

Roots of Connection: Exploring Childhood Adoption and Attachment

by

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Abstract

There is a connection between childhood adoption and attachment, and its implications on adoptees. Exploring this topic is relevant and important, as it relates to the developing identity and security in an adoptee's life. The principal objective of this Capstone is to offer a more comprehensive understanding around the connection between adoption and attachment and how this association shapes future outcomes for adoptees. Additionally, this Capstone aims to provide insight for adoptive parents and mental health practitioners to gain a better understanding on how they might be able to better support adoptees. This paper concludes with an infographic intended as a toolkit for adoptive parents and mental health practitioners interested in working with or already working with adoptees or adoptive families. This infographic aims to bring together information and resources to further support adoptive families with fostering attachment and attunement.

Keywords: adoption, adoptive parents, adverse experiences, attachment, attachment theory, attunement, birth family, identity building, internal working models

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Chapter One: Introduction

Topic Overview

The topic of this paper centres around the connection between childhood adoption and attachment and its implications on adoptees. I aim to explore the association between adoption and attachment to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the identity and security in an adoptee's life. This review aims to explore how adoptive parents and mental health practitioners can affectively approach and support adoptees.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the association between adoption and attachment, and how these experiences shape future outcomes. A greater understanding of these topics will hopefully enable adoptive parents to be more attuned to the social, psychological and emotional needs of any child facing the personal impact of separation from birth parents. The goal is to provide an understanding of this topic that can help inform adoptive parents with the knowledge and skills necessary to help adoptees navigate their unique experiences.

Significance, Context and Contribution to the Field

Researching the adoption of children and its impact on attachment styles and later relationships is a significant and relevant area of study. Attachment theory has been researched extensively and has shown that early caregiving experiences shape attachment styles, which, in turn, impact future relationships. However, there is still a need for more specific research that focuses on adoption as a unique context within attachment theory. The current research provides a basis and starting point, but further investigation is needed to explore this intersection.

According to statistics from Keyes and colleagues (2008), in the United States approximately 120,000 children are adopted each year which means there is a total of 1.5 million adopted children under the age of 18 living in the United States. Although data in Canada is not as readily available, data from the 2011 National Household Survey revealed that approximately 48,000 children under the age of 14 were adopted in 2011 (Statistics Canada, 2011). The number of adopted individuals and their respective families shows the significance of research focused on adoption and the importance in understanding and supporting this population.

There is currently a gap in the literature when it comes to understanding the oftentimes nuanced dynamics of adoption. Further research in this area could provide useful information on the impact of adoption on attachment and implications on identity formation, wellbeing, and relationship patterns in adulthood. Gaining a better understanding of the link between adoption and parental attunement could primarily help adoptive parents but could also have practical and clinical implications for mental health practitioners who work with adopted individuals and families. This research has the potential to contribute to better outcomes for adopted children and their development from adolescence into adulthood and relationships with families and other close people in their lives.

Regarding my contribution to the field, I intend to take the knowledge I have gained from my own lived experience of adoption as well as the knowledge from others whom I both know personally and worked with in professional contexts and apply it. I aim to create an educational parenting toolkit for adoptive families in the form of an infographic for the use of adoptive parents and mental health practitioners. My objective is for this to be an informative, engaging and easily readable resource for these populations who feel ill-equipped or wanting to gain more knowledge in this area.

Conceptual Framework

In the context of this conceptual framework, several key concepts will be examined to better understand the dynamics of adoption and attachment and the impact on individuals over the course of their lives. The primary concepts to be explored are as follows. Firstly, I will discuss the impact of age at adoption. Within this, I will discuss experiences prior to adoption including the potential of adverse experiences during this time. Following this, I will discuss adoptive parents' attunement to their child's needs, which include areas such as connection with birth family, conscientiousness in identity building and uncertainty in adoption. I will then explore the presence of ambiguous loss in adoption. Finally, I will explore wellness in adulthood, including adoptees psychosocial wellbeing and the impact on parenting. My intention is to review each of the concepts and discuss the varying relationships between them.

Personal Positioning

As an individual who was adopted as an infant, I come to this research topic with a personal connection and some understanding of the complexities surrounding adoption. My own experiences as an adoptee have been a driving force behind my decision to explore this topic more.

Growing up, I have always been aware of my unique life story -- one that includes both my birth family and my adoptive family. This dual identity has been a key part of who I am and has shaped my perspective on family, identity, and belonging. My unique background of being adopted at five days old and a child of an open adoption has made me curious and has been a motivator for me in gaining an understanding of the experiences of others who were adopted.

Throughout my life I have been able to engage with adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoption professionals, many of whom have shared their stories and insights with

me. Through this, I have come to appreciate the diverse narratives and emotions that surround early childhood adoption – none of which are exactly alike to each other. Because of this, I can see a benefit to further research in the field of attachment and its repercussions on adolescents and adults who underwent adoption during their early years.

In this paper, I am dedicated to exploring the many aspects of childhood adoption and its impact on the wellbeing and identity development of adoptees. I will do this with a specific focus on its relation to attachment theory. While my own experiences influence my perspective, I intend to remain aware of my subjective experiences as I approach this research with empathy and academic rigor, recognizing the varied experiences and potential challenges adoptees might face. I see how this topic may both serve as motivation and a potential bias.

I believe that gaining a better understanding of the complexities of childhood adoption is important not only for adoptees themselves but also for adoptive families, adoption agencies, mental health practitioners and policymakers. It is my hope that this research will contribute to a broader awareness of the unique needs and strengths of adoptees.

Data Collection Procedure

The data collection procedure involves several essential steps in order to gather relevant information, analyze it and draw meaningful conclusions. After clearly outlining the topic and objectives for research, I determined the sources from which I wanted to collect data. This process included searching databases and libraries using key terms that might help me find relevant peer-reviewed articles and journals. I then read these articles, assessed their relevancy and connection to my topic, compared information and identified gaps in the existing literature.

My data collection consisted of analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data. I purposely used mixed methods of qualitative and quantitative data in order to ensure I was able

to gather a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between adoption, attachment styles, and associated outcomes. Through this, I observed that the qualitative data collection included interviews and observation, while the quantitative data collection included surveys and more standardized measures.

Definition of Key Terms

Adoptee

An adoptee refers to an individual who has been adopted. This means that they have become the legal child of adoptive parents other than their birth parents (Baxter et al., 2001).

Adoption

Adoption refers to a lifelong process that creates a parent-child relationship between individuals who are not biologically related (Zamostny et al., 2003). It involves three key groups: the adoptee, the birth family, and the adoptive family, where legally, there is a transfer of all parental rights and responsibilities from the birth parents to the adoptive parents (Zamostny et al., 2003).

Adoption is also a social service which involves providing support to everyone involved, including finding children who need families, preparing adoptive parents, placing children, and supporting families after the adoption (Zamostny et al., 2003).

Adoptive Parents

Adoptive parents legally become the parents of their child who is not their biological offspring through the process of adoption (Zamostny et al., 2003). Through this legal process, adoptive parents take on all the rights and responsibilities of parenthood and a permanent parent-child relationship is established (Zamostny et al., 2003).

Attachment Style

Attachment style is a concept originating from Bowlby's attachment theory and relates to an individual's "characteristic ways of relating in intimate caregiving and receiving relationships with "attachment figures", often one's parents, children and romantic partners" (Levy et al., 2011, p. 193). According to attachment theory, there are four primary attachment styles: secure, anxious-preoccupied, anxious-avoidant (Ainsworth, 1979; Levy et al., 2011) and disorganized attachment (Levy et al., 2011).

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is a psychological and evolutionary framework originating from John Bowlby that explains human attachment and relationships (Levy et al., 2011). Its central premise is based on the necessity for young children to maintain connections with at least one primary caregiver to attain typical social and emotional development (Hicks & Corbel 2013; Bowlby 1982).

Anxious-avoidant Attachment

An anxious-avoidant attachment pattern refers to a type of insecure attachment that looks like an infant tending to steer clear of or disregarding their caregiver (Ainsworth, 1979). They tend to show little emotional response when the caregiver leaves or returns (Ainsworth, 1979).

Anxious-preoccupied Attachment

Anxious-preoccupied attachment refers to a type of insecure attachment which is characterized by unpredictable responses of the caregivers and by the child's feelings of anxiety and preoccupation about the caregiver being available to them (Plotka, 2011).

Birth Family

The birth family refers to an adoptee's biological relatives, including birth parents and siblings (Lo et al., 2023).

Disorganized Attachment

Disorganized attachment type is the least secure attachment style as there is no consistent way that they children cope with a stressful situation (Van den Dries et al., 2009). During challenging situations, their reactions might be contradictory because they lack consistency in attachment strategies during these stressful times (Van den Dries et al., 2009).

Research has shown that disorganized attachment is also associated with a variety of developmental challenges (Van den Dries et al., 2009). When compared to children with secure attachments, those who are insecurely attached are more likely to display externalizing behaviours, which can carry over into later childhood and adolescence (Lyons-Ruth et al., 1997). In addition, meta-analyses have found that insecure attachment behaviours across childhood have also been found to predict a greater risk of psychopathology (Van IJzendoorn et al., 1999). These findings demonstrate the potential impact of early attachment experiences on later development.

