SENSE OF SELF: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF ADULT KOREAN ADOPTEES’ EVOLVING RELATIONSHIP WITH THEIR BIRTH FAMILIES

by

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(Under the Direction of TALMADGE C GUY)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore how Adult Korean Adoptees’ (AKAs) evolving relationships with their birth families affect their developing senses of self.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do AKAs describe their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ2. How have AKAs’ sense of self developed through their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ3. What meaning do AKAs attach to the experience of reuniting with their birth families?

A qualitative approach implementing narrative inquiry was used for this study. Open-ended interviews were conducted with eight Adult Korean Adoptees (AKAs) who have had reunion experiences with their birth families and have continuing relationships with their birth families.

Analysis revealed four major themes. The first theme indicated that AKAs develop unique and distinctive family relationships with their birth families. The second theme revealed AKAs challenges with the language, culture, and social stigmas that make their relationships with their birth families complicated. The third theme showed that AKAs were satisfied with their experiences in terms of validating their identities by integrating knowledge about their
origins and birth families. Finally, this study found that their evolving relationships with their birth families have had significant impacts on their understandings of themselves by increasing their attachment to their origin of birth.

Three major conclusions were drawn from this study: 1.) AKAs increase the complexity of understanding self by building distinctive family affiliations with their birth families; 2.) AKAs generate developmental pathways by experiencing their cognitive maturation and connecting the self with others selectively; and finally, 3.) AKAs’ relationships with their birth families are turning points that precipitate the ongoing development of their senses of self in their adulthoods.

INDEX WORDS: Adult Development, Adult Education, Adult Korean Adoptees, Family Relationships, Narrative Inquiry, Sense of Self, Reunification
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B.A., Indiana University of Pennsylvania, 2004

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2015
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May 2015
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my Lord, who always supports, inspires, and loves me unconditionally. My Lord, please use this study for your name.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Six years of this doctoral journey go through my mind like a flash. I would like to take this opportunity to give thanks to many wonderful people who have been very supportive and have inspired me to complete my doctoral journey at the University of Georgia. Although my deepest thanks are not enough to express my appreciation in words, these special recognitions will be remembered and inscribed in my soul.

Thank you to my major professor, Dr. Talmadge C. Guy. You have always been there for me when I needed you and have provided me with support, encouragement, and insight. Your mentorship, guidance, warmth, and care allowed me to complete this study. I truly appreciate you for standing by me throughout my doctoral journey.

Dr. Juanita Johnson-Bailey, as my methodologist, showed me that I can do narrative study and be successful. You gave me your book, Flat-footed Truths. Whenever I was not very confident while doing my work, I opened your book and was reminded of your belief in me. I love your warmth, sincerely, and boundless brilliance.

Dr. Aliki Nicolaides, thank you for the most intriguing and inspiring course of my doctoral program. I was not just gaining knowledge from your class, but you made me reflect on who I am as an adult living in a complex world. I also appreciate that you mentored me throughout this dissertation process and gave me supportive feedback.

Much thanks to Dr. Betsy Vonk. Even though I was not able to take your class during my time at the University of Georgia and had no relationship with you previously, you willingly accepted becoming my committee member. Every time I visited you to discuss my study, you
always welcomed me with warmth and encouragement. I have been very fortunate to have you on my committee.

In addition to my major professor and dissertation committee members, I am fortunate to have had several exceptional faculty members in the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy. Because of you all, I was able to learn, grow, and become an adult educator. River’s Crossing was my second home, and I felt so cozy and comfortable studying there. I also thank you for the support from the department, such as hosting international student parties and UGALLA.

I thank my colleagues and fellow graduate students in the Adult Education and Qualitative Research program for their companionship and support throughout my doctoral journey. Ines Beltran, thank you for being there for me when I needed you. Because of you and your family, I didn’t feel as homesick. Many thanks to my fellow Korean graduate students and church friends. Without your support, encouragement, and friendship, I could not have survived this doctoral journey. I also thank Pastor Daniel P. Park at Athens Korean Baptist Church. I became a born again Christian because of you. Thank you for your immeasurable support, guidance, and prayer.

To my eight study participants, you were a great support by showing interest and participating in this study. I am very grateful to have had the occasion to meet you and share life stories with each of you. I was touched by your sincerity and continued support with this study. This dissertation would not have been possible without you.

Stephanie Short, the moment I met you in class until now, you have been through my doctoral journey with me offering great support, encouragement, friendship, and love. Even though I am no longer in Athens and moved up to PA, you continually show a great love for me and my family. I am very sure that you are an angel from God.
To my parents, Sangchun Son and Okbun Jeon. I was so fortunate to be born as your daughter. I know it was a hard decision for you to let me study abroad and stay so far away, but you have trusted and supported me unconditionally. Your presence enables me to stand tall and pursue this life’s dream. I will never forget your sacrifice and love for me. And, many thanks to my three sisters. I couldn’t imagine how I would have come to this moment of completing my dissertation without your care, love and presence. My son, Jeeho, I met you while I was writing a prospectus defense, and now, you are two years old. You are the joy, sunshine, motivation, and love of my life. Thank you for allowing mommy to work on this dissertation. Finally, to my husband, Duckki Min, a heartfelt thank you for everything you have done for me. There are no words that can express how much I appreciate your unconditional love, support, and encouragement through out this doctoral journey. You are a true blessing in my life. I love you.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Korean War, over 150,000 Korean children were placed for adoption in Western families in Europe, North America, and Australia (Hubinette, 2004). In particular, a large number of Koreans (109,323) were placed in the United States between 1953 and 2008 (Onishi, 2008). This was, indeed, the first wave of international adoptions that brought Korean-born children to the United States. Now, these adoptees are considered the first generation of international adoptees, and more international children from a variety of countries are being adopted in Western societies. As most Korean-born children are placed with White families, they question their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities throughout their childhood (Huh, 2007). Several studies broached these issues and have conducted research on these juvenile adoptees’ adjustment and identity development. However, as some of these children have reached adulthood, curiosity about their roots, origins, and birth families may prompt them to search for their birth families. Although there are no official statistics, since the late 1980s, the number of Korean adoptees from the United States and Europe who visit Korea has risen to approximately 3,000 to 5,000 per year (Kim, 2007). Searching and reuniting with birth families have therefore become significant phenomena for international Korean adoptees. Studies on reunion experiences have found that the primary outcome of these searches is for adoptees to have a better sense of self in relation to their identities (Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Trinder, Feast, & Howe, 2004).

Studies on adoptees’ reunion experiences have mainly been conducted on domestic adoptions and reveal that reunions are known to promote adoptees’ identity satisfaction and
development. But, these studies do not account for the complexities of international adoptees’ search and reunion experiences. There is a lack of understanding concerning the different contexts of adult Korean adoptees’ reunion experiences with their birth families and how these experiences influence their sense of self in their continued growth and development. Addressing the Korean context is important in terms of providing a better understanding of the background of international Korean adoptions. Beginning at this point, I will explore the unique issues apparent to adult Korean adoptees’ reunion experiences.

**Background of International Korean Adoption.**

The attention to international Korean adoption began when Harry and Bertha Holt of Oregon adopted twelve Korean children and organized a mass international adoption network from Korea in 1955. Harry Holt established a private adoption agency, the Holt Adoption Program, in 1964 in Seoul, Korea. Later, Korean Social Services and Eastern Social Welfare were established and became major organizations for arranging international Korean adoptions. However, there were many controversies surrounding international adoption, because there were doubts about these agencies’ abilities to arrange suitable adoptive families and their knowledge about how the processes were accomplished (Choy, 2007).

South Korea recovered very quickly from the war and achieved economic success in the 1980s. Yet, international adoptions between South Korea and the West have continued. The first criticism of Korean adoption came during the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics with a public announcement from the American press condemning Korea for exporting children to the West (Kim, 2003). Critics charged that Korea’s adoption programs contributed to the success of the business industry in Korea by selling children like commodities (Hubinette, 2004). In response to this condemnation, the Korean government planned to reduce international adoption and
encouraged domestic adoption by providing tax incentives and family benefits. The number of international adoptions decreased with the effort to increase domestic adoption in Korea, but international Korean adoptions have not yet ceased. According to the Korea Adoption Service (2011), 1,013 children, from newborns to three year old toddlers, were placed overseas in 2010. In consideration of the history of Korean society, the continued phenomena of international Korean adoption can be explained by two sets of factors: (a) the social and cultural contexts in Korea and (b) the political and economic contexts in Korea.

A combination of cultural and social norms that formed within Korean society created the increased rate of international adoption. Confucianism has influenced and shaped Korean family systems since the Chosun dynasty, and historically, Koreans only adopt paternal kin and prefer male infants (Chun, 1989). Although Korean society has experienced rapid change since the 1960s, Confucian ideology remains resilient and emphasizes chastity as the unequivocal responsibility of women and to regulate women’s sexuality. Children being born out of wedlock or an unofficial union is censured as being immoral and sinful (Kim, 2003). Within this social context and the lack of governmental support, the burden of these children is placed solely on the mothers, and thus, few choices remain besides having abortions or giving babies up for international adoption.

