for this group of women than some other cohorts, and therefore details such as the number of family members are changed where necessary.

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4.3 Participants

4.3.1 Identifying and tracing participants

My study shared the same recruitment process as the BCAS and I took a lead role in the related tasks. As a starting point, 13 women adopted via the Hong Kong Adoption Project were already in contact with BAAF following a small reunion event organised in 2000 by one of the adopted women. Once funding had been secured, an early task was to write to these women to inform them of the planned research.

Tracing the remaining women took more than 18 months, a process achieved with the help of seven BAAF volunteers. In particular, one long-standing volunteer – Dr Gill Clark – brought a wealth of experience in family tracing and relevant archives. Due to the sensitive nature of the information, all volunteers were interviewed informally by me and/or Julia Feast before starting this role. They also signed confidentiality agreements stating that they would not discuss any information gleaned through this work outside of the research team.

I worked with and coordinated the efforts of the volunteers to trace the adopted women. The starting point for each search was the information that I had extracted from the ISS UK files: name used after adoption, name used during orphanage care (sometimes retained as a middle name), address of adoptive family at time of adoption, and date of birth. In addition, some files contained other information, such as family connections to other geographical areas, or a note that the family had subsequently moved or planned to move.

Current addresses were identified via public records such as the electoral roll. The volunteers and I matched up elements from birth, marriage and death certificates and other publicly available information (for example, it was discovered that some women had public web profiles that mentioned their origins). The checking of marriage records was particularly important as a number of women had married and changed their surnames, in some cases more than once. Middle names and/or initials also proved helpful in identifying a number of the women, particularly where these were unusual or derived from their pre-adoption names.

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Of the total group of 100, two women were found to have died and one woman could not be traced within the 18-month period. The remaining 97 women were contacted as outlined below.

4.3.2 Initiating contact

For most of the women, the first time they heard about the research was when a letter arrived at their current address. The wording of the letter was therefore important, and a standard template was developed with input from the research team and the BCAS Advisory Group. Members of the pilot group also checked the letter and accompanying leaflet during the piloting process of the research materials (described in section 4.4.3).

A personalised copy of a letter signed by Julia Feast was sent to each potential participant along with the information leaflet and consent form. Where no response was received after a reasonable period (usually six weeks), a second copy was sent along with a note that it was being re-sent in case the first one had gone astray. In six cases, a third letter was sent recorded delivery along with a note that we would not attempt to contact the person again if no response was received. No letters were sent during December, to avoid the risk of raising difficult emotions in the run-up to Christmas and the New Year, in case thinking about family was painful for some potential participants at that time of year.

For cases where no current address could be identified despite our best efforts, an alternative address was identified for a close relative within the adoptive family who was asked to pass a letter on to the adopted person. Generally, most relatives were happy to do so, even if in the end the woman declined to participate. Sadly, two women were found to have died before the study commenced. Only one women from the original group of 100 girls was not traced.

As the majority of the women were adopted transracially, it seemed highly likely they would know about their adoptions. Before letters were sent to those women who had been adopted by families with one ethnically Chinese parent, in each case careful consideration was given to the possibility that she might be unaware of her adoptive

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status (for example, taking into account her age at adoption and any relevant information gleaned from the ISS UK records). In the end, no cases of 'concealed' adoptions were found.

4.3.3 Gaining consent from participants

All 68 participants signed a consent form that had been approved by the Psychiatry, Nursing and Midwifery Ethics Committee at Kings College, London (reference number PNM/08/09-27). The leaflet sent to all potential participants stated they were free to withdraw without giving an explanation at any time before the data were anonymised and analysed. As Silverman notes, studies take different approaches to what 'consent' means, and an approach that allows participants the option to withdraw later without explanation balances the needs of both participant and researcher (Silverman, 2010).

4.3.4 Non-participation

Two women (additional to the 68 participants) initially gave consent then later withdrew for personal reasons. Four women participated in BCAS by completing questionnaires but declined to be interviewed, and are therefore excluded from my study.

The remaining women who had been traced either declined to participate (n = 16) or did not respond to letters (n = 7). Non-participants who replied were offered the opportunity to be kept informed of the study's progress and any related developments. Therefore, two lists of names were developed: one list of participants, and one list of other adopted people who were interested in the project, namely non-participants and a small number of women adopted from Hong Kong but not via ISS, who had contacted BAAF after hearing about the study. The BCAS research team wrote to both groups every few months to keep them informed about developments (Julia Feast and I co-signed all letters).

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4.3.5 Comparing participants and non-participants

As a research team for the BCAS, we agreed it was not appropriate to seek further information from non-participants beyond what they decided to share in their response to the invitation to participate. To do so felt overly intrusive and would have risked breaching the conditions of our ethical approval from King's College, London.

On the basis of the information supplied in their responses, there was no obvious pattern of differences between participants or non-participants. Although some women who declined told us participating would mean re-visiting unhappy earlier experiences, so did some of the most committed participants in the study. Among those women who gave reasons for non-participation, a small number explicitly mentioned not wanting to discuss their adoption experience. Others explained they were too busy or recent major life events meant the timing was not appropriate.

In the BCAS, baseline data on the participants and non-participants early experiences were tested and only one statistically significant difference was identified: the participants entered orphanage care on average 3.5 months earlier than non-participants (Feast et al, 2013a). In previous studies, later age at exit from orphanage care (usually meaning later age at adoption placement) has been found to predict poorer outcomes (Rutter and Sonuga-Barke, 2010; McCall, 2011) but participants and non-participants in the BCAS research had no significant difference on this variable (Feast et al, 2013a). We found no evidence from other studies about why age at entry into orphanage care might affect participation and no hypotheses for how this might affect outcomes (Feast et al, 2013a).

For the purposes of my study, it is worth reiterating that most qualitative studies of internationally adopted adults either use advertising via adoption organisations (for example, McGinnis et al, 2009); or access via a specialist group or event (for example, Docan-Morgan, 2010), and therefore do not allow for checking differences against 'non-participants' except in the wider sense of comparing their samples to national or other externally collated data.

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4.4 Research tools and preparation for interviews

4.4.1 Overview of interview schedule

During the process of tracing the women, I was also developing my interview schedule as part of the work to develop the full interview schedule to be used for the BCAS (which I was also heavily involved with). My interview schedule was divided into two parts. The order of the full interview schedule was as follows:

- Introductions and brief overview: members of adoptive family and current household, current location and main previous locations, and education/work circumstances.
- Childhood and adolescence – relationships with family members, life events (illness, parental divorce, moves), school, friendships, activities.
- **Adoption and Hong Kong (my section).**
- Adult life – partnership(s), children (if any), adoptive family, social relationships, work/education, health, general life events.
- **Final reflections (my section).**

The questions I developed for the 'Adoption and Hong Kong' and 'Final reflections' sections explored the women's specific experiences in relation to being adopted from Hong Kong.

In contrast, the other sections of the interview schedule focused more on life events and experiences across a range of domains, not necessarily linked to adoption. This was in keeping with the hypothesis for the BCAS that the women's pre-adoption experiences would lead to a higher risk of poorer outcomes in midlife, but that the effects might be modified by post-adoption events in childhood, adolescence or adult life. The final version of the interview schedule for my two sections is shown in Table 4.1: a total of 17 main questions.

4.4.2 Developing questions

I drew on three main sources in developing my initial draft of the interview schedule: previous research studies, discussions with the BCAS research team and other

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colleagues, and my pre-existing knowledge (discussed in Chapter 1). I followed Patton's (2002) principles of developing open-ended questions and considering the interview from the participants' point of view, for example in terms of length and structure of the schedule.

Most of the questions fall into the categories Patton defines as '*opinion and values questions*' and '*feelings questions*'. The questions were primarily phrased in terms of the participants' experiences and their reflections on these experiences – using '*what*' or '*how*', and avoiding '*why*'. As Patton describes:

> *"Why" questions presuppose that things happen for a reason and that those reasons are knowable. "Why" questions presume cause-effect relationships, an ordered world, and rationality. "Why" questions move beyond what has happened, what one has experienced, how one feels, what one opines, and what one knows to the making of analytical and deductive inferences.* (2002: 363)

At the end of the first of my two sections, I included what Patton terms a 'summarising transition question': '*Before I move on to the next section, are there any other positive or negative experiences related to being adopted from Hong Kong that we haven't covered?*'. This helped to bring out any issues that the participant wanted to raise that were not covered by earlier questions, and is in keeping with my aim of identifying experiences that the participant feels are meaningful but may not have been picked up in previous research.

When collecting self-reported retrospective accounts of people's feelings and actions, a 'probing' approach is considered to reduce the likelihood of mistakes or bias in recall (Hardt and Rutter, 2004). 'Probes' are additional questions added after the main questions that help to elicit further information, clarify previous statements or check details (Patton, 2002). These questions helped to clarify any inconsistencies identified as the interview progressed, and the responses often provided a clearer picture of the participant's experiences (Hardt and Rutter, 2004). Therefore, following the main questions, some specific probes were written out in full in my interview schedule (for example, '*Has this changed over time?*'). A note at the

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start of the schedule reminded interviewers to use probes wherever it would be helpful, such as '*Can you tell me a bit more about that?*', or to ask for further details, such as when an event occurred or how long it went on for.

Although often not explicitly acknowledged in research studies involving internationally adopted adults, some adopted people may feel guilty or hesitant about expressing feelings that could be perceived as negative or 'ungrateful' in relation to their adoption. This is a recurring theme in narrative accounts by adopted people outside of research: in presentations or anthologies of adopted people's accounts of what being adopted means to them (see, for example, Harris, 2006). In order to allow such participants to express their opinions without being seen to attribute blame, two questions were phrased in general terms without referring to their own experiences:

> *If you had any messages for people adopting from overseas today, what would they be?*

> *What support (if any) do you think that children adopted from overseas need and at what stage?*

The 'Final reflections' section was the last part of the full interview schedule and therefore signalled the end of the interview. As Patton notes, '*in the spirit of emergent interviewing, open-ended interviewing, it's important in formal interviews to provide an opportunity for the interviewee to have the final say*' (2002: 379). In line with this thinking, the final question I included was:

> *Finally, I have asked you a lot of questions and you have told me a lot about your life. Is there anything you think for the purposes of this research it is important for us to know?*

This question structure proved to be an effective approach to finishing the interview. The first sentence acknowledged the experience from the participants' point of view, and in many cases elicited a smile or laugh. Not all participants had something to add, but some women reiterated or expanded on a point made earlier in the

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interview. Thus it provided a way for participants to indicate the relative importance of some issues over others. Occasionally participants also raised a new issue that might have been missed without this final question.

4.4.3 Piloting and further development

The interview schedule was carefully scrutinised via piloting of a draft version: a process described as an opportunity for '*going wrong and putting it right*' before starting the main interviews (Silverman, 2010: 198). As noted in the previous chapter, ensuring consistency between interviewers and the opportunity to pilot the content and precise wording of the interview schedule are two advantages of using standardised open-ended interviews (Patton, 2002; see section 3.2.2). I was the only member of the research team involved at all stages of the piloting: I co-led the first session, led the second session and carried out the final interview (after one pilot participant offered the opportunity to be re-interviewed to test the final revised version). I was also responsible for making subsequent revisions and ensuring the BCAS team arrived at a final agreed version for the full interview schedule, including the two sections for my PhD.

The pilot group consisted of five transracially adopted women, four of whom were born in Hong Kong in the 1960s and adopted by families in the UK, but not via the ISS UK adoption project. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with their permission, and the women gave feedback afterwards.

All research interviewers had the opportunity to carry out at least one interview. Some did so in pairs, with one taking notes while the other carried out the interview, then switching roles halfway through. We (the eight research interviewers) read all the pilot interview transcripts and then discussed them as a group at a subsequent meeting. Members of the BCAS Advisory Group also offered comments on a draft version of the interview schedule.

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Amendments to the interview schedule

In light of the piloting and subsequent discussions, two main amendments are most relevant to my study. First, I changed the ordering of sections to make it 'flow' more naturally from the participants' point of view: the first section of my interview schedule ('Adoption and Hong Kong') was moved from the start of the interview schedule to a later point, after the first section about childhood and adolescence (see section 4.2.1). Pilot participants felt this move would allow interviewees to relax into the process by answering initial questions about life events before turning to the more reflective and personal questions on specifically adoption-related experiences and their feelings about adoption and its effects across the lifespan. It also made sense that the full interview schedule progressed chronologically, so my section (which related to current views) was part of the 'adulthood' section.

Second, I revised and fine-tuned the wording of some questions. As Patton (2002) notes, clarity is an important aspect of constructing interview questions. For example, the words 'international adoption' were replaced with 'adoption from other countries' or 'adoption from overseas' throughout the interview schedule, which pilot participants felt was less ambiguous. I also re-wrote the first question in the Adoption and Hong Kong section to remove the phrase 'openness about adoption' – a fairly common term used in practice and research in relation to how much a person feels able to talk to others about their adoption-related experiences. Instead, the pilot participants suggested '*Can I start by asking, is being adopted something you feel comfortable talking about to other people?*', which they felt was clearer and also a gentler opening question.

To ensure similarity across the interviews, two probing questions were written out in parentheses ('*Who do you talk to? Has this changed over time?*') to be asked if appropriate to the initial response. The question '*As an adult, how comfortable do you feel with your Chinese appearance?*' (followed by a probing question '*Has this changed over time?*') was also added at the suggestion of the pilot participants, who felt this was a potentially important issue that had been overlooked in the first draft. The final version of my two sections of the interview schedule is shown in the table overleaf.

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Table 4.1 – Final Interview Schedule

'Adoption and Hong Kong' section
Can I start by asking, is being adopted something you feel comfortable talking about to other people? (Who do you talk to? Has this changed over time?)
Can you tell me about the positive aspects of being adopted from Hong Kong?
Have there been any difficult aspects related to being adopted from Hong Kong?
Have you ever contacted any post-adoption services or joined any groups for adopted people?
As an adult, how comfortable do you feel with your Chinese appearance? (Has this changed over time?)
Which cultural heritage(s) do you feel most closely linked to?
Do you feel you have ever experienced racism or being negatively stereotyped in your life in the UK?
Have you ever tried to find out information about your origins? (If so, what did you do about this and what was the outcome?)
Do you think about your birth family much now? (If so, who do you talk to about this?)
Before I move on to the next section, are there any other positive or negative experiences related to being adopted from Hong Kong that we haven't covered?
'Final reflections' section
Looking at your whole life to this point, what effect (if any) do you think that starting life in an orphanage has had on you?
How has any information you have found out about your origins (or lack of information if has not sought access) affected your life? (probe – particularly in relation to birth parents/family of origin)
Overall, could you tell me what have been the most important positive and negative aspects of being adopted for you?
What do you feel about having being brought up transracially? – within adoptive family – in a mainly white European culture
If you had any messages for people adopting from overseas today, what would they be?
What support (if any) do you think that children adopted from overseas need and at what stage?
Finally, I have asked you a lot of questions and you have told me a lot about your life. Is there anything you think for the purposes of this research it is important for us to know?

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The time spent on piloting the interview schedule and reviewing the transcripts and audio recordings therefore proved valuable in ensuring (1) that questions were worded clearly and sensitively, (2) that pilot participants felt the interview schedule was appropriately balanced and not missing obvious topics and (3) that all research interviewers had the opportunity to practise and raise queries before carrying out interviews for the study.

4.4.4 Interviewers: training and agreeing a common approach

Interviews were carried out by eight interviewers: me (21 interviews), Julia Feast (nine interviews) and six research interviewers (between two and seven interviews each). All the other research interviewers were experienced at conducting interviews for adoption research: one from multiple waves of the English Romanian Adoptees study (Rutter and Sonuga-Barke, 2010); the others from the Adoption Search and Reunion study (Triseliotis et al, 2005). I had carried out interviews on four previous research projects involving adoption or fostering. Six research interviewers, including Julia Feast, were qualified social workers, with between 20 and 30 years of experience each, predominantly in working with adopted adults.

In addition to the piloting process described above, our group of research interviewers met as a team three times (before, during and after the data collection period). We also participated in two days of training on the particular interview method relevant to the other parts of the interview schedule (the Adult Life Phase Interview; see Bifulco et al, 2000), which offered further opportunity to discuss our approach to interviewing. While as interviewers we brought individual experiences and skills, by using a prescribed interview schedule and explicitly discussing our approach, we aimed for a consistency in certain core aspects (Patton, 2002).

We agreed that ensuring the participants felt comfortable with the interview process was a common goal, particularly given the sensitive nature of some of the questions, and that we had a responsibility to provide information about where to go for support or further information if required by participants (a list of relevant organisations was prepared in advance of interviewing).

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Our agreed approach was informed not only by principles of good practice in research but also by the social work background of the research team and BAAF's organisational commitment to promoting the well-being of adopted people. Through our discussions, an overarching 'sensitising concept' (Patton, 2002) emerged: an awareness of the very wide variety of experiences adopted people can have, and that their views of those experiences can differ in subtle ways. In light of this, maintaining a neutral and open approach to what the participants had to say was important. As Peshkin describes:

> *We display respect to our research others by taking seriously what they say, what they think they are doing, what they make of things. In this way, we communicate that we have not come with preconceived notions of the type that preclude careful, serious listening.* (Peshkin, 2001: 244)

4.4.5 Reflecting on my interviewing style

From examining the transcripts from my pilot interviews and listening back to the recordings, I identified that I had a tendency to add in extra words to try and 'soften' the questions. Usually this occurred if I felt the topic was sensitive or presumed that a participant might not want to share further information. The piloting process allowed me to get used to the questions and feel more comfortable with them.

By the time of the 'real' participant interviews, I found most women were willing to share information once they had been assured of confidentiality and data security. My style became less hesitant, and I also learned not to rush onto the next question quickly to avoid silence. I realised that sometimes the participant needed more time to think about how to phrase their response and to consider how much detail they wanted to share. Therefore, I stopped assuming that hesitations indicated unwillingness to answer the question.

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4.5 Data collection

4.5.1 Conducting the interviews

The majority of the interviews were carried out in participants' homes to make the process as convenient as possible for them. However, all participants were offered a choice and eight women preferred to be interviewed either at a local BAAF office (BAAF has eight offices around the UK) or an alternative venue such as a rented meeting room close to their local area (selected after taking into account issues of accessibility and the confidential nature of the interview topic).

Five participants living outside the UK were interviewed via Skype™ (an internet-based video chat and voice call service). I carried out all the Skype interviews, which were of similar length to the face-to-face interviews and sometimes split into two separate calls. All participants interviewed via Skype seemed comfortable with being interviewed in this way, and being able to see each other enabled me to follow their gestures and facial expressions, which helped to make the interviews 'flow' relatively naturally. (The majority of the second half of one interview was conducted by telephone, following technical difficulties with Skype, but did not lead to any audible difference in the participant's style of responding to questions.)

Interviewees were offered a break between two of the middle sections, which gave them some control over the pacing of the interview.

4.5.2 Participant styles during interviews

Patton advocates that semi-structured interviews facilitate the collection of a minimum amount of data from each interview, with less concern about '*qualitative differences in the depth and breadth of information received from different people*' (2002: 347) compared to other methods. In other words, each interview contains responses to a set of central questions. Some women were quite comfortable talking at length about their feelings and experiences, while others had a more succinct way of sharing information.

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An additional important issue was to ensure that the careful pre-prepared wording of each question did not lead participants away from issues they might raise spontaneously in a more informal style of interview. I was aware of this in my own interviews and used additional questions to check if participants wanted to add to their responses. From the written transcripts, many of the other researchers' level of experience is evident: their careful probing elicited detailed stories relating to events or experiences not specifically referred to in the wording of the questions.

In most cases, as the interview progressed the participant appeared to become more comfortable. For example, they started to go beyond the direct scope of the questions to offer additional examples, or their responses became more expansive and seemed more open. In reviewing the transcripts, interviewers seemed particularly adept at spotting when interviewees might feel uncomfortable and offering feedback/reinforcement to support them (for example, '*this is so helpful, we really appreciate that you have given us so much of your time*') in line with good practice outlined by Patton (2002). Across the eight interviewers, our style was similar in this regard.

In most interview transcripts, several examples can be detected of the interviewer inserting additional questions or probes to invite the participant to expand on or clarify their response to a standardised question. As noted earlier, probing helps to build up 'thick' data, an important component of phenomenological analysis, and also reduces inconsistencies or mistakes introduced by either the interviewee or the interviewer (Geertz, 2003; Hardt and Rutter, 2004; Creswell, 2007).

4.5.3 Validation

Methodologists disagree about the best way to tackle validation in qualitative research (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2007). Some have attempted to create structures that mirror concepts from quantitative research, such as reliability (stability of findings) and validity (truthfulness of findings) (Whittemore, Chase and Mandle, 2001: 522). For example, Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified four aspects of validation in qualitative research: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmality. In contrast, Wolcott (1994) has argued that instead of adapting

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validation techniques from quantitative research, qualitative researchers should instead strive for 'understanding': a potentially helpful break from quantitative terminology, but perhaps a term not concrete enough to satisfy those who argue that qualitative research lacks rigour and structure.

In this context, how best do we address the question '*Is the account valid, and by whose standards?*' (Creswell, 2007: 201). Whittemore et al (2001) synthesised learning from 13 different proposed validation techniques in qualitative research. The resulting framework of primary and secondary validity criteria offers some flexibility to enable it to work for different qualitative approaches. The authors describe the primary criteria as necessary for all qualitative research, while the secondary criteria have relative importance depending on the methodological approach. The criteria are shown in Figure 4.1, with the first three items under the heading 'Secondary criteria' being those identified as especially pertinent in phenomenological research (Whittemore et al, 2001) (the others are given in parentheses in the figure).

For each criterion, the authors also suggest an assessment question, resulting in a list of six questions they suggest phenomenological researchers should consider. In Table 4.2, I list the criteria and related questions relevant to phenomenological research, and describe the techniques I employ in my study to address these.

Figure 4.1 – Validation criteria (based on Whittemore et al, 2001)

Primary criteria:	Secondary criteria:
• Credibility • Authenticity • Integrity • Criticality	• Vividness • Explicitness • Thoroughness • (Congruence) • (Sensitivity) • (Creativity)

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4.6 Data analysis

4.6.1 Preparing and scoping the data

The interviews were transcribed verbatim by a small group of administrative staff employed by BAAF. All transcribers signed confidentiality agreements. As instructed, transcribers included hesitation noises, unfinished phrases or sentences and any audibly expressed behaviour, such as laughter.

Each research interviewer read the transcripts from their own interviews, often several times, during the process of completing the interviewer ratings that formed part of the data for the BCAS research. Where necessary, they listened to the interview recordings again to double-check information. They alerted the research team to any mistakes or missing words (for example, where the recording was temporarily inaudible due to background noise). Due to the professional skills of the transcribers, very few amendments were required. From the 21 interviews I conducted, for example, the only changes were a handful of short phrases that were difficult to decipher on the tape but which I could fill in from memory. (The exception was one interview where extended interference from an unknown source obscured part of the recording. Between the transciber and me, we managed to salvage around 85% of the total interview.)

For my study, I printed off hard copies of each full interview transcript (all sections). Although my analysis concentrates on the two sections of my interview schedule embedded into the larger schedule, I chose to mark out these sections in colour on the transcript instead of extracting and printing off only those sections.

There were two reasons for keeping the full transcripts intact. First, it allowed me to read the full interview at the beginning of the analysis, in order to make notes for the 'structural' description necessary for phenomenological analysis (described below). Second, within my two sections of the interview data, participants sometimes referred to previous answers, as shorthand to avoid repeating a story told earlier.

Table 4.2 – Application of validity criteria

Criteria and assessment questions (Whittemore et al, 2001: 534)		*Techniques applied in my study*
Primary Criteria		
Credibility	Do the results of the research reflect the experience of participants in a believable way?	- Use of extended quotes to evidence my conclusions - Within-group checking for similarities between stories - Expert-checking – with research and social work colleagues
Authenticity	Does a representation of the emic perspective exhibit awareness to the subtle differences in the voices of all participants?	- Research interviewer training emphasised importance of eliciting individual experiences - Probing interview style used to maximise detail and minimise errors - Attention paid to individual voices and 'deviant' cases in analysis
Criticality	Does the research process demonstrate evidence of critical appraisal?	- Alternative explanations or hypotheses explored - Examination of own bias (see Chapter 1) - 'Tolerance for ambiguity' prioritised over tidy but inauthentic conclusions
Integrity	Does the research reflect recursive and repetitive checks of validity as well as a humble presentation of findings?	- Research process described in detail for readers' judgment - Findings presented as ideographic rather than nomothetic statements - Validity of findings examined in light of other research
Secondary criteria		
Explicitness	Have methodological decisions, interpretations and investigator biases been addressed?	- Exploration of my pre-existing knowledge base (see Chapter 1) - Analysis is data-driven, as opposed to theory-driven - Explicit acknowledgement of researcher perspective (for example, that conclusions are my interpretation, not the only possible interpretation)
Vividness	Have thick and faithful descriptions been portrayed with artfulness and clarity?	- Use of full range of data (interview data; fieldnotes from interviews; notes from follow-up conversations) in phenomenological analysis - Interviews transcribed verbatim - Textual and structural descriptions are full, detailed and nuanced
Sensitivity	Has the investigation been implemented in ways that are sensitive to the nature of human, cultural and social contexts?	- Consideration of participant experiences throughout research cycle (for example, provided detailed information leaflet; regular communication) - Careful checking of anonymisation to avoid identification of individuals

Therefore, in order to understand the full range of their answer, I defined a standard for my analysis: if the participant indicated that information given outside of my two sections constituted an answer (or part of an answer) to one of the questions within my sections, I included that additional data in my analysis (and physically added the data to the extracted sections I uploaded to NVivo; http://www.qsrinternational.com/).

I elected to use this approach after having read each of the transcripts at least twice in their entirety. Without these additional data, I risked missing out on potentially important aspects of the women's responses to questions in my sections. Working out a suitable approach for identifying which data are central to the core of their research is an important task for qualitative researchers: a process sometimes referred to as 'winnowing' the data (Creswell, 2007).

4.6.2 Fieldnotes and additional data

During the initial period of making contact with participants, Julia Feast and I started keeping notes every time one of us received a response or was in contact with a participant, whether by letter, email or telephone (using case numbers rather than participant names). As we both worked outside the office regularly, this helped to keep both of us up-to-date, so either of us could follow up without the participant needing to repeat the information they had shared previously. We also continued this task during the period of interviewing: we took it in turns to follow up with interviewers after each interview, and noted any issues that had arisen, whether any follow-up was required and, if so, who was responsible for following up. For example, if a participant had questions about the research process that the interviewer could not answer, either Julia or I would call the participant afterwards.

After every interview, the relevant interviewer contacted the participant a few days later, to thank them again, check they had not been left feeling uncomfortable about any aspect of the interview and offer further information as required (for example, details about relevant support services). Sometimes

during these calls participants would also share further information that they had not disclosed during the interview and (with their permission), the interviewer would pass this on to me or Julia. Maintaining regular, detailed communication with the research interviewers, as soon as practicable after each interview, helped to ensure that potentially important information was not overlooked.

These additional data were especially important for the interviews I did not conduct as it gave me a sense of how the data were collected, and how the interviewer thought the participant may have felt during the interview. For example, some accompanying notes explained why the research interviewer did not press for details on a particular topic, sometimes if an interviewee started to seem uncomfortable and unwilling to respond to probes.

At the point of starting the phenomenological analysis for this study, therefore, I had gathered the following additional data, in addition to the interview transcripts:

- Notes of any additional information from interviewers, including in some cases information shared during post-interview follow-up phone calls (passed on to the research team with the participant's consent)
- Brief pen sketches outlining the main events and experiences from each interview, based on my first reading of each transcript for the BCAS, to help interpret and illustrate the quantitative findings

An alternative approach to starting the data collection would be to start by listening to each interview in full, particularly those interviews that I did not conduct. However, the recordings of the interviews were stored securely on-site at the BAAF London head office, and during the period I carried out the analysis of the data I was based at the BAAF Scotland office and carried out my PhD work at home in Edinburgh. I had already extracted the relevant sections and removed any identifying information so had codified written data to work from in order to minimise the risk of identifying data being accessed by others. In discussions with the BCAS research team, no practical route to re-creating the same procedure with the recorded data was identified. On

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balance I decided that – particularly in light of the number of interviews to analyse – that it was better to concentrate on completing a thorough and consistent analysis of the written extracts.