Insecure Attachment

Insecure attachment includes anxious-preoccupied, anxious-avoidant and disorganized attachment styles. Insecure children either show that they are averse to seeking comfort from their caregivers (avoidant) or act resistant when distressed (anxious) (Ainsworth, 1979).

Psychosocial Wellbeing

Psychosocial wellbeing includes an individual's emotional, social, and mental health, as well as how people feel connected to others (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020; Kumar, 2020). It is wide-ranging and key to understanding overall health, as it affects how people see and handle life's

challenges, handle stress, form relationships and view themselves (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020; Kumar, 2020). Taking care of one's psychosocial wellbeing is important for living a happy and fulfilling life, as it helps one manage stress, build strong relationships, and reach one's personal goals (Eiroa-Orosa, 2020; Kumar, 2020).

Relinquishment

In the context of adoption, relinquishment refers to the act of voluntarily giving up parental rights and is referenced to often involving legal and emotional struggles (La Monica, 2000). As pointed out by La Monica (2000), a synonym for relinquishment is "to succumb", which La Monica (2000) argues reinforces the idea of a struggle that occurs before one yields to something overpowering. It can be a decision made by a birth parent who chooses to transfer control of their child to another family (La Monica, 2000). This act is formalized through legal documents, such as relinquishment papers, which may be signed before or after birth (La Monica, 2000).

Secure Attachment

Secure attachment in childhood is characterized by children who are upset and distressed by their parent's departure but can calm themselves relatively quickly once the parent returns (Ainsworth, 1979). Securely attached children have a sense of safety and trust in their parent, where there is an understanding that they can rely on them to come back (Ainsworth, 1979).

Research consistently shows that forming a secure attachment with a parent or caregiver has long-term benefits for children and contributes to their emotional and social development (Van den Dries, 2009). The perception of this relationships in securely attached children leads to the formation of trust towards their caregivers, which gives the children confidence that they can affect their environment (Van den Dries, 2009). Research conducted on infants and preschoolers

show that this core trust serves as a powerful foundation which supports their ability to regulate their own emotions and increase their desire for independence and confidence in approaching social interactions and problem solving for themselves (Van den Dries et al., 2009; Sroufe et al., 2005). Securely attached adults are known to be “more open to exploring their surroundings and relationships...and tend to be open...collaborative, ...and trusting” (Levy et al., 2011, p. 195).

Capstone Outline

The introduction of the capstone focuses on the prevalence and provides background on why research focused on the intersection of adoption and attachment is important. With the number of adoptees and their adoptive families in both the United States and Canada, there is a need to support those who are involved in adoption.

Chapter Two delves into the theoretical frameworks and historical context underpinning the concepts discussed, with a particular focus on the connection between attachment and adoption. This chapter examines prior research, highlighting the intersections and distinctions between various studies to highlight what has been explored and what gaps remain in the existing body of knowledge on this topic.

Chapter Three will provide a comprehensive summary of the limitations in the current research and recommendations for future research. This chapter will also discuss recommendations for adoptive parents, including how adoptive parents and mental health practitioners might play a part in bridging the gap between theory and practice. The chapter will also serve as a guide for adoptive parents, outlining a parenting toolkit infographic for adoptive parents to reference. This section aims to bring together helpful information and resources in one place, to assist adoptive parents in supporting attachment and attunement with their child.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter Summary

What does it mean to build a sense of belonging when your earliest connections have been shaped by loss? This question resonates with many of those who have experienced adoption. At its core, adoption embodies a “a dance of loss and love” (Unknown author, n.d.), giving rise to deeply personal and varied experiences that reflect the uniqueness of each adoptee. Yet, despite this diversity of experience, there is a common, shared need for identity and belonging.

For both adoptees and adoptive parents, gaining insight into the nuanced dynamics that shape an adoptee’s experience is essential to fostering meaningful relationships and providing effective support. Recognizing these complexities allows for a deeper understanding of the emotional and psychological needs that arise in adoption. This chapter highlights current understanding of adoption and attachment, identifying key themes such as experiences prior to adoption, adoptive parent’s attunement to their child, connection to birth family and ambiguous loss, all of which contribute to a broader comprehension of the dynamics at play in an adoptee's life. This literature review seeks to integrate existing research to present a thorough understanding of the relationship between attachment and adoption, while also identifying gaps in the current body of knowledge that could be further explored. This review will analyze current literature on adoption and attachment through exploring their interconnectedness and how these and various other factors influence adoptees' outcomes.

Given that adoption inherently involves separation, loss, and the formation of attachments to new parents (Bowlby, 1982), attachment theory is an appropriate theoretical foundation for this examination. This review aims to be based on this perspective to gain a

deeper understanding of the intricacies of adoption and the consequences of it on adoptees and their families.

Historical Background of Attachment Theory

Attachment theory is a widely researched developmental theory of the twenty-first century that has been greatly influential across various areas of psychology. The theory emphasizes the role of the unconscious, through the concept of "internal working models" and highlights how early life experiences can shape an individual's development (Shilkret & Shilkret, 2011).

Attachment theory was first developed in the mid-twentieth century by John Bowlby and then expanded on by Mary Ainsworth. Bowlby based his work on the idea of imprinting in evolutionary history and the relationship between parents and children (Shilkret & Shilkret, 2011). He theorized that humans have a process of attachment that maintains proximity of the young to a central caregiver they return to in times of distress and fear (Shilkret & Shilkret, 2011).

Bowlby (1982) suggests that attachment relationships consist of a long-term inclination to seek proximity to a specific caregiver and the sense of safety that comes with it, particularly in instances of fear, fatigue or illness (Bowlby, 1982; Van den dries et al., 2009). However, Van den dries et al. (2009) maintained that although forming attachment relationships is an innate and human universal tendency, there are differences among individuals in terms of the quality of attachments formed.

These differences can be categorized into distinct attachment classifications: secure, insecure (avoidant or anxious), or insecure-disorganized and are based on the strategies children employ when responding to stress. Ainsworth built on this foundation through her empirical

research, identifying specific attachment styles and demonstrating how caregiving behaviours influence these patterns (Ainsworth, 1979; Shilkret & Shilkret, 2011). Ainsworth's research with families in Uganda, along with her Baltimore Study demonstrated the link between mothers and children and insecure attachment (Shilkret & Shilkret, 2011). They found that parents who grew up having insecure attachment themselves are more likely to pass on insecure attachment to their children which resulted in generational patterns of insecure attachment (Shilkret & Shilkret, 2011).

The research by John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, who studied the development of attachment between children and their early caregivers, lays the foundation for our present understanding of attachment theory, and provides a basis for understanding the association between adoption and attachment.

Internal Working Models

Raby and Dozier (2019) propose that early attachment experiences play an important role in shaping "attachment representations" of close relationships, which continue to persist across the lifespan from childhood into adulthood. This concept of "attachment representations" aligns closely with Ainsworth's idea of the internal working model, which emphasizes the lasting influence of these early relational patterns on an individual's way of connecting with and relating to others (Ainsworth, 1979).

Attachment Classifications

Attachment classifications, derived from Bowlby's attachment theory, describe the styles of emotional attachments that individuals have formed with their attachment figures. (Levy et al., 2011). As defined in the Introduction, these classifications – secure, anxious, avoidance and disorganized – offer a systematic way to understand the diversity of attachment styles (Levy et

al., 2011). By examining these categories, we can better understand how caregiving relationships influence emotional and relational development across the lifespan (Levy et al., 2011; Plotka, 2011). The examination of these specific attachment styles, including secure and insecure forms, offers a framework for considering how these might influence other outcomes in life.

Age at Adoption

It is commonly understood that life before adoption can be characterized by adverse experiences and lack of stability which puts infants at risk of insecure attachment (Lionetti, 2014). The attachment perspective suggests that in children adopted later, negative preadoption experiences contributed to the development of insecure and disorganized attachment representations (Van den Dries et al., 2009). It can therefore be hypothesized that the least amount of time prior to adoption placement seems to be ideal for attachment and future outcomes.

In line with the findings of Van den Dries and colleagues (2009), it was discovered that children who were adopted *after* their first birthday showed less secure attachment than those who were not adopted. When assessing both groups using two different methods – one relying on observational assessment and the other using both observational and self-report assessments – it revealed that adopted children also had higher levels of disorganized attachment compared to their non-adopted peers (Van den Dries et al., 2009). These results were attributed to the maltreatment and neglect that the children experienced prior to being adopted (Van den Dries et al., 2009). Van den Dries and colleagues (2009) concluded that *early* adoption appeared to be an effective intervention in bettering attachment outcomes when compared to institutionalized children.

While infants adopted as babies typically experience continuous care from their adoptive parents, older placed children undergo significant changes when they join their adoptive families (Howe, 2001). Howe (2001) examined childhood experiences and current contact levels of adult adoptees with their adoptive and, in cases of birth family reunions, birth mothers. Although pre-placement history data were not collected, age at adoption placement serves as a proxy measure to assess potential differences in adoption experiences and the contact they have (Howe, 2001).