Another set of factors is related to economic reasons interwoven into a political backdrop. Particularly, in the United States, the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) initiated a movement against the placement of African-American children with White families in the 1970s. As a result, the demand for international adoption increased to meet a lack of available White babies for infertile couples (Lovelock, 2000), and the Korean government silenced the practice of international adoption and saved budgetary amounts on social welfare.
Both the United States and the Korean governments were in a win-win situation without taking these children’s needs into account. Bound together with these contexts, international adoptions in Korea have been formed by multifaceted backgrounds of social, cultural, political, and economical situations. As a result, Korean-born children were placed with White families in Western nations without support from their own government or concern from society.

**Adult Korean Adoptees as Transracial Adoptees**

Raised in an integrated family in which racial, ethnic and cultural differences exist between adoptees and their adoptive parents, Korean born children are assumed to have difficulties developing their racial and ethnic identities. Added to the political concerns of racism and imperialism, the practice of transracial adoption has received a great deal of attention (Kahan, 2006). Several studies have focused on transracial adoptees’ racial and ethnic identity development (Huh & Reid, 2000; Huh, 2007). These studies found that parents’ positive support for their children’s ethnicity greatly influence the children’s identity development. However, Nelson (2009) argues that, although studies claim to focus on adoptees’ development, the primary concern is the role of the adoptive parents and not the adoptees themselves.

The development concern continues as adoptees enter into adulthood. Adoptees move away from their adoptive parents, go to college, find careers and form relationships with others. Studies found that through cultural exploration and activities among the same ethnic group or diverse groups, adult Korean adoptees enhanced their own identity development (Shiao & Tuan, 2008, 2011: Song & Lee, 2009). Furthermore, as part of this exploration, there are a significant number of international adoptees searching for their birth families and information about their origins (Tieman, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2008). The estimated number of Korean adoptees from the United States and Europe who visit Korea is approximately 3,000 to 5,000 every year.
The primary motivation for searching and reuniting with birth families is related to identity issues. In other words, inquiring questions like “Who am I?” and “Where did I come from?” are main concerns for better understandings of self. The reunions, in essence, provide opportunities to gain information about their births and roots that help adoptees’ have a sense of self (Passmore & Feeney, 2009, p. 101). Yet, while the importance of searching and reuniting has received a great deal of attention for adult adoptees in their development of identities and well-being, little is known about trans-racial adoptees’ reunion experiences, especially among inter-country adoptees.

Several studies have examined adult adoptees’ reunions and relationships with their birth families. According to these studies’ findings, adult adoptees who reunited with their birth mothers maintained that their reunions were successful in terms of removing the secrecy surrounding their adoptive identities and allowed them to better understand their adoptive status (March, 1997: Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Long-term post-reunion relationships were examined by Howe and Feast (2001) over a ten year period. They found that over sixty percent of participants continued contact with their birth parents and eighty-eight percent reported positive reunion experiences. Based on these findings, it is assumed that each reunion is unique and different; overall, the results of these reunions were advantageous for adoptees in general.

Trinder, Feast and Howe (2004) published Adoption Reunion Handbook, which provides detailed information about the process of reunification and maintaining relationships with birth families. In the study, three key outcomes were summarized, including information about one’s roots, new relationships with others, and a new way of thinking about oneself. Among these three expected outcomes, the authors emphasized that knowing who you are and building a better sense of self as an adoptee would be the most important outcome of a reunion experience.
However, even though the study stated the positive effects of reunions on adoptees’ identity development, these studies did not provide specific reasons why adoptees felt complete after their reunion experiences and how they processed their continued relationships with their birth families. In other words, while studies suggested that identity is one of the main concerns of adult adoptees before, during, and after the reunion experiences, they did not articulate the complexities and the dynamics of identity development or discuss how these experiences might influence adoptees’ sense of self and their personal growth. In addition, most studies on reunions were conducted within a domestic reunion context that does not address the unique condition of international adoptees. Korean-born adult adoptees were the first large group of international adoptees to be placed in the West and became a significant adoptee population. This was especially true in the U.S. Since the 1970s, although Korean-born adult adoptees have been actively engaged in searching for their roots and involved in reuniting with their birth families, little attention has been paid to this group of adoptees and their reunion experiences.

Several studies offer theoretical frameworks for transracial adoptees’ racial and ethnic development, which acknowledge distinction from other general identity theories. For instance, Baden and Steward (2000) argued that previous identity models are not relevant to transracial adoptees that are different racially, ethnically, or culturally than their adoptive parents. Acknowledging adoptees own races and cultures, Baden and Steward developed the Cultural-Racial Identity Model and suggested factors, such as adoptive parents, family members, and schools, that contribute to transracial adoptees’ identity development. While this model generally covers transracial adoptees’ identity development, Lieberman (2001) in particular conducted her research focused on adult Korean adoptees’ identity development. Lieberman viewed cultural identity as distinct and proposed a model of cultural identity development.
Another approach to Korean adoptees’ identity was studied by Kaanta (2010). This study suggested that Korean adoptees experience an ongoing recursive process rather than a lingering stage development when they encounter a triggering life event in adulthood. In other words, Korean adoptees are continually constructing and reconstructing who they are as they experience certain life situations and transitions. This finding, in fact, was not surprising, because Dunbar and Grutevant (2004) and Baden and Steward (2000) had already suggested that adoptees’ identities are dependent on many social and cultural factors as well as life events. Nevertheless, Kaanta’s (2010) studies contributed to the field by including adult Korean adoptees and by supporting the idea that the construction of adoptees’ identities is a lifelong process. While both Liberman (2001) and Kaanta’s studies highlight adoptees’ self-formation into adulthood, there has been no additional discussions of what this might mean to the adoptees and why this progression matters to them.

Considering Korean adoptees’ reunions with their birth families as life events, Korean adoptees may experience mixed feelings of joy, sadness, love, grief, sorrow, burden and relief as they continue in these relationships. According to Kegan (1982), the two utmost yearnings in the human experience are to be included and to have a sense of self. This concept can also be applied to adult Korean adoptees, because one of the motivations of reunification is to know their origins and roots, which may help adult Korean adoptees feel more included in a particular ethnic and cultural group. Adult Korean adoptees simultaneously seek to understand where they belong between their adoptive and birth families’ cultures. In fact, their sense of self is placed in a central position for establishing an understanding of what it means to be reunited and how they identify themselves in building relationships with their birth families. The way one approaches the construction of the self is, therefore, important to understanding AKAs.
Theories of the Self

Studies in the field of adult education often view self through a humanistic approach, which seeks out an ideal self, referred to as a unitary self, by emphasizing excessive individualism and a separation from the social world (Clark & Dirkx, 2000). However, self never exists outside of society so that it is not appropriate to explain the understanding of self by excluding relationships with others and the broader society (Brookfield, 2002; Fromm, 2004). Analyzing the self through a postmodernist perspective, Foucault (1985) views the self as an active ethical being; the self is understood as always in process, to have plural minds as opposed to having a single principle to be shaped. In fact, living in the postmodern era, where increasing complexities, different cultures, and diverse ideas continue to influence individuals, challenges the conventional view of the self inevitably (Gergen, 1991).

Viewing the self as an interaction between the self and cultural contexts, Kegan (1994) describes the mental demands of an adult’s life as playing multiple roles that are required of them by society. Relating the self with others in society, Kegan argues that developing complex ways of making meaning is necessary in order to meet the increased demands of modern life. For instance, through AKAs’ continuing relationships with their birth families, they see differences in the cultural contexts between their adoptive and birth cultures and acclimate to where they belong in the family’s configuration. They may simultaneously construct and reconstruct meaning to understand themselves both at personal and relational levels. Although studies on adoptees’ reunion experiences emphasize the influence of these relationships on adoptees’ well-being and self-development (Trinder et al., 2004), how the self makes sense of these reunion experiences and the continuation of familial relationships after reunification has not yet been studied.
Viewed from the perspective of constructivism, meaning is constructed through interactions between human beings within the social context (Crotty, 1998). Based on this epistemology, the narrative approach can be applied to understand how AKAs form an understanding of the self. Narrative activity is viewed as a way of organizing and making meaning of one’s experience (Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1990). In short, the development of self can be viewed through this narrative activity, as the self continuously participates and expresses its own existence (McAdams, 1997; Polkinghorne, 1988). A narrative approach allows the self to reveal our consciousness as it relates to others within particular contexts and time frames. Thus, through narratives, one’s development is expressed and experienced (Freeman, 2001).

