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Molding the Self: Understanding Adoptees' Identity Formation, A Literature Review

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Abstract

The topic under investigation focuses on the complex process of identity formation in adoptees, particularly those in transracial and international adoption scenarios. Grounding this topic in theory, the author draws from psychological and sociological perspectives. The literature illustrates key factors in adoptees' identity formation, and it emphasizes the importance of family involvement and cultural connections in integrating identities, as well as the role of cultural ties in understanding racial identities. The conclusion from this study reveals the complexities and clinical considerations of adoptee identity formation, showing their challenges in combining birth and adoptive cultures. It underscores the value of art therapy in therapeutic practices for adoptees, contributing to a deeper comprehension of how adoption affects identity. The findings advocate for culturally sensitive therapeutic methods and enhanced social services and policies, promoting empathy for adoptees.

Keywords: transracial, adoption, identity formation, art therapy, cultural connections
The author identifies as a transracially adopted Chinese adoptee from Nanchang, Jiangxi China.

Molding the Self: Understanding Adoptees' Identity Formation

Introduction

This literature review attempted to enhance therapeutic approaches, guide research, and hopefully impact policy and support services by focusing on peer-reviewed studies and varied methods. The thematic analysis intended to offer detailed insights into adoptee identity, thereby improving support, policy, and fostering societal empathy towards adoptees. The paper examined adoptee identity formation, particularly concentrating on transracial and international adoptees. It explored how these adoptees reconciled their personal and social identities amid influences from both their adoptive and birth cultures. The review discussed the psychological challenges of managing dual identities and understanding adoptive status, incorporating insights from literature on adoptees' experiences and the role of psychological frameworks and art therapy in aiding their identity development.

These topics resonated with me, illustrating the complex process of adoptee identity development, a process I have navigated as a transracial survivor of adoption. My personal experiences were often oversimplified by others who saw us merely as 'fortunate' or 'rescued,' ignoring the deep trauma and identity issues us adoptees face. In my work in adoptee competent counseling, I saw how this simplistic view not only trivialized the complexities of adoption trauma but also perpetuated the 'white savior' narrative common in transracial adoption stories. This research, grounded in the lived experiences of adoptees such as me, sought to alter how society views adoption and supports adoptees. It was an effort to transcend stigma and perceptions and to recognize and address the nuanced and diverse experiences of adoptees as they embarked on their journey of self-exploration. My Chinese adoptee identity has been a complex journey, marked by profound loss through adoption, including my culture, language,

family, and legal identity in my birth country. Denied citizenship and stripped of my Chinese name and birth rights, I grappled with trauma from feelings of non-belonging and cultural disconnection in a transracial White European household. Alienation from the Chinese community due to perceived cultural inauthenticity and linguistic barriers deepened my struggle with identity. Simultaneously, I faced feelings of inadequacy for not being "white enough," leading to a lifelong quest to answer, "Where do I belong?" and "Who am I?" An innate emptiness and identity confusion lingered within, complicating my attempts to fit into American society while feeling pressured to reject my Chinese heritage to survive and exist. Identity is indeed a lifelong journey, and the arts became a therapeutic medium through which I expressed myself and managed the struggles related to my adoption, helping me discover more about who I am.

Through this research, my objective was to deepen my understanding of the multifaceted impact of adoption on identity formation, with an interest in transracial and international adoptees. I explored how adoptees integrated their birth and adoptive cultures, assessed the psychological impacts of their adoptee status, and examined how they navigated identity conflicts. Additionally, I evaluated the effectiveness of arts therapies in supporting adoptee identity formation. This research was not only academically driven but also deeply personal, enhancing my professional practice in adoption counseling and providing research-informed, sensitive support to both my clients and me as an adoptee.

Method

The search strategy used a systematic approach, utilizing keywords such as "transracial adoption identity development," "adoptee identity formation," and "adoptive identity challenges." This aimed at capturing a broad variety of relevant literature. Academic databases

like Lesley Library and EBSCO Host served as primary sources due to their abundant variety of scholarly articles across many disciplines like psychology, social work, and family studies, thereby applying a multidisciplinary perspective. The peer-reviewed articles were selected to guarantee scholarly integrity and value. The thesis utilized modern and contemporary theories and insights, while also considering historical and developmental perspectives to chart the evolution of adoption practices and their psychological impacts. The review included a vast array of research methods, including qualitative and mixed-methods studies, to create a well-rounded understanding of adoptee identity formation. Initially, the literature review process began with a broad search to collect relevant studies. This phase was important to collect literature, which was then narrowed down based on its relevance to adoptee identity formation, history, theory, and frameworks, and the success of current therapeutic interventions. The literature was then thematically organized to form a storyline that enriched conceptualization of adoptee identity while also integrating racial and ethnic implications and considerations.