The study's findings shows that age at placement is correlated with adopted individuals' self-reported adoption experiences and their current level of contact with both adoptive and birth mothers (Howe, 2001). Of note, those individuals placed at older ages more frequently reported feelings of not belonging within their adoptive families during their upbringing, perceiving less maternal love, and having less frequent contact with both their adoptive and birth mothers in adulthood (Howe, 2001). These results are discussed from an attachment perspective, suggesting that children adopted at older ages may have experienced insecure attachment relationships with their adoptive mothers (Howe, 2001).

Experiences Prior to Adoption

Building upon Howe's (2001) study, Hjern and colleagues' study (2018) aimed at identifying the risk of depression in adulthood for participants, comparing those in long-term foster care and those adopted in infancy in Sweden. This study used a register data from cohorts of the Swedish national population born between 1972 and 1981 (Hjern et al., 2018).

This investigation focused on the part that early caregiving plays on the chances of children who were raised in foster homes (prior to the age of 2) of being prescribed antidepressant medications and receiving psychiatric care later in life (Hjern et al., 2018). The findings show that when compared with those in long-term foster care, early adoption in linked

with a lowered risk of experiencing depression in adulthood (Hjern et al., 2018). They suggest, therefore, that adoption could offer a much more reliable and stable childhood home life, which is associated with better mental wellbeing (Hjern et al., 2018). More specifically, the study shows that early adoption plays a crucial role in decreasing the risk of depression due to early childhood adversity and points to findings in neurobiological research, showing how early adversity can produce changes to the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) system, which has previously been associated with depression (Hjern et al., 2018).

In a similar fashion, Van den Dries and colleagues (2009) use the central ideas of attachment theory to explain what research has found about attachment style in adopted children. Van den Dries and colleagues (2009) cited studies showing that children with an adoptive history have higher rates of insecure and disorganized attachment.

These outcomes can be understood through the lens of attachment theory that believes that that initial separation and loss of birth parents can affect an adoptee's ability of forming secure attachment relationships (Bowlby, 1982).

As pointed out by Van den Dries and colleagues (2009), these difficulties are even more profound in the cases of internationally adopted children most of whom have been in institutionalized care for longer times. These environments, other researchers also report, are often characterized by deprivation, neglect, and inconsistent caregiving, all which can conflict with opportunities for children to form secure attachment bonds (Grotevant et al., 2000; Howe, 2005).

Importantly, Van den Dries (2009) meta-analysis failed to consider the critical issue of age at adoption which both Hjern and colleagues (2019) and Howe (2005) in fact argue is a key factor helping to explain risks to the formation of a secure attachment. Their work has revealed

evidence that suggests that the longer a child spends in an environment that lacks secure attachment, such as institutional care, the greater the chances they will develop insecure, or even disorganized, attachment styles (Hjern et al., 2019; Howe, 2005).

Adverse Experiences

Research on attachment theory has focused heavily on how early negative or traumatic experiences can affect attachment development over time. Raby and Dozier's study (2019) examined a central hypothesis of attachment theory: early attachment experiences shape the development of mental representations of close relationships, which persist throughout the lifespan (from childhood to adulthood). This hypothesis has been questioned regarding how much early attachment patterns can change due to later life experiences (Raby & Dozier, 2019).

While attachment can adapt to shifts in caregiving environments, many believe that early attachment experiences still have lasting effects that shape development, even when caregiving circumstances change (Raby & Dozier, 2019; Shilkret & Shilkret, 2011). Even with these changes, the initial attachment experiences can have an enduring impact which can influence how adoptees might behave and react.

Raby and Dozier (2019) bring to light that testing this hypothesis proves to be difficult due to the quality of the caregiving environment staying relatively stable for most families, thus making it difficult to differentiate the effects of early experiences versus later experiences. However, they highlight the uniqueness of children adopted after maltreatment and institutionalized care who experience significant changes in their caregiving environments (Raby & Dozier, 2019). Raby and Dozier (2019) point out that these children often face pre-adoptive conditions that fail to meet their developmental needs, including the absence of consistent and responsive attachment figures. But after adoption, these children usually experience stable and

enriched caregiving environments provided by the adoptive parents (Raby & Dozier, 2019). Due to these unique circumstances, Raby & Dozier (2019) point out that there *can* be an effective evaluation of the long-term consequences of early attachment experiences and the capacity for later caregiving by adoptive parents to shape attachment representations.

Raby and Dozier (2019) report that most children placed in adoptive or foster homes form bonds with their new caregivers within a few months and show better attachment security than children in institutional care. However, children with pre-adoptive trauma and adversity are more likely to develop insecure attachments with their adoptive parents compared to non-adopted children (Raby & Dozier, 2019). These findings indicate that even with significant environmental changes for the adopted child, early attachment patterns shape adopted children's expectations of new caregivers which may allow experiences of early adversity to have lasting effects on these later attachments (Raby & Dozier, 2019).

In another study that focused on attachment representations, Roman and colleagues (2012) examined attachment representations of 40 international adopted children, 58 children raised in birth families without maltreatment, and 50 institutionalized children, ages 4-8. Their findings revealed that adopted children's attachment representations were more negative than those of the birth family group, but like those of the institutionalized children (Roman et al., 2012). This finding indicates that the early experiences of adopted children, which can be marked by separation and loss, can have a lingering effect on how they might perceive or approach relationships, even after placed in their supportive adoptive families.

The findings from both Raby and Dozier (2019) and Roman and colleagues (2012) suggest quite a complex interplay between the plasticity of attachment representations and the lasting influence of early caregiving experiences. While both find that early attachment

relationships do not solely determine later attachment patterns, both show how early adversity can leave a lasting impact on later attachment outcomes, even amidst changes in caregiving (Raby & Dozier 2019; Roman et al., 2012). These findings also emphasize the significance that early intervention can have for adopted children where adoptive parents provide consistent and responsive care to help mitigate some of the effects of earlier adverse experiences.

Building on this, Julian's (2013) longitudinal study explores the impact of early experiences on long-term development, particularly in children adopted from institutional care. These children experience varying degrees of deprivation early in life, followed by improved care in adoptive homes (Julian, 2013). Their study examines the effects of the age at which these children are adopted from institutional care on various aspects of social and behavioural development (Julian, 2013).

The study reveals that there is evidence that suggests that the age at adoption significantly affects their development, particularly if they experienced severe deprivation and are later assessed during adolescence (Julian, 2013). Importantly, staying in institutional care past a certain age considerably heightens the risk of long-term social and behavioural challenges, with the critical age depending on how severe the early deprivation was (Julian, 2013).

Julian (2013) suggests that one of the main causes of the long-lasting effects seen in children who have been institutionalized is the lack of early caregiver-child attachment in these institutional settings. Julian (2013) provides evidence that indicates that frequent caregiver rotation can lead to a lack of secure attachment to any one caregiver, even in institutions that meet basic medical, nutritional and safety needs. As a result, children lack the development of consistent relationships with one primary caregiver which is critical in their early development (Julian, 2013). Julian (2013) credits these relationships as providing comfort, emotional support,

and essential skills like understanding social cues and agency through interactions with responsive caregivers. To support this, it is noted that on a physiological level, relationship deprivation elevates stress levels in infants and restricts the quantity and quality of their environmental and relational stimulation, which are areas essential for healthy development (Julian, 2013). Julian (2013) points to insufficient caregiver-child relationships likely contributing to “abnormal” social behaviour such as a lack of social inhibition and awareness in these children (Julian, 2013).

Studies like Raby and Dozier (2019), Roman and colleagues (2012) and Julian (2013) highlight the nuanced interplay between the lasting effects of early adversity and the potential there is for recovery through an improvement in caregiving. However, factors such as the severity of early deprivation, age at adoption, and the quality of caregiving environments continue to shape attachment outcomes which highlight both the resilience and vulnerability inherent in the development of attachment. When distilled down, these findings emphasize the substantial impact of these early experiences in an adoptee’s life prior to adoption. When viewed from the attachment theory lens, the absence of a consistent, reliable relationship early on combined with the influence of later caregiving appears to be a vital factor and can influence long-term social, emotional and behavioural outcomes for adoptees.

Adoptive Parents’ Attunement to Child

Raby and Dozier (2019) examine the intergenerational transmission of attachment in adoptive families. Interestingly, their results showed that adoptive parents’ attachment styles have a strong influence on their children’s attachment style and behaviours in childhood and adolescence, regardless of genetic relatedness (Raby & Dozier, 2019).

This relationship is mediated by parents' mental representations of attachment, which shape their responses to their children's behaviours (Raby & Dozier, 2019). It was found that the ways in which parents respond plays a pivotal role in guiding the child's developing sense of security or insecurity within the attachment relationship (Raby & Dozier, 2019).