Approaching AKAs’ sense of self, understood in narrative terms as relational, recognizes multiple, shifting, open-ended, and complex selves in their reunion contexts. This conceptualization of self offers the opportunity to explore AKAs’ shifting and complex stories to understand how AKAs make meaning and generate meanings between themselves and their birth families as well as between AKAs and the world around them. With this approach, an analytic tool is necessary to examine the complexities of AKAs and how these experiences influence their growth and senses of self. Kegan’s (1982, 1994) constructive-developmental theory offers an explanation of development as our way of knowing ourselves related to our surroundings by articulating the movement of our meaning making.

This framework offers a subject-object relationship in which the subject refers to what we are influenced by and identify with, while the object refers to the shifting meaning of the self in which an individual experiences differentiation of the self from the world, and the self is enabled to have a “relationship to” the world rather than “embeddedness in” the world (Kegan,
1982, p. 77). By analyzing the meaning system between the subject-object relationship, this framework permits exploration as a way of looking at self-development. The transition of consciousness occurs with a qualitative shift when individuals are enabled to differentiate and to integrate new views of self and others. In this process, Kegan (1994) highlights the importance of one’s developmental capacities, because they describe the relationship between cognitive, individual and contextual factors that all influence or mediate an adult’s meaning making. Developmental capacities are described as ways of knowing in which individuals perceive a certain knowledge to claim understanding, construct identity to interpret or form the self, and establish relationships with others as well as self within the milieu (Baxter Magolda, Abes, & Torres, 2009: Drago-Severson, 2004). According to Kegan (1982), increased or changed capacities broaden individuals’ perspectives on self and others. Exploring one’s self development, therefore, is essential for looking at not only individuals’ changes of meaning but also their changing developmental capacities.

Without approaching adult Korean adoptees’ meaning-making and its gradual development as well as changes in developmental capacities within their experiences, the increase in and continuation of adult Korean adoptees’ relationships with their birth families would remain unknown, and adoptees and scholars would never fully be able to understand and reflect on their evolving relationships. In other words, we would continually fail to create opportunities to represent and to study adult Korean adoptees’ needs and support their growth so that they can understand and cope with their reunion experiences.

**Statement of the Problem**

Adopted into Western nations, Korean-born children were raised in European-American adoptive families. Within this context, their physicality hints of different racial and ethnic
backgrounds, but transracial adoptees’ absorption into Western society usually expunges everything linked to their origin except their physicality, which paradoxically is much more apparent in Western societies. Several studies focused on international adoptees’ identity development and suggested adoptive parents’ interactive responsibility to expose adoptees to their own culture (Huh & Reid, 2000: Huh 2007). However, these studies only account for the adoptees’ childhood, while the quest for identity continues into adulthood, as these adoptees’ continuously experience identity development over their life spans. In order to gain a better sense of self and understand who they are, a number of adult Korean adoptees return to Korea and begin searching and reuniting with their birth parents (Kim, 2007). Little is known about international adult adoptees’ reunion experiences, particularly adult Korean adoptees, which are the largest first generation of international adoptions (Kim, 2007; Ahn-Redding & Simon, 2007).

While this phenomenon remains a vital issue for adult Korean adoptees and for other international adult adoptees, no meaningful and persistent attention has been expended on these groups, including supporting their ethnic and racial development in adulthood. Even though studies suggest that the adoptees’ main purpose for reunification with birth families is knowing themselves better and feeling more complete about themselves (Passmore & Feeney, 2009; Howe & Feast, 2001; Trinder et al., 2004), the complexities and the dynamics of these experiences and how they might influence adoptees’ growth and development, in terms of increasing their sense of self, is unknown. Through approaching adult Korean adoptees’ ways of knowing related to their evolving relationships with their birth families, I believe that this can provide both supports and challenges that are developmentally imperative for adult Korean adoptees.
Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore how Adult Korean Adoptees’ (AKAs) evolving relationships with their birth families affect their developing senses of self. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do AKAs describe their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ2. How have AKAs’ sense of self developed through their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ3. What meaning do AKAs attach to the experience of reuniting with their birth families?

Significance of the Study

International adoption in Korea was initiated in 1953, when Korean-born children were adopted into Western and European societies. These children have become the largest and first generation of international adoptees. As these children have reached adulthood, a significant number of adult Korean adoptees have searched for and have been reunited with their birth families. Since few studies have focused on this particular group of adults, this study will encompass several significant premises. First, this study will contribute to bridging the knowledge gaps in the existing literature on international adoptees. This is the first study to examine international adult adoptees’ reunion experiences with their birth families. In fact, most studies on adoptee/birth family reunions only included domestic adult adoptees and omitted the complexities and dynamic situations apparent in international adoptees’ reunion contexts. The different cultures, races, and ethnicities of adult Korean adoptees’ experiences can be useful in considering international perspectives on the reunification process.

Second, this study is theoretically significant through its exploration of adult Korean adoptees’ ways of knowing the self. As transracial adoptees, adult Korean adoptees may
experience different means of developing their sense of self and understanding their race, ethnicity and culture. Approaching how they make meaning of the self and reconstruct that meaning over time in their evolving relationships with their birth families will add insight to the constructive-developmental theory related to a particular context, including social identities of race, ethnicity, culture and gender. By researching how adults negotiate their ways of knowing and develop self as relational, this study can broaden adults’ learning perspectives to more actively engage and interaction in cultural contexts between the self and others.

Third, this study will lead to knowledge that will assist practitioners whose jobs relate to working with adoptees or adoption issues more specifically, including an increased understanding of the usefulness of program planners in adoption agencies, social workers who mediate these reunions, and educators who provide workshops or learning programs to adoptees. For instance, this study will provide rich descriptions of adoptees’ reunion experiences that will enable educators, who provide language services or other programs, to better understand adult Korean adoptees’ needs and concerns when organizing educational curriculum. As this study focuses on a particular group of adult Korean adoptees, policy makers in Korea might recognize the important phenomenon of these reunions and may consider legislation that speaks to adoptees’ needs and adult adoptees’ post-adoption support.

Finally, this study predominantly contributes to three deserving parties, the adult Korean adoptees, their adoptive parents, and their birth families, that are all involved, but have differing interests in, the international adoption process. This in-depth study may uncover and provide instances of complicated relationships through reunion experiences. Above all, by studying adult Korean adoptees’ reunion experiences and their impacts, the most important contribution of this study may be to the adult Korean adoptees themselves. Although every reunion case is
unique and different, this study can, at least, serve as a representation of adult Korean adoptees’ reunion experiences and provide imperative insights into better understanding the complexities behind the reunion phenomenon.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to explore how Adult Korean Adoptees’ (AKAs) evolving relationships with their birth families affect their developing senses of self.

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RQ2. How have AKAs’ sense of self developed through their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ3. What meaning do AKAs attach to the experience of reuniting with their birth families?

In order to provide a background for this study, four areas of literature related to this study are reviewed. I review the historical background on international Korean adoptions, including the social, cultural, and political contexts. This highlights what factors in the Korean context has influenced international Korean adoption and how the practice has been continued. Next, I address inter-country adoptees’ development as transracial adoptees and discuss adoptees’ reunion phenomenon, describing what research has been conducted and the findings on adoptees’ reunion experiences. Following the findings mainly concerned with adoptees’ issues about identities and their pursuit of a sense of self, I discuss the notion of self. And, then, the concept of self is theorized focusing on the relational self and the narrative approach of self. Finally, I present a theoretical framework addressing Kegan’s (1982) constructive-developmental theory.
**Historical Background on International Korean Adoption**

International Korean adoption began after the end of the Korean War in 1953. According to the Korea Central Adoption Resources Department, an official number of 164,612 South Korean children were adopted by families in Western nations between 1958 and 2011. However, these numbers did not include children who were placed by private adoption agencies. It has been estimated that almost 200,000 Korean-born children were sent to Western nations for adoption. Among these, a large number of Koreans (110,554) were placed in the United States. As a response to the increasing numbers of children, from war orphans to unwanted mixed-race children of soldiers, South Korea and the United States created an international adoption program.

In 1954, the Korean government established the Social Welfare Society to organize international adoptions (Sarri, Baik, & Bombyk, 1998). World Vision, which is known as a missionary service organization, instigated the legalization of Korean adoptions. When Harry Holt from Oregon adopted eight Korean children, World Vision played an instrumental role in helping secure the adoptions. Soon after, Mr. Holt visited Korea and adopted three more Korean orphans for a total of eleven children. As this event became publicized, making Mr. Holt became a humanitarian hero (Choy, 2007). Mr. Holt continued to organize mass international adoptions of hundreds of children from Korea by appealing to Christian families through letters. In response, there were major controversies concerning the process of international adoption and how it should be accomplished (Choy, 2007). Mr. Holt moved to Korea and established a childcare center in Seoul, Korea in 1960. With the help of the Social Welfare Society, Holt Children’s Services have become the major adoption agency. Four years later, in 1964, Korean Social Services was established to provide adoption services for orphans and mixed-race
children. Eastern Social Welfare was established in 1972 to assist orphans and place them for adoption (Kaanta, 2010). For over fifty years, these four representative organizations have consistently worked to organize international adoption in Korea. In fact, despite the rapid growth in Korea’s economy in the 1980s, international adoptions between South Korea and the West have continues to the present day.