Literature Review

Historical Context and Theoretical Foundations/Approaches

The topic of adoptees' identity formation through adoption elaborates on multidisciplinary work that includes psychosocial theories of development, ethnic and racial identity formation, and specific studies on transnational and transracial adoption. This research collectively underscores the nuances and complexities of adoptees' identity formation, illustrating the significance of cultural exploration, social connections, and individual experiences in informing their sense of self. Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, particularly the stage of "Identity vs. Role Confusion," is central to understanding adoptees' identity formation (Brocious, 2017, pp. 322-333). Erikson posited that adolescence is a critical period for identity

development, where individuals explore different aspects of themselves before arriving at a more integrated sense of self (Erikson, 1968 as cited in Brocious, 2017). For adoptees, this exploration can include reconciling their adoptive and birth cultures, as well as understanding their place within their families and society. The work on ethnic and racial identity development, such as the models proposed by Jean Phinney and others, is relevant (Phinney et al., 2007 as cited in Brocious, 2017). These models explore the process of identity formation in individuals from ethnic and racial minority groups, emphasizing the role of exploration and commitment in developing a secure sense of ethnic identity. For transnational and transracial adoptees, this process can be more nuanced, involving the incorporation of various cultural identities and navigating lived experiences of racism and marginalization. Research specifically focusing on the experiences of transnational and transracial adoptees provides a direct foundation for this topic. Such studies examine the unique challenges and opportunities these adoptees face in forming their identities, including the impact of cultural socialization practices (e.g., homeland visits, participation in cultural camps), relationships with other adoptees, and encounters with racism. The study underlines the significance of cultural exploration activities and the transformative experience of traveling to one's birth country.

Attachment, Regulation, and Competency (ARC) attempts to address the effects of trauma on child development and well-being by fostering secure caregiving systems, developing skills for emotional and physiological regulation, and building resilience through the enhancement of competencies (Fehrenbach et al., 2022). Understanding the identity formation of adoptees involves acknowledging their unique challenges, such as loss, identity confusion, and difficulties in attachment and emotional regulation. The ARC framework is beneficial for adoptees, focusing on the central areas impacted by adoption. It focuses on enhancing caregiver-

child relationships, important for adoptees with early attachment disruptions. The framework also offers regulation skills to help adoptees manage stress and trauma responses, assisting in coping with identity complexities and past traumas. Finally, it underlines resilience and a positive self-concept, which may be useful as adoptees and is important to help navigate identity formation and blend adoption experiences.

Attachment theory, as proposed by John Bowlby, proposes the significance of early relationships between children and their caregivers (Verbovaya, 2016). It posits that the quality of these early interactions fundamentally influences an individual's sense of security and self-identity. In the context of adoption, particularly international and transracial adoption, this theory illuminates the potential struggles adoptees may face in forming secure attachments. These challenges are often worsened by the adoptees' experiences of loss, separation, and, in some cases, prior neglect or trauma before adoption. Attachment theory offers the perspective that the development of a secure attachment is critical for adoptees to explore and to integrate their dual identities for wholeness. This promotes resilience and a coherent sense of self amidst the complexities of navigating between their birth and adoptive cultures. Moreover, Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a broader lens through which to view adoptees' identity formation, stressing the multiple environmental layers that inform an individual's development (Verbovaya, 2016). This theory considers the adoptee within the context of various interacting systems, from the immediate family environment (microsystem) to broader societal and cultural influences (macrosystem). For adoptees, these systems include the adoptive family, birth culture, school, peer groups, and societal attitudes toward adoption and race. The theory underscores how adoptees' identities are shaped not only by their relationships within their adoptive families but also by their experiences in navigating the norms, values, and

expectations of their adoptive and birth cultures. Ecological systems theory highlights the importance of supportive environments across these systems to facilitate positive identity development for adoptees, acknowledging the role of societal attitudes, cultural preservation, and policy in shaping their experiences.

The person-centered humanistic approach to adopting identity underscores understanding the unique challenges that adopted individuals encounter during their identity formation. It discusses the personal complexity involved in developing an adoptive identity, recognizing it as a multifaceted construct (Grotevant et al., 2017). This approach utilizes many elements, including the adoptee's understanding of their adoption story, their feelings towards both biological and adoptive families, and how they integrate this aspect of their identity into their overall sense of self. By emphasizing the exploration and validation of adoptees' personal experiences and emotions connected to their adoption, this approach advocates for a more integrated and coherent self-concept. The concept of adoptive identity by Grotevant et al. (2017) posited its impact on adjustment investigates how various patterns of adoptive identity, such as Unexamined, Limited, Unsettled, and Integrated, influence the psychological well-being of adopted individuals. The Grotevant et al. (2017) observed that adoptees with unresolved or conflicted adoptive identities, particularly those in the Unsettled category, may exhibit higher levels of internalizing problem.

The study (Grotevant et al., 2017) emphasizes the need for nurturing adoptive identity exploration during adolescence to foster long-term well-being. The study uses a longitudinal design, employing semi-structured interviews and standardized self-report measures (Youth Self Report at Wave 2 and Adult Self Report at Wave 3) to study internalizing and externalizing behaviors and adoptive identity. Adoptive identity is reviewed using the following factors:

exploration, salience, internal consistency, flexibility, positive affect, and negative affect, which are coded from interview data. Cluster analysis is then used to organize participants into adoptive identity groups: Unexamined, Limited, Unsettled, and Integrated. Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) is used to explore the influence of adoptive identity on adjustment struggles over time, and accounting for earlier behaviors. It advocates for recognizing each adoptee's distinct experiences and perceptions of their adoption to provide customized support and enhance their mental health. The research underlines the importance of adoption-informed clinical practices and individualized therapy that promotes open family dialogues surrounding adoption, which could help assist adoptees in embracing their identities.