Although this approach meant I could not access some contextual data for the interviews I did not carry out myself, I focused instead on making use of other cues such as the interviewers' sense of when to probe for further information, the interviewees' signals (such as verbalising that a question was difficult to answer or provoked strong emotions) and the written notes made by the transcribers (such as those indicating laughter, or long pauses). My analysis, therefore, is in line with the argument described earlier, that other people's experiences are *"meaningful, knowable and able to be made explicit"* (Patton, 2002). This reflects the assumption within phenomenology that the experiences being described in the interviews are not simply linguistic constructions, but represent the participants' way of making sense of the world (Smith, Flowers and Larkin, 2009).

Phenomenological analysis relies on 'thick' description of not only the individual's experiences but also the context of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2007; Smith et al, 2009). Geertz (2003) argued in his original description of 'thick' description that researchers must use the full range of data available. The additional notes about the interview data for my study therefore created an opportunity for anchoring my analysis of the interview data within a broader context, and thus creating a more fully realised description of the phenomenon.

Before coding the data for each interview, I wrote a new description from scratch, which concentrated on the main adoption-related experiences and feelings described by the participant. I noted any particularly strong patterns in their responses, or if their responses had changed across the interview.

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4.6.3 Data analysis software

I used the qualitative research analysis software NVivo to store the transcripts, to annotate them to reflect the significant statements I identified and to group the significant statements into meaning units (see section 4.6.4). I also stored a 'memo' linked to each transcript of the notes related to that interview, as described above. I chose not to use any other analytical features of the software, such as automatic counting of key words.

As described earlier, by reading the full interviews and making notes I gained a context for the participant's account, but my phenomenological analysis was focused on my two sections of the interview. All coding was initially carried out on a paper copy of the transcript by physically highlighting statements and making notes in the margin. Then I coded the electronic version of the transcript in NVivo, usually on the same or next day. This gave me the opportunity to re-consider each piece of coded data. Sometimes at this point I changed the code or added a second or third code to the same statement.

Before entering any data into NVivo, I consulted both Professor Rushton and the IT department at BAAF to ensure they were satisfied with the security afforded by this software. Professor Rushton confirmed that as the data had personal data (names, addresses) removed this met his requirements, and the IT manager at BAAF confirmed that the security level was that equivalent to other software BAAF uses to store information about children and families related to adoption.

4.6.4 Carrying out data analysis

As noted earlier, my analytical approach is in line with Creswell's explanation of phenomenological analysis (Creswell, 2007). Although Creswell's method is presented as a series of steps – and, in comparison to other qualitative methods, phenomenology is considered to be relatively structured – it is important for the researcher to maintain a 'tolerance for ambiguity' and to reflect on their decision-making continually throughout the analysis, rather than slavishly follow 'instructions' (Collaizi, 1978). My analysis for this study evolved as follows.

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Describing my pre-existing knowledge base

The and professional experiences that I bring to this research into the phenomenon of international adoption. As Creswell explains, this step is '*an attempt to set aside the researcher's personal experiences (which cannot be done entirely) so that the focus can be directed to the participants in the study*' (Creswell, 2007: 159). For this reason, I outlined my personal and professional knowledge in Chapter 1 and the literature that has informed my thinking in Chapter 2.

Identifying and listing 'significant statements' from the interview data

In Creswell's words, this process '*works to develop a list of non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements*' (2007: 159). While coding the first 12 interviews, I developed a range of codes, which I re-examined and refined as I went along. After these 12 interviews were coded, I sketched out a rough diagram of how these initial codes related to each other and developed a short draft description for each code. As the analysis continued, I worked back and forth between individual transcripts and the coding framework, and adjusted individual codes as necessary to more accurately reflect the data: for example, 'advice to adopters' was changed to 'advice for future adoptions'. The final version of the coding framework is shown in Figure 4.2 on the previous page.

Grouping statements together into 'meaning units'

While coding individual statements, I started to develop links between codes and arrange the codes into groups, as shown in Appendix 1. In phenomenological research, these groups are termed 'meaning units': the equivalent to the term 'themes' in other approaches (Silverman, 1998; Creswell, 2007; Silverman 2010). This step and the previous step were part of an iterative cycle, as I continued to refine individual codes and how statements were grouped together. I also added notes to my memo as the analysis continued, for example of any contradictory statements.

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Writing textural and structural descriptions

According to Creswell (2007), the textural description sets out what the participants experienced (and is evidenced by verbatim examples); the structural description focuses on how the experience happened (the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced). To achieve 'thick' description, I used the additional data collected as part of the research process and the notes I had made in a memo for each interview. When examining individual coded statements, if I was not sure how this fitted into the 'flow' of the interview, I returned to the interview extracts and re-read the statement in context. For most of the codes I developed short one- or two-page drafts that captured the main cumulative points, then returned to the data to check I had represented the data accurately and made clear if any individual quotes were 'disconfirming' unusual statements. Other codes related to data that were used to 'anchor' individual statements: for example, I have paraphrased some of the contextual information I had coded in the sentences immediately preceding or following the quoted extracts, to allow the reader a better sense of the individual's overall experience.

Developing a composite description

Finally, drawing on the range of notes and drafts I had written, I wrote a 'composite description', sometimes referred to as the 'essence' of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). This description draws together the main points and is the 'heart' of the phenomenological analysis, which '*intends to return and re-examine these taken for granted experiences and perhaps uncover new and / or forgotten meanings*' (Laverty, 2003: 4). At this stage, I arranged the short draft texts under the broad headings 'adoption appraisal overview', 'conversations with family/friends', 'conversations with strangers/acquaintances' and 'ways of framing adoptive experiences', which were the starting points for my empirical chapters.

As I developed each chapter, I turned to other empirical and theoretical literature to help interpret and contextualise the findings that emerged from this study. In keeping with a phenomenological approach (Smith et al, 2009), I held off on making connections to other work until my own data analysis had

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been through several iterations and felt relatively 'settled'. This stage helped me to address my research questions '*more comprehensively (with broader scope or increased depth) therefore making the research richer and more useful*' (Morse, 2010: 484). As I wrote up the findings, my interpretation of these women's experiences became more 'thick', as new connections emerged between separate threads of the analysis and broad themes were teased out into more nuanced descriptions.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described in detail how I have applied in my study the methodological approach outlined in Chapter 3. I have reported on issues related to ethical approval; identifying, recruiting and gaining consent from participants; developing the interview schedule; and carrying out data collection. Finally, I have outlined my approach to analysing the data, including situating the results from my study within the field of ex-orphanage internationally adopted adults' studies.

These first four chapters have set out the background, literature, methodology and methods for my study. In the following chapters, I report on the process and results of my data analysis and findings

Figure 4.2: Coding Framework

WAYS OF FRAMING OWN EXPERIENCE
- contemplating a different life
- comparing own and others' experiencess
- differences to adoption today
- advice to adopters (*a priori)

BIRTH FAMILY / HONG KONG
- identifying with birth mother
- making links with Hong Kong others
- thinking about birth family/origins
- tracing or not tracing

EVENTS AND IMPACT
- effects of orphanage care
- unknown or losses of adoption
- opportunities of adoption
- heritage, ethnic and cultural identity
- nuances of racism, prejudice and assumptions
- being different
- impact on their children
- things parents did

ADOPTION APPRAISAL
- attitude towards adoption
- adoption is 'irrelevant'
- change in attitude
- ethnicity more salient than adoption
- ambivalence/difficult to answer

ADOPTION CONVERSATIONS
- questions about adoption
- talking about adoption
- others' views

Lifelong experience of adoption

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5 ADOPTION APPRAISAL

5.1 Introduction

A central aim in this study, as stated earlier, is to document and examine the events and experiences reported retrospectively as meaningful by this group of internationally adopted women. Thus, my focus moves beyond the idea of whether women's views are positive or negative to examine the nuances behind these broad-brush categories and explore the way the women came to form those views.

In the current chapter, five aspects relevant to adoption appraisal are discussed:

- Considering adoption alongside other experiences

- Building a personal history

- Appraising the unknown

- Shifting personal perspectives

- Shifting external contexts

This chapter also acts as a foundation for the next two chapters, in which I examine how conversations about adoption affect the adoption appraisal process, and vice versa (Chapter 6), and how women chose to frame their descriptions of the different aspects of adoption in their interview responses (Chapter 7).

5.1.1 Data analysis and overview

Before turning to the individual themes, a few key points about the data analysis are provided here. As noted in Chapter 1, adoption is the final result of a series of actions taken by adults, including birth parent(s), social work and legal professionals, and, finally, the adoptive parents. If we consider that adoption appraisal involves the person at the centre of that process looking back on all that followed, it is no surprise that untangling the threads is challenging, particularly where many years or decades have passed since the adoption. This is evident from an individual perspective. Starting the analysis for this study quickly reinforced that this is also true from a research perspective.

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Most interviews contained some contradictions or surprises. At an individual level, very few stories about how adoption affected these women's lives over the long term were entirely straightforward. Complex, rich data containing some ambiguities or inconsistences is one sign that interview responses have moved beyond 'thin' stories of the type often shared in public (Geertz, 2003; Kohli, 2006; Simmonds, 2007). Nevertheless, at a group level, while the range of opinions offered was diverse, there were distinct features in the way women described the different factors relevant to their views of their adoptions. To give a sense of the broad spectrum of viewpoints and issues raised, this first empirical chapter includes a particularly high concentration of extracts from across the interviews.

Adoption, in the interview schedule, was conceptualised in the way described earlier: a process involving multiple interlinking aspects, rather than a single event marked by a legal order. However, as shown in the interview schedule (Chapter 4, Table 4.1), individual questions did not combine these aspects, in order to allow any connections to emerge directly from the women's responses. Commonly, many women made links between adoptive family relationships and dynamics, being adopted into the UK and the impact of adoption. Conversely, responses about the impact of orphanage care, and to some extent birth families, were marked distinctly by a lack of direct memories. Linked to this, participants were less likely to spontaneously mention orphanage care or birth parents, so these topics were usually discussed only after the interviewer had asked directly. Below, five separate but interlinked aspects of the women's appraisals of their adoptions are described.

5.2 Considering the place of adoption alongside other experiences

Adoption research has encompassed three historical trends: identifying risks associated with adoption, examining capacity for recovery from risks, and disaggregating the underlying processes and factors that lead to diverse outcomes for adopted children (Palacios and Brodzinsky, 2010). Cumulatively, the body of evidence has moved towards refining our understanding of how adoption relates to outcomes, but many questions remain. One striking theme in this study was that many of the women directly expressed their own questioning stance about this issue. As one participant, Alexandra, noted when attempting to summarise her experience

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of adoption: '*It is one of the things about teasing out, you know, what is it that is actually about family and what is it that is actually about adoption?*' Similarly, another participant, Isobel, felt that her adoption may be of more interest to others than herself, because as far as she was concerned, her childhood was not so unusual: '*I didn't keep saying to myself, I have been adopted, if you see what I mean. I just grew up.*' A third participant, Tina, even described her adoption as 'irrelevant' in many ways, because she felt other events and experiences were more salient to her overall perspective on her life.

There were a wide range of views about which aspects of their experiences were the most salient and where adoption fitted within those. For some, being adopted remained an important aspect of their identities in midlife. For others it was being *transracially* and *internationally* adopted, whether or not they felt this had been problematic.

Ellen talked about her own experience in positive terms, and felt close to her parents and siblings. Her interview suggested a sense of contentment with her life in general, including her views on her own adoption. When asked about whether she had any advice for others considering adoption, however, her response added a different slant:

> *I think there could be issues. I feel being adopted from abroad, just because of race or colour, might be less than an issue than actually the issue of being adopted. And I think the adoption itself is where the issues come up more and if someone is going to have a problem with it, they may not feel comfortable, not happy about the fact that they were adopted, then I don't think it is necessarily because you have been adopted from another culture, and that could be where the significant problems arise.*

In contrast, Gina had a difficult relationship with her family, which she described in clear terms, but initially she did not connect this to adoption. When asked about the positive and negative aspects of being adopted, she said she felt there was, in adulthood, a '*huge gulf, a sort of no man's land*' between her and her parents. She added that rather than thinking of her adoption as being positive or negative, '*I just

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thought "that is", that's my set of the sort of the reality of the situation.' At one point she stated that she felt the difficulties with her parents related more to personality characteristics, but later in the interview, she reflected:

> *I think part of the lack of successful relationship with my parents, for me as an adult, is partly to do with being adopted in the sense that….well it's just my psychological theory, I think there's something genetic inherited in people which withstands all the stresses and strains and disagreements. There's a bond there that makes…even if your daughter or your son drives you crazy, makes you be able to identify with them and understand them. There's one of the two parents that can understand so that keeps a link and I think if you're adopted possibly suddenly if there isn't a close relationship then there's a gulf and nobody…and both parents and adopted child are at sea.*

This pattern of contradiction, or ambivalence, in assessing the impact of adoption was not uncommon. Similarly, Vivian's summary of how she viewed her adoption reflected this, not only in her choice of words but also the fact her delivery became somewhat hesitant:

> *I know that there are things that I think would have helped it to go better. … But I don't have any kind of negative views on it. I don't think that was a really bad thing to have happened. When I talk to a lot of my friends who are from normal kind of families and they have problems, they struggle, things are going wrong, people are ill, people don't get on, some people don't talk, some people do. I don't see that mine is…or any of my problems or things I had were particularly related to being adopted but I am sure being adopted had some [pause] I know that being adopted and some of the things that have happened to me, [pause] some of my patterns of behaviour, some of them not good patterns of behaviour, must be related to my early childhood and partly attributed to my experience of being adopt[ed] I think. But I am not a kind of, 'oh well if I had not been adopted it would all be fine and wonderful and hunky dory'.*

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Cathy was one of a group of women who viewed the benefits of adoption as clear-cut, and she felt that some other adopted people had, as she expressed it, a '*chip on their shoulders*'. In most cases, as with Ann's description below, however, women who felt this way did acknowledge reasons why others might feel this way:

> *How do I feel about it [being transracially adopted]? I haven't got any problem with it. … I think it is only a problem for people who want to make it a problem. There are some people who have maybe very strong feelings about identity for whatever reason that might be and there is a part of me that actually thinks that must be insecurity on their part, unless they feel well they don't want to have [pause] they want to be able to have a different cultures and that you shouldn't mix things up because then you lose that history, that specific aspect of that culture. Maybe that is what it is.*

A number of themes that emerged across the interviews – adoptive, racial and ethnic identities; unknown origins; the long-term impact of early life; relationships with adoptive families – were examined in the British Chinese Adoption Study (BCAS) from a different perspective, in order to explore within-group and across-group differences in outcomes and experiences, as reported earlier. The point for this study is that the process of looking back and appraising one's adoption highlights that it is a multi-faceted experience, and that individual people's viewpoints can vary on each of those aspects. Although 'adoption' sounds like a singular event, there are numerous strands of the adoptive experience that are closely interlinked. Adoption almost always (with the exception of step-parent adoptions) involves separation from birth parents, then joining and being raised in a new unrelated family. The women in this study also experienced orphanage care of varying lengths, separation from their country, culture and language of origin, and lack of information about birth parents (which all but ruled out future reunions). As noted earlier, untangling these components is a complex process. In addition, as evidenced in the quotes above, in some cases adoptive experiences were difficult to separate out from all the other aspects that made up their lives by midlife.

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5.3 Building a personal history

An area of great focus in adoption social work – or any social work with children separated from their birth family – is how and when to tell children about their origins, and what happened to them before they were adopted. The importance and the challenges of this task are well documented (Howe and Feast, 2003; Palacios and Sánchez-Sandoval, 2005; MacDonald and McSherry, 2011; Neil, Beek and Ward, 2015), although advice available at the time this group of women were adopted was much more limited (see Chapter 6, section 6.2.1). In the next chapter I examine how the women reported family communication since childhood, but here it is worth noting two aspects of adoption appraisal that emerged as prominent factors: parents' decisions to adopt, and childcare professionals' decisions about which children to put forward for adoption. The context of describing and reflecting on adoptive families is also considered.

5.3.1 Reflecting on adults' decisions about children

Viewpoints on parental motivation to adopt and professionals' decision-making were offered spontaneously; no questions in the interview schedule specifically addressed these topics. Previous research and practice literature has identified that a major aspect for adopted people in coming to terms with their personal histories involves their perspectives on birth family and why they were relinquished, abandoned or removed from their parents' care (Verrier, 1993; Mullender, Pavlovic and Staples, 2005). The two interconnected issues of being abandoned and thinking about birth family were explored in the BCAS research, with the majority of women falling into a category described as viewing this as a 'closed door' due to the lack of readily available information (Feast et al, 2013a). In my analysis, while noting the importance of understanding origins and birth family, the dual tasks of assessing parental and childcare professionals' roles in decision-making about their adoptions emerged as additional aspects of this history-building.

First are the women's reflections on their parents' motivation to adopt. Whether they described these in positive or negative terms, it was striking that many women put themselves in their parents' shoes. This approach is consistent with conceptualising midlife as a specific point in the lifespan where people's attention shifts from

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consolidating their family and work lives towards being aware of their position between the younger and older generations. Among the new concerns that may arise in midlife is a feeling of increased responsibility towards parents, as opposed to the other way round (Staudinger and Bluck, 2001). As discussed in Chapter 2, although there are varied descriptions of this stage of life, an accumulation of evidence supports the theory that midlife is distinct from earlier periods. Applying this perspective marks out the differences between these women's process of adoption appraisal as opposed to younger cohorts, even those at earlier stages of adulthood.

A distinct feature of this group in comparison to, for example, current domestic adoptions, is that the majority of adopters had not experienced infertility. Instead, sympathy with the refugee cause, the desire to give a 'needy' child a home, the wish to expand – rather than start – a family and religious beliefs were the most likely reasons given in the written application forms that were available to the BCAS research team (Feast et al, 2013a). This group therefore differs from the parents in other studies where infertility is the main impetus for adopters pursuing this route of family formation (Kirk, 1964; Triseliotis et al, 2005).

Not all the women touched on this topic, but for those who mentioned it, two tendencies emerged. The first was a relatively large group who expressed admiration for their parents' motivation in pursuing adoption. This group fits the overall pattern in the interviews of many women who spoke positively about their families and being adopted. For example, Josephine described her close relationship with both her parents, and said this meant she 'often forgot' she was adopted. As well as praising her parents' care towards her, she picked up on the issue of her age at the time she was adopted:

> *I've been able to continue my life and have a nice life, and have my family, and pass on what directly or indirectly I've been taught by my parents, passed onto my children. … In the case of my parents I mean I was three years old so I means it's, it was perhaps more difficult for them or, you know. So I think there was, it was very generous of my parents, particularly my mum cause she was the one who would, was sort of having to look after me when at the beginning, to sort of want to take me in, whereas a lot of people you know*

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> *they think oh you've got to choose between a baby or a three-year-old, I think*
> *you know 99% would go for the baby.*

Josephine makes two relevant points. First, she picks up on a specific detail about her parents' decision to adopt a toddler as opposed to a baby. Second, she is now in the position her parents were in, and is 'passing on' their approach in the way she raises her children.

Similarly, Sophie described how her adoptive mother had made both the birth children and the adopted children within her large group of siblings feel equally valued. She said her parents loved her '*unconditionally*', which gave her '*definite security*'. She speculated that she would not be able to foster or adopt '*because the way I love my children I don't know if I could love somebody else's child so much*'. She felt that her adoption made her '*look at things differently than people who weren't adopted*' because of how she reflected on the role and meaning of family.

At the other end of the spectrum, a much smaller group of women questioned their parents' motivation in adopting a child at all. Two participants had particularly extreme experiences: both described very difficult childhoods and behaviour from their adoptive parents that would be a cause for concern if reported by a child. For both of them, this had been reflected in the messages about being adopted they had received from family members. Miranda, for example, remembered the impact of an older relative telling her about the adoption process:

> *Apparently … my mum and dad didn't want to adopt me in the end and*
> *seemingly I was finally adopted because the procedure had gone hence forth*
> *… [and] my mum and dad couldn't pull out in the end – and apparently that's*
> *what happened and that's how I came to be adopted in the end but they did*
> *initially didn't want me.*

Although Miranda hoped that other adopted people could benefit from being adopted into families who cared for them, unsurprisingly she described her own experience as feeling like a 'burden' to her family. While such experiences were unusual, it underlines the vital importance of support for adopted children and their families

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being available if it is required. As Harris (2014) points out, the generally positive societal view of adopters in society does not rule out the possibility of abusive or callous behaviour towards children in those families.

The second aspect of building a personal history was related to women's reflections on professionals' decision-making about which children would be put forward for adoption. This topic was raised less often but still provided interesting examples. Childcare workers in Hong Kong who wrote the children's reports noted that some children had physical characteristics that may have played a role in their birth parents' decisions to abandon or relinquish them, but also meant they were unlikely to find a local family to adopt them and therefore international adoption would be their best option of finding a family (Feast et al, 2013a). Most commonly, this was a cleft palate, but the effects of illnesses such as polio and other ailments were also noted. Children's ages and general physical development were also cited as factors considered by the childcare workers (Feast et al, 2013a).

Speculations on why some children and not others were put forward for adoption were mentioned in passing in several interviews, but the clearest link to adoption appraisal was three women who believed their medical conditions had led to them being adopted. All three understood that such medical conditions could not be treated in Hong Kong at the time. Two women, in particular, described their disabilities as an important part of their personal history. For example, Joan described feeling she had to be 'grateful' for the long-standing disability and health issues she has struggled with, because they were the reasons she was adopted. These feelings feed into her wider ambivalence about being adopted, discussed in the next section.

5.3.2 Reflecting on family: gratitude and guilt

As discussed in Chapter 1, a range of competing beliefs prevail about people who adopt or are adopted. Adopters are often viewed in a positive light as 'altruistic', yet families formed by adoption are sometimes viewed as somehow 'lesser' than families connected by genetics; portrayals of adopted children range from deviant and 'damaged' to 'special' and 'chosen' (Fisher, 2003; Kline, Karel and Chatterjee,

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2006). The design of the interview schedule was informed by an awareness of the need for sensitivity and the potential for provoking intense emotional reactions when talking about adoptive families. The pilot group's scrutiny of wording and order of questions led to amendments to the interview schedule to reflect their experiences of being asked about adoption (see Chapter 4).

These experiences translated into how the women expressed their feelings about adoption and adoptive family members. Alexandra spent several minutes describing in detail how she 'struggled' with feeling that her adoption experience was 'very mixed'. Such thoughts induced a sense of guilt that she was failing to appreciate that her life was 'pretty good really', in terms of markers such as having a nice house, husband, child, good education, work and friendships. She explained:

> [S]o in terms of those aspects that are really positive because that is successful, that is good. And I am not trying not to appreciate those things but I also ... I suppose why I find it difficult is because it has taken quite a lot to get to where I am as well. You know I am still in therapy at various times and I do struggle at different times with family, other people's family and what happens in families.

When the interviewer sought clarification, Alexandra's response included several pauses, and sentences that went unfinished. The language and careful delivery in other interviews also suggested a similar wariness about being perceived as 'ungrateful'.

A related issue that came up, albeit less frequently, was the sense that some interviewees felt they 'owed' their adoptive parents. Some of this feeling may well be shared by people who are not adopted, but participants made explicit links to the effort involved in adoption as a route to becoming a parent. As Eva suggested when comparing herself and her brother (who was born to their parents):

> I think as I've grown up, knowing my circumstances, I've always probably wanted to do well for my parents, probably, because they've invested a lot in me, they obviously wanted me because they adopted me and they went to a

lot of trouble going through the adoption society, so part of me has always
wanted to be, well, hey look my brother can do that so I can do that as well.

It was notable in many interviews that the more complex or ambivalent viewpoints on adoption were only reported in the latter parts of the interviews. There was a sense, in some cases, that women chose their words carefully before presenting a more nuanced version of their views about adoption. Valerie believed this was probably a feeling shared by other adopted people:

I mean I think everyone feels they don't want to be adopted, I would have
rather have been a biological – had biological parents. I have to be careful
with saying that because I do appreciate my family and what they've given
me, um, but I think everybody would.

Joan teased out the issue of weighing up different aspects of being adopted, and highlighted the complex emotions involved:

Sometimes I do wonder what life would have been like [if I wasn't adopted],
would it have been better? But then you sort of say to yourself, well rather
than saying that you have got to think on the positive side. I feel very eternally
grateful to my parents for having got me out of that home, but then I think to
myself, why do I have to feel this feeling that I have got to be very grateful?
And this has come across in everything through my life. That although they
have never said it, you know you should be jolly lucky we got you out of that
home. That is really what they have been wanting to say but they haven't said
it. … And I hate feeling like that. Why should I feel grateful? All I want to be is
like one of my sisters but that is never going to happen.

5.4 Appraising the unknown

A central aspect shared by this group of women is that they have very little information about their lives before they were adopted. Because the majority of women were left, without any information, to be found by passers-by, it means that they also have very little chance of being able to find out about their birth families.

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Only one of the 68 women, who had been adopted at age six and whose family had remained in contact with staff in Hong Kong, could recall details about her life in orphanage care. Although the idea that thinking about birth family as a 'closed door' was discussed in the BCAS (Feast et al, 2013a, chapter 9), the analysis for the current study highlights that this lack of information translates into having to 'appraise the unknown' when it comes to reflecting on one's adoption experience.

As the average age at which the children came to the UK was 23 months, this lack of direct memories is in line with findings from psychological research that memories of actual events, as opposed to re-constituted 'memories', tend to be limited before the age of three years (Rubin and Schulkind, 1997). The fact that their adoptive parents had little knowledge of events in their children's pre-adoptive lives and therefore could not discuss these may also have restricted the opportunities for reinforcement of early memories (Mullen, 1994). In addition, at the time of the interviews fewer than one in ten of the women had sought access to their adoption records, which included information about the orphanages (Feast et al, 2013a).

As a consequence, many women emphasised the link between lack of memories and not feeling able to identify any potential impact of their early experiences on their subsequent lives. For example, Barbara said she could not answer: '*I really can't, because my memory of that just isn't there, so I can't really reflect on something I don't know about*'.

Other women, such as Vivian, speculated about their early experiences:

> *[W]hen I read all the reports of my early days in the orphanage one of the things it says, [name] is very content to sit in her cot and play with her label all day long. You know you had a label on an elastic band. So I must have learned very early on to cope, to be ……..you know you did not get a lot of cuddles. I don't imagine they had enough time being all loving.*

The way Vivian describes orphanage care, using phrases such as, '*I must have learned*' and '*I don't imagine*'*,* was similar to others who considered that these early experiences might have an effect on their later lives. Their responses often included

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softening words or phrases, rather than definitive statements: a pattern that will be considered further in Chapter 7.

Some participants described seeking out information in order to understand their own experiences, or having a general sense of some of the issues that might come up for children who had come from orphanage care. A small number of women worked in roles that brought them into direct contact with adopted children or adoptive families, and so had developed relevant professional knowledge. In many cases, participants thought the impact on them personally was limited, as illustrated by Isobel:

> *I suppose part of me thinks it's made no difference but I'm sure people's early life must make a difference. It's very strange really because although I'm aware of that, there's not really anything that I know to, you know, because I know so little really. I do think that having children or you look at other people's children you do wonder about the first 15 months of the child's life not having much of a family home – not attaching to a mother and all that kind of thing so I wonder if that's made me a slightly detached person in some ways or able to detach from people rather too easily.*

Maxine also referred to 'not knowing' in her final response of the interview. She acknowledged the difficulty of answering questions when '*you can't say what your life would have been like*' otherwise, but she went on to speculate about possible effects:

> *I sort of wonder if I would have had a relationship, if relationships would have been better for me, because, I mean like I said as a child […] I'd go out for an hour and think oh I want to go back in and be on my own, as a child, so I don't know whether that stems back from when you were a baby and you were just sort of left.*

Like the majority of the women, participants Vivian, Isobel and Maxine did not use the word 'attachment', but their responses reflect some of the core aspects of this theory. As noted in the Introduction, much of the research on international adoption

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is concerned principally with whether children can recover from a lack of opportunities in early life to develop or sustain relationships with parental figures offering attentive, individualised and consistent care in early life (Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1965). Attachment theory focuses on the processes involved in developing attachment relationships to caregivers, and the consequences of disruption to such processes (Bowlby, 1969). Vivian and Isobel both speculate about the circumstances of orphanage care, where carers would be unlikely to be able to provide the type of optimal care usually best provided in family environments. In Bowlby's terminology, they experienced 'atypical rearing', which has the potential to have 'grave and far-reaching effects' (Bowlby, 1953).

