

**“It’s a complicated thing”: A biographical-narrative
exploration of the experiences and identities of adult
intercountry adoptees in Australia**

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Statement of Originality/Authorship

I hereby certify that the work embodied in the thesis is my own work, conducted under normal supervision. The thesis contains no material which has been accepted, or is being examined, for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material written by another person, except where due reference has been made.

I also hereby declare that the work embodied in this thesis contains published papers, of which I am the sole author:

1. Goode, E. (2015). Autoethnography from ‘in-between’: An account of the cultural identity construction of a Korean-Australian adoptee. *Studia Sociologica*, VII(2), 120–138.
2. Goode, E. (2018). The dilemma of voice in biographical narratives: Confronting complexity in the ‘unexpected stories’ of intercountry adoptees. *Communication Research and Practice*, 4(1), 83–98.

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Signed

Elizabeth Goode

For Simon and Louie

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Statement of Originality/Authorship.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Abstract.....	viii
List of Abbreviations.....	ix
List of Tables.....	ix
CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION	1
Introducing intercountry adoption.....	1
A personal/political project	3
Research aims.....	5
The contributions and limits of this research	6
Chapter outlines.....	8
CHAPTER 2 – INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION IN AUSTRALIA: HISTORY, PRACTICE AND SCHOLARSHIP	10
Introduction	10
PART 1 – Intercountry adoption in Australia	11
‘Rescue’ and ‘clean breaks’: Situating the first wave of Australian intercountry adoptees..	11
The second wave: Adoption from South Korea, and changing attitudes towards the adoption of Australian children.....	13
‘In the best interests of the child’: International regulation of intercountry adoption	17
The third wave: China and the decline of intercountry adoption in the new millennium.....	20
Inquiries, apology and ‘anti adoption culture’	20
PART 2 – Surveying the intercountry adoption literature	23
Adjustment and damage: Psychological discourse in intercountry adoption.....	23
Perspectives on the 2005 Inquiry into Overseas Adoption in Australia	28
Ethics, social justice and adult adoptee voices.....	33
Conclusion.....	36
CHAPTER 3 – THE ‘CULTURAL IDENTITIES’ OF AUSTRALIAN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTTEES	38
Introduction	38
PART 1 – Mapping the conceptual terrain.....	38
‘Race’ and ethnicity	38
Cultural identity and belonging.....	40
Globalisation, diaspora and postmodernism: Problematism essentialist conceptions of cultural identity	43

PART 2 – Intercountry adoptees and cultural identity.....	46
Difference and dissonance	46
Seeking to (re)connect with ‘birth culture’	49
Hybridity and the diverse experiences of intercountry adoptees	51
Conclusion.....	55
CHAPTER 4 – METHODOLOGY	56
A qualitative, inter-subjective project	56
Narrative inquiry	58
Narratives and ‘truth’	60
Biographical-narrative interviews	61
Advantages of biographical-narrative interviews	62
Sample size and generalisability	63
Participant recruitment	65
Conducting interviews.....	66
Synchronous and asynchronous interview methods	66
A note on insider research.....	67
During the interviews.....	68
Analysing and ‘writing up’ interview data.....	71
Inquiring into self: Autoethnography	73
Autoethnography: A contested method of study.....	73
Conducting autoethnography: Data collection, analysis and writing	75
Addressing criticisms and limitations of narrative inquiry	77
‘Truth’ and validity	77
Ethics, ‘truth’ and honouring participants’ voices	79
The limits of my story: Autoethnography and ethics.....	81
Conclusion.....	84
CHAPTER 5 – ENCOUNTERING COMPLEXITY AND UNEXPECTED THEMES IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEE NARRATIVES	85
Introduction	85
Adoption and its meanings: Sam’s story.....	85
The fact and meaning of adoption.....	86
“I don’t belong anywhere and nowhere belongs to me”	89
The “meaning that you’re told” and the “meaning that is yours”	90
Intersections of identity: More than an adoptee.....	92
Space, agency and belonging as an intercountry adoptee.....	95
Extending the story: Intersectional identities.....	97

Extending the story: Finding resonance and reflecting on my own sensemaking about adoption.....	97
Family, ‘race’ and identity: Julie’s story.....	100
“I always had a sense of shame”.....	100
The courage to heal.....	102
“I actually like who I am”.....	105
Extending the story: Insights on family and healing.....	108
Rebuilding self after family dysfunction: Another narrative of abuse and healing.....	109
Extending the story: Transformation and ‘making life better’.....	111
Conclusion.....	112
CHAPTER 6 – THE SIGNIFICANCE OF ‘FAMILY’.....	114
Introduction.....	114
Reflections on searching for biological family.....	114
Shades of desire, disinterest and ambivalence.....	114
“I just want to find a family member”.....	118
Seeking family after a “happy adoption”.....	120
Relating to biological family post-reunion.....	129
Strangers, but kin?.....	129
Confronting unknowns and misinformation.....	132
“Twists and turns”.....	134
‘Real’ family?.....	137
Relating to adoptive family as adults.....	138
“I view my family as my family”.....	138
Becoming estranged.....	139
Navigating tensions in adulthood.....	141
Forming new families: The significance of having children.....	144
“Becoming a mum has put things in a different perspective for me”.....	145
“It does impact our children”.....	147
The importance of social relatedness.....	149
Conclusion.....	150
CHAPTER 7 – CULTURAL IDENTITY IN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEES’ LIFE STORIES.....	153
Introduction.....	153
PART 1 – Into ‘whiteness’: Exploring the foundations of participants’ cultural identities.....	153
Growing up ‘white’: Experiences in formative years.....	153
Explaining ‘whiteness’: Family, friends and community.....	154