From Victims to Heroes: Transforming Adoptee Therapy Groups

In my professional clinical experiences working with adoptees in group settings, the dynamic can transform someone feeling helpless into a helper, providing a sense of meaning, duty, and mission. Within community-based AT groups, especially for adoptees, this transformation is particularly impactful. The individual who may initially feel like a "victim" can evolve into a "hero" within the group context through offering support, advice, belonging, and understanding (Rogers et al., 2023). By viewing an individual's life story through the Hero's Journey can improve the sense of meaning in life. In the context of community-based therapy, acknowledging member's journey as heroic and meaningful can cultivate a sense of purpose, resilience, and belonging. By reframing experiences as part of a heroic narrative, individuals may find meaning in their successes and struggles, allowing an engaged and supportive group dynamic. Community based settings can give unique opportunities for members to transform roles, allowing those who once needed support to offer it, therefore nurturing a symbiotic and reciprocal environment of support and empowerment.

Art Therapy and Adoption

Art therapy's (AT) integration into adoptee support reflects the field's growth, with an increase in its use and recognized benefits for adoptees. It provides a unique way for adoptees to explore and express their experiences, contributing to their healing and development. As the field evolves, more research and practice will likely clarify AT's effectiveness and specific applications for adoptees. One of the earliest published reports on art therapy with adoptees is Katz's (1980) report that emphasizes the importance of adoption counseling as a key component in preventing mental health issues among adoptees and adoptive families. Katz argues that adoptees intrinsically are at higher risk for emotional difficulties and underlines the need for adoption practices to include preventive mental health strategies. By framing adoption within Gerald Caplan's 1964 conceptualization of preventive psychiatry (Caplan, 1964 as cited in Katz, 1980), Katz outlines a hierarchical approach to counseling that includes primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention efforts. Primary prevention prepares prospective adoptive parents to accept the child's biological history, avoiding identity issues. Secondary prevention helps older adopted children acclimate and heal in their new families. Tertiary prevention supports adult adoptees and families facing long-term challenges, often tied to identity or biological roots. Katz's (1980) research highlights the role of adoption counseling in resolving identity concerns among adoptees by creating a culture of acceptance and understanding of the adoptee's biological roots within their adoptive family systems. This method helps in avoiding adverse self-views and encourages transparent discussions about the adoptee's background, which is essential for their identity development. Counseling offers a contained space for both adoptive families and adoptees to manage the nuances of adoption, treating the unique mental health challenges tied to

adoptive identity and recommending methods to foster stronger family relationships and self-awareness.

Subsequently, Robertson's (2001) article studies the complicated nature of adoptive kinship and its psychological impact on adolescent adoptees. The study utilized a longitudinal analysis involving 145 adopted individuals from adolescence (Mage= 15.7) to emerging adulthood (mean age 25.0). It assessed participants at two points, Waves Two and three using the Youth Self Report (YSR) and Adult Self Report (ASR) to calculate internalizing and externalizing behaviors. The statistical method utilized is factorial ANCOVA, which is used to investigate disparities in internalizing problems in young adults across many identity groups, with adjustments made for internalizing scores from adolescence. Highlighting the unique challenges adoptees face during their developmental year, Robertson underscores the necessity of addressing adoption-related issues in therapy. She advocates for AT as an effective approach to aid adolescent adoptees in navigating their identities. Through the introduction of a specialized AT program, Robertson outlines eight proposed art exercises in a *Lifebook* format, trying to empower adoptees to articulate, and integrate their unique life narratives into their fluid and ever-changing self-understandings. With her background in arts and personal experience as an adoptive and biological parent, Robertson brings a rich understanding to the practice of AT, offering a valuable resource for therapists working with this demographic.

Robertson's (2001) proposed program, concentrating on adolescent adoptees, addresses the topic by elucidating the complicated challenges adoptees face in their identity development. Her approach, through the forming of a Lifebook with AT exercises, offers a physical and creative method for adoptees to explore and articulate their experiences. This method not only aids in

their personal development but also in the integration of their adoption stories into their broader self-concept.

Later, David Henley's (2005) article titled "Attachment Disorders in Post-Institutionalized Adopted Children: Art Therapy Approaches to Reactivity and Detachment" was published as one of the earliest scholarly research articles on AT and adoption. The study examines the difficulties faced by post-institutionalized adopted children, concentrating on attachment disorders displayed as reactivity and detachment. By presenting case vignettes, Henley illuminates the complex emotional landscapes of these children, who often struggle with forming loving bonds and deriving emotional nurturance from their adoptive parents due to their traumatic early experiences in Eastern European orphanages. Henley presents AT as an important therapeutic option, offering a structured and flexible way for these children to explore and express their emotions and lived experiences. The article discusses using AT to help adopted children with attachment disorders, providing a means for expression and healing. It underscores the necessity of personalized therapeutic methods that account for the children's unique backgrounds and the significant impact of art in their recovery. Specifically, it studies the use of AT for post-institutionalized children facing attachment issues, illustrating how AT can aid in managing reactivity and detachment. Through case vignettes, Henley illustrates how AT can be adapted to the specific needs of adoptees, highlighting the therapy's adaptability and its effectiveness in building connections and understanding. The focus on a nuanced approach underlines the importance of acknowledging adoptees' individual stories and how AT contributes to their healing and well-being.