Even without the specific terminology, the idea that children who have experienced orphanage care may have subsequent difficulties is well established and forms part of the potentially negative associations directed at adopted people (Baden, 2016). Despite a move towards greater openness in adoption (a statement which is itself contested: Jones, 2013), many adopted people are in the situation of dealing, to varying degrees, with a lack of information about their birth family. This can occur even if records exist: in the US, for example, in many states adopted people are not permitted to access their records (Smith and Donaldson Adoption Institute staff, 2014).

For many adopted people, including the vast majority adopted in the UK, a choice exists about whether to pursue the option of accessing information about their birth families (and legislation supports their right to do so). For the women in my study, it is assumed there is no such choice and the state of 'not knowing' will continue. Powell and Afifi (2005) interviewed 54 adopted adults in the US for a study exploring connections between 'uncertainty management' and 'ambiguous loss'. They reviewed theoretical work on how people integrate problematic information and choose to reduce uncertainty, and concluded that a lack of knowledge has particular salience in the context of adoption: two-thirds of participants reported struggling with this issue to some extent. Depending on the situation, people may seek to reduce uncertainty and therefore reduce the attendant anxiety; conversely, the potential for fraught emotions and difficult conclusions may lead others to maintain the uncertainty for fear of the alternative (Powell and Afifi, 2005).

As a result, one potential strategy for dealing with uncertainty – actively seeking information – is all but ruled out for this group of women. The odds that searching for birth parents will yield results are significantly reduced in the absence of names, dates of birth or physical descriptions. An interesting distinction was raised by one participant in the US study: even if she never found any information about her birth parents, this was a '*knowledge hole*' not an '*emotional hole*' (Powell and Afifi, 2005: 140). This distinction seemed to fit some of the descriptions in the current study, where women were well aware of the lack of information but not necessarily preoccupied by it.

One reason why Powell and Afifi's interpretation of adopted people's approaches to uncertainty management resonates with the descriptions in my study is that it allows for a range of strategies. The authors mostly refrain from suggesting that one approach is superior; therefore, their framework allows for the full range of experiences described by the women in this study: the positive, the ambivalent and the emotionally complex. Although the potential information that might be gleaned (if sought) is likely to be different (information about the orphanage and Hong Kong rather than birth family), some women had indeed '*reappraised the uncertainty as positive in order to manage the stress associated with it*' (Powell and Afifi, 2005: 133).

5.5 Changing perspectives

5.5.1 Triggers versus gradual change

Many participants described a gradual change in their viewpoints, which had occurred over several years or even decades. Instead of a specific catalyst, they talked about a slow-growing adjustment linked, in many cases, to overall life satisfaction.

One particularly striking element was that, by midlife, this group of women had now reached or surpassed the age their adoptive parents were when raising them, and the age at which they assumed their birth parents had been when they were born. As

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a result, their responses often situated their own experiences in adulthood alongside those of their parents. Although much of the midlife research has focused on the demands of caring for parents as a stressor during this life phase (Lachman, Teshale and Agrigoroaei, 2015), in the current study the women reflected more on other aspects of relationships with their adoptive parents.

Jocelyn, Katy and Marylyn all illustrated long-term changes in perspective in different ways. In Jocelyn's case, following a difficult childhood and a particularly strained relationship with her adoptive mother, she described coming to a more settled view of her adoption over time, which was linked to a range of other life experiences, including being able to confide in her partner. She had chosen deliberately to raise her children very differently from how she had been raised, and thought carefully about her own style of parenting. Although she still struggled with some aspects of her adoptive parents' behaviour towards her, looking back from adulthood she recognised the difficulties, unrelated to her adoption, that they had faced when she was young.

Katy reflected on a somewhat broader change in her perspective. When asked about the positive and negative aspects of being adopted, she described life as a 'learning curve' and concluded:

> *You change – what you will think at one stage in your life, when you look back on it you get it all into perspective, so...what I might have thought was negative when I was younger I see as positive now, 'cause I think well, Mum and Dad had difficulties parenting, I've had difficulties parenting, none of us are perfect. It's not a negative I don't suppose, but it's just life isn't it? And there's no point in thinking "I was abandoned when I was such and such an age and it's all gone terribly wrong". You can't blame anything that goes wrong in your life with what happened to you in the beginning of life.*

She makes an important distinction: struggles are not necessarily viewed as making an experience 'negative'. Despite the mention of parenting difficulties, throughout the interview Katy reported her experiences within her family in generally positive terms, which was reflected in her advice for future adoptions that others should follow her

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parents' example of being as open and honest as possible with the child about their history and origins.

For Marylyn, her faith, which she shared with some members of her adoptive family, had come to play a greater role in her life in recent years. She felt her strong involvement with her local church community offered opportunities for reflection. She said she looks back on her life and feels '*God has been watching me all through my life, because look at me. I am just so fortunate now from what I could have been*' Although this example is specifically faith-based (which was relatively unusual in this study), other women spoke about finding meaning in work or relationships that had helped shape their overall attitude, including towards their adoptions.

Another group of women, however, highlighted specific events that had prompted a change of attitude. The idea of 'triggers' that precipitate a search for birth parents (where that is possible) is well established, with the death of an adoptive parent often cited as an example (Kirton, Feast and Howe, 2000). Although participants in this study could not search for birth parents, some comments did echo this phenomenon. For example, Elaine described seeking information about birth family as a 'no-go' area because it was unlikely to lead to results, but went on to elaborate, as reported by the interviewer[4]:

> *She said a few hours after giving birth to her own child "I actually managed to forgive my birth parents for abandoning me" – she said that she could understand why they did abandon her if it was for financial reasons and also for the fact that girl babies were not valued in China but also because she had this [condition] which needed medical treatment and she often thinks that maybe her parents abandoned her for her own good because they wouldn't be able to afford the medical treatment she needs.*

Elaine made it clear this shift did not create a desire to search for her further information. Instead, she found a new solace in the idea that relinquishing a child

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[4] As this interviewee declined to be recorded, the interviewer took detailed notes and the next day made a recording of her notes and additional points she remembered. The recording was then transcribed as a report.

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could be an act based on love rather than cruelty or indifference. Of the women who reported such feelings, it was notable that many had poorer or troubling experiences of adoption themselves, which may have heightened the emotions associated with becoming mothers themselves. However, this was not always the case and some women with very positive views of their adoptions also reported similar experiences, although usually not such a specific turnaround as the description above.

One further example of a 'trigger' highlights the links between personal experiences and the types of societal shifts described at the start of this section. In Chapter 1, I noted that interest in genealogy and heredity is evident in the growth of television programmes and websites related to tracing family histories. For most adopted people, 'tracing' tends to mean birth parents. However, Jennifer described a different type of experience she had while watching the BBC programme *'Who Do You Think You Are?':*

> *Maybe I like that programme because I can see how people get a sense of their connections over the years and I think perhaps it's a longing to think I had that. Then I thought it was interesting … that somebody I watched on it who was adopted and looked back at his adoptive parents' generations and saying, it was important. Which helped me think yes, that is right, it was important to learn about them and even though he was not blood related because of his parents becoming who they are now it shaped them. I am probably not expressing myself very well, but because of the previous generations it shaped his parents, therefore they shaped him, and so for him it was important. It wasn't like a gap, there was no gap because he was not blood related.*

Although her wording – '*maybe*'; '*I think perhaps*'; '*I am probably not expressing myself well*' – seems tentative on paper, she recalled this insight as '*really quite profound*'. Throughout the interview she described her relationship with her parents and siblings as close, but she had struggled at times with her feelings about being abandoned and adopted. Watching the programme altered her perspective and made her feel more positive. Her description suggests a shift from a viewpoint that was occasionally troubling and preoccupying, to a more comfortable understanding

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of her own experience. What is notable is that her reassessment was not prompted by a major life event such as giving birth, but a private moment that occurred during a television programme aimed at a general audience.

5.5.2 Relationships with adoptive family members

The quantitative analysis for the BCAS research documented in detail several points about the women's relationships with their adoptive families that offer a useful context for understanding the results from the current study. Overall, most women had good or satisfactory relationships with their adoptive parents over time: women reported they got along some or most of the time with their adoptive mothers in childhood (73%), adolescence (49%) and adulthood (73%) and their adoptive fathers in childhood (82%), adolescence (65%) and adulthood (69%) (Feast et al, 2013). Although analysis using McNemar's test (to test for changes between retrospective reports on childhood and adulthood) did not identify these fluctuations as statistically significant changes over time (Feast et al, 2013a), individual reports highlighted that for those women who had experienced changes in their relationship with their adoptive parents, these changes *felt* significant to them. Sometimes new difficulties arose, but more commonly women found ways to resolve earlier tensions or, occasionally, decided to cut off relationships that had caused great stress (Feast et al, 2013a; Grant and Rushton, in preparation). In examining the data collected via the Adult Life Phase Interview (Bifulco et al, 2000) for the 'social domain' about adoptive family members, in early adulthood adversity related to adoptive family mostly involved arguments or tension with family members, but in mid-adulthood adversity involved a combination of difficulties in relationship functioning and stress associated with illness or death of family member (Grant and Rushton, in preparation).

In the phenomenological analysis for this study, what emerged strongly was how shifts in relationships with family and the women's views of their adoptions were often interlinked. Family relationships were one of the most frequently cited factors in relation to the adoption appraisal process. Effects were described in both directions: improvement or deterioration in relationships could lead to changes in adoption appraisal, and re-appraisal of their adoption could also affect those relationships.

Eva provides a clear example of a case where these two aspects were closely entwined. She recalled that during her childhood, her adoptive mother had a fierce temper, which has mellowed as the years have passed. She reflected on her adoption as follows:

> I've had a good life and I couldn't want for anything and so that is very positive and my parents are very supportive of me. Okay, obviously in the earlier years we had problems however they have all been resolved now so you know, now they are the sort of parents that you can relate to. The not so positives, if I could turn back the clock I wouldn't have wished for what had happened in the earlier years, basically, if it was like what it is now, then I would be fine but then I feel sad because I think, you know, you miss out on so much.

Conversely, Marylyn's relationships with her adoptive family had remained similar over time, but her perspective on her adoption had changed. She commented at one point that she felt '*the whole thing about adoption is lovely*' and then, slightly later on, continued:

> I think it [my view] would have moved from indifference when I was younger because I didn't, you just didn't think about it. It wasn't an issue other than a few times feeling as though people were making comment. … But I think that probably certainly when I was moving into adulthood I probably must have thought about it quite a lot more then, and just realised how fortunate I was … and I think it has been a growing thought.

At the other end of the spectrum from these positive appraisals, Jocelyn's recollections were far more painful. She described reassessing her views of both her birth and her adoptive parents. When asked about whether she ever thinks about her birth parents, she explained:

> [F]rom my perception the way it was presented was I had to be grateful that my mother didn't have an abortion. … I don't know [about her circumstances]. I have no idea. But throughout my 20s and 30s, it wasn't really til almost my

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> *40s that I actually thought that it could have been a couple. I feel no ill-feeling*
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> *towards the pair of them at all. I feel very benign about them. If I had any ill*
>
> *feelings it would be towards my adoptive mother not my birth parents. … I*
>
> *realise it was an abusive childhood. Because if you describe that to somebody*
>
> *now, social services would be in there and would say that is not acceptable.*
>
> *And it was quite painful when I came, when I first started coming to that*
>
> *realisation because for me it is just my childhood and that is what I suffered*
>
> *and I had to just get on with it and bear it. But looking back, now I have*
>
> *become a parent, I think actually that was not acceptable.*

Although describing different conclusions arising from re-appraisal, Eva, Jocelyn and Marylyn all highlighted a more recent understanding based on re-interpretation of earlier memories of raw, unprocessed emotional responses. These individual examples represent more widespread experiences shared by others within the group.

On the surface this link between adoption appraisal and views on adoptive family appears straightforward: for many women the main barometer by which they measured the success of their adoption was their relationships with their adoptive parents. Nevertheless, as will be discussed later, women also made efforts to separate out their own experiences from their attitude towards adoption in general. Adoptive family was an important factor, but one that was weighed up against others in appraising adoption.

5.6 Shifting contexts

Alongside family, the broader social and cultural context was cited repeatedly as an important factor in adoption appraisal. Again, many of the women's responses referred to the dynamic nature of this context, often in relation to changing perceptions about adoption or, in particular, transracial and international adoption.

For example, Christine described the difference in reactions over time:

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> *I mean it was a little bit of a stigma when I was young, to be adopted. Well I felt that. But certainly now, and it's almost like, I'm not saying it's almost the reverse, but now you say you're adopted. It's not like it used to be [intake of breath] you know you say "oh I'm adopted" it was kind of like (intake of breath). But now it's like "oh really, that's interesting" so it has changed I think.*

Diane also listed the ways in which times had changed since her own adoption:

> *I saw recently in a card shop, congratulations on being adopted, I mean in my parents time there was probably nothing like that at all, you know but it's quite a big thing and I also notice, well I've got some baby books up there, a couple of the baby books have a section on when your baby arrives and an adoption section and I was very interested because my parents, I don't know if they had anything.*

Societal shifts did not only relate to adoption. The most common change women cited was the increasing diversity of the UK as resulting in a noticeable change over the decades in the way they were perceived, the impact of which was explored in the BCAS (Feast et al, 2013a). Several women explicitly stated that as the proportion and geographical spread of people from ethnic minorities had increased, so their own racial origins attracted less curiosity and fewer questions. A small number of women deliberately chose to move to large cities seeking neighbourhoods with greater ethnic and racial diversity, although this was a less frequent occurrence than predicted based on studies from the US (McGinnis et al, 2009; see Rushton et al, 2013, for further discussion related to this cohort).

Another related aspect of change was the independence afforded to these women as opposed to earlier generations: for example, more than one-third had attended university (Feast et al, 2013a), and they were conscious of the opportunities this brought. Conversely, some women commented on the impact of their increasing age: in other words, not a shift in societal attitudes *per se* but a shift in how society perceived them as they moved from young adulthood into midlife. Although they had little control over these external, macro-level variations, many women did recognise and comment on how these changes related to their own perspectives.

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The link between external contexts and individual experiences is recognised in recent developments in sociological theory of the family, associated particularly with the work of Carol Smart. She argues that:

> *[O]ur personal musings, desires, thoughts and emotions about and around relationships are not entirely individual because they are formed in social and historical contexts; many others have much the same feelings as our own. … The social context may not determine what a person feels about relationships, but it would seem there is a complex interplay between social mores and at least some of the personal feelings we may experience.* (Smart, 2007: 49–50)

To illustrate this point, as part of a broader discussion, she cites the example of adopted people who decide to search for birth parents, and experience these feelings as intensely personal thoughts, even though the experience is far from unique. Although the women in my study lack the information to begin searching for birth family, the overall message remains relevant: their views about their adoptions, and their relationships with their adoptive parents and siblings, are constructed within broader patterns of understanding how families are constituted and recognised.

Much of the material about the impact of external influences was raised in the context of talking about adoption to other people, which will be discussed in the next chapter. For the purpose of the current chapter, it is worth noting that changes at the level of family, culture and society can all provoke individual re-interpretation of an earlier experience in one's life.

5.7   Adoption appraisal in midlife

The findings from my data reiterate that the place and meaning of adoption in people's lives continues to change into midlife, and paying attention to how and why their perceptions alter is important. This fits with broader research on midlife. Much of the theoretical work for this life phase has focused on the importance of family and career, and the search '*to find an adaptive and meaningful balance between love and work, or communion and agency in one's life*' (Staudinger and Bluck, 2001: 12).

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For adopted people, a specific component of that task involves relationships with adoptive family members and, more broadly, developing an '*adaptive and meaningful*' view of their particular early experiences. How internationally adopted adults' – indeed adopted adults' – viewpoints change is relatively under-explored in adoption research to date. Of the 11 midlife studies described in Chapter 2, only two studies other than BCAS specifically measured changes in different life phases. Both were US studies that included Korean-born adopted adults (McGinnis et al, 2009; Song and Lee, 2009).

As discussed in Chapter 2, McGinnis et al (2009) found that adoption became more important as the decades passed for internationally (Korean-born, n = 179) and domestically (white US-born, n = 156) adopted adults:

> *Adoption is an increasingly significant identity for adopted people as they age, and remains so even when they are adults. A primary contribution of this study is the understanding that adoption is an important factor in most adopted persons' lives, not just as children and adolescents, but throughout adulthood. Adoption grew in significance to respondents in this study from early childhood through adolescence, continued to increase during young adulthood, and remained important to the vast majority through adulthood. For example, 81 per cent of Koreans and over 70 per cent of Whites rated their identity as an adopted person as important or very important during young adulthood.* (McGinnis et al, 2009: 4)

This finding offers empirical evidence for the concept, enshrined in legislation in the UK, that adoption is a lifelong experience. However, it is important to bear in mind, as shown in the analysis in this chapter, that the prominence of adoption in comparison to other aspects of people's lives does vary between individuals and over time. Some women pointed out that other people were often more interested in the idea of their adoption than they were.

In a second US study, Song and Lee (2009) designed their research specifically to explore changes in cultural socialisation in childhood, adolescence, early adulthood and adulthood. Their cohort of 67 Korean-born adopted adults were more likely to be

interested in interpersonal socialisation as time passed, as opposed to activities such as eating Korean food or learning martial arts. By adulthood, the two cultural/racial experiences described as having the greatest benefit were meeting other Korean adopted or non-adopted people (40%) and attending Korean adoption conferences or cultural camps (24%).

At the time of participating in the current study, only a minority of the women were actively involved in experience-based socialisation: although 19% had close friends who had Chinese origins, only 7% were active in organisations or social groups attended mostly by Chinese people (Rushton et al, 2012). This divergence from the US findings may reflect different recruitment methods: McGinnis et al (2009) and Song and Lee (2009) used adoption networks and adopted adult gatherings to help recruit participants, which may have translated into cohorts with a greater proportion of people interested in such activities. More recently, however, the rapid development of the UK Adult Hong Kong Adoptees Network (www.hkadopteesnetwork.com/uk/) has opened up new opportunities for participants from this study, as well as others adopted from Hong Kong, to meet with each other on a regular basis. Some of those who joined have demonstrated great enthusiasm and commitment in organising a variety of activities once the opportunity arose, even if they had never sought out such activities before. However, not all study participants chose to be involved: as with all aspects of the analysis presented here, individuals' viewpoints varied.

This phenomenological analysis therefore supports the view that adoption appraisal is best thought of as a dynamic process in which fluctuations will occur over time. These findings add further weight to the argument for adoption appraisal as a complex, on-going task (Brodzkinsy, 1990; Brodzinsky et al, 1993). They also offer empirical evidence with a much longer-term perspective than previous studies with younger cohorts (Juffer, 2006; Juffer and Tieman, 2009), and a more nuanced conceptualisation of adoption appraisal than can be gleaned from quantitative findings (Storsbergen et al, 2010; Rushton et al, 2013).

What the previous quantitative findings captured was useful because it shows that women who felt negatively or very negatively about their adoptions also had poorer

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psychological functioning (Rushton et al, 2013). But the phenomenological findings reported above underline the importance of exploring the factors that go into making such a personal judgement.

This view of adoption appraisal as a process, rather than an outcome, is in keeping with Brodzinsky's (Brodzinsky, 1990; Brodzinsky et al, 1993) original definition of the adoption adjustment process for children and adoptive families. I will return to this issue in further depth in the final chapter.

5.8 Conclusion

This phenomenological analysis extends the parameters of variables that influence the adoption appraisal process in adulthood compared to childhood. These adopted women are no longer living in the sphere of adoptive family life; the nature of potential environmental influences changes substantially as they grow into independent adults. As evidenced in this chapter, shifts in perspective can result from changes in relationships with adoptive family members, from significant events in their own lives (the birth of children, the development of a successful career or strong relationships in adult life) or can be viewed as triggered by a conversation or interaction or receiving information that sets off something for the individual.

The different ways in which women chose to frame their responses to questions about the impact of their early experiences is explored in Chapter 7. In this current chapter, what is worth noting is the effort involved in teasing out different aspects of the adoption appraisal process, as illustrated by the nature of the responses presented above.

6   ADOPTION CONVERSATIONS

6.1   Introduction

A core argument presented in this thesis is that adoption appraisal is a dynamic, on-going process across the lifespan. In the previous chapter, I presented the different strands of adoption-related experiences that were identified as relevant to this group of women, and how their perceptions of these experiences changed over time. In this chapter I examine in greater detail one arena in which adoption appraisal processes are played out: talking about, or *not* talking about, adoption with other people.

I focus here on two settings: conversations with family, and conversations with strangers and acquaintances. From the early stages of the analysis, frequent examples were found of how other people's questions or statements about adoption, and the assumptions behind them perceived by the listener, provoked a range of emotions. With more detailed scrutiny of the data, it became clear that, particularly in talking to people they did not know well, the women engaged in actively managing these conversations, as previous experiences primed them to anticipate how the exchange might unfold. Talking about adoption in a therapeutic setting, which some of the women had experienced, was mainly covered in the ALPHI section of the interview, and is reported in a separate report (Rushton and Grant, in preparation), so is not covered here.

Throughout the chapter I draw on other research and theory to illuminate the tasks that individuals engage in when talking about adoption in their everyday lives. Much previous work has been undertaken that explores the experiences and impact of talking about adoption, and the concept of 'communicative openness' in adoptive families is particularly well established in the literature, as will be discussed. However, the majority of this work has focused on families' willingness to discuss and share information about adoption with their children while they are still, or have been recently, living at home. As this study takes a long-term perspective, the women were able to compare and

comment on how such experiences had changed, and therefore offer a different angle from research seeking to understand children's and young adult's perceptions (Juffer, 2006; Juffer and Tieman, 2009; Neil et al, 2015; Watson et al, 2015). Many of the women now seldom found themselves in situations where differences between family members' racial origins drew attention to their adoptive status. As with the previous chapter, this theme of change over time is a thread which ran throughout the women's descriptions, and involved both changes in their own feelings and changes in the external context.

To understand the process of talking about adoption, it is useful to look at broader communication theory. Conversations can be seen as a way of 'framing' a particular set of circumstances: in this case, the phenomenon of international adoption.

> *Conversational talk may be seen as an activity which frames the meaning of what is going on and makes it interpretable. The frames must be inferred from the talk, but the talk only makes sense when the appropriate frame is understood. Listeners must figure out just what the talker is up to. Since talkers are aware of this situation, they craft their talk with a sensitivity to how it might be interpreted or misinterpreted. … Self-presentation and sense-making are then part of the same process.* (Malone, 1997: 11)

The extent to which listener and speaker emerge from the conversation with an agreed interpretation relies on whether they share similar worldviews or '*cultural linguistic norms*' (Garcés-Conejos Blitvich, 2013: 3). As will be made clear in the examples in the second half of this chapter, assumptions or pre-conceptions about adoption may jar with individuals' views of their own experience. Relatedly, Goffman's work on self-presentation 'in interaction' with others describes how people bring a history of previous encounters and cultural assumptions to such conversations, which affects how they interpret the information being shared (Goffman, 1971).

The term 'micro-aggressions' captures the intentional or unintentional comments that '*communicate adoption-related and biology-related judgements, slights, or criticisms about adoption, foster care or relinquishing care for a child*' (Baden, 2016: 6), and imply that adoption is '*not quite as good*' as conceiving and giving birth to a child (Fisher, 2003). This conceptualisation draws on Goffman's seminal work on stigma and social identity, in which deviation from social norms creates discomfort among others who do not share the same trait (Goffman, 1963). He theorised that being from a racial or ethnic minority was in many contexts a 'stigmatised' trait, among others such as having a visible physical disability or a criminal record (Goffman, 1963). For the transracially adopted women in this study, stigma could relate either to adoption or to racial origins (Baden, 2016).

This chapter is presented in two parts. First, I map out the range of conversations with family (and, to a lesser extent, partners and friends), and the varying emotional responses to these types of conversations. Second, I focus on reported interactions with strangers or acquaintances, and how the women chose to respond in these contexts.

There are two related aims in this chapter. The first is to examine how talking about adoption was experienced by this group of women, as opposed to younger cohorts (MacDonald and McSherry, 2011; Neil et al, 2015), domestically adopted adults (Howe and Feast, 2003) or internationally adopted adults in countries where international adoption is more common (Lindblad and Signell, 2008; Docan-Morgan, 2010; Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010; Docan-Morgan, 2011). The second aim is to move beyond documenting the women's experiences to considering their diverse range of responses to similar situations.

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6.2 Adoption conversations with family

In this section I summarise and give examples of the ways the women in my
study described talking about adoption within their families, in childhood and
subsequently, and how this both affected and was affected by their
perspectives on their adoptions. I start by outlining developments in research
and practice about communicating about adoption within adoptive families.

6.2.1 Communicative openness

Many of the women referred to how readily (or otherwise) they felt they could
discuss adoption within their families, and the extent to which their parents or
other family members chose to share information with them. The process of
talking about adoption within families has been termed 'communicative
openness', although participants did not use this term directly.

Communicative openness has become a cornerstone of advice and guidance
to adoptive families. As Palacios and Sánchez-Sandoval note in their
summary of research on communication with adopted children:

> *The most common recommendation is that the communication process
> should start as early as possible with a simple and credible history that
> is told before the age of four and that will later still be talked about and
> to which information elements will be added as the cognitive and
> emotional capacities of the adopted child allow for efficient
> communication.* (2005: 126)

While communicative openness is '*universally recommended*' in adoption
practice and perceived as a '*morally compulsory*' task for adoptive parents, it
remains challenging and provokes anxiety for many families (Palacios and
Sánchez-Sandoval, 2005). Sharing information about children's origins
represents one of the additional tasks involved in providing a 'family for
developmental recovery' (Quinton, 2012) for adopted children, as described in
Chapter 1.

Dozens of specialist titles now exist with advice for how to approach this topic, such as: *Telling the Truth to your Adopted or Foster Child* (Keefer and Schooler, 2000); *Adoptions Conversations* (Wolfs, 2008); *More Adoption Conversations* (Wolfs, 2010); and *Talking About Adoption* (Morrison, 2012). In short, talking about adoption is both an important task and, in some cases, a difficult one for adoptive families.

However, in the UK, the shift away from a 'closed' model of adoption to one that encourages adoptive parents to be more open is relatively recent. A significant marker of change was the Children Act 1975, which granted adopted people access to their birth certificates for the first time (Howe and Feast, 2003). Like other adopted people adopted prior to that time, the participants in my study were likely to have been '*brought up by adoptive parents who were encouraged by adoption agencies to raise their child as if s/he was their own birth child and only answer questions if and when they were raised*' (Howe and Feast, 2003: 194).

The women in my study, therefore, experienced adoptions that were structurally closed (as there was no information about birth parents for the majority of them) and at a time when communicative openness was not widely encouraged.

As with the descriptions of relationships with adoptive family members, there was a broad range of experiences across the sample, but common threads did emerge. Although some of the women recalled their adoptive parents seemed relatively open to discussing adoption, a majority reported that they did not discuss their adoptions frequently. However, what was notable, particularly in comparison to previous research, was the different patterns in how this was interpreted by individuals.

Alexandra felt that the lack of communicative openness in her family made it difficult to gauge how to approach the subject at all. As she suggests, engaging in a conversation with the potential to raise painful emotions depends on both parties:

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> *I think the adoption, because it wasn't talked about, has affected my ability to question things or feel open about stuff and, yeah, name stuff definitely and taking the risk in asking, for example, my family about what they felt about it for me to be in the family. So the impact that I might have had on them but also the impact that they have had on me. So they have never asked me either 'what has it been like for you?' because it is too loaded. There is a code of silence or something.*

As Alexandra's words indicate, within her family raising the topic of adoption felt like a 'risk', and she felt wary about the potential response from her family members. The subject was also too 'loaded' for them to ask her about. This example shows how silence could be co-produced by the adopted person and their parents.

These recollections have some commonalities with children's views about talking about adoption (Watson et al, 2015), but looking back from mid-life, many women commented on turning points in the patterns of communication within families. While it is not possible to determine directionality in retrospect, particularly without data from the adoptive parents, it is helpful to understand how adopted people reflect on communicative openness over the long term.