Discounting racism and living ‘normal’ lives	156
Renouncing ‘Asianness’	158
‘White habitus’: The normalised embodiment of white identities	161
PART 2 – Moving through/beyond ‘whiteness’: Participants’ cultural identities in adulthood	164
Home is back there? Long roads, loss, and ‘outsiderness’	164
Embracing stability: The ir/relevance of roots and ‘race’	169
Racism, tourism and (not quite) belonging	173
Reconceptualising belonging and identity	175
“I’m just fully two things at once”	176
“To be Australian does mean that you come from anywhere, pretty much”	178
Pendulum swings.....	182
Conclusion.....	186
CHAPTER 8 – MAKING SENSE OF IT ALL: REFLECTING ON THE IDENTITIES AND LIFE STORIES OF AUSTRALIAN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTEES	189
What have we learned? Bringing the stories together.....	189
Family relationships are central to making sense of being an intercountry adoptee	191
Other adoptees are an important source of support, affirmation and belonging, and can be a critical catalyst for thinking differently about adoption and identity.....	194
Professional counselling and therapy was a critical sensemaking mechanism for some participants	196
Adoptee identifications are multiple and intersectional.....	197
Participants developed a ‘white habitus’ in childhood, but made sense of non/belonging in their birth and adoptive countries in varied ways in adulthood.....	198
Making sense of intercountry adoption is lifelong, complex and diverse	201
Where do we go from here? Recommendations for further research	202
What have I learned? Reflecting on my/our stories	204
BIBLIOGRAPHY	207
APPENDICES	238
Appendix 1. Recruitment message.....	238
Appendix 2. Participant Information Statement.....	239
Appendix 3. Consent Form	242

Abstract

Since the late 1960s, more than 10,000 infants and children have been adopted from overseas by Australian parents (Rosenwald, 2009a). Many of these adoptees are now adults in their twenties, thirties and forties. Most were adopted from Asian countries by ‘white’ parents, and came of age in a sociocultural milieu shaped by assimilationist discourses and simplistic understandings of what it means to be an intercountry adoptee. These adults are now in a position to offer nuanced reflections on their experiences, identities and relationships from childhood through to early and middle adulthood. As a postgraduate researcher, this has also been an intensely personal project, for I myself was adopted to Australia from South Korea in the mid-1980s.

Drawing on biographical-narrative and autoethnographic data, the research explores and explains how a sample of adult intercountry adoptees make sense of being transnationally, and in most cases also transracially and transculturally, adopted. It also examines the extent to which they feel a sense of belonging to personally-salient people and places, and how their identifications and senses of self have changed over their lifetimes. This original research exposes the complexity and diversity across these intercountry adoptees’ lives by focusing in-depth on *their* sensemaking about matters of adoption, family, identity and belonging.

Nine individuals born in Asian countries and adopted to Australian parents in the 1970s, 80s and early 90s participated in biographical-narrative interviews, sharing their life stories and perspectives on self and belonging over multiple interactions with the researcher. I also contributed autoethnographic data to the study, drawing on journal entries, personal emails, and memories. My autoethnographic voice extends and supplements the varied insights interviewees provided, especially regarding aspects of experience that I was able to contribute a unique or deepened perspective on.

Importantly, this inquiry has yielded rich, complex and contrasting accounts that centre around themes of familial and cultural non/belonging. It specifically highlights the significance of family relationships in adoptees’ evolving perceptions of self and adoption, as well as the importance of connections with other adoptees. The diversity and indeterminacy of participants’ cultural identifications in adulthood, plus the intersectional and multifaceted nature of their identities, is also foregrounded. This thesis thereby illuminates that constructing identity as an intercountry, transracial adoptee is a lifelong, multi-dimensional, and highly personal experience that entails intricate interplay between individual sensemaking and wider sociocultural ideas about family, adoption, ‘race’ and belonging.

List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
AIFS	Australian Institute of Family Studies
AIHW	Australian Institute of Health and Welfare
DHA	Department of Home Affairs
DPMC	Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet
DSS	Department of Social Services
HCCH	Hague Conference on Private International Law
HREC	Human Research Ethics Committee
HREOC	Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission
HRSCFHS	House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services
ICA	Inter-Country Adoption
PARC	Post Adoption Research Centre
SCARC	Senate Community Affairs References Committee
UK	United Kingdom
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child
US	United States of America

List of Tables

Table 1. Summary of participants.....	66
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