Then, Morrison-Derbyshire's study (2023) examines how art therapy (AT) plays a central role in the identity development of children adopted into families of a different race. The

research employed semi-structured interviews with four art psychotherapists based in the United Kingdom, and used a qualitative, thematic analysis to examine the collected data. The study identifies three main themes: the contributions of art psychotherapists, caregivers, and care networks in providing support; the necessity of child-focused therapy; and the hurdles in incorporating cultural awareness into art psychotherapy. This research brings to light the contemporary theoretical foundations and practical approaches in this unique domain of art psychotherapy. It employs a multidisciplinary perspective that is derived from several foundational theories. Additionally, the study recognizes the potential trauma coming from transracial adoption, and advocates for art therapy as an effective method for navigating the intricate trauma histories and attachment issues these children may face. Also, the research offers a critical examination and expansion of Erikson's developmental stages, arguing for the integration of intersectionality within identity work to ensure transracially adopted children develop a well-rounded sense of self. This approach allows for the identification of key themes related to the therapists' experiences and strategies in supporting transracial adoptees through AT. The study postures art psychotherapy as the principal approach for aiding transracially adopted children, outlining several key treatment strategies. It stresses a systemic approach, emphasizing the need for a supportive environment that includes therapists, caregivers, and the broader care system to facilitate the exploration of the child's identity. The research promotes a child-led therapeutic process that is culturally sensitive, urging the use of art materials and interventions that are relevant to the child's cultural background. Additionally, it highlights the necessity for art therapists to undergo formal training in cultural humility to create anti-oppressive therapeutic frameworks, which is imperative for effectively supporting the formation of the child's racial and adoptive identity. The study underlines the value of collaborative art-

making and non-verbal communication in exploring identity and attachment issues in therapy, especially for transracially adopted children. It advocates for culturally sensitive and intersectional art psychotherapy approaches, enhanced training in cultural humility, and greater systemic collaboration to deeply understand and integrate adoptees' racial and adoptive identities.

Metzl's (2023) arts-based case study offers an approach to the study of identity formation in adoptees, with a particular focus on the role of AT. Several theoretical orientations underpin this approach. Firstly, it highlights the importance of attachment theory, pointing out the complex nature of attachment in adopted children and how AT can help navigate these challenges. Secondly, it adopts trauma-informed care principles, acknowledging the potential trauma of adoption and tailoring interventions to meet the unique needs of adoptees. Thirdly, developmental psychology is brought into consideration, with the study stressing the need to understand the child's experiences through the lens of their developmental stage. Lastly, the approach is aligned with the *expressive therapies' continuum*, using art as a powerful means for non-verbal communication. This permits children to express and work through feelings surrounding adoption and their identities in a contained and safe space. An art-based case study methodology was used to study the therapeutic journey of a child, looking at problems coming from early adoption. This qualitative approach involved an examination of art products and clinical notes, attempting to identify the primary clinical themes related to adoption, the struggles they present, and how AT can help with healing. The study researched narratives, art, and therapy dynamics, linking them to adoption and AT literature. The article highlighted the participant's growth through AT and its healing benefits for adopted children.

Metzl's (2023) case study frames AT as an important modality for helping adoptees in creating their identities. Firstly, it presents art as a critical means for expression and healing, showcasing how AT enables a non-verbal exploration of the emotions and experiences stemming from adoption. This provides a secure environment for children to work through their complex feelings. Secondly, the study emphasizes attachment-based interventions, where AT plays a central role in fostering secure attachments between the child, their adoptive parents, and the therapist. Thirdly, the case study underscores the role of family involvement in AT for adoptees, showing that involving adoptive parents enhances family bonds and understanding through art. It also displays AT's adaptability, using different materials and methods to meet each child's developmental needs. The findings illustrate how AT can be utilized to address identity issues in adoptees, underlining the need for an empathetic approach to address the complicated and nuanced struggles of adoption.

Therapeutic Modalities to Aid Identity Formation

I advocate for an expansion in the scope of AT techniques utilized in the literature on adoptee identity and mental health within AT and psychology. Specifically, I recommend an exploration of how digital art forms can be integrated into therapeutic practices for adoptees. As an adoptee, I have found many movies about transformation of adoptees, helping me better understand my adoption and come to terms with who I am through other adoptee's searches and journeys. This exploration might include an examination of digital storytelling, video art, and the use of social media as innovative platforms for self-expression and identity exploration. These digital mediums offer opportunities for adoptees to tell their stories, identities, and experiences in ways that are aligned with modern mediums of communication and self-expression (Fitzhardinge, 2008). Fitzhardinge (2008) writes about how expressing and conceptualizing

one's life story is important for forming identity and psychological resilience. Films can allow adoptees to express and reshape their adoption narratives, empowering them to strengthen their identity and sense of self. Furthermore Juppi (2023) discusses how Digital Storytelling (DST) engages individuals in a reflective, narrative process that enhances self-awareness and identity exploration. It can even help assist with career development by permitting individuals to combine and blend personal histories with professional goals, which can help repair potential identity fragmentation. DST can empower individuals to actively form their narratives, giving agency over externally influenced life stories. Moreover, storytelling in supportive setting has implications for adoptees' identity formation and could maybe help strengthen their social integration and affirm their identities. Future research would benefit from studying how traditional and cultural art forms may enhance AT by bolstering adoptees' connection to their culture of origin. Using both digital and traditional arts in AT may provide therapists with a broader set of tools to assist adoptees on their identity and mental health journeys.