This finding illustrates the importance of the adoptive parental role in the development of their children's attachment patterns as the role model of their own attachment behaviours and lends further support to the beliefs of attachment theory that attachment representations are passed down by one generation to the next (Raby & Dozier, 2019). As demonstrated by the literature provided, adoptive parents' responses to their child's attachment needs not only determine the child's sense of security but also what their relationships look like, including connections to their birth family, as they navigate through life.

Connection with Birth Family

Throughout the twentieth century and largely throughout most Western nations, adoption was primarily based on "closed adoptions" where the identities of the birth and adoptive families were hidden from each other, and the adoptee, who had their birth certificate changed so that their birth parents were not listed (Lo et al., 2023). However, since the 1970s, there has been a gradual movement towards more openness around adoption and a developing understanding that adopted children may benefit from remained connected with their birth families (Lo et al., 2023). Work by Lo and colleagues (2023) brings up an important question about how this increased openness, specifically in terms of contact with birth families, might influence adoptees' wellbeing in childhood but also through to adulthood.

Although earlier theories in the 1970s and 1980s posited that contact with birth relatives may result in confusion over parental identity and negatively affect psychological adjustment,

(Kraft et al., 1985), the view has shifted in that contact with birth relatives may actually promote positive adjustment (Lo et al., 2023). These connections could help adoptees create a narrative around their identity by giving them insight into their birth history as well (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). Research suggests that forming this narrative through the process of integrating one's personal histories into their sense of self, is a crucial part of positive psychological development in adulthood (Waters & Fivush, 2015). For adoptees, the desire for information about *where* they come from and *who* they come from indicates that having those connections with one's birth family is significant in the formation of a coherent and integrated adoption identity.

Lo and colleagues' (2023) longitudinal study examined adoption outcomes, psychological adjustment and wellbeing of young adults who were adopted. This research was based on a long-term investigation of how adoptive family dynamics influenced these outcomes (Lo et al., 2023). In their study, Lo and colleagues' (2023) employed standardized measures such as the Brief Symptom Inventory, Ryff Scales of Psychological Wellbeing, and the Adoptive Identity Scale in addition to interviews. Participants were made up of four groupings: extended contact, limited contact, no contact and stopped contact (Lo et al., 2023).

The findings showed that compared to adopted young adults in the "limited contact" group, those in the "extended contact" group experienced higher psychological wellbeing and lower psychological distress (Lo et al., 2023). This suggests that regular and fulfilling contact with the birth family can improve psychological adjustment (Lo et al., 2023). Those in the "extended contact" group generally reported more positive relationships with their birth mothers than those in the other groups, which also suggests that extended and satisfying contact may lead to more positive relationships with birth family members (Lo et al., 2023). According to these

findings, long-lasting and fulfilling contact with the birth family is correlated with higher psychological wellbeing (Lo et al., 2023).

Grotevant and colleagues' 2011 study examined how three factors: post-adoption contacts between adoptive and birth families, openness in adoption-related communication, and satisfaction with contact, was found to correlate with externalizing behaviours (like aggression or rule-breaking) in adolescent and young adult adoptees. The participants of the study included 190 families with children placed for adoption as infants (Grotevant et al., 2011).

Their research revealed that externalizing behaviours remained relatively stable from childhood through to early adulthood (Grotevant et al., 2011). Although they found that contact and communication openness were connected, they did not directly affect externalizing behaviours in adolescence or adulthood (Grotevant et al., 2011). However, families who were more satisfied with the level of contact reported fewer externalizing behaviours in their adolescents over time (Grotevant et al., 2011).

It was also found that satisfaction was indirectly related to externalizing behaviour into early adulthood (Grotevant et al., 2011). They found that how satisfied families were with the contact between the adoptive and birth families appeared to play a larger role in whether adoptees exhibited problematic behaviours than simply whether that contact or openness in communication about adoption was present (Grotevant et al., 2011).

In analysis, both studies highlight the significant role that connection to birth families plays in the wellbeing and behavioural outcomes of adoptees. Lo and colleagues (2023) found that extended and satisfying contact with birth families was associated to lower psychological distress and higher wellbeing in adopted young adults which suggests that maintaining positive and consistent contact with birth families can lead to healthier psychological adjustment.

Similarly, Grotevant and colleagues (2011) found that while simply the presence of contact or openness of communication did not directly impact externalizing behaviours, it is the level of satisfaction with the level of contact that had an influence on adoptees' behaviour, which led to fewer externalizing behaviours over time. Together, these studies emphasize that it is not *just* the existence of contact, but also the quality and satisfaction of the relationship that play a role in their long-term psychological and behavioural outcomes. This suggests that if the relationship between the adoptee and birth family is unstable or difficult, there may not be benefits. Instead, it is the adoptee's *perception* of the relationship that plays a crucial role. These findings indicate that fostering positive relationships, when possible and beneficial, between adoptees and their birth families is important.

Conscientiousness in Adoption Identity Building

Von Korff and Grotevant (2011) explored how discussions about adoption among adoptive families influence attachment between parents helping their children stay connected with their birth families and the development of their children's adoptive identities in adolescence. Interviews and questionnaires were administered to 184 adoptive families at two points in time -- when teens were 15 and 25 years old (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). The results highlighted how adoptive parents' support in maintaining contact with birth relatives led to more conversations within the adoptive family about adoption-related topics (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). It was found that support and communication were not only essential for adopted adolescents in forming their adoptive identities but also displays the significance of a secure attachment between adoptive parents and their adopted adolescents in helping them navigate their identity development (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011).

In a similar way, Pace and colleagues (2018) focused on the role of attachment between adopted adolescents and their adoptive parents. The research explored the ways adopted adolescents' attachment styles influenced emotional functioning and behavioural issues (Pace et al., 2018). Data for this study was gathered from interviews and questionnaires involving 46 adopted adolescents and 34 non-adopted adolescents, all between the ages of 12 and 16 (Pace et al., 2018). This data was used to compare the results from adopted and non-adopted adolescents (Pace et al., 2018). First, they used primary data from a longitudinal study on a sample of children tracked from ages 3 to 15 to test the hypothesis that being adopted influenced whether or not attachment type predicts behavioural issues (Pace et al., 2018). They then investigated if adoption had an impact on how adolescents' behaviour was linked to their ability to regulate their emotions (Pace et al., 2018). Although adoption was associated with more behavioural issues, this study appeared to show that attachment type did *not* influence behaviour, except for adolescents with disorganized attachment, who had higher internalizing problems (anxiety and sadness), regardless of whether they were adopted or not (Pace et al., 2018). Not surprisingly, these results highlight the importance of attachment in adolescent's psychological health and indicate that secure attachment with caregivers is an important part of their wellbeing (Pace et al., 2018). It also emphasizes the need to address attachment and emotional regulation in *all* adolescents (Pace et al., 2018).

These insights are particularly compelling because they demonstrate that the distinction between adopted and non-adopted adolescents does *not* significantly influence attachment outcomes (Pace et al., 2018). Rather, it is the distinction between secure and insecure attachment styles that is most important. This research indicates that the quality of attachment, rather than

the experience of adoption itself, is crucial in shaping developmental trajectories (Pace et al., 2018).

Building on Pace and colleagues' (2018) emphasis on quality of attachments and their significance, Grotevant and colleagues (2000) explore how the process of the identity formation process can pose challenges for adolescent adoptees. Grotevant and colleagues (2000) explore how the identity formation process can bring about unique challenges compared to non-adoptees, as adoptees must integrate their adoption experience into their self-concept. For instance, adoptees may experience a lack of belonging during adolescence because they physically differ from their adoptive family as well as facing challenges in peer relationships because of their unique family structure (Grotevant et al., 2000).

These emotions might be intensified by contrasting senses of belonging linked to their adoptive and birth families (Grotevant et al., 2000). The authors suggest that as adoptees transition into adulthood, they might experience difficulties related to forming and building relationships. They attribute this to what they see as a disrupted sense of self in adoptees that results from limited knowledge about their origins (Grotevant et al., 2000). They suggest that concerns from adoptees about being vulnerable, facing further emotional loss or sharing deeply personal feelings around adoption might make forming these connections more difficult (Grotevant et al., 2000). Grotevant and colleagues (2000) highlight that, despite the challenges that might come from these experiences, adoptees can still navigate identity development in ways that align with typical patterns.

Although Pace and colleagues (2018) observed that adoption may increase the possibility of behaviour problems, they note that the attachment quality, rather than adoption itself, has a greater impact. Their study concentrated on helping adolescents regulate their emotions to

decrease behavioural issues and support their wellbeing (Pace et al., 2018). However, many challenges are unique to adoptees and distinct from those of non-adoptees, which their research did not specifically address.

Contrasting this, research by Von Korf and Grotevant (2011) and Grotevant and colleagues (2000) explored the unique experiences of adoptees more specifically. These studies emphasized how adoptees may experience more difficulties in forming their identities because, in contrast to non-adoptees, they must overcome extra complexities such as understanding their origins and integrating their adoptive identity. Both studies found that adoptive parents' openness and integration of adoption-related communication were critical for their children's identity development. It could be said that these behaviours that adoptive parents exhibit, foster secure attachment that is crucial to supporting both identity formation as well as a host of other development outcomes in adoptees.