Although in the example above adoption and its consequences were prickly subjects, co-produced silence was also a feature in some happier circumstances. Ruth provided a good example of this: she described her adoption in consistently positive terms and she felt close to and admired her adoptive parents. But she also remembered as a child finding ways to close down conversations about adoption. Now, in her mid-40s, the invitation to join the research study and her adoptive mother's advancing age had prompted her to ask new questions. She reported that recent conversations with her adoptive mother helped her to better understand her parents' perspective now she was an adult herself.

Joan also described her own resistance to talking about adoption, although in her case this led, at times, to feeling resentful of her mother's comparatively less guarded attitude, particularly in talking about her adoption with other people. She described a difference in views, which stretched back over a number of years, but which recently she had been able to discuss directly with her mother:

> *I mean the last few years I have been able to open up a lot more, but it has taken me this long. My mum thought it would have been in my teens that I would have rebelled more so on this topic but I didn't. She said, you just sailed through it all. You sailed through it in so much that you never told us that there was any problems.*

Although these three examples coalesce around the idea of silence – in other words, not talking about adoption – each has distinct qualities. Alexandra felt unable to talk to her family, and suspects they felt too uncomfortable to discuss it with her. She viewed this as a deficit in the relationship. Ruth avoided the topic of adoption but also felt a strong and enduring sense of belonging within her family, with her parents and siblings. Joan had long disliked her mother's candidness in talking about her adoption, and it was not until mid-adulthood that she felt willing to discuss it more openly.

Some women did not seek to talk about adoption often, but neither did they shy away from talking about it. Ann described her siblings as her closest friends, and she illustrated their relationship through examples of how they had confided in each other and relied on each other at stressful times over the years. Although adoption was not central to the conversations they had, it did come up at times:

> *I think my elder sister made a comment, she made it when I was pregnant with [daughter], she also made it on my 50th birthday. So it is obviously something that has occurred to her and she has thought about, and that is that yes, we are a family and we are all very close,*

but my children are the only blood relatives that I have got that I know of.

The analysis also identified alternative approaches to open communication. Caroline was asked whether she ever talked to her adoptive family about her birth family. She said they did so, and with her husband too, but '*almost lightly*', they all wondered aloud who her birth family might be and speculated that '*they might all turn up!*'. This type of jocular tone was also evidenced in other interviews. Comparing similar statements across different women's interviews showed a pattern: these women acknowledged that adoption in general could bring difficult aspects but did not share a sense of this themselves. As Isobel noted, she could '*imagine there would be all sorts of problems*' with transracial adoption, although she did not feel she had experienced this herself despite the fact she was '*certainly aware I was different*'.

As these examples show, two factors varied: the frequency with which adoption was discussed and the adopted person's role in instigating and/or responding to conversations. Many of the points raised by the women during their interviews reflected Kirk's 'shared fate' theory, where 'difference' is that fate shared by adoptive parents and their children (Kirk, 1964). Kirk was an adoptive father of four children during an era when closed adoptions (where records are sealed to prevent contact between adopted people and their birth families) and the idea of adoption as a 'fresh start' was prevalent. Based on interviews with 2,000 adoptive families, he identified a spectrum of adoptive parents' responses to the concept of being a family formed by adoption. He described two patterns of 'coping mechanisms': 'rejection of difference' and 'acceptance of difference' (Kirk, 1964). Kirk's argument that the latter group were better placed to navigate successfully the challenges of adoptive family life was, at the time, a challenge to received wisdom. Brodzinsky (1990) suggested a moderated version of this theory: that 'insistence on difference' (in other words, always emphasising differences from other families while downplaying shared aspects of their lives) could be as unhelpful and confusing for adopted children as an attitude of denial of difference. He

argued that families who managed to find a balance (avoiding denial of difference, but not constantly highlighting it) were those who tended to have the most successful outcomes.

Overall, the women's statements tended to support Brodzinsky's (1990) theory that adjustment occurs most readily when families find a balance between being open about adoption without over-emphasising it, even if that balance needs to be re-adjusted as the years pass. Yet, as pointed out in several interviews, the advice given to parents at the time pre-dated these developments in research and practice.

In adoptions today, lifestory books are routinely prepared by social workers or sometimes adoptive parents, to document and share information about the child's history. These books often contain photographs of and personal information about birth family, which may show family resemblances or similarities, such as shared interests. Children and young people report mixed emotional reactions; lifestory books can raise uncomfortable feelings or disconnections from their current lives, but can also be a useful starting point for understanding their 'story' and help facilitate discussions with adoptive parents (Watson et al, 2015). Nevertheless, even when parents are committed to discussing adoption openly and sensitively with their adopted children, working out how to share difficult information about pre-adoption histories can cause considerable angst (MacDonald and McSherry, 2011). Families who are more communicatively open tend also to have more structurally open adoption arrangements (in the form of contact with the birth family), a pattern which continues from childhood to late adolescence (Miller and Neil, 2009; Neil et al, 2015).

Over the longer term, into adulthood, feeling comfortable talking to adoptive parents about adoption has also been found to be associated with better adoption adjustment in a rare UK study of domestically adopted adults (Feast and Howe, 2003). Overall, in their study of 472 adopted people, just over 40% described their adoptive parents as generally open to talking about their adoptions (40% of the 392 participants who had searched for birth parents;

43% of the 76 participants who had not searched for birth parents). However, a 'significant exception' was found for the Black, Asian and mixed ethnicity participants (n = 32), for whom this proportion rose to 67% (p < 0.01) (Howe and Feast, 2003). This chimes with the theory – reflected in some of the women's comments in my study – that the visible differences between family members in transracial adoptions lead to greater openness.

The communication pathways underlying silence across time may differ from family to family, and in a retrospective study it is difficult to determine who influenced whom. What my findings emphasise is the different 'actors' in this process. The women's descriptions of how their feelings affected their responses to their parents' attitudes, and vice versa, is striking: communicative openness is framed as the product of all the individuals involved rather than a parent-to-child, didactic process. The potential agency of the adopted person might seem more obvious in adult life, but some women's recollections also emphasised their role in shaping family communication in childhood or adolescence, for example by closing down conversations if they felt uncomfortable. Conversely, some remembered actively trying to raise the topic but finding their parents' discomfort or, less commonly, anger taught them not to try again. Many noted that it was only later they had come to recognise the strength of their feelings – positive, negative or ambivalent – about their parents' approach to discussing adoption.

6.2.2 Family communication and the outside world

A further point raised repeatedly was how family communication about adoption related to experiences outside the home. As discussed in Chapter 2, 'international boundary management' describes communication *within* a family that expresses or reinforces the family identity, while 'external boundary management' refers to communication *about* the family to define it to other people (Docan-Morgan, 2010). Both are relevant within this chapter.

Several women pointed out, in line with current advice for adopters, that one benefit of communicative openness is that it prepares children for the comments and attitudes they might face in other contexts. The visible difference between family members that often results from international adoption, combined with the relative rarity of international adoption in the UK, contributes to the likelihood of potentially having to engage in 'external boundary management' in explaining one's family to others.

Lesley emphasised that, even if co-produced silence worked within the family context, children also have to cope with the wider world. Although she was close to her family and felt loved and 'safe' at home, she had periods of feeling very isolated at school or in other contexts. She attributed these feelings in large part to growing up transracially and internationally adopted, without knowing others in the same situation. As she described: '*It would have been fine had everybody else been indoctrinated with the same ideology*' as her family, but her parents' attitude was not always shared by others outside the family home.

Like many other interviewees, Lesley stressed that her parents' approach was in line with a common view at the time that reminding children of their early lives was likely to introduce confusion rather than help them understand their origins.

> *I was told, my parents were told, don't mention it, don't mention she is Chinese or adopted too often, allow her to be assimilated. … so – it was kind of nobody spoke to me about it so [pause] I didn't even know. … I never knew where Hong Kong was. Hong Kong never had any cognitive meaning to me.*

As Lesley and other women pointed out, in the context of international adoption, open communication would have potentially opened up conversations about their country of origin. Several statements reflected this: if the topic of adoption risked provoking tension, asking questions about Hong Kong felt similarly fraught.

Many women raised the issue of communicative openness in the context of support for adopted children, in particular in response to the questions about what advice they would have for people considering adoption. As noted in Chapter 4 (section 4.4.2), one aim of including this question was to allow participants to describe any difficulties they had experienced, or felt could be relevant in adoption, without feeling they were being critical of or disloyal to their families.

Although support was generally viewed as positive, there were a number of nuanced differences in perspective. Isobel felt that support from outside the family was important, but that not all children would need help and not all the time. She, and several other women, pointed out that parents may not always be aware of the challenges their children face:

> *I think my parents have done a great job but I think they, they wouldn't have given that a thought probably I don't think, they'd have just you know I'm one of the family and off we go. And possibly you know they weren't….that's how they wanted it to be, you know not to be any differences or….but there are differences aren't there and you can't….you know you can't, you can't change that.*

Encouragement to talk more openly was not limited to helping children overcome difficulties, but in a wider sense related to helping adopted people understand and make sense of their early lives. By the time of the study, some women had already lost one or both adoptive parents, while others were conscious of their parents' age or difficulties with memory, which diminished opportunities to discuss meaningful topics. Rita reflected on this issue when asked about advice for future adopters:

> *[T]alk openly about it and encourage them, if they want, to try and find out about their background, 'cos it's too late now for me to talk about it and it's only sort of you contacting me and that thinking we never asked Dad or Mum that, so I don't know. It's not that they wouldn't*

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> *have told us, it's just we never thought to ask them, so be very very*
> *open about it and encourage them to talk to you about it and discuss*
> *their feelings about being adopted.*

Discussing a 'lack of communicative openness' risks creating a sense of adoptive parents' failure, or conjuring up stereotypes of stiff-upper-lipped British families unable to engage in conversations about emotions. Yet those women who described difficulty in talking to their adoptive family about adoption had a variety of viewpoints. Some women were indeed critical of their parents' approach. In such cases, often they reported a broader pattern that their parents had not been warm, supportive or consistent in their attitudes towards them and sometimes also to their siblings. Yet, other women – not only limited to those who had good relationships with their parents – put themselves in their parents' shoes. Looking back from several decades later, and often after becoming parents themselves or having other much-cherished children in their lives, a common pattern was to describe their parents' actions in a sympathetic or more positive light.

6.2.3 External support: reflecting on past and present

As noted previously, there was a common pattern across interviews of women referring explicitly to the ways things have changed in the years since their adoptions. Many of the women who had no direct criticisms of the way their adoptive parents had approached their adoptions nevertheless felt that increased support would be useful to adoptions today. A frequent theme within these responses was the need to allow children opportunities to discuss adoption in a natural, unforced way. Most, like Gina, felt it was important to strike a balance:

> *I think it's very good if they know there's a network or an organisation*
> *where they can drop in or they can write or communicate on whatever*
> *level whenever they want to. But I do think as a child especially, it's*
> *better that that is quite sort of low profile that they know it's there but*
> *it's just not rammed down their throat the whole time. I think it's a very*

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> *bad idea to just always be saying "oh you're adopted, have you got any*
> *problems?" You say "what problems?! No I'm just a normal kid."*

She added that when difficulties did arise, knowing others shared these
experiences was reassuring:

> *It doesn't make it better for you but it makes you realise it's not you, but*
> *that it's just a certain situation that you've come from.*

An important point in relation to support offered to adopted people can be
inferred from this viewpoint: the opportunity to meet others who shared the
'*situation that you've come from*' may be more appropriate or attractive for
some people than the one-to-one model of therapeutic counselling.

Jane reported a mixed experience within her adoptive family, although she
attributed this more to personal characteristics within the family rather than to
adoption. She was careful not to criticise her adoptive parents when
describing her own experiences, but her advice reflected some of the
difficulties she had encountered:

> *I think I would say, it is not an advantage to adopt a child who looks*
> *different. Otherwise I would say go for it, but do keep a bit more of an*
> *eye on them and how they are going, because they are going to be*
> *picked on. I think any child is going to be picked on at school and it is*
> *one of easier things to be picked on. Talk to them. I think parents do*
> *now, they talk to their children a lot more now and find out how they are*
> *thinking, what they are feeling. So do all those modern type parent*
> *things. I think that would have been of more benefit to me when I was*
> *younger.*

She felt that having someone in a similar situation to talk to was important not
only for children but also for their parents '*if only to be told you are not the*
only one. … [and that] there are other people you can talk to who have gone
through this, or this is how you can deal with it. If only for that it would have

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been useful.' In her case, as with many participants, she described experiences at school that, as far as she was aware, her parents had no knowledge of.

This emphasis on the importance of not feeling alone was shared by others who had more positive experiences within their adoptive families. Jennifer echoed this sentiment when she stated that adopted children should be helped to feel comfortable with the dual message that '*you are unusual but there are others like you*'. Given that most of the participants in this study grew up in areas with relatively little ethnic diversity, a sense of being 'unusual' could relate both to adoption and to racial heritage.

6.2.4 Summary: talking about adoption within families

As outlined above, the phenomenological analysis of my data broadly supported the view that communicative openness and feeling comfortable with adoptive status are linked. Indeed, many of the women's statements made this view explicit. However, not only were there numerous exceptions, but, naturally, how women described the impact on their own lives was often more complicated than a simple predictive relationship. In this section, I bring together the central themes on this topic.

Given the ages and life stages of the participants, opportunities for re-visiting the topic in discussions with family or other loved ones had mounted up over the years. The examples above illustrate some of the individual experiences across the group, each of which raises different points in relation to communicative openness. Two broad dimensions emerged: the frequency of such conversations, and the emotions raised by talking about adoption.

Looking across the interviews, many of the participants felt the topic of adoption did not come up often with family, or indeed friends. However, as evidenced, there were mixed reactions to adoption being seldom discussed. Some women reported they did not think of it often themselves, or felt that earlier discussions had resulted in any uncomfortable issues being 'laid to

rest'. Other women did not like to discuss adoption, or felt the topic made other family members uncomfortable, or a mixture of both; they therefore tended to avoid raising the subject or closed down the conversation if it came up. These experiences contrasted with reports from women for whom the topic came up naturally and relatively often, and they either enjoyed or felt neutrally about it. Many of these women actively engaged in talking about adoption with family. Others did not seek to bring the subject up, but felt at ease if someone else did.

It is important to stress that individual women could experience any of these types of reactions, depending on who else was involved in the discussion. Therefore, the data defied categorisation along the lines of a 'typology', as the variations *within* individual women's experiences were as evident as those *between* women's experiences. Some participants, for example, reported feeling unable to talk about adoption with their adoptive parents but had discussed it in depth with partners or close friends, and valued the bonds with these confidant(e)s. For other women, adoption had become a touchy subject with their mother, for example, but it felt natural to talk to their father. Sometimes opportunities for communicative openness developed later, after leaving home. Sometimes there was a 'breakthrough' with one family member in particular, or a friend or partner emerged as someone to share feelings with openly for the first time.

Overall, the women's descriptions indicated a tendency to grow more comfortable over time discussing their adoptions. By mid-life, most women had at least one confidant(e) – within or outside of the family – with whom they could discuss their adoption if they wanted to, although not all chose to do so. In contrast to studies that have focused on the challenges of family communication, for many women adoption had always felt like a topic they could discuss freely.

Nevertheless, there were examples of families where adoption conversations remained unspoken, and I have described the varied reactions to *not* talking about adoption within families. Some women accepted that things would not

change and this was 'just how it is'. For others, there was no resolution; talking about adoption continued to provoke tension. The positive examples in my study do not diminish the pain and loneliness felt by those for whom adoption continued to be a complex and potentially painful subject to broach.

6.3 Adoption conversations with strangers and acquaintances

The previous section outlined the women's views on talking about adoption with people they know well, while the remainder of this chapter focuses on talking about adoption with new people or people they did not know well. As I developed the interpretative phenomenological analysis, these statements were coded as conversations with 'non-confidantes'. Although some women's descriptions referred to particular situations (meeting a friend of a friend, or working with a client or relatively distant colleague), there were strong similarities between the emotional responses and strategies described, so these experiences are discussed together.

Some women's descriptions displayed ambivalence, with references to intertwined, often contrasting, emotions; others described one over-riding reaction to most experiences. A central thread in the descriptions, irrespective of the emotions attached, was repetition: having to start from the beginning each time the topic came up with a new person.

6.3.1 Context: changes in move to adulthood

As has been discussed earlier, external factors changed as the women moved into adulthood and independence from their adoptive families. There were fewer circumstances where the women were viewed as the 'child' in a family unit with parents who did not 'match', particularly as many grew up in areas with few other minority ethnic children. Increasing ethnic diversity in the UK, or for some women a move to a more ethnically diverse area, meant that it was rarer for them to find themselves in situations where they were an ethnic 'minority of one'. Nevertheless, international adoption has remained at a relatively low level in the UK over the past few decades (Selman, 2000;

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Boéchat, 2013; Selman, 2016). The conversations described in the interviews reflected this. From the women's perspective, questions often stemmed from other people's initial surprise and desire to satiate their own curiosity.

The point that interactions or conversations with others can 'force' transracially adopted people to discuss personal aspects of their history in otherwise casual encounters is well established: this topic has been an explicit area of investigation in previous studies in Sweden (Lindblad and Signell, 2008; Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010) and the US (Docan-Morgan, 2010; Docan-Morgan, 2011) and with a young adult cohort in Finland (Koskinen, 2015). However, the conclusions and the data cited in previous publications have focused primarily on the difficulties, negative impact and hurt feelings that have arisen. Where the findings in my study differ from previous research is in the *range* of experiences this cohort described, which included a substantial proportion of casual conversations described as neutral or even enjoyable, as described in the following section.

6.3.2 Feeling comfortable talking about adoption

Several participants presented interactions with curious strangers or people they did not know well as something they shrugged off quite easily. Janice typified this group, and said her adoption was '*a bit like a conversational piece really*' and she did not '*mind that at all*'. Some women enjoyed talking to others about what adoption means to them.

Hayley's response chimed with this description of feeling relatively at ease discussing adoption:

> *I'm proud of it actually. It's not something – when you look different you can't really hide behind it you see because it's a bit obvious when I'm with my mother who is very English looking as you can see. But you can see people are questioning it, so I normally kind of help them because otherwise they're left thinking, 'well, who is this lady?' and*

...maybe if I had been white and adopted I would never need to explain, so it would never come out.

In the quote above, Hayley highlights the potentially greater frequency of adoption coming up in conversation for transracially adopted people. However, she does not express annoyance. Instead she describes how she actively tries to help avoid confusion by addressing questions even if they remain unspoken.

Josephine, on the other hand, was one of the women who grew up with an ethnically Chinese parent. She felt this brought the benefit of fewer questions:

I spent most of my time with my mother so if we were out together there wasn't a difference between [us], we were both then obviously the same, and when it has occurred I've been with my father and he's said 'no, she's adopted' there's been no problems there. It's, err, fortunate in that respect I didn't have this constant thing of somebody saying to me, my parents having to say 'oh no, we adopted her when she was a small child', which I think might perhaps have changed my way perhaps of seeing it, being adopted.

Again, as with the adoption appraisal process and communicative openness within adoptive families, time also plays a role. Statistically significant changes between views in childhood and adulthood were picked up in the quantitative analysis for the British Chinese Adoption Study, particularly in relation to how comfortable women felt with reactions to their Chinese appearance: only 44% felt comfortable when growing up but 88% felt comfortable in adulthood. Using McNemar's test showed this change was highly significant ($p < 0.001$; Rushton et al, 2012). Similarly, women were less likely to feel uncomfortable with comments about the fact they looked different from their adoptive family, although nearly one-third still found such comments difficult: 54% felt uncomfortable in childhood and 29% in adulthood (McNemar's test, as before, showed this was highly significant: $p < 0.001$; Rushton et al, 2012).

During the interviews many women expressed a similar growing sense of ease in relation to discussing adoption with other people, as Gwen highlighted:

> *When I was still living at home I hated that I felt it [adoption] defined me and I always had to get that little statement out and then, because I was not really reconciled myself I was quite resentful. And now I bring it up quite naturally and quite comfortably.*

Belinda, similarly, felt that as an adult she had grown more relaxed about discussing her adoption in a casual context, which she attributed to becoming more confident and less concerned with others' views. Her description, and others like it, fit with the findings described in Chapter 5 about the broader process of adoption adjustment as subject to change in different phases of adult life.

Several participants, all of whom reported in general that they felt positively about being adopted, also described enjoying telling other people about their backgrounds. As Jackie said: '*I just like telling people the story. And they say, oh fascinating. I think it is quite … you couldn't make it up really, it is like a story book.*'

Gloria used a similar image to describe her experiences. As one of the older children to be adopted, her adoptive parents had maintained some contact with senior staff from the orphanage. Her subsequent visits provided a sense of continuity between her life before and after joining her adoptive family. She was happy to share information about her early life with others: '*when they hear about it, they become a bit emotional – what a wonderful story*'. Occasionally, women mentioned feeling that sharing details their adoptions had prompted other people to confide in them about their own family experiences.

Other women took 'openness' one step further and agreed to talk publicly about their experiences. A small minority had sought or accepted platforms to

speak, usually to groups of prospective adoptive parents or adopted children. Their motivations tended to be either to share their own positive stories or to provide a feeling of solidarity that having questions about adoption is a 'normal reaction to an abnormal event' (Blake, 2016).

Florence had accepted an invitation from an organisation for families who had adopted children from overseas, and remembered that the children there 'were all excited when they found out that I was an adult adoptee, so yes, I've no problems with it.'

Similarly, Diane described herself as feeling 'quite comfortable' talking about her adoption:

> I have actually spoken about adoption, not only to other youngsters who are adopted, but also to others thinking of adopting and people have said, 'oh, that's really inspiring' and they feel, you know, more motivated and more comfortable to adopt, because, you know, they've asked me how my parents coped, could handle the whole issue of appearance, and the difference in appearance.

For those women who felt comfortable discussing their adoptions in most contexts, there were repeated examples of exchanges where others' motivations were viewed as benign curiosity, with some women reporting this to be 'the norm', with few difficult conversations. Naturally, questions that seemed rude, hostile or aggressive were interpreted differently.

As the women's statements indicate, the responses in my study align along an extended spectrum, one which includes an additional dimension of positive experiences. These experiences add a different perspective compared to previous studies, which have focused more on difficulties in order to highlight the challenges of navigating racism, prejudice and thoughtlessness in feeling forced to account for your origins many years after the childhood event of adoption. For example, although Docan-Morgan (2010) documented the embarrassment or frustration caused by *overly* positive generalisations (e.g.

'*Asian babies are so cute!*'), her research focused on understanding how adopted people experienced 'intrusive interactions' from strangers. Similarly, Tigervall and Hübinette (2010) concentrated on exploring 'everyday racism' experienced by internationally adopted people in Sweden.

Positive examples from my analysis are included here to illustrate the breadth of views expressed by the cohort in the current study. Nevertheless, as demonstrated by the statements in the following section, these experiences were counterbalanced by examples of the challenges of talking about adoption in some circumstances.

6.3.3 When talking about adoption is more difficult

In terms of more difficult encounters, many of these stemmed from the same starting point: being asked personal questions quite quickly after meeting someone, or in situations where private information would not usually be shared. Feeling 'on the spot' could provoke negative emotional responses such as frustration, irritation or simply the feeling that repeating oneself was tiresome.

For example, Gill described a close relationship with her parents and sister (who was not adopted)*.* Following a series of questions about her experiences during childhood, when asked if she had anything to add, she responded: '*I just remember getting really irritated by people like……yeah the "how do you get on with your adoptive family" bit. That still drives me mad now.*' She stated that to her it felt like '*my mother's given birth to me*'*,* and continued:

> *If you try and explain that to people they just don't you know understand really. They just umm….'do you fit in with them?' or 'do you like your family?' I say 'well I've been with them since I was a baby you know how is it for you, do you get on with your…?' You know, it's no different. I don't think people…..people still don't understand that, I don't think.*

This gap between what one wants to say and what the other person hears was highlighted across interviews, and chimes with broader conceptual work on 'conversational talk' (Malone, 1997) and stigma (Goffman, 1963) highlighted earlier. Some women described how if they demurred from answering, they felt like this was misinterpreted as proof that adoption was an 'issue' for them. In fact, their discomfort stemmed from being asked about private matters or the implication that their family relationships were 'not the same' as those based on genetic links. The women's accounts highlight the feeling of their perceptions being 'discredited' in such conversations. Although non-adopted people may also be asked questions about their families, this group of women's reports are significant because of the well-documented experiences of insensitive, rude and hostile comments based on racial and adoption misconceptions or prejudices revealed in comments or questions addressed to transracially adopted people (Baden, 2016).

Similarly, many women reported having to correct misconceptions about adoption. The conceptual work around adoption micro-aggressions references adopted people repeatedly having to explain one's own history to others who may hold assumptions or views that do not reflect the adopted person's own experience: '*members of the AKN [adoption kinship network] often find themselves educating their inquiring peers, strangers, physicians and even therapists about adoption*' (Baden, 2016: 21).

Diane's response echoed this mismatch between one's own feelings and other people's grasp of adoption. She described how generally she quite enjoyed sharing her experiences of growing up in an adoptive family. As her job involved meeting new people regularly, casual enquiries about her ethnic heritage often led to conversation about adoption. On most occasions, she perceived this as unproblematic, but a few incidents had been a source of frustration, particularly in relation to descriptions of her adoptive family. She recalled one encounter:

> *[M]aybe they just couldn't get their head around or understand the whole thing of adoption, because they then kept saying, oh, so she's*

not really your mother is she? Or your 'step sisters' and I sort of
thought but they're not my step sisters, they using it really in an
incorrect term, but for them they felt like it was a step mother or a step
sister, step siblings and I sort of didn't like that because I was...well
they're not – it's not the same context that's not what happened here.

She described feeling '*not completely really upset, but just more annoyed*' on
that occasion. Overall, her reaction to questions about her adoption depended
on the circumstances and the person's demeanour. Like many women, she
gave examples of racial as well as adoption micro-aggressions:

[S]ome people can be quite aggressive and say 'so where do you
come from then?' you know, be quite sort of forward and in your face
and forthright and I'd say, well, born in Hong Kong, you know, I was
just born in Hong Kong, but people often assume that I speak their
language, which of course I don't. Sometimes I was in the mood for
that kind of level of curiosity let's say, and sometimes it's not always so
welcome.

As Diane's response indicates, choice of words matters. Phrases such as
'birth parents' or 'biological parents' may feel unfamiliar or awkward to people
who have little previous experience of talking about adoption, and the
women's examples included people asking about their 'real parents' instead.
For subjects as emotionally charged as family and adoption, no labels are
entirely value-free. Preferred terminology also differs between individuals,
countries and periods of time. Given this variation, it is unsurprising that
talking about adoption often involves discrepancies in choices of words, but
as Diane points out, step-family terminology is factually incorrect.

Choice of words is salient not only in terms of accuracy and implied value
judgements, but also in describing the emotional reactions to talking about
adoption. For example, Diane avoids describing her own reaction as angry,
but rather choses to soften the description: '*not completely really upset*'; and
to use indirect, almost euphemistic language. As the final sentence in the

quote above epitomises ('*sometimes I was in the mood for that kind of level of curiosity let's say, and sometimes it's not always so welcome*'), her phrasing hints at her feelings rather than describes them bluntly.

A smaller group of women had a more direct and clear-cut approach to discussing their adoptions with other people. For Joan, the feeling of having to explain oneself grew tiresome. She reported that, quite simply, she has always viewed her adoption as a private matter: '*Nobody knows about my background and nobody is going to know about my background*.'

Other studies have identified recurring themes in the comments made to internationally adopted women and, in particular, unwelcome use of sexualised imagery (Lindblad and Signell, 2008). In the current study, a small number of incidents were reported involving comments or gestures based on assumptions about their sexual availability or passiveness, linked to racial stereotypes about Asian women. Audrey recalled an incident where a work colleague of her husband's had asked if he had 'bought' his wife, which was similar to an experience reported in the pilot group. There were no specific questions about sexual-based comments in the interview schedule, so it is possible such experiences were more widespread but women chose to give different examples when discussing racism and stereotyping. In Lindblad and Signell's (2008: 48) study, for example, the advert to recruit participants specifically described their study's topic as '*experiences of violations related to geographic origin and appearance*'.

6.3.4 Talking to Chinese people or people of Chinese heritage

Several participants noted that talking to people of Chinese heritage raised different emotions, and in some cases almost a sense of having to apologise for oneself. These issues have been discussed elsewhere in an earlier piece of work on ethnic identities and the assumptions made on the basis of their East Asian appearances in relation to knowing about customs, speaking the language and other issues (Rushton et al, 2012). For my study, without

repeating previous work, it is worth noting that unplanned conversations represent a different context for managing boundaries in talking about being adopted.