From the 1950s until 1995, Korea had the longest running international adoption program of any country (Ahn-Redding & Simon, 2007). However, by 1995, China had surpassed the total number of children sent to the United States. Yet, Korea still remains one of the top countries along with China, Russia, and Guatemala (McGinnis, 2007). The 1988 Olympic Games in Seoul represented a triumph for a democratic and industrialized South Korea and South Korea received international recognition. At that time, while the world media reported Korea’s success, they also scrutinized Korea’s international programs. Critics charged that Korea’s adoption programs contributed to the success of business and industry in Korea by selling children like commodities (Hubinette, 2004).

In response to this condemnation, the government planned to reduce international adoption and encouraged domestic adoption by providing tax incentives and family benefits. The government designated May 11th as National Adoption Day to encourage domestic adoption (Bae, 2005; Lee, 2006). In addressing the media’s charges, the Korean government enacted a program to reduce the number of international adoptions by five percent each year, beginning in 1994, with the goal of ending international adoption by 2011 and increasing domestic adoption. As a result, the total number of children adopted domestically rose to 68,939 in 2006 (Kim, 2007).
Over the past fifty years, international Korean adoption has continued even after the nation recovered from war and achieved economic success. In response, consideration has been given to other factors and backgrounds that have influenced the continued practice of international adoption. Exploring Korean history, the continued phenomena of international Korean adoption can be better understood. In the next following section, the social and cultural contexts and the political and economic contexts of Korea are addressed.

Social and Cultural Factors

As was explained earlier, the inception of international adoption began after the Korean War with the purpose of rescuing orphans and mixed race children. However, the number of international adoptions increased due to the combination of cultural and social notions formed within Korean society. Confucianism has been deeply rooted in the foundation of Korea society and has influenced and shaped Korean cultural identity. With the strong ideology of Confucianism, historically, Koreans only adopted paternal kin and preferred male infants (Chun, 1989). Due to these cultural norms, the majority of biracial children, with Korean mothers and U.S. and European military fathers, were seen to be unsuitable to live in a country perceived as racially homogeneous. These biracial children were the primary allure of international adoption agreements with Western nations (Hubinette, 2004).

In the 1960s, Korea experienced a significant change due to urbanization and industrialization and created a new phenomenon, including the shift of the youth population to big cities, the creation of a new family system, as well as the creation of social problems, such as unmarried mothers, illegitimate children, and abandoned children (Chun, 1989). While the society experienced rapid change, the notion of Confucian ideology strongly remained and distinguished the role of women from that of men. In Confucian culture, for instance, women’s
chastity is considered an important duty, and these ideals are only applied to women. Yang (1998) argued that “the ideal of chastity plays a critical role in regulating women’s sexuality,” and the notion not only refers to virginity, but also that “there is always a proper place where female sexuality belongs” (p. 131). The cultural ideology on blood-relatedness stigmatized both the mother and children. Koreans viewed pre-marital sex and the children born from such unofficial unions as immoral and sinful (Kim, 2003). As a result, the stigmatization of an unwanted pregnancy was primarily placed on mothers, and thus, these mothers were encouraged to either have abortions or give their babies up for international adoption.

During the 1970s to 80s, the Korean government did not have an “adequate or tangible social welfare structure” (Hurdis, 2007, p. 177). The patriarchal attitudes in cultural beliefs freed men from taking responsibility for their children and providing financial and economic support. Thus, all the responsibility for caring for the children became the woman’s burden (Kim, 2003). In other words, both illegitimate children and unwed mothers were excluded from the welfare aid provided by the Korean government. As a result, these mothers sought out aid from private organizations and, with few other alternatives, made decisions to place their children for international adoption (Hurdis, 2007). Furthermore, during this time, the government announced family planning, such as a one-child policy, sex education, legalized abortion in 1973, economic incentives to reduce the size of families, and overseas adoptions (Sarri et al., 1998). Reducing the allowable size of families instigated a preference for male children, because, culturally, only males were the only gender eligible to receive inheritances or guarantee the care of their elderly parents.

By the end of the 1960s, there were no more biracial children or war orphans sent to Western nations for international adoption. However, abandoned Korean-born children, the
majority being girls, were available for international adoption (Hubinette, 2004). In fact, international adoption did not solely occur through the personal choices of destitute parents. Rather, it was a forced choice because of the lack of support from the government as well as the imposing social stigma on illegitimacy and adherence to a Confucian ideology which favored sons. The ideology of international adoption, in fact, was viewed as “West is best” (Kaanta, 2010, p. 13) in terms of removing “unfit” children from Korea and sending them to developed Western countries.

Political Factors

South Korea has achieved economic success, and as of 2004, commanded the eleventh largest economy in the world. With adequate economic resources, nevertheless, the practice of international Korean adoption has not been eliminated, and as a result, groups of adoptees have banded together to challenge international adoption policies and the continued neglect of children (Kim, 2007). During this period American society experienced social changes through the introduction of contraception, the legalization of abortion, the social support offered single parenthood, and the advocacy for women’s rights. As a result, the number of White children available for adoption decreased as the desire for parenting remained. In addition, fertility rates in the United States dropped dramatically as one out of every twelve couples was infertile, and the demand for adoption surpassed the available children (Rothschild, 1988). Within this situation, transracial adoption was instituted, and African American children or Native American children were placed with White families in addition to international adoptions.

However, criticisms were made by the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) and other organizations over the negative effects of transracial adoption in the development of children’s identities. The controversy went further to embark on a movement
against the placement of African-American children with White families in the 1970s (Roorda, 2007). In this circumstance, the demand for international adoption increased to meet both a lack of available White babies for infertile couples and to replace transracial adoptions in the U.S. (Lovelock, 2000).

While the demand for children increased in the West, particularly in the U.S., the Korean government silenced the practice of international adoption and did not take any particular action to support its own country’s children. Because of this condition, an invisible political relationship existed between Korea and powerful Western nations like the United States (Masson, 2001). According to Hubinette (2004), the western nations that were involved in the Korea War coincidently received the largest number of children from Korea. For instance, the United States had become a major ally that supported Korea during its recovery from the ashes of war, and the Korean government organized private government networks linked to agencies in the United States to facilitate the adoption of Korean children (Sarri et al., 1998). However, the president Kim Dae Jung was aware of the issue surrounding international Korean adoptions (McGinnis, 2007). During his incumbency, several efforts were made to reduce international adoption and increase domestic adoption. When the president invited a group of adopted Koreans to the presidential house, he formally apologized on behalf of the nation for sending Korean children to the West (Savasta, 1999). Despite the efforts of the president, the IMF financial crisis devastated the country, and the issue of international adoption has continued to be ignored. Although the country quickly recovered and resumed its economy, the budgetary amount the government spends on social welfare is still lacking compared to other economically advanced nations (Kaanta, 2010). The Korea Central Adoption Resources Department reported that 916 children from newborns to three year old toddlers were placed overseas in 2011.
The aforementioned contexts demonstrate that the practice of international Korean adoption is not just a matter between the adoptive family and the relinquished child. Taken together, the practice of adoption is an extremely complicated issue that needs to be addressed in consideration of particular contexts. In other words, international adoptions in Korea have been formed against a background of changing social, cultural, political, and economical circumstances. Exploring these factors is necessary to gain a better understanding of adopted Korean adults as well as their reunion experiences, in which their birth families may refer to these multifaceted background stories in answering difficult questions. Acknowledging the different contexts and being aware of their influences will be extremely beneficial for this study.

**Korean-born Adoptees as Transracial Adoptees**

As Korean adoptees were raised in racially heterogeneous family, they are called transracial adoptees. This refers to the placement of children, either domestically or internationally, with adoptive parents of a different race or ethnicity (Evan B. Donaldson Institute, 2002). Issues with transracial adoptees (TRAs) include such things as whether these children grow up in culturally conscious homes without much confusion or self-consciousness about their ethnic identity, how they develop their identity in dual societies when they become adults, and how race matter to their lives (Roorda, 2007). Regarding these concerns, several studies found that TRAs have healthier racial development compared to interracial adoptees (Simon & Altstein, 2001; Simon, Altstein & Melli 1994). In a longitudinal study conducted from 1971 to 1991, Simon, Altstein and Melli (1994) collected surveys and conducted interviews with transracial families with Black, Korean, and Native American children. In the study, they examined the relationships between adoptees and their adoptive parents and the parents’ perceptions of their adopted children’s racial identities over the years. The authors concluded that TRAs were comfortable with their racial identities and advocated transracial adoption as a
way to provide a permanent home for children who were in foster care. Emphasizing parents’ roles in transracial adoptees’ family, Huh (2007) found that the more the adoptees participated in Korean cultural activities and the more their parents were willing to talk about adoption, the more the child identified with being Korean. These studies highlight the effect of cultural activities and ease of communication between adoptees and parents and how these factors influence the adoptees’ ethnic identity development. Other factors that have an impact on cultural and racial identities are support from schools, social agencies, peers and family members (Huh & Reid, 2000).