Together, these studies provide evidence that secure attachment is integral to development. Also, for adoptees specifically, the research suggests that supportive communication regarding adoption can facilitate secure attachment as well as help adoptees navigate challenges to identity.

Adoption Uncertainty

Lotan and colleagues' (2023) qualitative study included 24 participants, all of whom were adopted from Israel as infants through closed adoptions and subsequently looked for their birth families. Their study sought to investigate the ways in which participants' sense of identity was impacted by adoption-related uncertainty (ARU) (Lotan et al., 2023).

Their research was conducted based on the understanding that adoptees face unique challenges in their identity development, primarily because of adoption-related uncertainty

(ARU) concerning their origins, past experiences, and the stigma associated with being raised by adoptive parents as opposed to their birth parents. They assert that this uncertainty is central to understanding the adoption experience and investigated it alongside protective factors in adoptees lives (Lotan et al., 2023).

The study's findings indicate that adoptees frequently experience ambiguity in their lives which is frequently brought about by concerns about the questions around adoption, the potential for connection with birth parents and adoptive parents' attitudes towards the birth family (Lotan et al., 2023). They found that all participants experienced some degree of identity uncertainty in relation to these issues and that these aspects play a significant role in ARU (Lotan et al., 2023). The study found two primary coping mechanisms in response to uncertainty: the "limiting" approach, which involves avoiding engaging with adoption-related issues, and the "expanding" approach, which involves actively addressing and exploring these themes (Lotan et al., 2023).

The study also emphasizes how important family support is in reducing ARU (Lotan et al., 2023). According to Lotan and colleagues (2023), this support serves as a protective factor that helps adoptees in developing a solid sense of self and to make meaning of their lives (Lotan et al., 2023). These factors, according to Lotan and colleagues (2023), demonstrate the importance of supportive environments in reducing adoptees' levels of uncertainty and enhancing their resilience.

Subsequently, the study examined the impact of social stigma on ARU. They reference a "genealogical imperative" that is present in much of Western society that stigmatizes adoption and can lead to adoptees and adoptive families to feel marginalized due to not aligning with this (Latchford, 2019). As a result of social stigma and internalization of prejudice, they suggest that

adoptees sense of identity might be further complicated by an identity gap where adoptees' perception of themselves differ from others' ideas of who they are (Lotan et al., 2023).

The study also examined coping responses to ARU, including strategies such as seeking information, social support, and reframing challenges (Lotan et al., 2023). According to Lotan and colleagues' (2023), these responses were part of broader patterns found in non-adoptivee populations, where uncertainty may either lead to a "new normal" or promote personal growth (Darnell et al., 2019). The study found that some adoptees ("limiters"), avoid confronting their ARU, while others ("expanders"), actively seek to make sense of it (Lotan et al., 2023).

Although expanding and limiting strategies did not consistently lower ARU, Lotan and colleagues (2023) discovered that the expending style produced a greater variety of coping responses. They found that these included sharing feelings, seeking support, and finding meaning in their experiences (Lotan et al., 2023). They also discovered that this method might be more successful in overcoming personal uncertainty by promoting resilience and creating meaning (Lotan et al., 2023).

Finally, Lotan and colleagues (2023) found that open, candid family discussions regarding adoption were crucial in reducing uncertainty and enhancing adoptees' resilience and sense of pride in their identity. These results highlight how secrecy around adoption can complicate and hinder the process of identity building and how open discussions about adoption are a protective factor, helping adoptees better navigate the uncertainties they face (Lotan et al., 2023).

Overall, Lotan and colleagues (2023) study's findings emphasize the importance of familial support and communication. These findings align with the concept of secure attachment,

where consistent emotional support and understanding from adoptive parents is given to adoptees.

As seen in Lotan and colleagues' study (2023), adoptees who used "expanding" coping strategies, like seeking information and discussing adoption, had a broader range of responses and stronger connections with their adoptive parents. Strategies such as encouraging emotional expression and social support are consistent with reinforcement of secure attachment and encouraging identity formation (Lotan et al., 2023). While "expanders" were found to use these strategies, "limiters" were found more likely to avoid these discussions and therefore did not have the same opportunity to solidify their attachment or sense of self in the same way. These open discussions, as utilized by expanders, seemed to provide a space for adoptees to safely explore their identity which fostered resilience in the face of obstacles that adoptees might face, such as social stigma and identity-related uncertainty. This supports the notion that an adoptee's identity development greatly depends on the quality of attachment and their readiness to have open discussion around adoption.

Attunement

The adoptive parents' level of attunement to their child's needs is crucial in all three of the topics that were discussed: connection to birth family, adoption identity formation, and adoption uncertainty. This idea of attunement aligns with the principles of attachment theory.

When a caregiver is aware of a child's emotional and cognitive state and prepared to take the lead, they can recognize and respond to the child's non-verbal and verbal cues in ways that foster emotional safety and trust (Di Renzo et al., 2021; Gattis et al., 2022). Because of this, attunement not only meets physical needs, but maintains empathy and responsiveness to the emotional and psychological states of the child (Di Renzo et al., 2021; Gattis et al., 2022). This

helps the child feel seen, heard and valued (Di Renzo et al., 2021; Gattis et al., 2022). In essence, it helps the adult to be present and ready to read and respond to the cues given by the child (Di Renzo et al., 2021; Gattis et al., 2022).

This attunement builds the foundation for secure attachment and emotional regulation -- key components of healthy development (Maté, 2011). Gabor Maté further expands on this, stating that "attunement is the quintessential component of a larger process, called *attachment*" (Maté, 2011, p.72). Maté emphasizes that attunement is not just emotionally enriching but biologically crucial and supports the development of neural pathways and neurochemical systems responsible for attention and self-regulation (Maté, 2011).

As evidenced by studies explored here, adoptive parents can support their child's development of resilience and a strong sense of self, both of which aid in the building of their adoption identity, by fostering a safe and secure emotional connection. While each adoptee's identity is shaped by their individuality and own choices, adoptees are deeply influenced by the attunement and responsiveness of their parents. This connection can shape how adoptees form how they view themselves, build their identity, and also cope with the uncertainties surrounding their adoption.

Ambiguous Loss in Adoption

Powell and Afifi (2005) as noted in Lotan and colleagues' (2023) article, have an understanding that adoptees' uncertainty stems from the ambiguous loss of their birth parents. They state that unlike a complete loss that can be gradually processed through grieving, ambiguous loss involves an ongoing uncertainty about the physical or emotional presence of someone significant, such as a birth parent (Powell & Afifi, 2005 as cited in Lotan et al., 2023). According to Boss (2009), this form of loss creates ongoing uncertainty and doubt which makes

it challenging to fully resolve (Lotan et al., 2023). Uncertainty regarding their origins and relationship to their birth family can present a deep sense of ambiguous loss for adoptees which can have an impact on their identity and emotional wellbeing (Lotan et al., 2023).

Grotevant and colleagues (2000) expanded on this, as they reported that becoming a parent can bring about intensified emotions for adoptees as it can bring up feelings of grief related to the loss of their biological connections. Also important is how the experience of becoming a parent can impact the adoptee with respect to their adoptive parents (Grotevant et al., 2000). For example, feelings of doubt around the legitimacy of their bond may arise (Grotevant et al., 2000). The literature suggests that major life events, such as becoming a parent, can present additional challenges for adoptees specifically around the exploration of their identity (Grotevant et al., 2000).

In another study, ter Meulen and colleagues (2019) explored the connection between life satisfaction for adoptees and their views on their adoption and relinquishment experiences. Their aim was to understand how these early experiences might shape their wellbeing as adults (ter Meulen et al., 2019). Their study surveyed 1,155 adult adoptees in the Netherlands who were originally adopted from 32 different countries (ter Meulen et al., 2019). The age of participants varied from 18 to 55, with an average of 29 years old (ter Meulen et al., 2019). This study used questionnaires to collect data which assessed adoptees life satisfaction and their perceptions of relinquishment and adoption (ter Meulen et al., 2019).

The results indicated that participants' life satisfaction was relatively high, even higher than the general Dutch population (ter Meulen et al., 2019). They also identified participants' attitudes toward relinquishment and adoption were associated with greater life satisfaction (ter Meulen et al., 2019). While the study found that the majority expressed favourable feelings about

their adoption, about 10% frequently reported negative emotions (ter Meulen et al., 2019). Interestingly, they found that most participants noted growing satisfaction with their adoption status as they aged (ter Meulen et al., 2019). They suggest that therapeutic interventions that focus on adoptees' feelings about relinquishment and adoption might help improve their life satisfaction (ter Meulen et al., 2019). These interventions may be particularly beneficial because they support further exploration of their identity in relation to the ambiguous nature of the loss.

In addition to many adoptees facing adversity prior to adoption, ter Meulen and colleagues (2019) found that they also reported feelings of loss surrounding their birth family and not knowing their family history. The results showed that most of the participants had positive feelings about their adoption (80%) and relinquishment (57%) and 91% of participants reported that they rarely or occasionally felt negative emotions about this (ter Meulen et al., 2019). Their findings demonstrates that even though some may have negative feelings around their relinquishment, many still view their adoption positively (ter Meulen et al., 2019). The results suggest that for most adoptees, they were able to handle processing their feelings and relinquishment (ter Meulen et al., 2019).