Cultural Identity and Psychological Outcomes in Adoption

Reynolds et al.'s (2020) study, which focuses on the experiences of Korean American adoptees who reclaimed their Korean birth names, utilizes a qualitative design, and employs in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nineteen participants. These interviews were designed to investigate into the adoptees' motivations for reclaiming their Korean names, the contexts in which they use these names, and the impacts of this reclamation on their identities and sense of self. Grounded theory methodology guided the data analysis, leading to the identification of key themes such as the factors influencing the decision to reclaim a Korean name, the many contexts in which the Korean name is used, and the larger implications of this name change on the adoptees' identities and perceptions of self. The study collects data using demographic surveys

and detailed interviews, which were recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis based on grounded theory. This approach reveals perspectives into how names influence identity and cultural navigation among Korean American adoptees. Findings show the significant effects of name reclamation on their sense of identity, belonging, and self-perception. This research enhances understanding of transracial adoptees' identity experiences, providing useful insights for mental health experts, adoption services, and adoptive families to aid adoptees' identity exploration. The study recommends that mental health professionals and adoption agencies would benefit from creating supportive environments that assist with cultural reconnection and validate adoptees' experiences of cultural and racial conflict. This includes teaching adoptive families about the significance of keeping ties with the adoptee's birth culture and giving resources like language courses and cultural experiences. The primary objective is to help adoptees navigate the difficulties and struggles of bicultural identity integration, improving their independence and sense of belonging.

Cloonan et al.'s (2023) research applied several theoretical models and orientations to understand identity formation in adult Colombian adoptees. The study uses a qualitative narrative methodology, collecting and analyzing the narratives of adult Colombian adoptees in the United States to explore their racial and ethnic identity development. Data were gathered through two semi-structured interviews for each participant, with more insights refined via member checking to improve data reliability and depth of understanding. The research used semi-structured interviews in English to examine identity formation among adoptees within racial and ethnic contexts. It applied both deductive and inductive analysis techniques, arranged narratives chronologically, identified themes, and validated findings with participant and peer feedback. The study underscored the nature of identity development and the challenges of

unethical adoption practices and multiple identity management. The article highlights how their racial and ethnic identities are dynamically and fluidly constructed. The discussion on racial and ethnic identity, particularly within the adoption context, indicates its important impact. This model analyzes the complexities of identity formation in individuals with multicultural backgrounds. Also, the research puts the adoptees' stories within the broader contexts of transracial and transnational adoption, acknowledging the distinct challenges and identity questions these individuals encounter, such as the dynamics of cultural, racial, and national identities and how adoption practices shape identity formation. Moreover, the focus on the adoptees' narratives and experiences aligns with a social constructionist view, which sees racial and ethnic identities as constructs that evolve through social interactions and broader societal influences. The study analyzed personal stories from six individuals, interviewed twice, to examine their experiences with transracial and transnational adoption and their racial and ethnic identity formation.

Cloonan et al.'s (2023) research discussed the challenges faced by these adoptees due to transracial and transnational adoption, including racial isolation, experiences of racism, and the effect of unethical adoption practices on their identity. However, the study suggested the importance of adoptive families understanding the need to foster pride and belonging to the adoptee's birth culture. It strongly encourages parents who adopt a child from a different race, culture, and/or ethnicity to provide resources for children to merge their birth heritage with their adoptive culture. Additionally, it mentions the necessity for parents to prepare children who look physically different to face discrimination based on their adoption status or physical appearance. The article illuminates the intersectionality of racial and ethnic identity development in transracial and transnational adoptees and points towards the need for culturally sensitive and

adoption-informed counseling approaches. These could include therapy that addresses issues of racial and ethnic identity, supports exploration of cultural heritage, and helps manage experiences of loss and discrimination. Counseling could also involve helping adoptees navigate feelings of belongingness and identity in the context of their adoptive and birth cultures.