In a similar vein but with a different approach to transracial adoptees’ socialization and development, Crolley-Simic and Vonk (2008) examined White mothers’ attitudes and characteristics associated with their adoptees’ birth cultures. This in-depth study articulates adoptive parents’ involvement in racial socialization practices. While this study confirms past research on the importance of racial socialization, it examines parents’ different levels of socialization and suggests implications on expanding socialization by integrating with adoptees’ birth cultures (Crolley-Simic & Vonk, 2008).

In another study about TRAs’ development, Baden and Steward (2000) developed the Cultural-Racial Identity Model, which particularly emphasizes influences on the culture and the race of transracial adoptees separately. The authors argued that previous identity models are not relevant to TRAs who are different racially, ethnically, or culturally than their adoptive parents. In other words, TRAs develop their racial and ethnic identities differently from children in homogenous families. In this model, Baden and Steward accounted for racial/ethnic and cultural differences between parents and their children and created two cultural identity axes and two racial identity axes. In addition, the authors added four categories on both the cultural identity
axes and the racial identity axes, and finally, the two racial and cultural identity axes are combined to create a model of sixteen-identity categories.

Conducting a study which applies the Cultural-Racial Identity Model, Baden (2007) obtained data from 51 adult transracial adoptees. The study revealed a wide range of cultural-racial identities throughout the sixteen categories and indicated that the model captured varying degrees of cultural-racial identities among the respondents of transracial adoptees. The study interestingly found that the adoptees’ race dimensions and the adoptees’ cultural dimensions were strongly correlated. Based on this finding, Baden found that adoptees’ experiences with their culture of origin and people from their own racial group is closely related for transracial adoptees. Another interpretation may be that transracial adoptees may not have particular distinctions between racial and cultural identity experiences or maybe the model was limited to distinguishing differences between racial and cultural identity for these adoptees (Baden, 2007).

Simon and Roorda (2000) published a book *In Their Own Voices: Transracial Adoptees Tell Their Stories*. Addressing the controversy surrounding transracial adoption, this book is written in a narrative format and includes adoptees’ experiences of being raised as TRAs. Through their interviews with the adult adoptees, Simon and Roorda found several important elements in understanding transracial adoptees. First, the adoptees articulated their deep appreciation of love and loyalty toward their adoptive parents and expressed the adoptive parents’ role in supporting them in building confidence in themselves. Second, while the adoptees’ narratives supported the important role of adoptive parents during the adoptees’ childhood and adolescence, the study revealed that race and ethnicity continually mattered as they entered into society as adults (Simon & Roorda, 2000).
Similar to the findings in Crolley-Simic and Vonk (2008) and Huh (2007), this study suggested that adoptive parents participate in the adoptees’ cultural consciousness by exposing their children to diversity and cultural activities that reflect their birth origin and urged the importance of continuous long-term outcomes of adoptees as they become adults (Simon & Roorda, 2000).

Particularly focusing on Korean adoptees, Lieberman (2001) conducted her research with nine adult adoptees that were born in Korea and adopted by Caucasian parents. In this study, she located seven common themes, which included the “feeling of not belonging, racial dissonance and rejection of one’s ethnicity, the process of racial and cultural identity development, internal coping resources, external supports, search fantasies, and the desire to become a parent” (p. 63). Based on these themes and analysis, a model of the racial and cultural identities of the participants was designed. Lieberman developed a three-stage model of racial identity that included awareness of differences, struggles with racial identity, and finally, acceptance of racial identity. Similar to Baden and Steward’s (2000) model, Lieberman viewed racial and cultural identity as distinct and proposed a model of cultural identity development. This model shared many commonalities to Baden and Steward’s Cultural-Racial Identity Model, but the significance of the study is that it focused specifically on a group of Korean adult adoptees among transracial adoptee groups.

Kaanta (2010) analyzed the ways adopted Korean adults experience their identity formation process and explored adoptees’ emotional development. The study recruited twenty-five adult Korean adoptees, including seven males and eighteen females, who ranged in age from their 20s to their 40s. The research design of this study combined in-depth interviews and observations of the participants based on ethnographical frameworks integrated with sociological
literature on identity development and emotional development within social contexts and processes. In this qualitative study, Kaanta found that identity formation is a recursive process rather than a linear stage development, because adopted Korean adults construct and reconstruct their identities continually as they experience life events. Second, identity formation involves emotions. The analysis of interviews indicates how the emotional management of adoptees affected their identity formation as they control their emotions between socially demanded feelings and their own emotions of being TRAs in their families. Last, Kaanta concludes Korean adult adoptees act as an agency of social progress, because they actively participate in social interactions and try to advance social perception toward adoptees and international adoption. While this research provides a deeper understanding of adopted Korean adults’ identity formation accounting for emotional factors, the theoretical framework that the researcher challenged in this study did not seem appropriate, because two theories that the author challenged focused on children’s identity development, not the adults that Kaanta was studying.

The above referenced studies on transracial adoptees, including Korean adoptees, acknowledge the distinctive cultural, racial, and ethnic contexts in understanding the development process, even though their approaches are different with different conclusions. Based on these studies, it can be concluded that adopted Korean adoptees experience a unique development process throughout their childhood into adulthood that does not follow tidy patterns. Yet, through this review of the literature, it was found that only a few studies examined adult adoptees’ identity development. In fact, most studies were more interested in adoptees’ childhoods and how to raise these children than in their lifelong development including adulthood. So, the question of how adult adoptees foster their developing racial, ethnic, and cultural identities still remains.
Adoptees’ Reunion Phenomenon

Adoptees’ adulthood brings more chances to be exposed to diverse environments and experiences, including moving away from their adoptive parents, going to college, finding careers and forming relationships with others. Song and Lee (2009) examine the cultural socialization experiences of adopted Korean Americans across four time spans - child, teen, young adult, and adult. This study finds that during their adulthood, there was an increase in cultural activities related to their birth origin as well as interpersonal associations with other Korean adults. In a similar vein, Shia and Tuan’s (2008) study on Korean adoptees asserts that cultural exploration during young adulthood significantly contributes to the formation of these youths’ ethnic identity. The reason is that as an adopted individual becomes independent from their adoptive parents, he or she makes the decision whether or not to be involved in cultural activities.

Depending on varying degrees of motivation for cultural exploration, Korean adoptees may participate in various opportunities, including joining one’s own ethnic group, discovering ethnic information, and visiting one’s homeland (Shiao & Tuan, 2008). Studies on international adoption found that a significant number of international adoptees search for their birth families and information about their origins (Tieman et al., 2008). According to Kim (2007), she gathered information from adoption agencies and found that the number of Korean adoptees from the United States and Europe who visit Korea has risen to approximately 3,000 to 5,000 per year, although there are no official statistics from the government. Based on the above studies, it is assumed that these adoptees visiting their homeland and searching and reuniting with their birth families has been observed as a post-adoption phenomenon.
Common reasons given by adoptees for searching for biological families are related to five motivations: a desire to look for a sense of belonging; a need to know medical and biological information; the obligation to assure birthparents of the adoptees’ well-being (Sachdev, 1992); a need to reduce stigmas (March, 1995); and a wish to have relationships with birth families in order to fill the gaps of loss and grief (Howe, Feast & Coster, 2000). Among these motivations, the issue related to identity is the most significant reason for searching and reuniting with birth families. Through reunion experiences, adoptees may have opportunities to gain information about their birth and roots to solve personal mysteries that might stymie their identity development. In effect, reunions may help adoptees have a better “sense of self” (Passmore & Feeney, 2009, p.101). According to Babb (1996), the desire of sixty to ninety percent of adoptees is to gain identifying information regarding their birth parents, which is a normative part of being adopted. Babb has estimated that between two and four percent of all adoptees in the United States search for their birth parents, which included as many as 88,000 adoptees in the 1990s. However, it is not clear how many adoptees are only seeking background information about their birth families and how many are interested in reuniting with their birth families (Mueller & Perry, 2001).