The findings from ter Meulen and colleagues (2019) speak to the feelings of loss inherent in the adoption experience and highlight the struggles adoptees can face with feelings specifically around relinquishment and feelings of loss around their birth families (ter Meulen et al., 2019). Despite participants reporting relatively high life satisfaction, the study shows that one's adoption can often involve navigating complex emotions tied to loss which could include feelings of disconnection and uncertainty about where they come from (ter Meulen et al., 2019). These findings resonate with the idea of *ambiguous loss*, in which the loss lacks closure or resolution.

For adoptees in this study, ambiguous loss could show up in the absence of birth family ties and the uncertainty surrounding their relinquishment. While many participants made sense of their relinquishment in a way that allowed them to maintain positive views of adoption, the fact that 10% of respondents frequently reported negative emotions, and that older participants expressed less satisfaction with their adoption status (ter Meulen et al., 2019), reflects the ongoing impact of this unresolved loss.

Besides separation from their birth families, the study indicates that adoptees find it difficult to reconcile their relinquishment with their own self-identity, and their “not knowing” and “being apart” serves as a constant reminder of their loss through adoption (ter Meulen et al., 2019). Therapeutic interventions that could help adoptees process the emotions tied to ambiguous loss could be useful in making sense of this experience for some adoptees (ter Meulen et al., 2019). Addressing the complex aspects of loss could enable adoption practices and post-adoption support to function in helping adoptees navigate and make sense of their complex experiences.

Together, the research collectively demonstrates how ambiguous loss is a part of adoptees’ lives. Powell and Afifi (2005) specifically connected adoptees’ feelings of uncertainty to ambiguous loss, which creates a unique kind of grief that can remain unresolved and hard to fully recognize. Adding to this, Grotevant and colleagues (2000) found that becoming a parent can bring these feelings to the surface.

The culmination of these findings demonstrate that ambiguous loss is a central part of adoptees’ experiences. This loss experienced by adoptees can show up in relationships, ideas of identity and self-perception and even in relationships. Addressing this loss, as ter Meulen and colleagues (2019) suggest, includes therapeutic interventions that allow adoptees to both explore

and make sense of their feelings about relinquishment. When the ambiguous nature of this loss is acknowledged, the opportunity opens up for adoptees to begin to process and grieve these feelings of loss.

Wellness in Adulthood

Psychosocial Wellbeing

Borders and colleagues (2000) conducted research on adopted adults aged 35-55 to examine whether they exhibited greater psychosocial dysfunction compared to non-adopted adults. The study utilized standardized measures and researcher-designed survey items (Borders et al., 2000). The results indicated that overall, adult adoptees and their non-adopted friends reported similar experiences and perceptions of their adult lives (Borders et al., 2000). Specifically, they exhibited moderate satisfaction with life, few life regrets, and some indecisiveness about life purpose and meaning (Borders et al., 2000).

According to Borders and colleagues (2000), both groups reported moderate levels of marital satisfaction and midlife identity issues. Nonetheless, some distinctions between adoptees and their friends were found. Compared to their friends, a greater proportion of adoptees viewed their parents as a source of meaning in their life (Borders et al., 2000). But adoptees reported perceiving their parents as less supportive than their friends did (Borders et al., 2000).

In terms of attachment in adulthood, adoptees were found less likely to classify themselves as securely attached and more likely to describe themselves as anxious or avoidant in comparison to their friends (Borders et al., 2000). Therefore, suggesting that a higher proportion of adoptees felt discomfort about being close to others, although they did not necessarily avoid these close emotional relationships at a higher rate (Borders et al., 2000). These findings,

although not causal, show what early attachment disruptions can affect the ways in which adoptees relate to others in adulthood.

According to Border and colleagues (2000), adoptees in the sample had a considerably higher average depression score and reported higher levels of depression than their friends (Borders et al., 2000). This disparity reveals a pattern that suggests that adoptees may experience difficulties that make symptoms of depression worse (Borders et al., 2000). Adoptees also had higher rates of clinical depression than their friends, with a greater proportion of adoptees exceeding the clinical cut-off for depression (Borders et al., 2000). These findings suggest that the experiences associated with adoption may make adoptees more vulnerable to the mental health challenges, even in supportive adoptive environments (Border et al., 2000).

These early experiences may continue into adulthood and affect adoptees' ability to control their emotions, cope with stress and develop their sense of self – all of which are known to be related to mental health outcomes (Border et al., 2000). Of interest to note is that while adoptees were more likely than their acquaintances to seek counselling at some time in their lives, adoption-related concerns were not the main reason of counselling requests (Borders et al., 2000). This contrast demonstrates how the reasons for seeking counselling can differ based on individual experiences. This also implies that adoptees seek counselling for a variety of issues rather than just adoption-related ones (Borders et al., 2000).

Overall, in terms of psychological and social wellbeing, the study demonstrated both similarities and differences between adult adoptees and their non-adopted friends. While both groups shared some common mental health challenges, there are differences in their attachment styles and in the rate and severity of depression (Borders et al., 2000). This contrast demonstrates

a clear indication for the need to acknowledge specific emotional and psychological needs of adoptees especially when it relates to attachment and mental health support.

Impact on Parenting

Neil and colleagues (2023) investigated the narratives of adoptees who became parents on their adoption and parenting experiences. The sample for the study included 40 adults who were adopted after the 1980s in England, most of whom were adopted through the child protection system (Neil et al., 2023). The study's aim was to better understand how early adoption impacted them as parents (Neil et al., 2023). Both men and women, between the ages of 20 and 30 with diverse ethnic backgrounds and adoption ages ranging from infancy to 12 years old made up the participants of the study (Neil et al., 2023).

Neil and colleagues (2023) examine participant narratives using a life story interview method and found four major themes that emerged: "continuously stable," "pulling through," "still struggling," and "robbed of parenthood" (Neil et al., 2023). The study emphasizes the complexity of adoptees life experiences, demonstrating that although early negative experiences present ongoing challenges, parenthood can also be a positive and life changing experience (Neil et al., 2023). The research demonstrated adoption can act as both a risk and a protective factor which affects how participants handle parenting and overcome challenges (Neil et al., 2023).

Neil and colleagues' (2023) findings echoed findings by Despax and Bouteyre (2019) and Field and Pond (2018), that becoming a parent can reawaken adoption-related issues. This was particularly clear in the "pulling through" and "still struggling" groups in Neil and colleagues' (2023) study. For adoptees in this group, parenthood often brought up fears of failing, feelings of rejection, or worries about repeating past patterns, particularly for those who had experienced neglect or were adopted at an older age (Neil et al., 2023).

Parenthood was also a turning point for many adoptees, motivating them to work to break cycles and rethink their roles as parents (Neil et al., 2023). But for others, specifically those in the “still struggling” group, the emotional intensity of parenting often intersected with mental health challenges and adoption-related anxieties which made the parenting experience overwhelming (Neil et al., 2023). Neil and colleagues (2023) emphasize the double-edged nature of parenthood for adoptees: while it can bring about healing and growth, it can also bring unresolved emotional struggles to the surface.

According to the study, many adoptees experience persistent mental health issues that continued after they became parents (Neil et al., 2023). These challenges increased concerns about reoccurring cycles of abuse (Neil et al., 2023). These were concerns across the majority of groups except for individuals in the “continuous stability” group (Neil et al., 2023). In spite of this, adoptees were often experienced parenthood as a motivator for change which encouraged them to stabilize their lives and work to break dysfunctional patterns (Neil et al., 2023). Unfortunately, some adoptees were discouraged from seeking help due to fears of being judged by others (Neil et al., 2023).

Relationships between adoptees and their birth and adoptive families were also altered by parenthood (Neil et al., 2023). While relationships with their birth families did not change, those in the “continuous stability” group maintained strong ties with their adoptive families (Neil et al., 2023). In the “pulling through” group, becoming a parent often led to stronger connections with adoptive parents, who often embraced grandparent roles, or to intentional distance from negative influences to protect their children (Neil et al., 2023).

The “still struggling” and “robbed of parenthood” groups, on the other hand, saw minimal change because their family relationships remained absent or strained (Neil et al., 2023).

Despite these difficulties, they found that parenthood brought about a sense of meaning and resilience for many adoptees (Neil et al., 2023). For the “pulling through” group, the biological connection with their children motivated them to overcome personal struggles (Neil et al., 2023). By contrast, the “still struggling” group, although deeply committed to their children, found that distress complicated their parenting. The participants in the “robbed of parenthood” group faced profound losses due to limitations on their ability to parent and feeling that this was central to their identity (Neil et al., 2023).

Neil and colleagues (2023) identified that openness about adoption, including open communication with adoptive parents and contact with birth families, plays an important role in adoptees’ wellbeing and parenting experiences. In all the types, they found that adoptees appreciated adoptive parents who facilitated building trust and helped them develop a coherent narrative around their adoption (Neil et al., 2023).