Previous literature has identified a positive role for ethnic/cultural socialisation, one aspect of which involves actively seeking out links to people who share the same racial heritage (Basow, Lilley, Bookwala and McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2008; Song and Lee, 2009). In my study, however, women also raised the experience of meeting Chinese people (or people of Chinese heritage) in the course of their daily lives, rather than for the specific purpose of ethnic socialisation. This is more akin to the experiences described in Reynolds et al's (2016) study of Korean American adopted adults in their late 20s, in which participants referred to feelings of 'shame' during such encounters. As one women expressed it: '*Especially around other Asians because I always felt I was letting them down or disappointing them*' (Reynolds et al, 2016: 241).

In the current study, some women downplayed the significance of such encounters, while others like Jennifer touched on a potential source of regret:

> *Sometimes I feel, if I think about it, yes, I am grateful, as I have already previously said, for the opportunities I have had. Other times I do feel it is a shame that I can't relate or converse with people of my own race and I do sometimes think, I wonder what they think of me when I tell them my background and they are the same race as me. What their views of it all are.*

Lesley emphasised that although she had accepted that as a transracially adopted person she had 'always just had to' explain relatively early on the basis of her family's different physical appearances, her feelings shifted when talking to Chinese people:

> *I tend not to be somebody who can say mind your own business. So I tend to kind of explain [in general]. Having said that, I kind of get embarrassed if I have to explain to a lot of Chinese people. A lot of*

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> *them don't understand adoption on the level that we do. So that is a bit*
> *more complex but I don't have a problem explaining, mainly probably*
> *because since before I can remember I have had to, even when I was*
> *in my mum's presence and she had to explain or as I grew older I*
> *would have to. 'How can she by your mum?' You know.*

However, as with other incidents, patterns varied across the group. Celia, for example, had experienced people talking to her in Cantonese or Mandarin but did not feel awkward because '*the minute I start to talk they obviously know I'm British*'. Others felt that similarities in physical appearance sometimes proved beneficial, or that they could take advantage of people's assumptions about them based on stereotypes of Chinese people that involve positive associations. As many women were quick to point out, racialised assumptions tend to be quite specific in terms of region and gender, so their experiences would probably have been different if they were, for example, black African boys who had been adopted into white families. A fuller exploration of the women's ethnic identifications and experiences of dealing with race-based mistreatment is reported elsewhere (Rushton et al, 2012; Feast et al, 2013a).

6.4 Actively managing conversations about adoption

The women described various strategies used in responding to questions or comments about their adoptions. As illustrated by the quotes in section 6.3.2, many conversations took place naturally and without the need for forethought or much conscious consideration of the speaker's assumptions or implied beliefs. But if women felt cautious, sensitive or vigilant, based on previous experiences of similar conversations, some chose deliberate actions to manage these situations.

In this section I describe a two-stage approach identified from the data in my study: (a) 'reading' the assumptions and intention expressed verbally and non-verbally by the person they are speaking to, and (b) tailoring their own response as a result of this assessment.

6.4.1 Assessing the other person's motivation for asking

Common patterns emerged from the women's experiences of talking – or being asked – about adoption. A number of aspects of the setting were identified as important. Who was asking the question? Why did they want to know? How did the adopted person know this person? These factors were described as being taken into account in terms of how much information to reveal, as Alexandra reported:

> *Well I guess it depends who the other people are, you know, it depends who it is ... who I tell and I sort have an instinct about that when I meet people. I mean I don't feel ... before if people would ask me where I was from I would do the sort of jokey 'London' thing because I know what they are getting at but now I would actually say 'well, no, I was adopted' or I am more willing to actually say that, more about my origins but not necessarily go into it in great detail and that is then about how people respond to me saying about it.*

The phrase '*sort of jokey "London" thing*' indicates the process of reading the potential subtext behind the question and found a response to avoid revealing too much personal information. In recent years, through increased confidence gained through her professional life and some counselling support she had received, Alexandra had grown more at ease with the complexity of her feelings about her adoption. As she describes above, this adjustment resulted in her using a different strategy for dealing with questions. She had grown more open, but remained alert to '*how people respond to me saying about it*' before giving more personal information.

A second aspect was how likely it was that the participant would have future interactions with this person. Annette explained that generally she preferred not to talk about herself and considered herself '*quite a private person*'. Her description suggests her attitude towards talking about adoption fitted into a wider sense of herself and how open she was with others. She judged how much information about her adoption to reveal based on the circumstances:

I have this sort of guideline, I guess, for myself. If I think I'm going to meet somebody more than two or three times, then I will say something. But if I think I'm not going to see someone again, then I don't bother.

(Interviewer) And can you talk easily about it, can you tell them?

Yeah, I will obviously choose the right moment but yeah, people like friends in my late teens early twenties who didn't really see my parents that much, but I knew that if they came to collect me, and they saw then then they would obviously see that they weren't Chinese. So yeah, I would sort of say I was adopted. But then I wouldn't really go into too much great detail.

As with other women's statements included in the previous section, Annette acknowledged the difference between childhood and adolescence, when being seen with white British family members could provoke questions, compared to adulthood when she was less likely to find herself in situations where her family's appearance would lead to having to explain. In addition, her response reveals her approach to judging the situation: when and to whom to reveal information, and the likely consequences of not explaining (such as questions from friends who came to pick her up from her parents' house).

Isobel also reflected on engaging in a similar process of deciding how much information to share, which took into account both the future relationship and reciprocity in sharing personal details:

You know I think, as I've said, the people that sort of demand to know I just close down, I don't really want to talk to them about it. I think I take the view that if I'm going to see these people on a regular basis, like my work colleagues, and I like them, then I'm more likely to spend the time to tell them a bit about myself, as they would me.

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Ruth made explicit the fact that the level of relationship influences the emotional response. Although she felt some reticence generally in talking about adoption, she added:

> I've always felt accepted by the people that I choose to wish to be friends with or develop some kind of relationship so always felt easy talking to people like that. And the unease is when complete strangers think that they've got a right to ask very personal questions.

Over time, Ruth felt more comfortable being blunt in her responses: she had now reached a point where she refused to answer questions if she felt they were inappropriately personal.

6.4.2 Tailoring responses

Many of the interviewees described developing a pattern of responding: a way of answering the similar questions that arose in order to pre-empt questions or steer the conversation. For some women this process was straightforward. Nina described herself as very open when people asked about her adoption: '*No problem, it's like hello, how are you, where are you from and I just read it all out*'. Her use of the word 'read' suggests an almost unconscious process, like reeling off a list.

Maria reported that discussing her adoption was generally unproblematic. She had previously talked in public about her experience of growing up in a family with a mixture of birth and adopted children. She described how explaining her family to others was a common occurrence and being open was the easiest route to addressing others' questions:

> I am quite happy for strangers to say something to me like 'where are you from' and I would say something like 'oh I was born in Hong Kong but I came over when I was a child and I was adopted'. I think I would have to say that because otherwise people won't understand – 'what

do you mean you came from Hong Kong?' and the two things you talk about are your parents and you would have to put it into context because, again, they won't understand that my parents are British so whether I like it or not, I have to say it and, because I have to say it, I am quite used to it.

Like Nina and Maria, many women had, over time, found a way of describing their early life and adoption that seemed to work for them in most contexts. This process echoes research cited in Chapter 3 (section 3.2.3) on 'self-defining memories': stories that are re-told many times and become part of how people show themselves to others (Singer et al, 2007).

Some respondents, such as Lynn, were motivated instead by the need to impart the information quickly, rather than a wish to share their story with others.

I've always been quite upfront with it really because I just think it's easier to explain, I think oh if I explain it now then I don't have to keep it, it's sort of done with kind of thing.

Rita reported that, as with previous examples, time had changed not only her perspective but also others' perceptions of adoption. For her, the main issue was to impart enough information to deal with questions, but without inviting further discussion:

It's not something I volunteer just like that but if it comes up then yeah, I mean 'cos it's more accepted now isn't it, you know anything goes it seems but many years ago I wouldn't have volunteered it, not that I'm ashamed if you know what I mean, it's hard to say but I wouldn't tell anyone unless a need came up really – I suppose I'd say it quite quickly.

These two examples reflect a form of 'deviance disavowal' strategy (Davis, 1961; Goffman, 1963). Through repeated experience, the women have found

a way to steer the conversation in a way that minimises the focus on the 'differences' of their early histories and moves the conversation on: '*it's sort of done with kind of thing*'. Although adoption feels '*more accepted now*' and many women described how conversations had become easier due to such changes, adoption stigma remains a live issue (Fisher, 2003; Miller and Neil, 2009; Palacios, 2009).

There were nuanced differences in motivation for deciding to share information early in the conversation. As with Rita, Marylyn also tended to say quite quickly that she was adopted, but not necessarily in order to avoid further questions. For her, most people's interest was genuine and her sharing that she was adopted was helpful to others: '*I think probably because I had given permission to ask*'.

Two distinct benefits, therefore, were perceived in answering quickly. First, it was a way of directing the conversation: prior experience suggested that *not* answering, or giving partial information, could lead to even more questions. Second, it could help others to feel less confused or more comfortable and, in contrast, open up the conversation by 'giving permission' to discuss personal history.

6.4.3 Dealing with ambiguity and lack of information

In one particular area – dealing with the lack of information about their origins – unsolicited questions could feel particularly difficult to deal with. As has been established, these women knew very little about their lives prior to being adopted, and in particular their lives before they entered orphanage care. Many adopted people, and some in other situations, share the experience of having incomplete or unclear information about their early origins. However, this situation is particularly acute for people left without any information at all, and particularly where children have been abandoned (Mullender et al, 2005).

When asked about whether, as an adult, she thought of her birth family often, Audrey raised the issue of other people's expectations. In an interview

marked by laughter and tales told to illustrate her enjoyment of her family relationships, she noted that people ask 'all the time' about her origins:

> It's all 'did you want to go and look for your birth parents?' and I think 'Not really, no.' Sometimes I think maybe I should, but it's just too much effort. I'd like to say I've not got enough time, but obviously that's a bad excuse because you've always got enough time for things that are important.

Audrey's response hints at the development of 'strategies' for dealing with oft-asked questions, as discussed in the previous section, but does not identify an effective approach.

Some women found dealing with this aspect of talking about adoption more upsetting than Audrey's experience implies. They described a dual response: feeling unable to provide information, but also somewhat unwilling or annoyed at being expected to do so. Questions about their origins were not limited to birth family but also included their pre-adoption experiences in orphanage care.

When asked about the impact of such early experiences, Gill noted the difficulty in answering such a question, in the context both of the research interview and of everyday social situations:

> It is like those two years [prior to being adopted] don't exist and we don't have photographs or anybody to tell us. It kind of is two years that didn't happen. So I would find that very difficult to answer really. How has it affected me coming from an orphanage? I suppose you could say I don't talk about it because I have never had the confidence to talk about it. Because nobody likes to say that they come from a [children's] home do they. It is this stigma thing. I mean even today I don't think a lot of children would want to shout about it.

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Gill ended her response to the question by stating: '*And I don't know, that is all I can really say on that question*'.

As well as being adopted from orphanage care, the majority of the women were abandoned, even if most of them were left in situations where they would be found quickly by other people. A rare study of adopted adults who were abandoned as children, although based on a small sample (n = 10), notes that such cases may involve particular stigma '*because of the additional shame or embarrassment that may be felt in relation to having been abandoned*', as well as dealing with '*the complete lack of hope foundlings have of ever gaining access to further information*' (Mullender et al, 2005: 63).

Abandonment, orphanage care, being adopted transracially and internationally: there are several components to these women's histories that marked them out from most other people they met. If story-telling relies on facts (Simmonds, 2007), then constructing a plausible narrative becomes more challenging without them, and the significance of this is heightened if the story involves differences in one's own history from other people's (Goffman, 1963).

6.5 Discussion

As shown in this chapter, the women's descriptions of talking about adoption within their families displayed a range of attitudes and experiences. In terms of communicative openness, their experiences reflect both the prevailing attitudes at the time and differences in the approaches of individual families. In particular, three elements were stressed: communicative openness was a two-way process, could change over time and depended on which family member or friend was involved. Attitudes towards adoption in the wider sense – usually presented as advice for future adoptions – mostly identified the importance of being open about adoption but without forcing the subject too often, in line with recommendations for practice which have developed in the years since these women joined their adoptive families (Palacios and Sánchez-Sandoval, 2005).

The themes in relation to talking to strangers or acquaintances were somewhat different. The women's interviews covered a variety of reactions to talking about adoption with people they did not know well or at all: feeling proud of their family and unusual origins; feeling embarrassed about being asked personal questions and unsure of how to respond; feeling frustrated with the assumptions they observed in other people's comments.

Some participants suggested that they usually felt prepared to talk freely about their early lives – there was no shame involved – but past experiences made them wary about how others might interpret the information. Many women had experienced conversations laden with adoption and racial micro-aggressions (Baden, 2016), displaying at best insensitivity and at worst prejudiced assumptions about these adopted women and their early histories. Strategies for dealing with such conversations included assessing the other person's intentions and the likelihood of future contact and choosing to impart the basic 'facts' of their adoptions early in the conversation. Some questions could not be answered due to lack of information.

For other women, the potential for negative or fraught conversations was either ignored or not seen as relevant to them; several women emphasised the enjoyment they found in telling others about their adoptive families and how they came to join them. This sense of delight, while limited to a subsample of the group, is important not to overlook, particularly as it has not tended to feature in previous studies that have concentrated on the experiences of and reactions to dealing with intrusive interactions (Lindblad and Signell, 2008; Docan-Morgan, 2010; Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010; Docan-Morgan, 2011; Baden, 2016).

As discussed in Chapter 1, international adoption touches on a number of significant 'big-picture' topics: the nature of family and the bonds between members; 'race' and migration; the state's responsibility towards children who cannot grow up with their birth parents, whether they are relinquished or removed from their parents' care. At an individual level, this translates into a

heightened significance in the sharing of stories about adoptive family life. Examples of this have been given in this chapter.

Sharing stories is a two-way process. When adopted people talk about their origins and adoptive family life, they open the door to the other person's interpretation of those experiences. Simmonds (2007: 2) emphasises that '*human beings are remarkably resistant to their stories being re-interpreted or re-told by others particularly when they are people with power*'. While Simmonds' argument refers to a professional context, some strands of this experience are echoed in the way women described everyday conversations about their personal histories. In my study, the person who might re-interpret the story was more likely to be an acquaintance, such as a friend-of-a-friend introduced in the pub, or a colleague at work, but allusions to feeling powerless were still evident. In particular, some women referred to lacking the 'tools' – in the form of knowledge of their origins and their lives prior to adoption – that would better equip them for dealing with questions about these personal topics.

6.6 Conclusion

Drawing together all the evidence presented in this chapter, there is one central point. The interplay between the adopted person's own view of their adoption and how they interpret and react to other people's views of their adoption is an important aspect of the process of understanding their adoptions, and one which was continuing for these women in their 40s and early 50s. In talking about adoption, each party – the adopted person and the person they are speaking to – engages in a dance of attributing thoughts, feelings and intentions to the other's verbal or non-verbal expressions (Malone, 1997). Although this is particularly noticeable in conversations where the adopted person's own perspective is challenged, the same process can be seen in the descriptions of women who enjoyed and actively engaged in talking openly about their adoptions.

The previous chapter set out core aspects in the adoption appraisal process in mid-adulthood. This chapter has built on that by examining in detail how adoption appraisal and talking about adoption relate to each other. It has foregrounded the argument that talking about adoption – to family members, acquaintances and strangers – is an important part of that process. Taken together, the findings from Chapters 5 and 6 underline the dynamic nature of adoption appraisal. The theme of talking about adoption continues into the next chapter, which considers how the women constructed their statements about adoption in the specific context of the research interview.

7 MODES OF APPRAISAL

7.1 Introduction

This thesis centres on how women appraise their adoptions from a midlife perspective, and the preceding chapter focused on that process in the context of conversations in everyday life. In this chapter, I explore how the women chose to frame adoption in different ways during the interviews for this study. My aim is to better understand not just what the women described as their viewpoints but *how* they expressed those views. I focus on three 'modes' of response identified in the interview responses:

- Resisting appraisal
- Appraisal by social comparison
- Appraisal by imagining alternatives

Below I examine each of these modes in turn and give examples of how responses within the same mode could be used to varied effect. For each mode I consider how the women draw on contextual information to emphasise specific aspects of their own experiences and viewpoints. Finally, I reflect on the messages about adoption that emerge from this group of women's responses.

7.2 Resisting appraisal

As described earlier, the women reported the difficulty of assessing, for example, the impact of early experiences of which they have no memories (Chapter 5). A similar pattern arose in conversations with other people about adoption; even if they wanted to answer questions they were not always in a position to do so (Chapter 6). Likewise, several women raised the difficulty of answering questions about adoption in the context of the research interview. Similar phrases were used across interviews to express this:

> *It's the only thing I knew really* (Jade)

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> *I didn't know any different – it's just kind of as it was* (Rita)

> *It's just very difficult 'cos I don't really know anything much about [my] background* (Maxine)

The phrase '*I don't know*' and variations thereof were used in different ways. Occasionally, a participant declined to elaborate, even after further probing, but more often they went on to expand or speculate. Several participants commented directly on the situation of participating in the study. Some mentioned answers they had given in the written questionnaire pack (completed prior to the interview). Others remarked – as in the example given earlier – that one's own life seems '*just kind of as it was*', as opposed to a topic pertinent for research investigation.

For example, Jane indicated that participating in the research compelled her to consider her own viewpoint in a new and specific light. When asked what effect she thought her early experiences had on her life to this point, as her response continued, the tenor changed from certainty, followed by hesitation, to a reflection on the context of the research study:

> *Jane: Oh it has obviously been the defining thing. I don't know. I have no idea how it would have turned out otherwise. I can't really say. … I haven't really thought about it to be honest until I had started looking at the questionnaire and evaluating things, you don't just tend to sit around and think about your life, you just get on with it all.*

Similarly, on occasion respondents voiced an opinion on the wording of interview questions. When asked how she felt about being transracially adopted, Tina noted:

> *Well, obviously in a way it's a bit of a weird question because I don't know what the alternatives would have been, but I mean I feel fine about my life now, so therefore you know it's been fine for me, but at*

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> *the same time, you're asking me to compare something with a*
> *complete unknown so it's hard to do really.*

What each of these types of responses – '*I don't know any different*', '*I haven't really thought about it*', '*you're asking me to compare*' – have in common is that they 'question the question'. Three interpretations of this mode are worth considering.

First, these responses state a fact: answering questions about one's own life is challenging in the context of a lack of information about both pre-adoption experiences and how life might have been in other circumstances. '*I don't know*' could, therefore, quite simply mean '*I don't know*'.

However, a second interpretation is suggested by the fact these types of phrases were often used in the beginning of an answer, then followed by a fuller more comprehensive response. Resisting appraisal also offered a temporary way to 'buy time' or to lay the ground for a fuller response. These responses emphasised personal characteristics and presented a particular version of self (Goffman, 1971) as different from people who might indulge in thinking about what might have been if they were not adopted: '*you don't just tend to sit around and think about your life, you just get on with it all*'.

Third, using these phrases could also soften the opinion that followed. Rather than making bold statements about adoption – either their own or other people's – these responses were framed in a more nuanced way, as will be discussed later in this chapter. If a research interview is a 'conversation with a purpose' (Burgess, 1988), then the communication features described in the previous chapter remain relevant: in this case, the participant's understanding of the interviewer's assumptions; the participant's assessment of how the interviewer may interpret the information they share; and the participant's deliberate shaping of their response to address those factors (Goffman, 1971; Malone, 1997).

The data under this theme underline again the lack of information available to the women about their origins. At the same time, these data provide evidence of one mode of answering questions: *resisting appraisal.* Conversely, the next two sections focus on ways in which, even when such questions were difficult to answer, women chose to draw on other information available to them in order to answer questions about adoption.

7.3 Appraisal by social comparison

Comparing oneself to others – a broad process termed 'social comparison' – is argued to be a '*pervasive social phenomenon*' (Suls, Martin and Wheeler, 2002: 159). When examining the data in my study from the angle of 'mode of response', one of the strongest patterns to emerge was how many women answered questions by comparing their own experiences to other people's, although none of the questions explicitly asked them to do so.

Briefly, social comparison theory posits that individuals select 'comparison targets' to use as external reference points to evaluate or describe one's own attributes or experiences (Wood, 1989; Suls et al, 2002; Buunk and Gibbons, 2007). The choice of comparison target reflects which dimensions the speaker seeks to emphasise: for example, a patient may choose to compare themselves to someone with a more aggressive form of the same disease in order to highlight the positive likelihood of their own recovery (Wood, 1989). Generally, 'upward' comparisons with more fortunate others tend to accentuate one's relative disadvantage; 'downward' comparisons with less fortunate others tend to accentuate one's own advantage (Smith, 2000; Suls et al, 2002). However, downward comparisons may not provide much comfort if the person perceives themselves as vulnerable to the fate of the 'less fortunate' other (Lockwood, 2002).

In the data for my study, a wide variety of comparison targets were identified. Sometimes, women referred directly to other people they knew or had met: most often, friends who were also adopted, or their own siblings. Many examples involved a more general 'other': other adopted people, or other

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people in general, which can be categorised as a 'target-free' social comparison (Wood, 1989). In addition to downward and upward comparisons, participants also used both assimilative comparisons (where similarities are emphasised) and contrastive comparisons (where differences are emphasised) (Smith, 2000; Suls et al, 2002). Examples reflecting this range are discussed in detail below.

7.3.1 Other adopted people

When asked about whether she thinks about her birth parents, Rose's response illustrated a contrastive comparison, in that she stressed how she differed from how adopted people might be perceived to behave:

> *I always have this thing about … when adopted people, be them foreign or just English, when they say 'oh I don't feel complete because I don't know who my birth parents are', I don't feel that at all, I just think, 'oh, well feel lucky that you were adopted by people that wanted you'. But no I certainly don't have this idea that I'm incomplete because I don't know who they are.*

Like many of the women, Rose felt she had 'blocked out' thinking about her birth family, as it was unlikely she would ever be able to trace them (for a full discussion of the frequency of thinking about birth parents, see Feast et al, 2013a, chapter 9). Although she acknowledged that she felt '*a little bit curious*', she distinguished this feeling from feeling '*incomplete*'. Her comparison emphasises the distance between her own experience and negative feelings that might be associated with adoption. By using a double negative, she suggests, rather than states, that she feels 'complete' despite her lack of knowledge about her origins.

Occasionally, comparison targets were whimsical, as in the case of Audrey, who wondered what life would have been like if she might have been adopted by a family like that of President Obama: '*You think, "I could have been a millionaire or something!"* '.

Both examples, although different in tone, emphasise a particular approach to thinking about adoption. The choice of comparison target serves to distance the speaker from undesirable traits (Schimel, Pyszczynski, Greenberg, O'Mahen and Arndt, 2000), in this case by emphasising the person is not prone to self-indulgent fantasies. Throughout her interview, Audrey was extremely positive about her adoption and the strength of the relationships with her adoptive family members, in particular her mother. She dismissed the idea of adoption as a source of problems or pain. She, and other women like her, presented an upbeat, positive viewpoint. This was in contrast to participants who discussed in some detail the challenges associated with being internationally and transracially adopted.

7.3.2 Siblings

Comparisons with siblings also arose relatively frequently. As noted earlier, most of the adopters did not come forward following infertility, and all except two of the participants grew up with at least one brother or sister.

Current messages for practice derived from research emphasise promoting and nurturing sibling relationships, where appropriate, either via placing siblings together for adoption or fostering or via post-placement contact (Tarren-Sweeney and Hazell, 2005; Cossar and Neil, 2013; Jones, 2015). Research designs that have compared adopted people and their siblings (both biological and by adoption) on psychological and other outcome measures have also been carried out (Westhues and Cohen, 1997; von Borczyskowski et al, 2006). However, adopted people's reflections on their relationships with siblings in adulthood have received less attention; in the midlife studies reviewed in Chapter 2, there are only passing anecdotal comments about brothers and sisters. In the British Chinese Adoption Study, specific questions about relationships with family members, including siblings, were covered under other parts of the interview schedule, but here I concentrate on how and when women spontaneously brought up their siblings when reflecting on their adoptions, without specific prompting.

Some comments touched directly on the 'chance' element of becoming related by adoption. For example, Hayley, below, alluded to her and her siblings' (birth children of her parents) different routes into the family. In other parts of her interview, she noted the differences between her adoptive mother and siblings' temperament and career choices in comparison to her own, but did not express dissatisfaction or concern about this. She added:

> *Participant: I do feel lucky and I feel privileged that obviously with my parents, I never would have had this life now would I?*
>
> *Interviewer: No, oh no.*
>
> *Participant: Whereas my siblings would because they were born to them...so I've always felt really happy about that, yes.*

Differences from siblings on dimensions, such as personality traits or life choices were not always perceived as problematic. Defining oneself in contrast to siblings, in order to assert an individualised identity and address sibling rivalry, is a phenomenon described as *sibling de-identification* (Schachter and Stone, 1988). Such comparisons provided examples of downward and upward comparisons. Pippa wondered if she was 'less neurotic' than her siblings and felt this has made her happier with her own life. Similarly, Ann had established a more successful career path than her siblings and wondered if this reflected genetic inheritance.

Responses that referred to family dynamics could also serve to emphasise either differences or similarities in siblings' experiences. Sensitivity to perceived parental fairness or favouritism is certainly not unique to adoption, and research with children has identified a link between the congruence of siblings' assessments of differential treatment and quality of sibling relationships (Kowal, Kramer, Krull and Crick, 2002). For the current study, the pertinent issue is how the women interpreted these experiences and then wove these interpretations into their appraisal of their adoptions.

Several women used their siblings in assimilative comparisons, particularly in relation to the way their parents behaved towards them. For example, Georgina talked about her siblings several times, and cited these relationships more than once as a source of comfort. She explained that her relationship with her adoptive parents had fluctuated, and at the time of the interview communication with her adoptive mother had broken down. In her case, her siblings were also adopted and she noted this as a positive:

> *Positive [about adoption] I guess would be the relationship with my two sisters. Positives I guess was that you know we were all in the same boat so there wasn't, I guess there wasn't that … because I wasn't adopted … into a family where they already had natural children. … But I guess we were all in the same position, there wasn't that, there wasn't that issue.*

These strong relationships helped balance out more difficult aspects of family life, and as a result she felt that '*on the whole, I had a good childhood*'. She suggests that being adopted into a family that already had birth children (the implied comparison target) might have brought greater difficulties.

Those women who grew up in families with birth children sometimes raised this as a relevant feature. The most straightforward responses cited good relationships with their siblings as a 'gain' of being adopted and a comfort when dealing, for example, with the ill health or death of parents, or other life stresses. As Ann described it: '*My siblings are my best friends*'.

Some took their responses further and reflected that feeling they were treated similarly to their siblings meant their relationships with their parents were not defined solely by adoption. Often this was mentioned in passing, as part of reporting a generally positive experience. However, among those women who reported difficulties in their relationships with their families, it was common to find that they pointed out their parents' relationships with their birth children shared many of the same traits. Being treated similarly could, therefore, also

be a source of comfort in families with more hostile or confrontational dynamics.

Contrastive comparisons involving siblings tended to be used to highlight more negative experiences. This could be being treated differently from a sibling who was also adopted or a sibling born to the adoptive parents. Either way, these examples tended to highlight feelings of regret, loneliness or rejection, although in some cases women described these as feelings they had learned to deal with rather than dwell on.

Although these women's reflections were clearly situated in midlife – as many commented on how their viewpoints about family dynamics had changed over time – this type of experience does chime with findings from research with adopted children who have been 'preferentially rejected' within their birth families (Dance, Rushton and Quinton, 2002). In summary, children who have been removed from families where they have been singled out for particularly harsh or rejecting treatment have been found to have much greater adjustment difficulties in their subsequent adoptive families than children removed from families where abuse or maltreatment was similar towards them and their siblings (Dance et al, 2002). The feeling of being 'singled out' can carry over into subsequent experiences in the adoptive family (Dance et al, 2002; Rutter, Bishop, Pine, Scott, Stevenson, Taylor and Thapar, 2011). The feelings described by women who felt singled out *within* their adoptive families reflect a similar message and suggest that the impact of such experiences can continue to reverberate into midlife.