While adoptees’ search and reunifications with their birth families have become significant to a number of adoptees (Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Tieman et al., 2008), studies on adoption have focused on adoptees’ psychological stability, including their adjustment and assimilation to adoptive families. In fact, there are few studies that particularly focus on adult adoptees’ reunion experiences and their relationships with their birth families and how those experiences have influenced the adoptees’ life. In Table 1, I summarized seven studies which conducted research on examining adoptees’ reunion experiences and relationships with their
birth families. In addition, several autobiographical essays, books and articles were located that reviewed adoptees’ reunion experiences. Although I gained some insight, knowledge and understanding about adoptees’ reunion experiences from those autobiographical books and articles, in this table, I only included the empirical studies that pertained to generalize overall research on adoptees’ reunion experiences.

Table 2.1

**Summary of Studies on Post-Reunion Relationships**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors/Year</th>
<th>Research Method</th>
<th>Focus &amp; Results</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Affleck, Psych, and Steed (2000)</td>
<td>Semi-structured interviews: 10 adoptees and 10 birthmothers</td>
<td>1. Focus: The expectations of the adoptees and birthmothers in ongoing adoption reunions 2. Results: Different expectations and experiences of building relationships between the adoptees and birthmothers</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Browning and Duncan (2005)</td>
<td>Interviews: 20 adoptees</td>
<td>1. Focus: Examined the long-term experience of post-reunions; the themes of the mothering role, family obligations and family memberships 2. Results: No predictable pathways in building relationships, varying levels of ambivalence and emotional strain, the adoptive mother generally retains the primary role of ‘mother’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Howe and Feast (2001)</td>
<td>Survey and Interviews: 48 adult adoptees</td>
<td>1. Focus: Examined the long-term outcome of reunions 2. Results: The restored relationships do not necessarily invalidate or dilute the affectional bonds formed with the adoptive parents. Social-bonds, which were formed during the childhoods of the adoptees, play more important roles in building parent-child relationships</td>
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</table>
Studies of such reunions, in general, found that adult adoptees’ reunion experiences with their birth parents or birth families were successful in terms of gaining information about their births and roots, which helped adoptees have a better sense of who they are. Following the initial meetings between adoptees and their birth families, the continuation of these relationships became a key issue. Gladstone and Westhues (1998) identified seven categories of the relationships that occurred: close (35%), close but not too close (10%), distant (22%), tense (6%), ambivalent (14%), searching (8%), and no contact (6%). Using a similar approach, Howe and Feast (2001) conducted a study on the long-term post-reunion relationships between adoptees and their birth families. Based on adoptees’ reunion experiences and the frequency of contact, Howe and Feast found that over sixty percent of participants continued contact with
their birth parents, and over eighty percent of participants continued contact with their adopted parents. The authors concluded that parent-child relationships established during childhood were strong and long-lasting and were not affected by the restored relationships between adoptees and their birth parents.

While Gladstone and Westhues (1998) and Howe and Feast (2001) emphasized the continued contact of relationships, other studies examined complicated relationships between adoptees and their birth families and explored factors that are associated with establishing relationships (Browning & Duncan, 2005; March, 1995, 1997; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). For instance, Affleck and Psych (2001) explored the expectations of the adoption reunion process involving adoptees and birth mothers. The study found that while birth mothers expected to have more of a mother-child relationship, adoptees indicated a weaker demand to have a mother-child relationship. Reflecting the social history of adoption, March (1997) discussed negative stereotypes conferred on birth mother in their social positions and the difficulties in bridging the gap of time that exist between adoptees and their birth mothers.

Adoptees’ concerns about their adoptive parents include: (a) not wanting to hurt their adoptive parents; (b) assuming that their adoptive parents would not understand their actions, and; (c) worrying that their adoptive parents would feel betrayed (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998; March, 1995). In other words, adoptees feel guilty and disloyal to their adoptive families, and consequently, they may feel anguish about continuing relationships with their birth families. Since adoption involves the adoptees, the adoptive parents, and the birth parents, they are all involved in the reunion experience. Although adoptive parents are not directly involved in adoptees’ reunification processes, their support is essential and plays an important role in influencing the resulting positive experiences in adoptees’ reunification.
In summary, studies on adoptees’ reunions employ different research methods and theoretical positions and have different purposes, but have one common finding which was that reunions were positive experiences for adoptees in terms of removing the secrecy surrounding their adoptive identities and allowed them to have a better understanding of self. Studies revealed gaps between adoptees and birth families and addressed difficulties in continuing relationships that bring about challenges in building relationships. While empirical studies articulated adoptees’ reunion phenomenon and discussed the findings, several gaps were found.

First, most of the samples in these studies included domestic adoptees that do not reflect the international adoptees’ reunion experiences. As a result, studies about reunions do not address the unique condition of international adoptees that may experience different outcomes in regard to post-reunion relationships. Korean-born adoptees, in particular, are the first large group of international adoptees to be placed in the West since the 1950s, and as the first international generation, they have been actively engaged in searching for their roots and involved in reuniting with their birth families. There has been ample time and vast opportunities for research to be conducted on this large population, yet none of the published studies focused on this group of adoptees. Thus, there continues to be a deficiency in research and understanding about adult Korea adoptees’ reunion experiences.

Second, while studies commonly mentioned adoptees’ satisfaction with their reunion journeys in terms of knowing themselves better and feeling more complete about themselves (Passmore & Feeney, 2009; March 1995; Howe & Feast, 2001), they did not articulate the complexities and the dynamics of understanding their reunion experiences or how these factors might influence these adoptees’ growth in terms of developing a sense of self. In fact, these concerns have not been adequately explored in the literature, which limits the knowledge of how
these experiences influence adoptees internally and externally in understanding themselves. Without knowing how reunions affect adoptees and what these experiences might mean to them, educators, service providers, or other groups, who are related to post-reunion issues, may not be able to provide the sufficient support to these adoptees.

**Theorizing the Self**

Literature on adoptees’ reunions revealed that adoptees’ main concern for searching and reuniting with their birth families is to have a better sense of self (Trinder et al., 2004; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). In effect, in a reunion context, Adult Korean Adoptees’ (AKAs) sense of self occupies a central position for making meaning of the reunification experience and identity development. In exploring AKAs’ reunion experiences, it is essential to theorize the concept of self. In this section, two approaches are reviewed. First, evolving concept of self is examined from the modern era to the postmodern era, and the concept of the relational self will be addressed to understand individuals who live in complex and ambiguous worlds. Second, I discuss the narrative approach to self which views narrative as an active way of knowing to understand the self. The discussion continues by addressing a joint distinction between the relational self and narrative self and how shared these views of the self are appropriate in exploring AKAs.

**From a Modernist to Postmodernist Conceptualization of the Self**

In the field of adult education, the concept of self has been widely understood from a modernist psychology approach. Self-actualization is a well-known concept proposed by Maslow (1970). In this theory, he addresses a hierarchy of needs in which human behavior is motivated to achieve and defines self-actualization as the highest need in this hierarchy. The idea of self-actualization is a desire for self-fulfillment that leads an individual to realize one’s
capabilities and fully use his or her potentials. In a similar vein, the notion of a unitary self is characterized as “the autonomous self—authentic, highly rational, and capable of taking action” (Clark & Dirkx, 2000, p. 103). Within this concept, self is characterized as being self-directed, autonomous, and responsible; a person becomes more complex in terms of self and the ways in which he or she discovers or achieves an authentic self (Erikson, 1995; Giddens, 1991). An authentic self is an essential element for understanding one’s existence, which is unique and coherent in creating who the person is (Weedon, 1997). According to Levinson (1996), in order to achieve developmental demands of growth, one must experience the transitional periods of individuation. This is a process in which a person becomes more autonomous, self-generating and self-responsible and is enabled to stand apart from the world. Thus, the self is ultimately essential in that the main focus of an understanding of self is from an individual viewpoint.

Clark and Dirkx (2000) discussed how this unitary, modernist view of the self has become a normative view in understanding self in the field of adult education and has influenced many aspects of studies and practices in adult development and learning. For example, self-directed learning is a popular learning theory in adult education. The idea of self-directed learning explains learners’ motivation as humans’ natural desire that learning is a natural orientation that takes place (Knowles, 1975). In the humanistic perspective, the nature of human beings focuses on adults’ primary control and responsibility (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991) and their need to achieve personal autonomy (Candy, 1991). In a similar vein, the concept of the unitary self is found in psychoanalytic thought. For instance, transformative learning is a method of transforming one’s assumptions for developing their potential abilities and exploring new meanings for their lives. In order to experience transformative learning, engaging in critical reflection is the key process to reflect on one’s own experience (Mezirow, 2000). Changing
one’s assumptions, examining the situation, revising one’s point of view, and reintegrating a new or revised assumption enable a person to attain self-exploration and cope with conflicts in the world. This view of self, which takes an individual to experience an internalized self, is very similar to the humanistic notion of self.