They also found that openness did not only strengthen relationships with adoptive parents but also helped adoptees process complex feelings about their birth families, especially during parenthood, when these emotions often come to the surface (Neil et al., 2023). The findings indicate that it is important to prepare and support adoptive parents to prioritize openness, which can benefit family relationships and promote resilience for adoptees as both adults and parents (Neil et al., 2023).

This study’s findings show how early experiences that adoptees have with their adoptive parents can really influence an adoptee’s ability to parent and highlights the layered and complex nature of an adoptee’s experience (Neil et al., 2023). When adoptees become parents, there are often anxieties and unresolved issues about their birth families that resurface (Neil et al., 2023). As pointed out by Neil and colleague’s (2023) findings and much research that has come before,

adoptive parents play a key role from the start. Adoptive parents offering of support, trust, and open communication can help build the resilience adoptees need for parenthood (Neil et al., 2023). Although not straightforward, this foundation of care may allow adoptees to better handle parenting challenges.

Together, the studies by Neil and colleagues (2023) and Borders and colleagues (2000) highlight how adoption affects adoptees' wellbeing as adults. Adoptees were more likely to suffer from attachment insecurities and higher levels of depression than non-adopted individuals, according to Borders and colleagues (2000), even though they generally reported similar life satisfaction and relationship difficulties.

The results of Neil and colleagues' (2023) study illustrated how adoption-related issues and fears associated with these complex adoption experiences can resurface during parenthood. Although these studies differ in many ways, both emphasize the importance of support, particularly from adoptive parents in fostering emotional resilience in their children (Borders et al., 2000; Neil et al., 2023). The results of both studies suggest that strong, open communication with adoptive parents provide adoptees with a foundation useful in learning to manage these complexities that may come up in both adulthood and parenthood (Borders et al., 2000; Neil et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Overall, the research demonstrates the role of adoptive families in shaping the lives of adoptees. Notably, of great importance is the adoptee's perception of this support, which plays a pivotal role in fostering secure emotional attachments. This finding aligns closely with concepts of attachment and attunement, whereby it reaches beyond meeting the physical needs of the child and focuses on a child's emotional, psychological and belonging needs. Also important is an

understanding of adoption as a lifelong process that is everchanging and dynamic rather than a single event at one point in time.

The culmination of these studies demonstrates the uniqueness of adoptees' experiences, not only in comparison to non-adoptees but also in the diverse ways these experiences vary among adoptees themselves. Despite these differences, there is an underlying, pervasive sense of loss that shows up in various ways. Even among individuals who express satisfaction with their lives and hold positive views of their adoption, there remains an undeniable and uniquely profound sense of ambiguous loss (ter Meulen et al., 2019) -- a type of loss without closure, often revisited and grieved throughout one's life. While this loss can be deeply and profoundly felt, it does not take away from the potential for healing. The research offers a hopeful perspective that adoptive parents' attunement and the cultivation of secure attachment relationships can facilitate healing from earlier adversities.

Looking ahead, it could be valuable to explore additional resources that could be available to adoptive parents to help them attune to their child's needs from the early stages of adoption through to adulthood. While significant progress has already been made in this area, there is still a need for continued pre- and post-adoption support to better help parents in fostering the long-term wellbeing of their children. Chapter Three will contribute to this need by providing an educational parenting toolkit for adoptive families geared specifically towards adoptive parents. In this way, the research is being utilized for the benefit of the population it aims to serve.

Chapter Three: Discussion

The previous chapter reviewed the current literature on the connection between adoption and attachment and the various outcomes associated with it. This chapter will discuss limitations in the existing research, identify areas for future exploration, and present ideas and recommendations for supporting adoptive parents. The recommendations are largely drawn from the findings of Gordon Neufeld and Gabor Maté in their book, *Hold on to Your Kids* (2013). This book provides an excellent overview and supports the literature on the importance of attachment and attunement and for the purposes of this paper, I suggest specifically in the lives of adoptees and adoptive parents. In addition, I have prepared a parenting toolkit which utilizes concepts from Neufeld and Maté's (2013) book and aims to provide a working understanding and insights for those who are caring for or working with adoptees specifically around attachment and attunement for adoptive parents.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

While existing research on adoption has provided valuable insights, more studies are necessary to further the current knowledge on this topic. In this section, I will explore the limitations of the current research on adoption with an aim to highlight the areas that could benefit from further development and exploration.

Some of the research on adoption and attachment lacks generalizability as many have small sample sizes that are drawn from specific populations (Pace et al., 2015). These factors make it difficult to generalize results to the larger "adopted population", especially across different cultural, socioeconomic or racial backgrounds. Although not feasible in all research contexts, when appropriate, future research could prioritize larger and more diverse samples to improve generalizability.

Additionally, there seems to be an underrepresentation of adoptee's voices, with research not always including qualitative research that allows free expression from the adoptee on their subjective and lived experiences (Feeney et al., 2007). As well, some cross-sectional adoption research has focused more on the adoptive parents' perspective of their adopted child, rather than the experience of the adoptee themselves (Feeney et al., 2007). Although insight and perspective from adoptive parents may be helpful in certain research contexts, it is crucial to prioritize the voices of adoptees in research specifically about them. This imbalance highlights the need to re-centre the adoptee's voice in adoption research.

Recommendations for future research could include studies that explore the intersectionality of adoption. For example, how does race, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status intersect with the experience of adoption? How might these intersections effect adoptive parents' ability to foster attachment in these contexts? Additionally, a focus on cross-racial adoptive families and the unique challenges they face would be beneficial. What might be the lived experience of adoptees who differ in race from their adoptive parents be? How might this experience differ in adoptive families where both adoptive parents and children are perceived as being of the same race? These are all questions that would be valuable to explore further.

Much of the current research is done in Western cultural contexts and there is limited research on adoption practices and outcomes other than this, particularly in low-income countries (Rothbaum et al., 2000). In Rothbaum and colleagues' (2000) critical examination of the universality of attachment theory, they found that most of these studies were rooted in Western, middle-class environments. Further research looking into the nuances of adoption in non-Western contexts, could be beneficial. This might include focusing on cultural views, policies and treatment of children prior to adoption.

It would also be helpful to have more longitudinal studies that follow adoptees from infancy to adulthood. It seems important to have longitudinal studies to understand more comprehensively how attachment evolves through developmental stages in adoptive families. This has the potential to reveal important findings relating to attachment, wellbeing and identity formation.

Lastly, further research on the efficacy of post-adoption services may prove beneficial. There is currently limited data on the efficacy of post-adoption services and resources for adoptees and adoptive families (Barth et al., 2001). There are also gaps in the literature regarding the specific needs of adoptees as they move through different life stages beyond childhood and into adult life (Barth et al., 2001). It appears that additional research is needed to explore the efficacy of post-adoption services and is essential in deepening understanding in how these services could expand or change to better help the communities they aim to serve.

Recommendations for Adoptive Parents

So why is this research important and how can we use it to impact the wellbeing and healthy development of adoptees and their families? How can mental health practitioners such as registered clinical counsellors (RCCs), bridge the gap between research and practice? What can be done to support these critical issues of wellness and identity in a way that makes sense and facilitates an approach that resonates with clients regardless of differences such as race, socioeconomic status or culture? Providing language for understanding attachment theory and strategies for becoming attuned to the needs of a child seem like critical first steps.

Gaining an understanding of attunement and attachment has the potential to bring wellness and growth into all parent-child relationships and to the complexities of adoptive families. As Gordan Neufeld (2013) states, “All the parenting skills in the world cannot

compensate for a lack of attachment relationship”, emphasizing that attachment really is the foundation of a child’s wellbeing. When one understands how attachment can impact growth and how attuned parenting can allow a child to be cared for, the universality of such an approach becomes clearer. In this way, access for helping can move beyond culture and socioeconomic standing.

Attachment as Hierarchical

According to Neufeld and Maté’s book, *Hold on to Your Kids* (2013), attuned parenting fosters secure attachment through deeply understanding and responding to a child’s emotional and psychological needs. It involves parents being sensitive to a child’s cues regarding emotions and developmental needs and prioritizes the child’s feelings and needing to be heard and seen (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Parents with high attunement skills help children develop resilience, emotionally regulate and develop a strong sense of self (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). They posit that there are issues when parents are not attuned -- whereby children may seek attachment elsewhere, specifically from peers – which can lead to insecure attachment, emotional insecurity, behavioural issues and difficulties in having healthy relationships later in life (Neufeld & Maté, 2013).

Specifically relevant to adopted children may be struggles with trust due to past disruptions in attachment and emotional shutdown which can present as acting out (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Also relevant to adoptees is the tendency to seek attachment to peers instead of parents in the absence of secure parent attachment (Delgado et al., 2022; Grant-Marsney et al., 2015; Neufeld & Maté, 2013). This also has been hypothesized as due to previous disruptions in attachment (Moretti & Peled, 2004; Neufeld & Maté, 2013). These common challenges faced by adopted children mean that understanding attachment as hierarchical and as protective is of the

utmost importance so that adoptive parents are profoundly aware of the role they play for their children.