Hartinger et al.'s (2019) study, explores the unique mental health needs of children adopted from foster care, underscoring the important role of trauma-informed care in addressing these needs. The theoretical orientation of the study is rooted in the understanding of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), complex trauma, and Developmental Trauma Disorder (DTD) as foundational elements that affect the developmental milestones and brain development of foster and adopted children (Webster, 2022). This orientation advocates for using a trauma-informed approach in both pre-and post-adoption services to decrease the negative effects of trauma and promote positive outcomes. The study promotes the integration of trauma-focused interventions that are accessible and personalized to the needs of adopted children and their families. By underlining the gaps in current adoption and mental health services, the research suggests innovative solutions, including the use of technology, to improve the provision and effectiveness of support for adoptive families, therefore addressing the unique dynamic of trauma and identity formation struggles in adopted children. It examines the consequences of these gaps on children's developmental outcomes and the challenges adoptive parents face without access to trauma-informed and adoption-competent professionals. The paper discusses the impact of adverse childhood experiences and DTD on adoptive families, emphasizing the importance of trauma-informed care. Developmental trauma disorder (DTD) was suggested but not included in the DSM-5, missing an opportunity to effectively acknowledge and treat children with complicated trauma histories. DTD's symptoms often lead to misdiagnosis or inadequate diagnosis under

current categories like PTSD, resulting in suboptimal treatment, especially for fostered or adopted children.

Webster's (2022) emphasizes that ongoing trauma from caregivers significantly disrupts child development, more severely than in adults, and that properly recognizing and diagnosing DTD could improve treatment approaches to address these developmental effects. Recognizing Developmental Trauma Disorder (DTD) is crucial for adopted children with complex grief and trauma histories, as proper diagnosis paves the way for more tailored therapeutic treatments that can significantly improve their outcomes. Moreover, the study (Heartinger et al., 2019) reviews the literature on trauma's effects and function role of trauma-informed practices in adoption, evaluates federal policies on adoption and foster care, and suggests using technology, such as apps and online platforms, to improve resources and outcomes for adopted children with trauma histories. The study recommends improving access to trauma-informed adoption services by applying a developmental trauma framework to address the unique needs of children adopted from foster care, centering on ACEs, complex trauma, and developmental trauma disorder (DTD) (Heartinger et al., 2019). The study emphasizes the importance of equipping adoptive parents with trauma-informed training and access to professionals skilled in adoption and trauma issues. Innovative strategies suggested in the study include creating virtual community partnerships and using ecological momentary interventions to provide real-time support and intervention, aiming to empower adoptive parents and improve the well-being and integration of adopted children into their new families.

Adoptive Family's Role in Adoption Identity Formation

As mentioned before, Von Korff and Grotevant's (2011) study on adoptive family systems underscores the significance of open communication and contact with birth relatives

within adoptive families as key factors that influence the formation of an adoptee's identity. The study shows the important role of adoption-related family conversations in mediating the relationship between adoptive parents' efforts to contact birth relatives and the formation of an adoptive adolescent's identity. The study employs a person-centered longitudinal model to study the development of adopted adolescents into adulthood, concentrating on how adoptive identity influences psychological adjustment. Adoptees were grouped into four categories (unexamined, limited, unsettled, integrated) based on interview responses covering six identity facets which included exploration, salience, internal consistency, flexibility, positive affect, and negative impact. This longitudinal study involves 145 adoptees who were followed and studies starting at adolescence (mean age 15.7) to emerging adulthood (mean age 25.0). The participants were assessed at two points (Waves 2 and 3) for internalizing and externalizing behaviors using the Youth Self Report and the Adult Self Report, respectively. The study employs factorial ANCOVA to look for differences in internalizing problems in young adults across different identity groups, considering their scores from adolescence.

Von Korff and Grotevant's research (2011) found that many discussions about adoption within the family, especially those stimulated by contact with birth relatives, are linked with the creation of a clear and coherent adoptive identity during adolescence. Moreover, the influence of these interactions with birth relatives and family conversations on adoptive identity continues into adulthood. The study shows that when adoptive parents actively encourage contact with birth relatives, it creates valuable opportunities for impactful family discussions about adoption, which helps the development of the adoptee's identity. Forming an adoptive identity involves the adoptee's reflection on their adoption experience and integrating this into a personal narrative, grappling with what being adopted means for them within their family's sociocultural context.

The article highlights the significance of adoptive families engaging in open and supportive dialogues about adoption because these discussions are imperative for adoptees to make sense of their adoption experiences and cultivate an adoptive identity. The findings show the positive impact of adoptive parents facilitating and engaging in contact with birth relatives, as these interactions can lead to more frequent adoption-related discussions, fostering the adoptee's process of identity formation.

Hamilton et al.'s article (2015) investigated the identity development and adjustment of transracial adoptees compared to same-race White adoptees. It used data from the Sibling Interaction and Behavior Study (SIBS), focusing on a sample of adoptees from various racial backgrounds including Asian, Latino, Black, mixed/other, and White. The research assessed several aspects such as general identity, attitudes about adoption, and parent-child communication about race and ethnicity, using both parent and child reports to evaluate communication differences and similarities across and within transracial and same-race adoptive families. The study indicates that transracial and same-race adoptees generally show similar levels of adoptive identity and adjustment, although some evidence suggests that same-race adoptees may display more maladaptive behaviors than their transracial counterparts. Parents of transracial adoptees tend to engage in more discussions regarding race and ethnicity than parents of same-race white adoptees, yet this communication is perceived differently across various transracial groups. For example, Asian and Latino adoptees reported engaging in more conversations about race and ethnicity with their parents than white adoptees, whereas Black and Mixed/Other adoptees did not report these levels of dialogue. This difference implies a gap in perceived communication about race and ethnicity between adoptive parents and their Black and Mixed/Other adoptees, maybe denoting possible discomfort or avoidance in discussing these

topics within these groups. The research illuminates the critical need for open and transparent dialogue within adoptive families about racial and ethnic identity, highlighting its role in the identity development process for transracial adoptees.