Clark and Dirkx (2000) criticized the notion of unitary self by arguing as being a concept that does not fit with the current postmodern era. Living in a society where social, cultural, and technological conditions change rapidly, individuals often experience ambiguities in self and are confused by their exposures to different ideas, notions, voices and positions. For example, when Clark experienced conflicting roles within a relationship, the notion of a unified self did not help her understand the situation in which she felt so fragmented and confused. However, recognizing the notion of self with multiplicity as relational, Clark confessed that understanding the self “enables this complexity to become visible” (p. 109). Indeed, the notion of a unitary self, which is excessively individualistic and separate from the social world, is not appropriate for explaining the understanding of self insofar as we live in a rapidly changing world in which we coexist in dynamic contexts.

In contrast to contemporary adult educators, who have often focused on learners’ individuality, Fromm (2004) argued that people, who are manipulated by social mass production and materialism, are striving to live in a similar way to be included in dominant society; thus, when people do not fit into that particular society, they feel alienated, because although they acknowledge their free will, automation conformity from anonymous authorities invisibly governs them. Fromm (2004) emphasized acknowledging the importance of human creativity, which advocates man to overcome alienation, since individuals are able to make their own connections to people and understand who they are to the “return of man himself” (p. 104).
Applying this concept to the field of adult education, Fromm advocated teaching a structuralized worldview to adults, because insofar as they learn, they may be enabled to understand their personal problems related to social contexts and take active roles in alleviating these problems. In other words, people should have an awareness of how “ideology, culture, and economics intersected to shape individual lives” (Brookfield, 2002, p. 109) to have a better understanding of themselves. An alternative idea of self is essentially needed to take the social into account and view the self within a relational context.

As Fromm (1961, 2004) strongly criticized the concept of objectification and commodification that makes an individual feel like a stranger, Foucault (1983) took a comparable view of the self. According to Foucault (1983), an individual is a “made subject” (p. 208) produced within the relations of power that subjects him to others through “control and dependence and [is] tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (p. 212). In his argument, the notion of a subject does not simply refer to the self; rather, it implies that the individual self is a subject to power that constructs the understanding of who a person is instead of creating his or her own self. In short, Foucault (1983) describes objectification as that which “transform(s) human beings into subjects” (p. 208).

Foucault’s notion of self has shifted over the years from how scientific knowledge objectifies individuals to how an individual interacts between himself or herself and others. Indeed, the attention from technologies of power moved to technologies of the self. Analyzing ancient Greek society, Foucault (1985) explained that individuals achieve self-knowledge by taking care of oneself and emphasized autonomy of the self based on ethics. In The Use of Pleasure, Foucault (1985) describes technologies of the self as “models proposed for setting up and developing relationships with the self, for self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination,
for deciphering the self by oneself, for the transformation one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object” (p. 29). By adopting the Greeks’ practice of freedom through care of the self, Foucault advocated a need for separating the embedded self from a dominated knowledge society and actively constructing the self to achieve one’s life into an object rather than a subject, which is influenced by power domination. Viewing the self as an active being, the self is understood as always in the process of having plural minds and open to disputation as opposed to having a single principle to be shaped.

Another approach to the postmodernist concept of self, Gergen (1991, 1993) describes how the social construction of the self has changed from the Romantic period through Modernism. Criticizing the boundaries of the concept of self which is separate from others and the world in the modern era, Gergen (1991) invited the idea of the multiplicity of self and challenged a single formulation of understanding self. Increasing complexity, different cultures, and more diverse ideas continue to influence individuals that inevitably challenge the conventional view of the self as a unitary or essential self. Contrasting the conventional concept, the relational approach views the self as a more “open slate” that “emerges on which a person may inscribe, erase, and rewrite their identities as the ever-shifting ever expanding and incoherent network of relationship invites or permits” (228). In effect, the complex notion of the self is socially constructed, and the self is simultaneously constructed and reconstructed both at personal and social levels.

In a similar but different approach, viewing the self as interacting between the self and cultural context, Kegan (1994) articulates the mental demands of an adult’s underlying life, playing multiple roles at work, school, or home. Within these multiple roles, the self interacts with others, who might have a different way of being, and influences not only what happens to
the individual but also what happen to his or her connection or relationship. In short, one’s relationship with others affects the self from “being extrinsically valuable to being intrinsically valuable” (p. 26) and makes one realize his or her role in composing reality, making meaning, and determining how he or she wants to relate to others. Relating the self with others in society, Kegan argues that developing complex ways of making meaning is necessary in order to meet the increased demand of modern life.

Kegan examined the development of consciousness in interacting with others by applying the six orders of consciousness proposed in his constructive-developmental theory. Within the six stages or levels of consciousnesses, the highest order is characterized as postmodernism in which an individual’s experience interpenetrates that of self and others. For instance, when a person faces conflict or differences with others, he or she does not assume the “wholeness, distinctness, or priority” (Kegan, 1994, p. 319) of the others. Rather, the person seeks the process by reflecting on his or her own meaning and also visiting the other’s way of seeing the world and being open to integrating the other’s position. Although few people experience this stage, Kegan proposed an ideal figure of the evolving self, which forms relationships between the self and others and the development of the individual’s experience. In other words, the self is opening another possible door to regulate the self and become a more multiple and complex self.

Defining the self as relational and multiple in this study on AKAs’ reunion experiences may help me to explore AKAs’ self with in-depth understanding, reflecting on their complicated relationships not only with their birth families but also with their adoptive parents, family members, and others who have influenced their lives during the comprehensive process of adoption. While the self as a relational concept provides much insight into understanding AKAs, it does not explain how the self forms in order to understand themselves and in what way they
make meaning through the experiences gained through their reunions. From this inquiry, self as a narrative approach is reviewed in the next section.

**Self in the Narrative Approach**

Constructivism acknowledges that meaning is not discovered but constructed by individuals through interactions between human beings and within the social context (Crotty, 1998). In other words, individuals construct their own meanings and understand experience related to the interactions between the self and others. Based on this epistemology, my understanding of self employs a narrative approach in order to explore how the self forms to understand AKAs’ experiences. Sarbin (1986) identified that the “narrator principle” contends that individuals are able to think and make choices according to narrative structure (p. 8). This principle assumes narratives as ways of organizing and making meaning of one’s experience (Polkinghorne, 1988; Bruner, 1990). The development of self can be viewed through this narrative activity as the self continuously participates and expresses its own existence “whose form is narrativity” (Polkinghorne, 1988, p. 151). In a similar vein, McAdams (1997) proposed the idea of a narrative identity and articulates that the self or identity is created through our narratives. Thus, instead of approaching what is the true nature of the self, the attention of understanding self from a narrative approach may yield an exploration of our meanings and their structures that relate the self to our worlds.

Another interpretation of self in a narrative approach provides a deeper understanding in connecting the self with others. While the humanist approach was criticized for emphasizing individualistic human agency and its concept of self, the narrative approach takes into account our consciousness in relation to how things are connected or related to something (Polkinghorne, 1988). In other words, our meaning is constructed and reconstructed within the connections or
relationships among the events which we experience. Freeman (2001) further explains the narrative self from a cultural dimension and argues that one's own story could never be produced alone. It is always situated and exists with and among others and is expressed through narrative. In effect, the construction of a narrative self is always a temporal process through which we make meaning related to others within a particular context and time frame. Thus, through narrative, one’s development is expressed and experienced (Freeman, 2001).

Approaching the self from a narrative orientation helps the understanding of adult development. Rossiter (1999) offered a way of understanding self and adult development in terms of narrative orientation and summarized four assumptions:

1. a narrative is a basic structure of human meaning making,
2. adult development is experienced and expressed through the construction of self stories,
3. a human science approach is appropriate for the study of adult development,
4. adult development proceeds in ways that are not necessarily predictable (p. 79).

Based on this assumption, Rossiter concluded that a narrative is the result of meaning making in understanding adult development. Studying one’s development within a relationship, Josselson (1996) used narrative orientation to understand one’s relationship with others by connecting and differentiating the process. Living in relationship with others, adults experience development throughout their life spans, and life experiences are reinterpreted over time and reshape their ways of understanding self. Josselson (2009) conducted a thirty-five year longitudinal study in which she studied the self-constructing meanings of the life events of one woman. This study reveals that changes and movements in the meanings of events as they unfold and helps the understanding of adult development, which is an ongoing process rather than an end point. In effect, meanings change and past memories are reconstructed to hold multiple definitions of self.
In summary, viewing the self as relational and narrative both recognizes the multiplicity of the self and maintains relations with others as an important element in shaping and reshaping one’s understanding of self. This approach on self offers me the opportunity to explore AKAs’ multiple, shifting, open-ended, and complex selves in their reunion contexts. The emphasis therefore is not in discovering single, unity, or core narratives. Rather, it is in seeking multiplicity and complexity in stories to explore how AKAs make meanings and generate meanings between themselves and their birth families and between AKAs and the world around them. Within this situation, an analytic tool is needed in order for me to examine the complexities of AKAs and how these experiences influence their growth and senses of self. Kegan (1994) postulates constructive-developmental theory as “a way of looking at human development that considers not only people’s changing agendas but their changing capacities” (p. 6). Applying this theory as an analytic tool will guide me in examining how AKAs understand their reunion experiences and how these processes influence their consciousness and the self.