A key premise of Neufeld and Maté's (2013) work outlined in *Hold on to Your Kids* centres around the idea of attachment as hierarchical. Aligning with attachment theory, children will instinctively seek attachment to feel a sense of safety. According to Neufeld and Maté (2013), children with insecure attachment oftentimes turn to their peers for security. Neufeld and Maté argue that parental attachment must matter more than peers because peer relationships cannot provide children with the stability and security, they need for healthy development. They point out that while parents can provide unconditional love, peers do not (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). This means that parents can help shape identity for children through reinforcing values, emotions and individuality (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Peers by contrast, cannot offer unconditional love and undermine healthy identity development (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Parents offer emotional security for children to have the freedom to express their emotions. Peer relationships, by contrast, can be emotionally volatile which can create uncertainty of acceptance (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). They argue that when peers replace parents as attachment figures, this can lead to overall instability and behavioural issues due to the insecurity that comes with unstable peer relationships (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Lastly, they propose that when children have a healthy dependence on parents, this facilitates true independence because this secure base allows them to become independent as a naturally occurring outcome (Neufeld & Maté, 2013). Children oriented towards peers may seek independence too soon and oftentimes in unhealthy ways such as by rebelling or shutting out parents as important influencers in their growth (Neufeld & Maté, 2013).

Returning to the earlier questions, this literature provides language for adoptive parents with which they can come to understand and apply the principles of attachment and attunement effectively. Mental health practitioners such as RCCs can play a key role in bridging the gap between research and practice by equipping adoptive families with the language and strategies needed to foster secure attachments. By understanding these concepts themselves, mental health practitioners can play a role in helping families foster attuned parenting and the complexities of adoption in a way that is accessible, regardless of differences like culture or socioeconomic status.

Contribution to the Field

I have created an infographic that is geared specifically towards adoptive parents and mental health practitioners supporting adoptive families. This infographic provides insights into attachment-based parenting, including core strategies to increase attunement, habits to strengthen attachment, and insights on healing and rebuilding attachment. In addition, the infographic provides book suggestions and support organizations within British Columbia and online resources for adoptive families.

My aim is that this infographic be used as a resource for adoptive parents who want to gain more knowledge surrounding attunement and as a resource for mental health practitioners who want to work with adoptive families. This infographic aims to give people language to explain why it works and to help them understand how it works. Introducing a framework that focuses on the importance of relationship offers an approach to care which is accessible to all. Unlike other “parenting toolkits” which may provide a “must-do list” on how to parent, my aim is to develop a resource that will help parents understand the nature of attachment and

attunement and how to use these understandings to foster healthy growth and development of their child. The infographic can be found in the appendix that follows this chapter.

Conclusion

The objective of this capstone paper was to explore the connection between childhood adoption and attachment, highlighting the impact that this can have on future life outcomes, identity, and overall wellbeing for adoptees. Approaching this work with empathy, compassion and a growth mindset is essential in making a meaningful impact. Despite the inherent complexities at play for adoptees, the insights that were gained through this capstone demonstrate the pivotal role that adoptive parents play in their children's lives and the ability for growth even after potentially adverse experiences. While there is inherent loss in adoption, adoptees should not be viewed through a lens of deficiency. Their experiences are unique, their voices offer insight, their insights offer opportunities for learning and their contributions add to the current body of knowledge to advance care. My hope is that mental health practitioners and adoptive parents approach supporting adoptees with a focus on the inherent strengths they possess while acknowledging the impact of loss that accompanies, by its very nature, the ongoing experience of adoption.

Appendix

PARENTING TOOLKIT
FOR ADOPTIVE PARENTS



*Based on Neufeld & Mate's Approach
on Attachment & Attunement*

"The secret of parenting is not in what a parent does, but rather, who the parent is to the child" - Gordon Neufeld

THE IMPORTANCE OF ATTACHMENT

UNDERSTANDING

ATTACHMENT AS HIERARCHICAL: Children instinctually want to attach, however it matters that their primary attachments be their parents, as this provides a secure base for emotional and psychological development. When peers replace parents as the primary attachments for children, they may struggle with trust, authority and emotional regulation.

(Neufeld & Mate, 2013)

"All the parenting skills in the world cannot compensate for a lack of attachment relationship" - Gordon Neufeld

THE POWER OF ATTUNEMENT

WHAT IS ATTUNED PARENTING? The ability to deeply understand and respond to your child's emotional and psychological needs.

(Neufeld & Mate, 2013)

CORE STRATEGIES >>



COLLECT BEFORE YOU DIRECT: Reconnecting before giving instructions. Ex: If a child is deeply engaged in play, first show interest make a connection about it, before transitioning them to another task.

(Neufeld & Mate, 2013)



ENGAGE AND INVITE DEPENDENCY: Children want to feel that they are wanted by their parents, not just that their parents are responsible for them. Ex: Inviting help in small tasks: "Can you be my special helper with this?" (Neufeld & Mate, 2013)



MATCH EMOTIONAL NEEDS, NOT JUST BEHAVIOUR: Instead of focusing on *what* a child is doing, focus on *why* they are doing it to help them feel emotionally understood. Ex: Instead of, "stop crying, it's not a big deal, say, "I see you're upset. Do you want to tell me what happened?"

Thümmler et al., 2022; Neufeld & Mate, 2013)



PLAYFUL CONNECTION: Play is a child's primary way of bonding and expressing emotions and signals that they feel safe. Ex: Silly role playing -- acting out a bedtime routine with stuffed animals to help ease the transition to bedtime.

(Ginsberg et al., 2007)

HABITS TO STRENGTHEN ATTACHMENT



LEADING WITH WARMTH: Initiating positive interactions such as smiling and making eye contact, greeting your child first, having morning snuggles or check-ins all help to foster attachment.

(Risi et al., 2021; Neufeld & Mate, 2013)

STRUCTURING TOGETHERNESS: Creating family routines such as family meals and bedtime rituals can help provide structure and create opportunities for connection. (Evergreen Psychotherapy Center, n.d.)



BRIDGING SEPARATIONS: Maintaining connection while there are absences can be important in fostering secure attachment. This may look like expressing affection and providing reassurance before leaving. This can aid in bridging the time of separation between the parent and the child.

(Thompson et al., 2022; Neufeld & Maté, 2013)

HEALING AND REBUILDING ATTACHMENT

FEAR OF VULNERABILITY: Children who have experienced inconsistent or unresponsive caregiving might act defensively, pushing away parents due to fear of being vulnerable and being hurt emotionally.

(Vandevivere et al., 2014; Neufeld & Maté, 2013)

TESTING PARENTAL COMMITMENT: When children act out in challenging ways, such as taking part in "do you really love me?" behaviours, they may be attempting to test parental commitment in order to seek reassurance and validate security with their parents.



(Delgado et al., 2022; Neufeld & Maté, 2013)

STAYING PRESENT EVEN WHEN REJECTED: Staying present even in the face of rejection is important in demonstrating reliability and stability and in rebuilding trust.

(Nordahl et al., 2020; Neufeld & Maté, 2013)

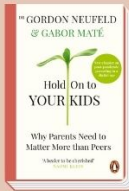
UNCONDITIONAL LOVE, NOT APPROVAL: Demonstrating unconditional love, beyond mere approval of behaviours is an important way to strengthen attachment and build trust.

(Neufeld & Maté, 2013)

REDUCE PEER ATTACHMENT: In order to strengthen parent-child attachment, it is important to reduce the level of peer attachment. Facilitating parent-child bond is the base for parents to provide guidance and emotional support.

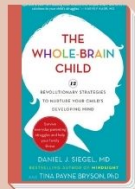
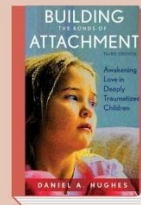
(Delgado et al., 2022; Grant-Marsney et al., 2015; Neufeld & Maté, 2013)

BOOKS ON ATTACHMENT-BASED PARENTING & ADOPTION



Hold on to Your Kids: Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers (2013) by Gordon Neufeld & Gabor Maté

Building the Bonds of Attachment: Awakening Love in Deeply Troubled Children (2017) by Daniel Hughes



The Whole-Brain Child: 12 Revolutionary Strategies to Nurture Your Child's Developing Mind (2011) by Daniel Siegel & Tina Payne Bryson

The Connected Child: Bring Hope and Healing to Your Adoptive Family (2007) by Karen Purvis, David Cross & Wendy Sunshine



SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS & ONLINE RESOURCES



1. *Belonging Network* (formerly *Adoptive Families Association of BC*)

Services: Support, education & connection for adoptive families

belongingnetwork.com

2. *Adoption Centre of British Columbia*

Services: Licensed adoption agency that offers services to both birth and adoptive parents, including support, information and assistance through adoption process

kcr.ca/family-services/adoption-centre-of-british-columbia/

3. *Families Rising*

Services: Maintains a database of support groups for adoptive, foster and kinship parents across Canada

wearefamiliesrising.org/parent-group/country/Canada/

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