Transracial Asian Adoptee Identity

Wing and Park-Taylor's (2022) article investigates the lived experiences of female Chinese transracial adoptees during the COVID-19 pandemic and the rebirth of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. This article illuminates the unique experiences of Asian American transracial adoptees, during the difficult period of the COVID-19 pandemic when anti-Asian hate dramatically increased. These distressing times, coupled with the reemergence of the Black Lives Matter movement, was an important time for understanding how such societal pressures influence the identity processes of adoptees. The work of Wing and Park-Taylor (2022) is relevant as it explores the ways in which these adoptees navigated their racial identities during dual racial crises. The results illustrate the significance of addressing these phenomena not only to enhance our understanding of adoptees' experiences but also to foster broader societal recognition and support for racial justice and dialogue. The study employs a phenomenological approach to study the experiences of 20 female Chinese transracial adoptees as they figured out and made sense of two racial pandemics, Anti-Asian Hate and Black Lives Matter, investigating their racial awareness, identity development, and advocacy purposes and goals. Data were collected through semi structured individual Zoom interviews and evaluated by using phenomenological analysis. The findings demonstrated that these racial events acted as catalysts, causing these adoptees to reexamine their racial identities and positionalities within America's racial hierarchy. Three salient themes arose: the adoptees' new self-understanding as racial beings, their perspective on their place within the White-Black racial dichotomy in America, and

their role in promoting racial justice. The study underscored the multifaceted nature of the adoptees' racialized selves, especially since they are people of color (POC) raised in White families. It revealed their unique position to foster racial dialogue and justice due to their personal experiences and racial visibility during these pandemics. The research contributes to a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the complex racial identity development among transracial adoptees, especially during times of heightened racial tensions. This nuanced understanding of transracial adoptee experiences is important because it shows the complicated dynamics of racial identity development during societal tensions. The illustration of this inner conflict in literature provides an emotional reflection on the challenges they face. Eng and Han (2019) characterize this experience: "transnational adoption might be a particularly severe form of racial melancholia and self-hate, one not only excluding the transnational adoptee from larger society but also alienating her from intimate structures of family and kinship" (p. 26). This quotation stressed the alienation and identity conflicts faced by transracial adoptees, underscoring the importance for adoptees to receive societal and familial understanding and support.

Traditional Arts

Traditional crafting plays a significant role in intergenerational cohesion, allowing Indigenous individuals to pass on cultural knowledge, which strengthens community bonds and reinforces cultural identity (Sydora et al., 2023). This activity enhances wellness by creating accomplishment, pride, and belonging, while also offering therapeutic benefits that help in healing historical trauma and supporting mental health. For adoptees, particularly those from diverse cultural backgrounds, creating indigenous crafts may function as an important and potent linkage to their cultural roots and original motherland communities, helping them build a strong

sense of identity and pride in their heritage. Additionally, crafting may encourage community engagement and social connectivity, offering adoptees important opportunities to form new connections and establish a sense of belonging within their indigenous communities. challenges faced by adoptees. Insights from trauma studies and cultural studies, highlighting the intersection of adoptive status with societal views on race and ethnicity (Baden et al., 2013; Brocious, 2017; Cloonan et al., 2023; Eng & Han, 2019; Fehrenbach et al., 2022; Fisher et al., 2020; Hartinger et al., 2016; Henley, 2005; Phinney et al., 2007; Reynolds et al., 2020; Webster, 2022; Wing & Park-Taylor, 2022).

Discussion

In my exploration of the literature, I learned about the critical gaps that exist in understanding and addressing identity formation of adoptees. It was disheartening to discover the significant oversight in research concerning the importance of connecting adoptees with their home cultures and countries. The lack of focus on the cultural context of adoption and its impact on adoptees' self-understanding was particularly concerning for me. This omission neglects a critical component of adoptees' journey toward self-recognition and validation. The existing literature highlights the necessity of a broader approach that includes cultural and homeland connections in supporting transracial adoptees' identity formation. At the heart of the study is the concept of intersectionality, which underscores the significance of acknowledging the complex dynamic between racial and adoptive identities, pushing for a full appreciation of the child's experiences. The gaps identified call for further research and the development of therapeutic practices that are culturally informed and sensitive to the unique needs of transracial adoptees. Further studies and clinical practices would benefit from implementing a holistic view that considers the influence of cultural and country-specific connections in adoptees' lives.

It promotes a comprehensive approach to meet the intricate identity requirements of transracially adopted children, highlighting the need for culturally aware therapeutic methods. The research underscores the significance of anti-oppressive practices in AT to aid the identity growth of transracial adoptees.