7.3.3 Target-free comparisons

Some comparisons involved comparing one's own experience to a generalised 'other people' rather than a specific person or type of person: a so-called target-free comparison (Wood, 1989). In my study, this was illustrated in several responses where women did not explicitly mention who 'other people' might be. This category of responses reflects some similar features to the imagined scenarios described later in this chapter, but involved

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an identifiable 'other' used as a comparison point, even if their characteristics were not spelled out explicitly.

Jane demonstrated this when, towards the end of the interview, she summarised her view by situating her own experience in a broad context:

> *I would not say that I was any luckier or unluckier than most people really. Overall I think the adoption scheme is a very good idea. But I just think that I may have been just a bit unlucky in terms of the people I ended up meeting or being involved with as a result.*

Above, Jane compares her own fortune to that of '*most people*'. By mentioning adoption, her response suggests she is reflecting on her own experience against the alternative of being adopted by another family. In the context of her interview, this answer was surprising after the difficult experiences she had described previously, including being bullied severely at school and being raised in a family where discussion of emotional issues was strongly discouraged. Using a comparison shed a different light on her adoption appraisal: it framed her experience in more positive terms than the descriptions of specific aspects of her experience would have suggested.

Other examples reflected a different approach of comparing themselves to how someone else might have reacted to the same circumstances. For example, Vivian gave a lengthy response when asked at the end of the interview whether there was anything that hadn't been covered. She described how adoptive parents have '*such power*' and a '*very strong position*' in terms of their child's life when they adopt a child from overseas, and that therefore '*huge caution*' is necessary. She concluded:

> *It is not just luck, but I can see how someone could be adopted and under the circumstances that I was adopted it could have gone very horribly wrong I think. Instead of I've done that … coping, pick yourself up and sort this out. It could have gone horribly the other way I think.*

Similarly, when asked about what impact she felt early orphanage care had on her subsequent life, Hayley started her answer by saying '*I haven't known anything else*'. She then went on to expand:

> *I think it probably has made quite a difference to my adoptive parents having had me at the age of one plus, rather than a baby. I don't think – I think babies, you know, give them time to adjust and adapt to each stage, and I think I was quite lucky because I was quite lively and bright and – bright not in terms of brain-brightness, but you know, kind of cheerful – and a quick learner I think.*

This type of comparison tended to underscore personal characteristics, as in the examples above. As well as highlighting the adopted person's agency in 'making the most' of their circumstances and finding their own path, these responses also allowed for adoption as a phenomenon to be framed as distinct from their own experiences. These data echoed statements highlighted in Chapter 5, which drew a line between personal experiences and broader views on adoption in general. In some of those examples, adoptive family characteristics such as warmth, understanding and commitment were credited in a similar way as 'making up for' the potential effects of pre-adoption experiences and being adopted. Similarly, here the examples suggest that adoption might bring risks, but personal characteristics could be invoked as factors that helped mitigate those risks.

As has been referenced frequently throughout these chapters, change over time was a feature of many interviews. Women sought to situate their experiences temporally, for example, in order to give a context to certain behaviours, such as corporal punishment by parents, which have become less acceptable over time. Comparisons with other people were often used in the same way – to give a context to their parents' behaviour. Among those women who reported difficult behaviour from their parents, to very different levels across the group, many emphasised this was a family-level rather than adoption-specific experience (for example, '*but my mum was the same with my brothers and sisters, and they weren't adopted*').

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In summary, comparing oneself to others – siblings, other adopted people or a generalised 'other' – provided fertile ground for conveying a range of points about the self (Goffman, 1971; Malone, 1997): emotional responses (such as a sense of belonging or rejection), viewpoints about adoption (*it is the defining thing* or *I'm no different from others*) and a sense of fortune (*I'm luckier or unluckier than others*). Contrastive and assimilative comparisons were used to accentuate similarities and differences from comparison targets.

7.4 Appraisal by imagining alternatives

The responses in this section highlight a third way of framing responses, namely by imagining what another life might have been like. Adoption, like other major life events, is often conceptualised in research designs as a turning point. The responses in this section take us back to that turning point and consider: what if it had not happened? What if they had not been adopted by the families who raised them? What if they had remained in Hong Kong, or been adopted under other circumstances?

Among such responses, the most common alternatives considered were, in order of prevalence, growing up in orphanage care, being adopted by a different family and, notably rarely, growing up within the birth family.

7.4.1 Orphanage care

In general, growing up in orphanage care was presented in these responses as a poor alternative to their own lives following adoption, in line with widespread cultural notions of pre-adoption circumstances in international adoption (Baden, 2016). Yet orphanage care tended to be referred to in broad, generalised terms. Like dealing with other people's questions, as described in the previous chapter, the lack of information about their early lives was salient. Rose illustrated this when asked about the most important positive and negative aspects of being adopted for her. She responded:

> *The positive obviously is I've had a better life than had I not been adopted, or I'm assuming I've had a better life, I don't know because I don't know at what stage in the orphanage they then think, 'oh well'. I mean I don't know whether the babies stay there that aren't adopted or what happens to them or whether they get adopted by Chinese people, I don't know.*

Some women acknowledged their lack of concrete knowledge about the orphanages but nevertheless speculated about how life might have unfolded if they had stayed in Hong Kong. Tina reflected on the extent to which her adoptive family and her own abilities had contributed to the life she leads now:

> *[M]y life would have been completely different, I'm sure of that, say in Hong Kong. I mean I have thought about it and I've thought well, you know if I would have probably, would I have worked very hard, would I have managed to get a scholarship to go to University? I'm reasonably bright but you know I'm not spectacular – it's possible I could have done that but in terms of ease, I have had opportunities that probably I would never have had if I'd stayed out there, no and I've had the advantage of a secure, loving family, a good education and therefore you know the career opportunities and life opportunities that that brings.*

Similar to some of the interpersonal comparisons, Tina's response and others like it reflected on their own characteristics. In this case, however, Tina makes a different point by emphasising how her environment, rather than personal characteristics alone, enabled her to flourish.

Less frequently, respondents had some, albeit limited, information about what life had been like in the Hong Kong orphanages. For example, when Faith was asked about whether she thought her early experience in orphanage care had an impact on her later life, she replied that what she knew of the orphanage suggested it was '*actually a very good orphanage and I think it was quite well run*', and that therefore the experience had not affected her

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greatly in the long term. However, when asked to reflect on being adopted, she noted:

> [Y]ou know, you read and hear this 'Where do you belong? Where is your sense of belonging?' and to be adopted for me, that is where my sense of belonging has been, in that I was given a second chance to have a family. A mother and father. Those people who were there to put me to bed at night, you know, to sing me songs and read me bedtime stories and the same people that were there in the morning to get me up, um, and they were mine. And I was theirs. That's my family and that's my feeling of sense of belonging. And I think, you know, children, I think children, people need that and institution care can't give that can it? You know, even a good institution can't ever give you those special people who you can make relationships with.

In common with much of the data under this theme, orphanage care is framed as deficient in comparison to adoptive family care, but in Faith's response those differences are portrayed particularly vividly. She focuses on the opportunity to form secure attachments with consistent caregivers, which remains a primary concern for policy and practice alike when considering the options for substitute care for children (Dozier, Kaufman, Kobak, O'Connor, Sagi-Schwartz, Scott, Shauffer, Smetana, van IJzendoorn and Zeanah, 2014).

Another relatively common pattern was reflected in Josephine's interview. When asked what she thought the possible effects of starting life in orphanage care might have been for her, she focused her response on the life she had led, rather than possible alternatives:

> I presume it's, err [long pause] well because I was in an orphanage it's been a good thing for me really so it because I was then adopted by my parents who it's it's been a very positive, it's a funny way of looking at it, perhaps it's it's it was a good thing for me, because I don't know perhaps my mother when she left me perhaps her situation wasn't [pause] erm, was perhaps precarious, perhaps a difficult situation that

she couldn't have perhaps given me what my adoptive parents have given me. So perhaps it's been a good thing that I came from an orphanage [laughter].

Other women, such as Hayley, shared a similar viewpoint:

I could honestly say there's been nothing negative [about having been in orphanage care] because I probably wouldn't be here, sitting in my nice house … with my lovely children, let's face it – I probably wouldn't be here I'd be, you know, possibly even dead – I may never have survived.

In both of these responses, orphanage care is portrayed as meaningful only in so far as it was a step on the way to being adopted. Instead of imagining what the alternatives might have been like, these women emphasised their current lives, then worked backwards to adoption as a vital event to achieving that.

Although orphanage care and imagined versions of life in Hong Kong were generally reflected in negative terms in comparison to adoption, it is important to balance these responses against other data where some women reflected on the losses involved in leaving Hong Kong. In contrast, these data encapsulate other (and no less important) aspects of an intervention that removes children from one country to another. Some of these aspects have been described in Chapter 5; below is one response, from Lesley, that identifies the impact some women felt was inherent in the decision for them to be adopted internationally:

I was taken away from Hong Kong. And I don't …..I have never felt I belong here. I don't feel I even straddle both cultures, I just don't think I belong in either one. I've grown used to it. That's fine. I don't have a problem with that, but that is a loss and it has taken me a long time to get anywhere comfortable with being in Hong Kong [when I visit]. I am more comfortable with it now than I have even been in my entire life. But I still have a sense of loss and I still have a sense of shame when

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people speak to me in Cantonese or even before I open my mouth I
can be identified as being not from Hong Kong as it were because of
my mannerisms, the way I walk, the way I talk, the way I dress.

Given the breadth of this sample, it is important to represent the full range of
responses from this group who share the experience of being internationally
adopted. Compare, for example, Faith and Lesley's very different views on
feeling like they 'belong'. Both women shared a number of broad markers of
'successful' adoptions: good psychological health, enduring relationships with
adoptive family members, and finding satisfaction in their professional and
family lives over time. Yet in contemplating how life might have been under
other circumstances, their responses reflect very different viewpoints of
adoption and its impact into mid-life.

Looking across the data, the issue of leaving Hong Kong was often conflated
with the idea of leaving orphanage care. Therefore, even women whose
answers to other questions made it clear that their adoptions had, at times,
not been easy were likely to frame staying in Hong Kong as a poor alternative
to their own lives. Comparing responses *within* interviews also highlighted that
holding both views was not uncommon: international adoption was a best
option open to them as children, but they continued to feel regret about the life
they would never know.

This ambiguity highlights an important point in relation to measures that rate
adoption appraisal via a numerical scale. Contextual data about which
features of adoption the respondent has in mind are essential for ensuring
responses are interpreted with validity.

7.4.2 Adoption under other circumstances

In a third category of imagined alternatives, participants considered the
possibility of being adopted under other circumstances. One of the most
common examples given was non-transracial or 'same-race' adoptions, where
a person's ethnic heritage is shared by their adoptive family. Several of these

comparisons were in response to the question '*what do you feel about having been brought up transracially?*', so the wording may have influenced the choice of comparison target.

In comparison to the responses about orphanage care, these responses tended to include more specific detail, perhaps because the experience of adoption with one factor altered was easier to envisage. For example, Florence speculated about the potential effect that being adopted into a family with Chinese heritage might have had:

> *I don't know if it would have been a challenge being raised the same race but I have a feeling that I wouldn't have felt so different. I mean some people can feel different and quite unique but somehow I didn't integrate that and unfortunately being different was negative.*

Only very occasionally did the women's speculations touch on the idea of being adopted by a family in Hong Kong, and even then this was mostly a passing reference. Very few of the women reported knowing other people who had been adopted within Hong Kong, thus perhaps reducing the likelihood of such a comparison coming to mind. As Wood (1989) argues, in a widely cited essay setting out the parameters of social comparisons, most tend to focus on the familiar: the knowledge most easily available to the comparer. In this vein, responses in this study that reflected on alternative adoptions often conjured up scenarios that were relatively close to their own lives.

In Rose's case, cited below, her adoptive family had also adopted another daughter from Hong Kong. When asked about being brought up transracially, she emphasised that it was '*all I ever knew I guess*' and '*it was just accepted*'. She went on to add:

> *But I don't know, perhaps it might have been different if I'd been the only one but because there were two of us, I don't really know. It's not as though – if we'd been older we'd have had a problem with the*

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language say because we'd have already learnt Chinese but no, we
only ever knew a white English background from growing up so ...

This type of imagined alternative underscores the person's viewpoint by emphasising the advantages of one's own position or circumstances. It is similar in effect to a downward interpersonal comparison but the tone is more speculative.

Ruth's interview was particularly detailed in reflecting on alternatives. Her case was somewhat unusual because she had some details about her birth family's circumstances, which she described as having ruled out a 'happy ending' had she stayed with them. She also reflected that, from what she knew of orphanage care, that was unlikely to have provided her with love and security. Throughout her interview, her responses about her adoptive family reported close relationships and a strong sense of belonging in her family. Her adoptive mother had once asked her, given their lack of financial resources, whether she thought she would have been happier being adopted into a wealthier family.

> *And I was kind of shocked that she suggested it because I never*
> *thought it was an option, I never had a tantrum saying 'I don't like this*
> *family, I want somebody else'. It would never….it was never an option*
> *because they were my parents in the same way that everyone else*
> *couldn't choose their parents. And no I don't think I would have been*
> *happier, I don't think more money would have measured against the*
> *immense amount of love that I received, so I can't imagine a happier*
> *outcome.*

An unusual feature of this comparison was that it arose from her adoptive mother: one example of communicative openness about adoption.

7.4.3 Growing up with birth family

Although few women speculated in detail about the possibility of growing up with their birth family – perhaps reflecting strategies for dealing with ambiguity, as described in the previous chapter – Ruth had some basic information about her birth family, including the fact that her birth father had relinquished her in the context of severe poverty and bereavement. She started by noting that she could not predict '*any other way that my life would have run*', then went on to add:

> *You know, if my father had oh I don't know, rallied whatever relatives he had around and cared for us I presume it would have been in utter poverty, in very difficult…and perhaps with all those health issues that weren't resolved. I mean presumably the health care there wasn't that good because look what happened. So if I hadn't have died at that stage, I might have done a bit later on, I don't know. I don't think it would have been a particularly good outcome there.*

Ruth's responses engaged directly with a number of other possible alternatives to her adoption, but she rejected each of them (growing up with birth family, growing up in orphanage care, growing up in another adoptive family) as inferior to the value of the love and security she felt within her adoptive family. In social comparison terms, she selected the dimension of 'love' and on this basis, each of the other options are 'downward comparisons' that emphasise the positive about her own situation.

Imagining the alternatives raises particular issues in relation to this group of women compared even to others who grew up outside their birth families. Gillis' (1997) distinction between 'families we live with' and 'families we live by' has been referenced in two studies that explore contact with birth family members (Holland and Crowley, 2013; MacDonald and McSherry, 2013). This concept juxtaposes the messy reality of life with the families who raise us – the families we live *with* – with cultural definitions of an idealised family life – the families we live *by* (Gillis, 1997; Smart, 2007).

Bridging the gap between reality and fantasy regarding birth parents can be emotionally fraught and complex. Contact can aid the process of children removed from their parents' care replacing an idolised version of their birth parents with a version that reflects the reasons they came into care (MacDonald and McSherry, 2013). Similarly, birth parents may remain a '*continued emotional co-presence*' for young people growing up in care, even if contact is intermittent (Holland and Crowley, 2013). Contact with birth parents may provoke feelings of anger, hurt or rejection, although over time some of these views may soften (Holland and Crowley, 2013).

Compared to the findings from these studies, the responses in my study, overall, did not suggest a tendency towards either idealised fantasies or widespread anger towards birth parents, although the latter was present in a few interviews. I noted in Chapter 6 that lack of information – and the need to deal with ambiguity – had led to a tendency towards viewing birth family as a closed door. This chimes with a small-scale study mentioned earlier of adopted adults who had been abandoned as children within the UK, some of whom also reported that earlier anger towards their birth mothers had dissipated over time (Mullender et al, 2005).

An interesting parallel arises in relation to midlife perspectives on adoptive family relationships. As discussed in Chapter 5, several women in the current study identified maturity and (for some) becoming parents themselves had led to a re-evaluation of what parents – any parents, not only adopters – can provide for their children. Earlier tensions with adoptive family members, even sometimes quite serious tensions, could ease over time. In relation to both birth and adoptive families, therefore, by midlife perspectives could shift quite considerably.

7.5 Discussion

Multiple references to real or imagined other lives were reflected in the women's responses. As a result, the 'messages' about adoption were also diverse (differing between participants) and nuanced (differing within

interviews). For this group of internationally adopted women, several interesting insights are gained when considering the comparison between one's own life and other people or possibilities.

I highlighted at the beginning of this chapter that some of the women's responses reflected on life without the intervention of adoption. As shown above, the majority of responses started from the point of assuming they could not grow up with their birth family, and instead considered other alternative forms of care: orphanage care or adoption under other circumstances. This is different from the two studies cited earlier, where the main reference point for an alternative life was growing up with birth parents. If the dominant cultural notions of an ideal family are steeped in attributes such as commitment, love and 'natural' bonds (Gillis, 1997; Smart, 2007), the dominant cultural notions of orphanage care tend to focus on the *absence* of such features (McCall, 2011; Baden, 2016). These notions – ideal family and orphanage care – represent very different starting points for reflecting on the positives or otherwise of one's own life.

While it was notable that life in Hong Kong was often portrayed in ways that highlighted the potential deficits, this evidence needs to be balanced against the forfeiture, discussed in more detail in Chapter 5, of culture, language and a sense of belonging that was felt acutely by some women.

A second trend related to comparisons with siblings. For women who reported generally positive things about their adoptive families, being treated similarly reinforced the message that they felt they belonged and that adoption was not a disadvantage. For women who reported more difficult relationships with adoptive parents, being treated similarly to siblings could help by situating their difficulties in their parents' behaviour rather than being framed as the adopted person's 'fault'. However, counter-examples suggested individual reactions to perceived similarities or differences varied.

Both social comparisons and imagined scenarios were used to distance oneself from undesirable outcomes, or to re-frame negative experiences. I

have noted earlier how women often strived to contextualise their parents'
behaviour or decisions. This was carried through in the analysis in this
chapter. In these exchanges, participants seemed to be explicitly seeking to
play down negative experiences by situating them in comparison to other
people or other times.

Therefore, one advantage of these modes of appraisal – comparisons to
others and imagining other possible lives – was that they provided a way of
expressing feelings without directly criticising or making explicit negative
statements. Adoption could be portrayed as problematic but without reference
to their own situation. Conversely, some women were keen to emphasise
positive personal characteristics, or characteristics of their family, that
ameliorated any potential problems that could be associated with adoption in
general. In both cases, using these modes enabled them to separate their
own experience from adoption as a social phenomenon.

7.6 Conclusion

I have outlined above three different ways in which the women responded to
questions about adoption: resisting appraisal, appraisal by comparison to
others and appraisal by imagining an alternative. What has emerged is a
picture of how adoption appraisal depends on the context in which it is being
appraised. As shown in this chapter, the women's responses gave rise to a
multitude of different direct and indirect messages about adoption: adoption
helped me find a sense of belonging, or left me without one; my life was
easier or more difficult than my siblings; *my* adoption was fine, but adoption in
general is risky.

The women chose different comparison targets, including not being adopted
or being adopted under other circumstances. They made upward
comparisons, which emphasised the gains of adoption, and downward
comparisons, which emphasised the losses; they used assimilative and
contrastive examples. Each ideographic statement uses a particular reference
point to express a particular aspect of adoption (either their own experience,

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or adoption in general, or both). The accumulative message is this: self-appraisal, in this case of the experience of international adoption, depends on the information drawn on from personal, familial and cultural contexts.

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8 SUMMARY, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

8.1.1 Review of aims and objectives

The study has examined how women in midlife look back on the early childhood experience of international adoption and its impact across a period of several decades. As I designed the study and began analysing the data, I started with a broad research question:

When internationally adopted adults describe their experiences of adoption, what are the most important factors from their viewpoint?

My aims were to:

- Explore the events and experiences described as meaningful in the context of international adoption
- Document the process of appraising adoption in midlife
- Evaluate the implications for future research in this small but developing field – studies of ex-orphanage, internationally adopted adults in midlife

A broader purpose of undertaking this work was to make a substantive contribution from a midlife and UK empirical study to debates about the long-term impact of adoption and the factors that help or hinder the development of a comfortable adjustment to adoption over the lifespan.

8.1.2 Review of study

My research design was based on using a phenomenological approach to analyse data from interviews with 68 ethnically Chinese women, adopted as children from Hong Kong to the UK in the 1960s. To explore adoption appraisal in mid-adulthood, I developed a semi-structured interview schedule of open-ended questions about adoption and adoption-related experiences across the lifespan. These questions were embedded into a larger interview

schedule used with participants of the British Chinese Adoption Study (BCAS). Of the 100 girls adopted via the same project, nearly 50 years later, 99 were traced and 68 agreed to participate in interviews.

I conducted 21 interviews and secured data from a further 47 interviews. Alongside the interview data, I gathered additional contextual data for each interview, for example any emotional reactions the interviewer noticed, or further information or clarification shared during the follow-up phone call.

After all the interviews were completed and transcribed, I marked out the relevant sections in each transcript for the phenomenological analysis. As described earlier, analysis involved two stages: reading each interview in full to get an overall sense of the interviewee's life, then carrying out a detailed phenomenological analysis of data from my questions, involving several rounds of re-engaging with the data, refining my codes and building these into 'meaning units' in line with Creswell's approach to phenomenological research.

Through this iterative process of analysis, I identified a 'joining theme': the adoption appraisal process involved both personal reflections and the experience of talking about adoption. This theme was used to develop a framework in three parts:

- factors relevant to adoption appraisal in midlife
- how individuals' views of their own experiences shaped, and were shaped by, conversations about adoption over time
- how adoption was framed in interview responses

Finally, I examined these themes in relation to each other and in reference to evidence from other empirical and theoretical literature in order to report, illustrate and explore the findings and conclusions from this study and to consider the implications relating to adoption appraisal in midlife. In the

current chapter I bring the individual findings together to draw out the cumulative messages.

Although this study was part of a larger project, the data for this thesis resulted from questions I had developed and piloted. I conducted 31% (n = 21) of the interviews and seven other interviewers carried out 3–13% (n = 2 – 9) respectively. I coordinated the data collection and carried out quality checks on the interview data. I also planned, carried out and reported on all aspects of the data analysis for my study independently.

8.2 Thesis overview

In this thesis, I have sketched out the social, historical, policy and personal background to this study (Chapter 1); critically reviewed existing empirical evidence on internationally adopted adults and theoretical literature relevant to adoption appraisal (Chapter 2); described the qualitative and phenomenological approach used in this study (Chapter 3); and explained the methods employed in conducting this research, guided primarily by Creswell's (2007) phenomenological approach, with some insights drawn from narrative approaches (Chapter 4).

The findings were presented in three parts: factors, experiences and changes relevant to adoption appraisal in midlife (Chapter 5); adoption conversations with families/friends and strangers/acquaintances (Chapter 6); and presenting adoption appraisal in the context of the research interviews (Chapter 7). Chapter 7 gave particular weight to the interpretative element of phenomenology. In each chapter I referenced other literature to situate my findings in broader empirical and theoretical contexts and consider the implications of the findings. For example, social comparison theory and social stigma theory were used in Chapter 7 to define the modes of appraisal women adopted in describing adoption in their interview responses.

In this final chapter, first I pull together and review the cumulative findings from this study. Next I explore this work in relation to (a) findings from the

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BCAS, (b) existing empirical findings from research with other cohorts of internationally adopted adults in midlife and (c) conceptual work that helps to shed light on different aspects of the adoption appraisal process. Then I review the strengths and limitations of my study. Finally, drawing on all this evidence, I lay out the implications of this work for policy and practice, future empirical research and the development of a model of adoption appraisal in adulthood.

8.3 Key findings

This study has examined, in detail, 68 Hong Kong-born women's views of how being adopted has shaped their lives. The findings have underlined that adoption appraisal is a dynamic process: individuals' viewpoints continue to change into mid-adulthood. Furthermore, as their reflections showed, it is not only the adopted person but also the broader environment in which they find themself that vary over the years.

The findings from this phenomenological study support the argument that research with adopted adults in midlife needs to take account of their differences from younger cohorts. They highlight that reassessment of individual perspectives is linked to family relationships and dynamics, everyday conversations about international adoption, and social and cultural contexts. An overview of these factors is shown in Figure 8.1.

The work from this dissertation suggests strongly that future studies of international adoption require a clear conceptualisation of midlife as distinct from earlier life phases, and a framework that takes account of adult life experiences and changes over time (Vaillant, 2002). As adopted people move from adolescence through young adulthood and into mid-adulthood, their perspectives on what being adopted means shift to accommodate life transitions and external changes in their family relationships, social circumstances and broader cultural attitudes.

Below I draw out the main strands of the evidence presented in Chapters 5, 6 and 7 that contribute to this over-arching conclusion. Implications for future research will be discussed in section 8.

Figure 8.1 – Adoption appraisal process identified via phenomenological analysis

Experiences at each life stage
- Childhood
- Adolescence
- Early adulthood
- Mi
- d-adulthood

Current relationships
- Adoptive parents, siblings
- Partner, children
- Close friends
Current circumstances re work, faith groups, other 'meaningful' activities

Adoption conversations
- With family and close friends
- With strangers and acquaintances

Adoption appraisal tasks:
- considering adoption alongside other experiences
- prioritising which aspects of adoption are most salient
- intepreting and making meaning of personal history
- re-appraising adoption in light of new experiences

Cultural notions and social attitudes towards:
- Adoption and families
- Women
- Ethnic minorities
- Personal information

Adoption Appraisal Modes:
- Resisting appraisal
- Appraisal by comparison
- Appraisal by imagining alternatives

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8.3.1 Mapping adoption appraisal in mid-life

Far from being a singular childhood event, adoption – and in this case, international adoption – was presented throughout the interviews as a multi-faceted and lifelong experience. For these women, adoption involved separation from their birth family and the culture and language of Hong Kong; unknown perinatal and post-natal circumstances followed by orphanage care; and being raised in adoptive families in the UK, mostly by white British couples. Running through the women's responses was a sense of how interconnected their views of these aspects were, and how difficult it could be to disentangle the influence of single aspects in retrospect. This interconnectedness has particular relevance for future quantitative and mixed methods research: using 'view of own adoption' as a single independent variable tells only part of the story. The combination of an indicator of proportions across a group accompanied by explanatory material is a much stronger formula.

In this study, the most prominent individual-level factors relevant to the adoption appraisal process were: fluctuations over time in relationships with adoptive parents, siblings and other relatives; the impact of not having information about their early lives; congruence or contradictions between feelings about adoption in general and their own experiences; and shifts in social identifications, including aspects of adoptive and ethnic/racial identities.

Two factors emerged that had not been drawn out in detail in previous research. First, reflections on their adoptive parents' motivations to adopt were closely tied to some women's views of their adoptions. Adoption researchers and practitioners are well versed in the importance of understanding one's origins, but previous research has tended to focus on birth family and pre-adoption experiences. This additional aspect – adoptive parents' motivations – probably reflects both the particular circumstances of this group and their stage of life. In contrast to other adopted adults in the UK, not only did these women lack information about their birth families, but many of their adoptive parents already had birth children. In other words, infertility

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was not a motivating factor for most of the adoptive parents. In addition, these participants were firmly in midlife, and often in the midst of raising teenagers or anticipating their own children leaving home. These reflections on parental motivations, therefore, were given in the context of their own experience of reaching and even passing their adoptive parents' age at the time of making the decision to adopt.

Second, the variation of quality of relationships *within* adoptive families was substantial. A strong relationship with one family member offered considerable comfort for some women who had faced real difficulties with other aspects of adoptive family life. This was particularly for women who felt united with their (adopted or non-adopted) siblings in criticism of their parents' behaviour or attitudes. The role of siblings – whether described as allies, foes or distant figures – had often changed over time too.

Any research that asks people to reflect on their relationships with family members is likely to feature, to varying degrees for the individuals involved, a mixture of elements. Arguments, misunderstandings, resentment and hurt will figure alongside closeness, encouragement, support and joy in each other. Difficulties in family relationships may be short-lived and rare, or may reflect deep-rooted conflicts. Neither pattern is exclusive to adoptive families. In terms of the current study, however, the variability and changing nature of family relationships has been clearly identified and linked directly to many women's appraisal of adoption.