Cultural Humility

I strongly encourage integrating cultural sensitivity and respect for ancestral and indigenous origins as significant in the advancement of adoption research and interventions (Fisher et al., 2020). Cultural humility involves an ongoing process of awareness and critique, where therapists continually monitor and recognize their biases and work on understanding and honoring clients' cultural backgrounds. Acknowledging and validating the adoptee's experiences related to their birth and adoptive culture can help address topics of identity, belonging, and self-esteem. It also permits adoptees to explore and integrate parts of their identity in a safe, supportive, and contained space. Fisher et al. (2020) posits that cultural humility involves acknowledging the power dynamics at play in therapeutic relationships and actively working to balance these dynamics, enhancing a more equitable and fair therapeutic alliance. Integrating cultural humility into therapy practices with adoptees honors their lived experiences and recognizes the importance of their birth and adoptive cultures and not idealizing or devaluing cultures (Baden et al., 2013). This approach supports a therapeutic process that is inclusive, respectful, validating, and affirming of the adoptee's identity, promoting healing and growth. Acknowledging adoptees' native cultures and origins is central for understanding their backgrounds and life stories before adoption. These practices may be critical and helpful for facilitating the grief and mourning process, aiding in the understanding of their past, and creating an understanding of their selves better.

Summary of the Literature Review

The literature review showed that while there is some understanding of the psychosocial facets of adoptees' identity formation and racial and ethnic identity, there is a lack of resources addressing the cultural and country-specific connections that are important to transracial adoptees' sense of self. Studies like Brocious (2017) give a framework by underlining the complexity of adoptees' identity processes and the role of cultural exploration, but there is a gap in regarding the important characteristics of cultural and homeland connection. The study by Morrison-Derbyshire (2023) introduces a contemporary perspective on using AT to support transracial adoptees' identity development. The acknowledgment of AT's role in navigating trauma and attachment issues is a step in the right direction, yet I assert that the incorporation of cultural sensitivity and honoring of ancestral and indigenous remains an important area for further development (Morrison-Derbyshire, 2023; Metzl, 2023; Robertson, 2001). Expanding on the integration of art into therapeutic practices, particularly for adoptees, it seems important to examine how art facilitates connection, cultural engagement, and personal empowerment. It is curious to consider how community-based art therapy groups can offer a supportive environment for individuals with shared experiences, particularly adoptees. These groups, as described by Feen-Calligan et al. (2018), seem to offer a unique opportunity for participants to engage in artmaking, express their feelings, share personal stories, and cultivate empathy and understanding among each other. This process, in turn, appears to strengthen community ties, foster a sense of belonging, and provide emotional support. Given these potential benefits, I am very interested in exploring how engaging in such therapeutic practices might help fill existing gaps in the research landscape and offer valuable insights into the therapeutic needs and

outcomes for adoptees. How might participation in group art therapy specifically benefit adoptees in terms of emotional expression and social integration.

Adoptees, who may struggle with identity and belonging, could find group therapy beneficial. Group therapy offers a space for connection and common experiences, increasing their sense of community and helping establish meaningful relationships. This is essential for adoptees to feel understood and supported (Levine et al., 1990). Levine (1990) asserts, "Because adjustment to adoption is highly complex and always in flux, preventative therapy in the form of support groups for children and parents which are reinstituted at various stages in the family's development is highly recommended. Art therapy within a group setting also empowers adoptees by validating their experiences and may improve agency. Engaging in art could potentially provide a way for adoptees to process emotions and articulate their narratives without words, which is especially valuable for those who find verbal expression difficult. These therapeutic practices could become instrumental for adoptees to navigate their complex feelings regarding identity, culture, and belonging. By engaging in art, they may connect with their heritage, express their individuality, and create a supportive community, celebrating their personal journeys. These activities could not only offer therapeutic benefits but also may empower adoptees to embrace their unique stories and identities.

For adoption-focused AT groups, this role shift can be healing and transformative. It not only helps in personal growth and self-esteem for the individuals but also enriches the group. Members can experience a shift from seeking help to providing it, supporting their sense of independence and community contribution. This role change can be particularly validating for adoptees, who may struggle with issues of identity and belonging because it provides them a proactive stance in their healing journey and in supporting others. Thus, the group becomes a

dynamic space where roles are fluid, and every member can experience being both a helper and someone who receives help, enhancing the therapeutic value and community feeling within the group.

Future Research Recommendations

Reflecting on the research available, there is a notable lack of studies on adoption identity suggesting the need for policy and advocacy informed by mental health research on adoptees. This gap is striking, considering the potential impact such advocacy could have on creating supportive environments for adoptees. In response to this scarcity, there is a need to enhance practical applications within my field of art therapy. I hope future research will develop specific AT protocols and interventions that are customized to meet the unique needs of adoptees such as ARC model (attachment, regulation, and competency), which emphasizes on the importance of recognizing earlier childhood attachment as an integral part of identity formation (Fehrenbach et al., 2022). These would not only provide an outline for therapeutic practices but also include detailed case studies and training materials to equip therapists with the necessary skills to offer efficacious support. Furthermore, I want to use the insights gained from my research to advocate for meaningful policy changes. This advocacy would target stakeholders including adoption agencies, educational institutions, and mental health services, to implement recommendations that facilitate better identity formation and mental health outcomes for adoptees. By concentrating in these areas, I want to bridge the gap between scholarly research and clinical methods, making sure that adoptees receive the supportive care and human rights they deserve within society.

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THESIS APPROVAL FORM

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In the judgment of the following signatory this thesis meets the academic standards that have been established for the above degree.

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