8.3.2 Adoption re-appraisal

The impact of changes over time on adoption appraisal was a uniting feature throughout different parts of the analysis. In addition to changes in family relationships, life events (such as the birth of a child) acted as catalysts in many cases, but women also described more gradual or subtle shifts in their perspectives over the years. A seemingly incidental event, such as watching a TV programme, could set off a new way of thinking about adoption.

It is worth reiterating that the current study's cohort was older on average (mean age 48 years, range 42–53 years, SD 2.4) at the time of participation in the study than all the cohorts in interview-based studies discussed in Chapter 2 [most of whom were in their 20s or early 30s; for example, participants in McGinnis et al (2009), one of the oldest cohorts, had a mean age of 31 years]. A larger volume of studies (for example, Basow et al, 2008) have examined younger adult cohorts up to age 25 years: a stage defined as emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2007), when participants have often moved away from home but their independence from adoptive parents may be less clearly established. For example, many studies of young adulthood recruit participants via university networks, when students may still be financially or otherwise reliant on the support of adoptive parents, or parent–child relationships may still be recovering from strains during adolescence.

Compared to other studies, therefore, this cohort looked back on a longer period of time and were more likely to have faced transitions such as losing an adoptive parent or other loved one, becoming a parent themselves, dealing with significant health problems, or experiencing setbacks or triumphs at work or in education (Vaillant, 2002). Similarly, as discussed in the next section, these women's development into mid-adulthood has taken place against several decades' worth of shifts in social attitudes in the UK, which influenced their own perceptions and how they were perceived by others.

Adoption appraisal as a process rather than an outcome is emphasised in models of children's adjustment (Brodzinsky, 1990; Brodzinsky, Smith and Brodzinsky, 1998; Palacios, 2009), but the factors taken into account in those models necessarily relate to much earlier life phases. For example, the stress and coping model of adoption appraisal – directly referenced in recent adult studies that have examined participants' views of their adoptions (Storsbergen et al, 2010; Rushton et al, 2013) – describes how children who have previously accepted a relatively simple story of their family life come to understand, often via contact with peers at school, that adoption is not everyone's experience, which prompts a reassessment of what adoption means (Brodzinsky, 1990). The current study identifies that while social

environments beyond the adoptive family still matter, those environments look dramatically different by midlife. Peers at school are replaced by partners, children, old and new friends, work colleagues and others. Conversations with other people continue to shape and be shaped by the adopted person's view of their own adoption throughout subsequent life stages. But the dynamics and meaning of these exchanges are closely linked in this study to the women's broader perspectives. By midlife, those perspectives have been shaped by other life events and external changes. While Brodzinsky's (1993) model sets out one cycle of reassessment in middle childhood, these women described numerous layers of reassessment that contributed to their current views.

Brodzinsky's (1990) and Palacios' (2009) models offer a useful starting point by applying broader social theory to the specific experience of adoption. Reviewing the advances by the late 1990s in conceptual approaches to adoption adjustment, Brodzinsky et al noted that these approaches reflected '*the belief that human behaviour is determined, not by a single causative factor, but by the interplay of multiple influences in the context of a developing person and an ever-changing environment*' (1998: 20). While childhood models cannot encapsulate effectively the life experiences of this group of adult women, this broader belief resonates strongly with the evidence from the current study.

While Brodzinsky's (1990) model was specifically developed as one of children's model of adjustment, other frameworks are also informative in the context of the findings from this study. Palacios (2009) applied Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological model to adopted children's development, and highlighted that development occurs within a systems framework including the adoptive home and school (microsystem) and broader cultural assumptions around adoption and adoptive families (microsystem). The ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986) drew on systems theory that saw lifespan development influenced by different types of environmental systems. Figure 8.2 shows Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological systems applied to this

group of adopted women's development in midlife and draws on Palacios'
(2009) work in applying this model to childhood.

A quick glance at even one section of this model – the microsystem –
captures the differences between childhood and mid-adulthood. Social
relationships have expanded to include partners, children, different circles of
friendships and work/educational settings (microsystem). Adoptive family
remains an important domain, but the adopted person's role has changed
substantially, and may include a shift from being cared for by parents to taking
on a caring role towards parents (microsystem). The ecological systems
model helps to clarify and illustrate the broader context of the women's lives
and development into mid-adulthood, but there are limits to the extent that
such a model can capture the nuances of the *process* of adoption appraisal. It
is in the interactions between the individual and the systems – for example, in
adoption conversations with family and strangers – that much of the process
of appraisal occurs, as the women's personal reflections meet external
perspectives on adoption.

8.3.3 Impact of external changes: familial, social and cultural

While the adoption appraisal process for individuals involves continual
'reappraisal', these person-level shifts do not take place in a vacuum. Three
contexts in particular emerged as important in the women's descriptions:
familial, social and cultural. Each of these contexts was also dynamic. Familial
contexts shifted as the women left home and made decisions about their adult
lives, their parents aged or died, and siblings' lifestyles diverged or developed
in tandem. Social contexts shifted as the UK became more ethnically diverse
and a broader range of family structures such as single-parent households
and step-families became more accepted; and in adulthood the women made
choices about where to live and with whom to spend time. Cultural contexts
shifted as attitudes towards adoption, towards migration and diversity, and
towards sharing personal information changed over time.

An ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Palacios, 2009) is particularly useful for the current study by its inclusion of the chronosystem, which encapsulates changes over time. Change has been perhaps the strongest theme in this thesis. Individual changes occur throughout life stages (childhood to adolescence to young adulthood to midlife) and can include, for example, changes in physical and mental health. Simultaneously, changes within microsystems can result from household moves (leaving adoptive home; forming or leaving partnerships; having children or children leaving home), and geographical distance from adoptive family and friends or others (for example, through moving house). Losses to microsystems can occur through bereavement or cutting off relationships. A house move might affect several systems, for example by moving closer to or further away from their adoptive family and close friends (microsystems), changing jobs (microsystem) and gaining new neighbours and local services (exosystems). Macrosystem shifts are often more gradual, involving cultural changes in attitudes and ideologies, but some women had moved abroad for various periods and described the effects of different cultural histories and expectations on their experiences.

Changes at familial, social and cultural levels also played into the ways women presented their adoptions in conversations with strangers and acquaintances. Furthermore, in presenting their adoptions in the context of these research interviews, women commented directly on how external contexts had changed, in particular when describing experiences that happened at earlier times when attitudes towards adoption, families and visible ethnic minorities reflected different assumptions.

A recurring point therefore, clearly identified in this study, was that paying attention to the context gave a better understanding of the viewpoint being expressed, and highlighted that views which appeared similar on the surface could be reached via different routes. This finding adds further weight to the argument that using a 'process–person–context–time' perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of adoption than focusing on outcomes alone (Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Palacios, 2009). Within individual interviews in this

study, the extent to which external shifts had influenced person-level changes was often difficult to distinguish. Looking across the interviews, however, the importance of taking an ecological perspective, which places an individual's experience in context, was readily identifiable.
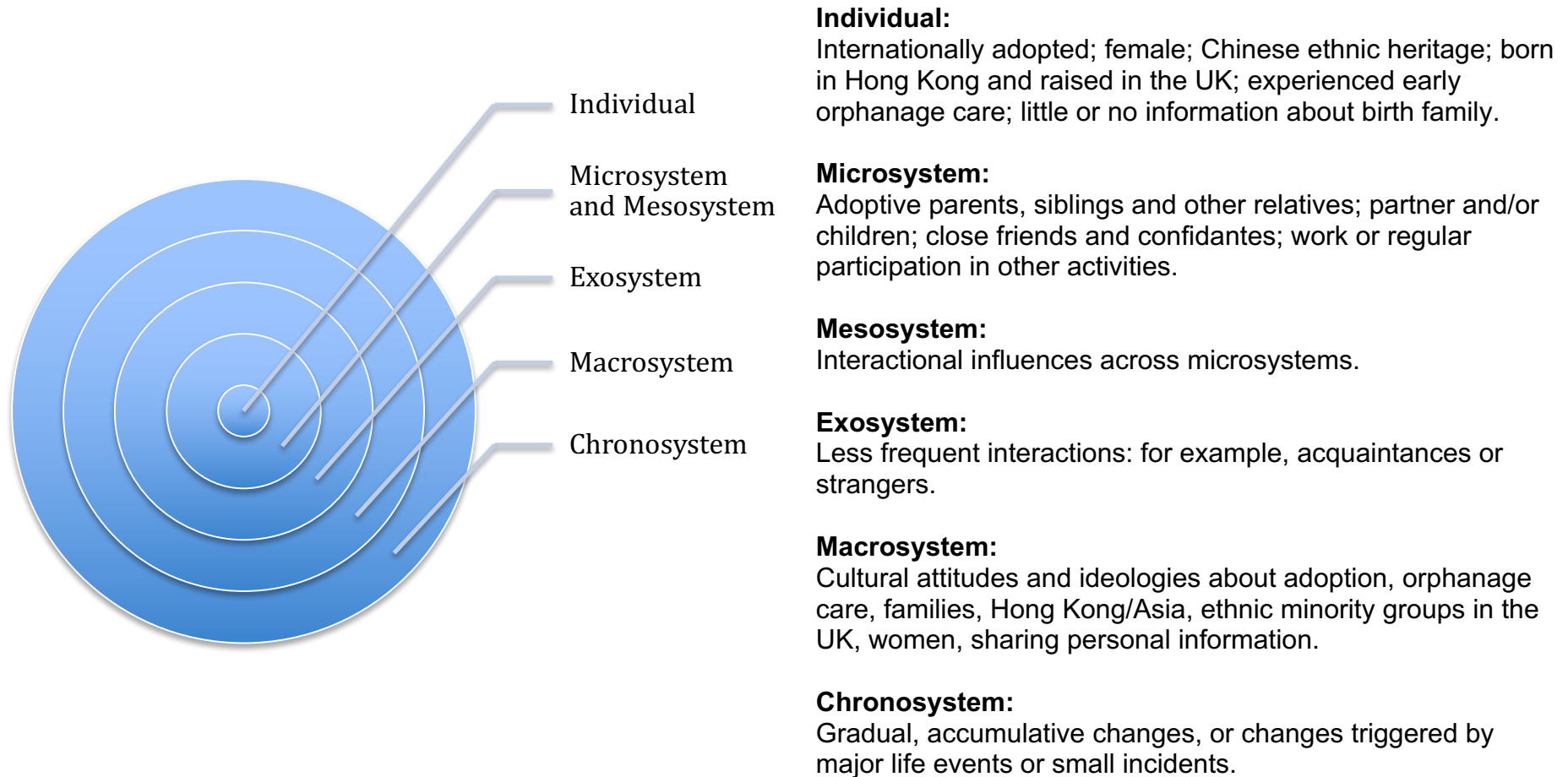
8.3.4 Context of appraisal

As well as understanding the context of the adopted person, understanding the context of *appraisal* is also important. Two different contexts were examined in this study: how women chose to discuss their adoptions in everyday life (Chapter 6) and how they described adoption in response to questions in these interviews (Chapter 7).

Many women's reports on the dynamics of conversations revealed their awareness of subtexts and assumptions about adoption, in line with other recent work on adoption stigma and micro-aggressions (Baden, 2016). These shaped their experiences of sharing their personal and family history with other people: the presentation of self (Goffman, 1971). Even within this group who shared such similar early experiences, the significance of particular words – 'lucky', 'belonging', 'adoptive mum' – varied between individuals and according to the context in which they were used. There was a substantial range of the emotions attached to talking about adoption: a range which included both positive and more difficult experiences. This variation was echoed in the wider adoption appraisal process, as women differed in the relative prominence they gave to the gains and losses of moving from Hong Kong orphanages to families in the UK.

In terms of discussing adoption in the interview context, three modes of adoption appraisal were identified: resisting appraisal, appraisal by social comparison and appraisal by imagining alternatives. A variety of comparison points – other adopted people, siblings, children raised in orphanage care – were used to portray adoption both as personal experience and in a broader sense.

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Figure 8.2 - Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1986) applied to the current cohort

Individual

Microsystem
and Mesosystem

Exosystem

Macrosystem

Chronosystem

Individual:
Internationally adopted; female; Chinese ethnic heritage; born in Hong Kong and raised in the UK; experienced early orphanage care; little or no information about birth family.

Microsystem:
Adoptive parents, siblings and other relatives; partner and/or children; close friends and confidantes; work or regular participation in other activities.

Mesosystem:
Interactional influences across microsystems.

Exosystem:
Less frequent interactions: for example, acquaintances or strangers.

Macrosystem:
Cultural attitudes and ideologies about adoption, orphanage care, families, Hong Kong/Asia, ethnic minority groups in the UK, women, sharing personal information.

Chronosystem:
Gradual, accumulative changes, or changes triggered by major life events or small incidents.

Many responses were speculative and based on imagining what life might have been like had they not been adopted, or been adopted by a family with different characteristics. The lack of information about their early lives was particularly acute for this group of women, and the most commonly imagined 'alternative life' was being raised in orphanage care, rather than by their birth family, which distinguishes this research from studies with other looked after and adopted cohorts (Holland and Crowley, 2013; MacDonald and McSherry, 2013). A markedly different comparison point is likely to result in a markedly different appraisal of one's own experience, as evidenced in research on social comparisons across numerous contexts (Smith, 2000; Suls et al, 2002).

8.3.5 Balancing the challenges and joys of adoption

Across the lifespan, adopted people face the task of integrating '*the meaning of their unique family status and their dual connection to two families into an emerging sense of self*' (Brodzinsky et al, 1998: 33). Even in the absence of contact, or the future possibility of contact, with their birth family, this task involves weighing up how the various elements of being adopted are balanced in relation to each other.

For internationally adopted adults, these elements cross at least two countries, which have different cultures, languages, child welfare systems and much more besides. At the time of these adoptions, the financial costs of international travel were prohibitive and very few of the women had returned to Hong Kong before adulthood. This lack of connection to and information about Hong Kong meant the differences between the lives they had lived and the numerous lives they *might* have experienced were often difficult to gauge. The process of 'weighing up' different possibilities was clear in the women's responses, and the balance of integrating the challenges and joys into their responses differed between participants and within their own assessments at different points in time.

Again, many of these points came to the surface when interviewees described talking about adoption with other people in their everyday lives. Even among

women who reported similar broad-brush experiences – for example, growing up in families where adoption was rarely discussed – their individual descriptions revealed distinct differences in their perceptions and feelings about these experiences.

One striking point was the range of emotional reactions to, and strategies for dealing with, similar questions from acquaintances or strangers about their adoptions and families. Numerous examples were given of adoption micro-aggressions (Baden, 2016), including assumptions, often clumsily expressed, about biological versus adoptive parenting, birth families and orphanage care. Some women felt that non-adopted people could never truly understand how this experience permeated their lives, yet others felt frustrated that any problems they had, or particular patterns in family relationships, were ascribed to adoption, when in their view other factors were more salient. Several individuals enjoyed the 'story-telling' element of sharing their experiences, or described 'helping out' people who seemed confused. The frustrations caused by others' preconceptions about adoption were evident, but were contrasted against experiences that were described in more neutral or even positive terms. These patterns fit with the three-dimensional approach described in Chapter 2 used to explore a Chinese-born US-raised adopted cohort's experiences in adolescence (Tan and Jordan-Arthur, 2012).

As with these women's experiences of talking about adoption, the importance and the difficulty of presenting a clear and balanced account of a complex phenomenon is, of course, highly relevant to producing research (see section 8.5.4 for further discussion in relation to this study). In recent years, a shift in adoption research has seen the traditional focus on risks and responses incorporate discussions of resilience and recovery (Palacios and Brodzinsky, 2010). As Palacios (2009: 89) emphasises:

> *Adoption research seems to be changing and the 'normality' and resilience perspectives are also finding [their] place in adoption research. Of course, it is not the task of adoption researchers to hide*

problems and difficulties, but to place them in the context of the otherwise many positive aspects of adoption.

Although this description refers mainly to research with children and adolescents, it encapsulates an issue relevant to this study of adults. Some women emphasised '*normality*': they described close and enduring family relationships that were not defined solely or predominantly by adoption. Others emphasised '*resilience*': they explained how they had adapted to or dealt with difficult aspects, from finding the words to respond to unwanted attention to managing complicated relationships with adoptive family members. These accounts did not '*hide problems and difficulties*'. Instead they demonstrated the process of weighing up the numerous interconnected strands of an experience as fundamentally transformational as being born into one family and raised in another.

Adopted adults, including those in midlife, have an enormous amount to contribute to current debates about the challenges and joys of adoption. The findings in this dissertation demonstrate that clearly. This group of participants, which included women who had never attended an adoption gathering or talked to professionals about their experience prior to their inclusion in the study, reported a particularly wide range of viewpoints. They raised several positive aspects, as well as the difficulties many internationally adopted people face, including racist assumptions (Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010) or other people's insensitive (whether intentionally or not) comments in relation to adopted people (Docan-Morgan, 2010; Docan-Morgan, 2011). The current study also moved beyond documenting those types of challenges to considering how adopted people perceived and chose to respond to these situations, in greater detail than Lindblad and Signell (2008) and with a sample four times larger. Adoption research has an important role in helping to refine and improve practice and to counteract the risk of policy-making driven by ideology alone. Listening carefully not only to what adopted adults have experienced but also how they feel about and have dealt with these experiences is an important step towards achieving this aim.

8.4 Strengths and limitations

From my search of the adoption literature, this is the only study of internationally adopted adults that has (a) focused primarily on adoption appraisal and (b) used a qualitative approach to explore adoption appraisal. As with all research, this study has its own individual strengths and limitations. Below I consider issues related to research design and, in addition, the challenges that arose while carrying out the study.

This study is an in-depth exploration of 68 women's accounts of international adoption and its meaning and salience into midlife, which has been undertaken to examine adoption appraisal processes and the factors that shape women's viewpoints. It was conducted in the UK, where international adoption research is scarce, and therefore offers an alternative view to previous midlife studies from the US, Scandinavia and Holland, where the historical, political and social context of international adoption is different. The data were collected directly from adopted adults rather than from records collected for other purposes or via adoptive parents. Below I consider the strength and limitations in relation to the sample, data quality and consistency, data analysis process, credibility and validity, and, finally, transferability to other adopted people's experiences.

8.4.1 Sample

Having undertaken a review of the literature (Chapter 2), this was the only identified cohort of internationally adopted adults to be followed up more than 40 years after they were placed with their adoptive families (Feast et al, 2013a). It is certainly the only such cohort of internationally adopted adults in the UK to have participated in a major research project, consisting of this study and the various strands of the BCAS that have been completed and/or published to date.

Compared to other qualitative studies reviewed in Chapter 2, this group were fairly homogeneous: same country of origin and orphanages that provided a similar quality of care; adopted during a 12-year period (1960–1972), by white

British families (with few exceptions) and at a relatively young age (mean 22 months; range 8–82 months; SD 13). Recruiting participants who shared a number of important markers of early childhood meant I was able to examine how their subsequent experiences and perspectives diverged from a similar starting point.

As the sample was drawn from participants recruited for the BCAS, previous analysis had identified and documented an overall picture of the women's adult lives. Mental and physical health, life satisfaction and current marriage/cohabitation rates did not differ significantly from UK comparison groups of age-matched non-adopted and domestically adopted women (Rushton et al, 2013). In addition, few women had regular contact with adoption networks or engaged in 'cultural socialisation' activities, such as deliberately seeking out opportunities to meet people with a connection to Hong Kong (Rushton et al, 2012; Feast et al, 2013a). This previous work provided a useful context for the current study.

As described in Chapter 3 (section 3.4.1), my sampling approach enabled me to include those participants who had no contact since childhood with organised adoption networks. This would have been less likely if I had recruited participants via adoption gatherings, support groups or other adoption-related organisations, which was the most common approach in other interview- or survey-based studies of internationally adopted adults (for example, McGinnis et al, 2009; Docan-Morgan, 2010; Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010). Through detailed analysis of the full range of participants' accounts, I have been able to 'document diversity and understand variation' across this group of women (as described in Chapter 3).

From the total group of 100 girls identified from the original International Social Service UK project (see Chapter 1), 68 women participated in this study. The participation rate in the BCAS (n = 72) was relatively high for a long-term follow-up, given that each woman was traced individually based on information from her original adoption file (Feast et al, 2013a). In addition, although my decision to include my questions in the interview schedule risked

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reducing the sample further (because participants were offered the option of completing only the questionnaire pack), this resulted in only four cases being excluded. Nevertheless, overall, 32 women declined to participate in the BCAS (n = 18) or in the interviews (n = 4); did not respond (n = 7); had died (n = 2) or could not be traced (n = 1). Therefore, these women's views on their adoptions and related experiences are not represented in this study.

8.4.2 Data quality and consistency

I have described earlier (Chapter 3, section 3.4.1) that I chose to extract and analyse the relevant sections from all 68 interviews, in order to use the full range of data available to address my research question. Regular discussion with and feedback from the other experienced and trained interviewers helped to ensure a consistency in approach to data collection (Patton, 2002). I checked each transcript as it arrived at the office, and followed up with interviewers as necessary to clarify or add contextual information. Reviewing the data in detail during the analysis confirmed that consistency across interviewers had mostly been achieved. Nevertheless, perhaps inevitably with a semi-structured approach, some interviews were more detailed than others. In a few cases, this was linked to a lack of probing following on from initial responses to the main questions. In some interviews the participant appeared to be reticent to expand on her responses, or had become tired or conscious of time by the final section. However, I developed a well-tested range of questions and used the full available sample in order to provide a more representative view of perceptions of the sample as a whole, and reduce potential bias that may have arisen from a more limited selection.

Working with a group of experienced adoption research interviewers, most of whom also had several years' practice experience, also brought some advantages. For example, one interviewer demonstrated particular skill in seeming to connect with participants, and her interviews tended to elicit particularly full responses. I made note of patterns in her interviews that will be useful for planning future interviews, for example, picking up on particular

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words or phrases the participant had used and teasing these out in subsequent probing questions.

These interviews offered a rich source of data to be analysed, but the available time and financial resources did not allow for subsequent follow-up interviews. Second interviews could have included follow-up questions identified during the analysis, which might have revealed useful additional information (Patton, 2002). For example, there could have been direct questions about strategies for dealing with unwanted or unanswerable queries in casual conversations about adoption, or about how adoption appraisal had changed between early adulthood and mid-adulthood. While further data collection was not feasible within this study – participants had already completed a 200-item questionnaire pack and taken part in interviews lasting between 1.5 and 5 hours – this learning is instructive for future research.

8.4.3 Data analysis

Using the full sample enabled me to mine the data for confirming or disconfirming evidence of each theme as I developed my analysis, and pick up on patterns across the group. Inevitably, this decision limited the level of analysis for each case compared to studies that use very small samples in great detail (for example, the approaches advocated in Smith et al, 2009 or Giorgio, 2009); instead I followed guidance on psychological phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007). A larger sample size allowed me more cases to draw on and therefore a wider spread of examples, which was particularly useful when checking whether ideographic statements echoed or contradicted each other across the group. In the tradeoff between depth and breadth, I chose to gain a broader range of views and focus less on the 'moment-to-moment utterances' (McAdams, 2012) of each individual case.

One advantage of using a phenomenological approach, which concentrates on the participants' experiences rather than testing a specific hypothesis or applying a pre-existing theory, is that this allowed me to start with a broad

scope when looking for recurring themes in the data. Although my main aim was to understand adoption appraisal, I was not seeking only responses that related to pre-existing models of children's appraisal of adoption. For example, I was not limited to looking for statements that emphasised adoption as a 'stress' to be coped with (Brodzinsky, 1990), but rather statements about how the women appraised their own experiences of adoption, in whatever form the data suggested. This approach enabled more positive and nuanced views to emerge and be included in the analysis.

8.4.4 Credibility and validity

As described, I applied Whittemore et al's (2001) criteria and assessment questions to my study (Chapter 4, Table 4.2). For example, in relation to credibility, I checked repeatedly for within-group similarities between stories, discussed my findings with colleagues and advisors ('expert-checking'), and have used extended quotes to evidence my conclusions.

In practice, while writing up this thesis, working out how to present a balanced picture of the evidence to emerge across interviews was a major part of the process. Not only did this study involve a relatively large number of cases for phenomenological research (Creswell, 2007; Mason, 2010) but, as discussed, stories of international adoption are lent particular emotional resonance by touching on issues of family, race, migration and identity (Kirton, 2000; Lee, 2003; Howe, 2009). In each chapter, therefore, a combination of summaries of the range of data (highlighting similarities and differences between accounts) and direct quotations were used to evidence both broad themes and individual cases that raised specific points. I contextualised ideographic statements by describing their place in the overall spectrum; this approach helps to distinguish between commonly shared experiences and '*surprises and … disconfirming evidence*' (Kuzel, 1999: 44).

In order to enable the reader to judge the validity of my approach and understand the links between the data and my findings, I have described openly my approach to gathering, analysing and presenting the data

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(Malterud, 2001; Whittemore et al, 2001; Creswell, 2007). In Chapter 3, I described the methodological underpinnings of my study, including a commitment to positional reflexivity.

It is worth reiterating that the arguments presented here are based on my interpretation of the data. My findings and conclusions are the result of the phenomenological approach I described in Chapters 3 and 4, build on the empirical and theoretical literature I outlined in Chapter 2 and draw on the professional and personal experience and knowledge laid out in Chapter 1. Through engaging with the data using a phenomenological approach, I chose to focus on adoption appraisal as a process involving a broad range of psychological and social factors. Another researcher carrying out a secondary analysis of my data might well produce an equally valid interpretation, or use alternative theoretical frameworks that would add perspectives that fall outside the scope of my study (Malterud, 2001, Patton, 2002).

8.4.5 Transferability

Finally, as discussed in Chapter 4, this group of women shared a number of specific characteristics related to early orphanage care in Hong Kong and international and transracial adoption to the UK during a one-decade period. While there are advantages to analysing experiences across a group of similar participants (Smith et al, 2009), it also means that these findings do not necessarily translate directly to the experiences of men, or non-UK adoptions, or domestic adoptions, or international adoptions among other ethnic groups. Similarly, changes in adoption policy and practice, and changes in culture and social attitudes, mean that children being adopted today will have experiences that share some aspects – but not all – with this cohort.

Instead of claiming that these experiences represent all adoptions, I have highlighted the findings from my study that replicate or diverge from research that has explored the lives of other similar cohorts. This process helps to identify 'meta-inferences' (Teddlie and Tashakkori, 2008), without

undermining the phenomenological results, by synthesising the learning from my analysis with the existing knowledge base on international adoption. It offers the reader a broader context for assessing my findings.

8.5 Contribution of this study to future research

In the following section I examine how the key findings, outlined in section 8.4, contribute to current thinking in research with internationally adopted adults. On-going research agendas from other areas, in particular mental health, are used to illuminate potential pathways for future studies of adoption in midlife.

8.5.1 Adoption appraisal and other outcomes

Recent empirical studies with adults suggest that adoption continues to be an important part of people's identities in midlife (McGinnis et al, 2009), and that internationally adopted adults' views of their own adoptions are associated with psychological well-being (Storsbergen et al, 2010; Rushton et al, 2013). It is notable that these results have been identified in cohorts in three countries: Hong Kong-born women in the UK (Rushton et al, 2013), Greek-born adults in Holland (Storsbergen et al, 2010) and Korean-born adults in the US (McGinnis et al, 2009). This is in line with earlier findings on long-term experiences following domestic adoption (Triseliotis, 1973; Feast, 1992; Howe et al, 2000; Triseliotis et al, 2005). The popularity of adopted adults' gatherings and conferences also points to the salience of adoption in midlife: even if attendees represent the minority of adopted adults, these events consistently attract large audiences[5].

Using simple quantitative tools in the three studies listed above enabled adopted people's views on adoption to be tested for potential statistical association with psychological adjustment in midlife. I have described earlier that in the BCAS, the variable 'retrospective view of own adoption' was based on the women's response to the statement 'I feel happy about being adopted':

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[5] For example, the International Korean Adoptee Association (IKAA) Gatherings in Seoul in 2007, 2010 and 2013 all attracted between 600 and 700 international participants, predominantly from the US and Scandinavia (www.ikaa.org/pressroom).

a five-point scale was offered, from strongly agree to strongly disagree (Feast et al, 2013a; Rushton et al, 2013). This variable was entered into the regression analysis along with a range of other independent variables related to orphanage care, adoptive family life and (in the work currently underway) adult life events to test for association with a composite adult outcome index measure of psychological adjustment (see Chapter 2, section 2.3; Rushton et al, 2013; Grant and Rushton, in preparation).

Similarly, Storsbergen et al (2010: 193) used two questions, the results of which were coded into binary variables:

> *Appraisal of adoption was introduced by a general open question: "How do you look back on the fact that you were relinquished and adopted?" Then the questionnaire continued with: "How would you summarise your feelings (about being relinquished and adopted)?".The adoptees rated their feelings on a 5-point scale: very positive to very negative (recoded into positive/neutral and negative), and this rating was used in the current study.*

This approach represented a step forward in measuring adoption appraisal when investigating adoption outcomes. Previous quantitative studies had analysed national data collected for other purposes, thus ruling out the introduction of adoption-specific questions (for example, von Borczyskowski et al, 2006) or had used standardised general mental health measures (for example, Tieman et al, 2005).

How does this link to the current study? This phenomenological analysis has identified a range of potentially competing internal and external factors that shaped women's perceptions and how they chose to express their views about international adoption. These findings highlight, therefore, not only that adoption appraisal is a continuous, dynamic process, but that without contextual information around adoption appraisal responses, our knowledge of how to interpret findings from simple linear measures remains limited.

8.5.2 Individual perceptions of 'positive' adoption experiences

An important aspect of this study was being able to disentangle and map out the range of priorities among the women's viewpoints on what mattered in the context of adoption, as described earlier. The findings from this study, particularly those reported in Chapter 5, identified that a 'prioritisation' occurs in adoption appraisal, which involves weighing up the relative priority of factors such as relationships with adoptive family members or the development of comfortable multi-faceted identities. In addition, individual perceptions of which factors are important also change over time.

A key implication of these findings is that individual viewpoints vary substantially on what constitutes a 'good' adoption. If empirical studies are to continue to explore adoption appraisal as one factor associated with differences in mental health outcomes (Storsbergen et al, 2010; Rushton et al, 2013), future work needs to recognise that participants' perceptions of positive outcomes may not align with each other, nor with researchers' perceptions of positive outcomes. For one person, having a close-knit adoptive family may be the sole measure of success, while for another developing a sense of racial and ethnic compatibility may be a greater preoccupation. This variability has direct implications for counselling and social work professionals if adopted adults seek support to help them manage adoption-related feelings (Rushton and Grant, in preparation).

A potentially helpful parallel is found in healthcare research, which has moved towards greater recognition of patient-perceived improvements in health, including systematic recording of national pre- and post-treatment Patient Reported Outcome Measures (PROMs) for some conditions (www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/thenhs/records/proms). As with defining the markers of a successful adoption outcome, mental health research has identified that individuals' perceptions of recovery vary: getting rid of symptoms, returning to work or education, or developing close relationships are all potential achievements, but the ranking of these outcomes in relation to each other varies for each individual (Ralph and Corrigan, 2005).

Understanding patients' priorities for recovery – or, in my field, adopted people's priorities in adoption appraisal – may raise potentially important influences that researchers have not previously considered.

To be clear, understanding individual priorities is important to understanding adoption appraisal, but adoption appraisal is just one aspect of a large and complex network of factors. In line with research with young adults, some epidemiological and longitudinal studies have identified significantly raised risks for poor mental health among internationally adopted adults in midlife (Grant, Rushton and Simmonds, 2016). While it is important not to infer that adopted people commonly experience severe psychological problems, such findings cannot be dismissed. Further research is needed to understand whether adoption appraisal plays a role in individuals' coping strategies and, if so, how this relates to mental health.

8.5.3 Divergent reactions to shared experiences

A point commonly made about adoption research is that cohorts with similar early experiences demonstrate heterogeneous outcomes[6] (Rutter and Sonuga-Barke, 2010; McCall, 2011). In keeping with this pattern, several themes in this study would fit under the broad heading of divergent reactions to shared experiences: talking about adoption with family members, feelings about the loss of connection to Hong Kong, and perceptions of parental motivations to adoption are just three examples. This point, therefore, is not new.

Comparing my findings to other studies of internationally adopted adults, however, underlines that this group describes a more diverse range of reactions – including more positive viewpoints – to the shared experience of international adoption. This was achieved by including the experiences of 'satisfied adoptees' from the 'vast silent majority', who have never sought

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[6] This is also true in other areas of research: see, for example, *Shared Beginnings, Divergent Lives: Delinquent Boys to Age 70,* Laub and Sampson's (2003) excellent and succinctly titled longitudinal study following up boys from reform schools in Boston in the 1940s into late adulthood.

adoption-specific services, responded to public adverts or attended psychotherapy (Brodzinsky et al, 1993). The current study, therefore, reinforces but also extends previous research by bringing a UK perspective from a cohort recruited using different methods from previous qualitative studies.

A clear example of diverse reactions arose in the descriptions of talking about adoption with strangers or acquaintances. At an individual level, examples in my study fitted patterns identified in other studies about the challenges of dealing with other people's (mis)conceptions around adoption (Lindblad and Signell, 2008; Docan-Morgan, 2010; Tigervall and Hübinette, 2010; Docan-Morgan, 2011; Baden, 2016). Conversely, an accumulation of counter-examples in this study provided a reminder that not all internationally adopted adults experience talking about adoption with other people as stressful, and indeed some described themselves as happy to help other people understand their experiences. It is important to ensure that the body of evidence on internationally adopted adults represents a nuanced picture of their experiences: in this example, a nuanced picture means holding in mind that stressful experiences of adoption micro-aggressions have been replicated across several national contexts, but that these experiences do not represent all adopted people.

A second example relates to the variation of quality of relationships *within* adoptive families described earlier (section 8.4.2). In some research designs, the variability of family compositions poses a challenge in formatting questions that cover relationships with each adoptive family member, particularly if households have changed, for example following parental separation. However, this finding suggests it is important to capture any particularly close or problematic relationships. Such relationships can influence adoption appraisal considerably even if they contrast with overall family dynamics.

8.5.4 Choosing how to present personal experiences

As outlined above, a number of previous important contributions to the literature have introduced findings or concepts that stress that talking about adoption continues to play an important role in adulthood. By including a close examination of this cohort of UK women's responses and strategies for conversations about being internationally adopted, I have added to this work.

This study also adds a new dimension: talking about adoption in the context of research interviews. This group of women demonstrated three modes of adoption appraisal: resisting appraisal, appraisal by social comparison and appraisal by imagining alternatives.

An insight from social psychology helps illuminate one of the cumulative themes in this thesis. Flexible regulation of emotional expression (FREE) represents an adaptive strategy for discussing personal experiences (Bonanno, Papa, Lalande, Westphal and Coifman, 2004). It is the capacity to chose the best form of expression or suppression of views and feelings according to the audience and circumstances. This description resonates with the findings from the current study about how women in midlife may respond to questions about adoption. In talking about adoption – whether with family and friends, strangers or research interviewers – the women were clearly engaged in processes of selecting how to respond to questions or statements.

By midlife, some women had developed strategies that made them feel more comfortable in responding to unexpected and sometimes intrusive questions about being adopted or statements that seemed based on flawed assumptions about their adoptive family relationships. They had learned from previous experience about how they felt and how others might react to particular themes or patterns in adoption conversations; many women had reflected in some depth on the issue of how 'conversational talk' (Malone, 1997) shaped and was shaped by their own perspectives on adoption. The capacity to deal with these situations was described as having developed and changed over time. The women's reflections clearly demonstrated the

differences in their perceptions in midlife from earlier periods of life, and especially from childhood, in line with broader theories of human lifespan development (Erikson, 1963; Vaillant, 2002; Sroufe, 2005).

8.6 Implications for policy and practice

In Chapter 1, and again at the start of the current chapter, I highlighted a broader purpose of this study: to make a substantive contribution from a midlife and UK perspective to debates about the long-term impact of adoption and the factors that help or hinder finding a comfortable adjustment to adoption over the lifespan. In this field, the connection between robust academic research and how practitioners and policy-makers use research evidence directly affects the lives of people who have experienced or will experience adoption and fostering. I have already set out the key findings from this study; here I outline how these translate into implications for policy and practice.

As the participants in this study were all female and adopted from Hong Kong to the UK in the 1960s, it is not possible to state definitively how far their experiences will chime with other adopted adults (for example, men or domestically adopted people). However, as discussed in Chapter 2, the experience of thinking about, reflecting on and wondering about the role adoption plays in one's life – in other words, the process of adoption appraisal – has been identified across a range of different groups of adopted people in adulthood. So while these messages derive from a study of internationally adopted women, initial feedback from practitioners (particularly from the CoramBAAF South East Post Adoption Network) indicates that they may also resonate in the context of domestic adoption, particularly where information about one's origins is unavailable, unclear or difficult to access. I have focused in this section on the points most closely tied to the work carried out for this thesis. Further work is underway with Professor Alan Rushton on a paper outlining policy and practice implications in relation to dealing with adversity in adult life (Grant and Rushton, in preparation).

As noted in a recent report for another part of the BCAS project (Rushton and Grant, 2015), existing practice and policy literature in relation to internationally adopted adults is limited. Particularly relevant to the current study is the fact that much of the literature on services for adopted adults in general focuses on searching for and reunions with birth relatives. Whether to make, renew or break contact with birth family members may be a pressing issue for domestically adopted adults, but as has been discussed earlier, this group of women had little likelihood of contact. A small body of literature also exists on adults who were transracially placed in the UK, as was the case for most of these BCAS placements (Kirton, Feast & Howe, 2000; Thoburn, 2004; Harris, 2005).

Three points in particular emerge from the findings of this study. First is the array of factors related to adoption appraisal in midlife. In particular, relationships with adoptive family members had often fluctuated over time and shifted in different stages of life. Related to this, there was substantial variation in quality of relationships *within* adoptive families. A strong relationship with one family member offered considerable comfort for some women who had faced real difficulties with other aspects of adoptive family life. This was particularly true for women who felt united with their (adopted or non-adopted) siblings in their views of their parents' behaviour or attitudes. Adoptive family relationships are likely to change substantially over time, particularly if the adopted person's role shifts from being cared for by their parents to taking on a caring role towards their parents.

The prominence or relevance of these factors varied between individuals and within individuals' perspectives over time. The long-term task of working out a comfortable adjustment to adoption over the lifespan is a process akin to the one Brodzinsky (1990) describes in childhood when, for example, starting school invites new conversations and new comparisons in how *my* life compares to those around me. However, in adulthood, both the factors relevant to appraisal and the context in which appraisal occurs are much expanded. By midlife, the cycle of 're-appraisal' of adoption has usually occurred many times, and through a series of changing familial, social and

cultural contexts. Adults' social relationships have expanded beyond adoptive family and school to include partners, children, different circles of friendships and work / education / community settings. Transitions and exposure to new environments and experiences can create a shift in perspective that may include re-assessing earlier viewpoints about adoption and family relationships.

Professionals working with internationally adopted adults, therefore, need to have a clear understanding of how both adoption *and* midlife as a specific period of the lifespan may shape an individual's experience. The adopted person is likely to have re-assessed their own perspective in several layers, and their perspective has shaped and been shaped by numerous environmental contexts, all of which are likely to have changed over time: family relationships and dynamics, everyday conversations about international adoption and social and cultural contexts.

The second point relates to these broader contexts around the adopted person. One of the more difficult aspects for many women in the study was not their own internal reflections on adoption, but the feelings that arose from talking to other people about adoption who held varying assumptions and in many cases misunderstandings about adoption. Adoption stigma and the 'micro-aggressions' related to this have been discussed earlier (XXXX) and provide a framework for understanding the experiences individuals may face – in this case, transracially adopted adults engaged in understanding and expressing their adoptive, racial and ethnic identities over time. While some women were happy to help others understand more about adoption by talking about their own experiences, others emphasised the frustration that arose in relation to personal questions, particularly when other people's views were expressed insensitively or clumsily. However, the terms 'stigma' and 'micro-aggression' are somewhat remote from the language the women used to describe their own experiences. Some actively resisted the idea that talking about adoption in everyday conversation was difficult: they described feeling comfortable sharing their 'story' in order to help or educate other people. Other women had developed their own approach to dealing with questions,

including finding phrases that helped to steer the conversation in a direction they felt more comfortable with. In most cases, finding ways to talk about adoption had been an individual pursuit for these women due to not knowing other adopted people. The examples in this study might provide a 'shortcut' for others facing the same experience.

The findings underline that adopted people can and do find ways to integrate information about their origins and early experiences, even when that provokes feelings of sadness and loss, into their subsequent lives and personal histories. A particular challenge for this group of women was dealing with a *lack* of information about their pre-adoption experiences. The way they chose to frame their descriptions of their adoptions – the modes of appraisal, described in chapter 7 – offer insight into how they considered adoption fitted into the overall arc of their lives, and how they reflected on any challenges that arose. Their approaches varied but often involved comparisons of their own lives with other people's or with imagined alternatives lives. The lack of information (and limited likelihood of future access to information) about birth family is perhaps why most women focused on orphanage care or adoption by another family as the alternative, instead of growing up within their birth family. The choice of comparison can help express a particular perspective about one's own approach to life. For example, some women seemed to find comfort in stressing the similarities between their own experiences and other people's and thus downplaying difficulties; others chose emphasise their strengths and ability to cope with events that would widely be considered stressful.

The third aspect relates to the nature of support or opportunities to reflect and come to terms with aspects of their adoptions, which varied considerably among this group. The fact that the women had – in most cases – found ways to feel comfortable in their own sense of themselves does not diminish that such a task may be difficult. The majority had never sought or accessed any professional support in relation to adoption. Nevertheless, some women's current psychological health was the result of sustained effort and, for a small number, enormously difficult periods in earlier life.

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One unusual aspect of this research – the wider BCAS project, including the current study - is the on-going links between participants that emerged throughout the period of the study. At the time of initial contact with individual participants, very few were in contact with other women adopted from Hong Kong. The exceptions were those women who had a sister (not biologically related) adopted via the same international adoption project, and a small number of women who had attended a reunion held in 2001. During the process of carrying out this research, the UK Hong Kong (Adult) Adoptees Network (UK HKAN) was formed by a group of participants and other adopted adults who were keen to seek links with other women adopted in similar circumstances. The network organises two main events each year in the UK, which any Hong Kong adopted adults can attend, as well as numerous informal local get-togethers. Two international trips – one to Hong Kong and one to visit other Hong Kong adopted adults in the US – have also taken place.

One means by which internationally adopted people – or other groups of adopted adults – may share knowledge and personal experience, and possibly benefit psychologically, is the creation of a specific support network. This creation of links, bonds and often friendships with those of similar backgrounds and history may help to deal with many of the issues taken to counsellors and therapists. Talking openly with other internationally adopted women may be easier to manage than with the adoptive family or therapists. This form of network offers an alternative to the one-to-one or small group model of therapeutic support. It does not negate the importance of access to timely, sensitive professional adoption support when needed, but the potential benefits of peer support should not be overlooked.

8.7 A new model: adoption appraisal in midlife

The need for a better understanding of the salience of adoption in adulthood has been identified in previous research; as Basow et al (2008: 479) have argued: *'a more nuanced way of assessing adoptive identity, beyond simply*

adjustment to adoption, is needed to examine further its relation to psychological well-being'. My argument, based on the findings from the current study, is that before more nuanced measures can be developed, we have to establish a clear conceptual model for understanding adoption appraisal in adulthood. This call for conceptual clarity reflects the paths via which other useful perspectives have entered the field of research on the long-term impact of adoption: insights from critical race theory and migration research have shed light on the 'transracial adoption paradox' (Lee, 2003; Lee, 2016); work on adoption micro-aggressions has provided a theoretical basis for understanding the '_common slights, insults and indignities that occur almost daily_' in everyday conversations about adoption (Baden, 2016: 6). In this section I draw together the findings from the current study into a framework for a new model of adoption appraisal in adulthood.

So how does the current study contribute to understanding adoption appraisal across the lifespan? The findings outlined above and shown in Figure 8.1 provide a framework for a new model of understanding adoption appraisal in adulthood: one that builds on, but is distinct from, models of children's adoption appraisal. Adults are no longer living in the sphere of adoptive family life; the nature of potential environmental influences changes substantially as they grow and develop independent lives. Therefore, this phenomenological analysis extends the parameters of variables that influence the adoption appraisal process in adulthood compared to childhood.

There are three key aspects identified in this study. In summary, adoption appraisal:
- is a multi-faceted process, involving re-appraisal of adoption alongside other experiences in each stage of life
- shapes and is shaped by the interplay between the adopted person's own perspective and other people's perspectives in talking about adoption
- involves comparisons to other people's lives _and_ alternative versions of their own lives

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Understanding adoption appraisal in adulthood means taking account of developments throughout earlier life stages and into midlife. This requires a conceptual framework that focuses on both change over time and a broad range of adult life domains: in Bronfenbrenner's (1986) and Palacios' (2009) terminology, this means rethinking how ecological systems relate to this life stage, as shown in Figure 8.2 earlier. By midlife, viewpoints have been established and/or reassessed over a much longer period of time and throughout a number of life phases.

Adoption appraisal involves considering adoption alongside other experiences throughout the lifespan and building a personal history that includes separation from family origin and joining and being raised in a new family, and often periods spent in some form of alternative care provided by the state. For adopted people like those in this study, who cannot access information about their origins and early lives, it also involves appraising the 'unknown' and how to integrate a *lack of* information as part of that personal history. The cycle of appraisal and re-appraisal involves not only shifting personal perspectives but shifting family, social and cultural contexts. Adoption from this perspective is not a single event marked by a legal order, but a process comprised of multiple interlinking aspects.

Perspectives may change as a result of a 'trigger' such as losing a parent or a period of stress or triumph, but they may also change more gradually over a period of several years or even decades, so the difference is only detectable in retrospect. Becoming a parent (of birth or adopted children) and all the experiences associated with raising children often lead to re-examining one's own experience on the other side of the child-parent relationship. There are particular aspects related to midlfe as adopted people reach and pass the age their birth and adoptive parents were when the adoption occurred. Reflections on birth parents and adoptive parents' actions may lead to a new understanding, which may be more critical or more sympathetic than their earlier interpretations of those events. As a result, 'self-defining' memories – those stories which are told and re-told and become part of the way people

reveal themselves to others – may also change, and in middle adulthood may become more focused on meaning-making rather than recalling specific details of experiences (Singer et al, 2007),

Talking about adoption with other people is an important arena in which adoption appraisal plays out. The interplay between the adopted person's own view of their adoption and how they interpret and react to other people's views of their adoption is an important aspect of the process of understanding their adoptions, and one which was continues into conversations in midlife. In talking about adoption, each party – the adopted person and the person they are speaking to – engages in a dance of attributing thoughts, feelings and intentions to the other's verbal or non-verbal expressions (Malone, 1997).

Within adoptive families, levels of communicative openness continue to change and vary, both in the frequency of such conversations, and the emotions raised by talking about adoption. The variations *within* individual experiences are as salient as those *between* individual's experiences. Some people, for example, may feel unable to talk about adoption with their adoptive parents but have discussed it in depth with partners or close friends, and value the bonds with these confidant(e)s. Sometimes opportunities for communicative openness with family members develop later, after leaving home. There may be a 'breakthrough' with one family member in particular, or a friend or partner emerges as someone to share feelings with openly for the first time. Most women in this study grew more comfortable over time talking about adoption. Nevertheless, in some families adoption conversations remained unspoken: some women accepted that things would not change and this was 'just how it is', while for others, there was no resolution and talking about adoption continued to provoke tension.

Talking about adoption with more distant friends, acquaintances and strangers raises different emotions: feeling proud of their family and unusual origins; feeling embarrassed about being asked personal questions and unsure of how to respond; feeling frustrated with the assumptions they observed in other people's comments. Over time, adopted people are likely to

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develop patterns or 'strategies' for such conversations, particularly if past experiences make them wary about how others might interpret the information. Many women had experienced conversations laden with adoption and racial micro-aggressions (Baden, 2016), displaying at best insensitivity and at worst prejudiced assumptions about these adopted women and their early histories. Approaches for dealing with these experiences include assessing the other person's intentions and the likelihood of future contact and choosing to impart the basic 'facts' of their adoptions early in the conversation. Some questions could not be answered due to lack of information. For other women, the potential for negative or fraught conversations was either ignored or not seen as relevant to them; several women emphasised the enjoyment they found in telling others about their adoptive families and how they came to join them.

International adoption touches on a number of significant 'big-picture' topics: the nature of family and the bonds between members; 'race' and migration; the state's responsibility towards children who cannot grow up with their birth parents, whether they are relinquished or removed from their parents' care. At an individual level, this translates into a heightened significance in the sharing of stories about adoptive family life. Sharing stories is a two-way process. When adopted people talk about their origins and adoptive family life, they open the conversational door to the other person's interpretation of those experiences. For adopted people who have little knowledge of their origins and their lives prior to adoption, this may lead to feeling they lack the 'tools' that would better equip them for dealing with questions about these personal topics.

In listening to adoption people talk about their experiences, it is important to consider not only *what* is being expressed but *how* it is being expressed. In particular, what starting point is being used to consider how life has turned out? Some people may chose to frame adoption as 'just a fact': something to be accepted rather than ruminated on. Alternatively – and more commonly in this study – questions about the meaning of adoption may invite comparisons to other alternatives: comparing oneself to others (siblings, other adopted

people or a more generalised 'average' person) or comparing one's life as it has been to the lives that might have been (growing up in orphanage care, with birth family or with a different adoptive family). Self-appraisal, in this case of the experience of international adoption, depends on the information drawn on from personal, familial and cultural contexts. Each potential comparison offers fertile ground for conveying a range of points about the self (Goffman, 1971; Malone, 1997): emotional responses (such as a sense of belonging or rejection), viewpoints about adoption (*it is the defining thing* or *I'm no different from others*) and a sense of fortune (*I'm luckier or unluckier than others*). Contrastive and assimilative comparisons help to accentuate similarities and differences from how life might have been under other circumstances. One advantage of these modes of appraisal – comparisons to others and imagining other possible lives – is that they provide a way of expressing feelings without directly relating them to one's own experiences. The speaker can separate out the views they feel comfortable expressing about their own lives (and, by association, the actions of their adoptive families) from their views on adoption as a social phenomenon.

Two brief case studies are presented here to illustrate differing approaches to adoption appraisal. In case 1, the participant described her childhood in ambivalent terms. She and her siblings shared the experience of difficult relationships with both adoptive parents, although there had been some improvements in recent years. A series of highly adverse events related to an early partnership and her children had resulted in the participant re-assessing her life in her mid-40s, which included her perspective on adoption. As she could not access information about her birth family, she chose instead to learn about and visit Hong Kong. In the context of a new partnership, she had found a confidante with whom she felt comfortable discussing her adoption. Despite the numerous challenges she had faced, she described her overall perspective as positive, which in turn led to a sense of 'acceptance' about her adoption and early life.

In contrast, in case study 2, the participant described her childhood and her relationships with her adoptive parents and siblings as very good. She had

some limited information about her birth family, but viewed the possibility of tracing them as almost impossible. She had never particularly sought out information about Hong Kong; nor had she discussed the issue much with her adoptive family in recent years, although her adoptive parents had raised the topic. She reflected that since accepting the invitation to join the study, she had been thinking about whether to talk to her adoptive parents about her adoption before it was 'too late'. She felt frustrated when other people's perspectives on adoption suggested that she 'should' have an interest in finding out more about her origins as she viewed this as a private matter. Her current perspective was that while international adoption raises a number of political questions, her own experience was very positive. She was considering taking a more active role in exploring her background and early life.

Each of the 68 cases illustrated nuanced differences in the adoption appraisal process. The work from this study lays the groundwork for a new model of how adopted adults come to understand and make meaning of adoption in midlife. Further work would be needed to test and refine these ideas – for example, to test whether the same factors are important to different groups, whether any new variables emerge from other research, the relative importance of different factors and how psycho-social factors, such as those identified in this study, interact with biological and other processes.

In previous work, adoption appraisal forms part of Brodzinsky's (1990) 'stress and coping model', in which biological factors (such as genetic and perinatal factors) and environment factors (such as social support, family environment, placement history) influence 'person variables' (including cognitive level, self-esteem and interpersonal trust). The adoption adjustment process, in turn, is shaped by these person variables. This study has clearly demonstrated, as outlined above, the numerous layers of changes in environmental factors, and how these interact with individual shifts in perspectives. It has strongly underlined the dynamic nature of adoption appraisal in midlife, with an emphasis on the process of *reappraisal* and importance of understanding individual perceptions of what constitutes a 'positive' adoption outcome.

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8.8 Conclusion

Although there is now accumulating evidence on the experiences and outcomes for internationally adopted adults, and recent findings suggest an association between outcomes and individuals' views of their own adoption, there has been little systematic examination of the adoption appraisal process in adulthood. This study has focused on internationally adopted women's perceptions of how being internationally adopted in early childhood has affected their lives in the long-term. Sixty-eight women of Chinese ethnicity in their 40s and 50s, adopted as young girls in the 1960s from orphanages in Hong Kong to the UK, have reported on their experiences. Their accounts identify that appraisal of adoption, including adjustment to adoption-related losses and gains, is a multi-faceted and dynamic process that continues long beyond childhood and adolescence.

Out of this work emerges a clearer picture of the importance of understanding individual perceptions of what constitutes a 'positive' adoption outcome. By adding to and extending the (mainly US-based) emerging body of literature on internationally adopted adults, the results of this study start to lay the groundwork for developing a new model of understanding adoption adjustment in adulthood: one that builds on, but is distinct from, models of children's adjustment to adoption.

Adoption raises specific questions that are different to those for people who grow up with their birth parents. As form of a state intervention, adoption means that the families children grow up in are determined by professional decision-making, not genetic inheritance. After an adoption order has been granted, professionals may continue to ask themselves questions: _'Was this a good thing that happened? Was this a good thing that you did? How has it worked out or has it been a failure?'_ (Simmonds, 2003: 252). For adopted people, as shown in this study, the question of whether their adoption has 'worked out' has major and long-term implications. Like researchers, many adopted people will continue to wonder, in Alexandra's words cited earlier,

when difficulties arise, *'what is it that is actually about family and what is it that is actually about adoption?'* For some women in this study, the answers were straightforward and clear-cut. For others, questions ebbed and flowed in the context of other life events and shifts in perspectives, or remained a preoccupation throughout life.

Adoption appraisal can be described as a process of settling the answers to questions in one's own mind and, in doing so, coming to an understanding of how adoption fits into the overall arc of one's life. This study has presented a nuanced account of how these 68 women, born in Hong Kong and raised in the UK, have approached this important task over a period of nearly five decades.

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Appendix 1: Complete list of publications related to British Chinese Adoption Study

Book

Feast, J., Grant, M., Rushton, A., & Simmonds, J. (2013). *Adversity, adoption and afterwards: A mid-life follow-up study of women adopted from Hong Kong*. London: BAAF.

Papers in peer-reviewed journals

Feast, J., Grant, M., Rushton, A., & Simmonds, J. (2013). The British Chinese Adoption Study: Planning a study of lifecourse and outcomes. *European Journal of Social Work, 16*(3), 344–359.

Grant, M., Rushton, A., & Simmonds, J. (2016) Is early experience destiny? Review of research on long-term outcomes following international adoption with special reference to the British Chinese Adoption Study. *The Scientific World Journal*, special issue Maltreatment Associated Psychiatric Problems. Article ID 6303490, 16 pages, doi:10.1155/2016/6303490.

Rushton, A. (2013). Early years adversity, adoption and adulthood: Conceptualising long-term outcomes. *Adoption and Fostering, 38*(4), 374–385.

Rushton, A., Grant, M., Feast, J., & Simmonds, J. (2012). Assessing community connectedness and self-regard in a mid-life follow-up of British Chinese adoptions. *Adoption and Fostering, 36*(3), 62–72.

Rushton, A., Grant, M., Feast, J., & Simmonds, J. (2013). The British Chinese Adoption Study: Orphanage care, adoption and mid-life outcomes. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry, 54*(11), 1215–1222.

In preparation

Grant, M., & Rushton, A. (in preparation). *Further analysis of the British Chinese Adoption Study (BCAS): The contribution to outcomes of adult life events and experiences.*

Rushton, A., & Grant M. (in preparation) *Understanding the life histories and service needs of adopted people: A follow-up study of British Chinese adopted women.*