**Kegan’s Constructive-Developmental Theory**

Constructive-developmental theory views development as our way of knowing related to our surroundings. This theory examines how we construct meanings and how that process of meaning evolves. Influenced by Piaget’s (1936) cognitive-structural model, the constructive-developmental view of adult growth and development is the ways in which individuals make sense of their experiences (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Kitchener & King, 1994). In *The Evolving Self*, Kegan (1982) proposed six qualitatively different systems of thought in constructing reality and explains how a qualitative shift in meaning systems occur to an individual’s understanding of oneself, the other and the relationship between the two.
Constructive-developmental theory provides several premises for understanding our experience of ourselves, others and the milieu of life. The first proposed premise is that individuals experience growth throughout their lives as they make meaning through their experience to renegotiate themselves and others. Kegan (1982) defines meaning making as a “simultaneously epistemological and ontological activity; it is about knowing and being, about theory-making and investments and commitments of the self” (p. 45). Constructivism believes that reality comes to us as how we perceive and interpret particular events or experiences. In other words, reality does not happen to us; rather, we construct and make sense of it based on our ways of knowing. According to Kegan, our experiences are organized into a form of complexity by including our “thinking, feeling, and social relating” (1994, p. 32). The process of meaning making takes us into another process of development as the previous meaning system integrates into a new meaning system. In essence, these processes of constructivism and development are observed in adulthood as individuals are continually interacting between the self and the other.

Next constructive-developmental theory assumes that these kinds of growth are gradual and progressive and occur differently depending upon the environment that a person experiences. Researchers of the constructive-developmental theory support the idea that because adults live in different contexts, adults who are in similar age brackets and life situations may experience different developmental processes (Drago-Severson, 2004; Kegan, 1982, 1994). Importantly, gradual growth causes a person to develop more complex ways of knowing, rather than just having one way of understanding themselves. Through continual meaning making to experiencing qualitative shifts in their meaning systems, adults experience transitional phases to grow and develop.
Understanding this transitional shift, the subject-object relationship plays a central role in this framework. Kegan (1982) describes the word “object” from etymology and explains that the word offers motion, such as “thrown from” or “thrown away from” (p. 76). Applied to a meaning making system, an object is an evolution like “a meaning-constitutive activity” (p. 77). An object’s relation to enables the individual to experience differentiations of the self from the world so that the person has a “relationship to” the world rather than “embeddedness in” (p. 77) the world. Thus, the term does not refer to persons as things for objectification; rather, it suggests that each person may differ by making sense of self that enables the differentiation of the self from other persons. Meanwhile, a subject refers to that which “we are run by, identified with, fused with, [and are] at the effect of” (Kegan, 2000, p. 53). In this framework, individuals are embedded in social, cultural, and relationship contexts, and live within these contexts as subjects. Yet, when we assume our own ownership in identifying ourselves and are enabled to reflect, differentiate, and integrate meanings, then, we are an object. The boundaries of subject and object change as the person gets “outside of oneself” and gradually experiences “moving from subject to object” (Kegan, 1982, p. 50). Through this transitional process, the qualitative differentiation of the self from the world is created and evolves in an individual for experiencing growth and development.

**Constructive-developmental Theory Applied to AKAs**

Kegan (1982, 1994) proposed the constructive development model with the five orders of consciousness which people develop in their lifetimes. At each order, individuals construct particular perspectives of knowing that determine their ways of looking at themselves and their world with their own values, beliefs, and relationships to others and themselves. Each way of knowing becomes an evolution by experiencing expected and unexpected activities, such as
integration and separation, pain and growth, and challenge and transformation. In effect, through the constant work of cognitive, emotional, physical, and spiritual activities, we transfer our ways of knowing from subject to object and make meaning to experience development. Among the five orders, the second order, the third order, and the fourth order are most commonly experienced and prevalent in adulthood. And, the last of the five orders is not generally found in a population (Kegan, 1994). For this reason, I applied the second to the fourth order in this study of AKAs.

In Kegan’s second order, adults rely on rules and identify others as either helpers or obstacles. Although individuals recognize that other people have different perceptions, “they do not yet have the developmental capacity to hold—or accommodate—both their perspective and the perspective of another person simultaneously” (Drago-Severson, 2004, p. 24). These individuals are solely focused on their own goals, needs, and interests. AKAs who are in the second order only care for their own needs. However, they can challenge the balance by inviting another’s point of view to the self. According to Kegan (1982), “understanding another is not the other’s experience but what the experience means to him or her” (p. 113). Allowing another’s views, indeed, enables the person to have a better sense of how this happens. When AKAs attempt to inquire about their birth and reasons for their adoptions, the adoptees also inadvertently ask for birth parents’ experiences, and they may find out that their birth parents had a difficult time and suffered from relinquishing their child. Recognizing birth families’ experiences, the adoptees may feel empathy and move their concrete thinking to abstract thinking. Through this process, the adoptees can reflect on their own thinking, while attempting to understand their birth families. In essence, the person is able to differentiate his or her own needs and integrate into a relationship with his or her birth family and experience the third order.
At the third order, adults are defined by others’ judgments and an active participation in a shared reality. This way of knowing makes one feel responsible for other people’s feelings and considers interpersonal relationships as important. Those at the third order care for others, this type of individual “represses anger rather than expressing it” and avoids conflict, because “it is a risk to the interpersonal relationship—and a threat to the person’s very self” (Drago-Severson, 2004, p. 26). Simply put, an adult at this order has the ability for abstract thinking. However, his or her own identity largely depends on relationships with others. Transitions from the third order to the fourth order are characterized by moving the self out from the interpersonal relationship and achieving one’s own identity. In other words, the relationship is moved from a “my” relationship to an “I have” relationship, and the person is able to enjoy a “new capacity for independence, to own herself, rather than having all the pieces of herself owned by various shared contexts” (Kegan, 1982, p. 101).

For AKAs, even though they may have a good relationship with their adoptive parents, questions about their origins are common for them. As a result, although adoptees attempt to fit into adoptive families, they may have a difficult time identifying who they are. In this situation, renegotiation and struggle are followed by identifying self within the relationship and having a relationship. Within this process, the adoptee reflects on the self and gradually has a perspective on the relationship between her adoptive parents and birth family. As a consequence, the adoptee may be able to reconstruct a new meaning of being an adoptee and to differentiate her own identity. Through shifting the balance from the third order to the fourth order, the adoptee may form a sense of self while allowing for a more complex emotional life. In essence, the person enters into a new intricacy, which could be considered a new level of complexity that may lead to additional growth and development.
The fourth order of a meaning making system is a person who has the ability to generate his or her own internal values and authority in relationships with others. This self authorship—“sense of self, self-dependence, self-ownership”—is significant (Kegan, 1982, p. 100). The person at the fourth order is able to hold interpersonal contexts as objects as they have a new capacity for independence rather than having oneself owned by shared contexts. By possessing this capacity, the person can control inner feelings and regulate meanings based on his or her self-authoring that complexities and conflicts are mediated by “the self-system” (p. 101). For AKAs, this is essential to understanding themselves, because their main motivation for reunions and continuing relationships is to have better senses of self and achieve their own identities (Trinder et al., 2004; Passmore & Feeney, 2009).

However, the limitation of the fourth order is having a narrow sense of the relationship. Because, in this context, the self fails to question an individual’s own premises, and the self is evaded through vulnerability in order to discover the other’s world (Kegan, 1994). As a result, relationships run by unitary selves will inescapably experience conflicts as they refuse to allow critical reflection on their own premises, and they refuse to find solutions by integrating to the other’s position. Thus, Kegan (1994) argued that the transition to the fifth order, which follows the fourth order of self-authorship, is desirable to adults insofar as we live in a society where more mental demands are required for multiple roles at school, work and home. In this transition to the final level, which entails increasing interpretations of the self and other, the self will be enabled to have a multiform epistemological organization to enhance one’s own understanding of self and others resulting in fewer conflicts. The transition to the next level or the fifth order will take place when the adoptee becomes free from the complexities and ambiguities of any relationship and is able to realize his or her own way of being.
Recognition of developmental capacities provides a better understanding of one’s changing agendas (Kegan, 1994). Developmental capacity can be categorized into three dimensions: epistemological, intrapersonal and interpersonal (Baxter Magolda et al., 2009; Drago-Severson, 2004). The epistemological dimension is understood as ways of knowing in which we perceive certainty of knowledge to claim our understanding. The question of how I know is the key point to recognize one’s assumptions, beliefs, and values. Through exploring one’s epistemological dimension, we can understand how a person structures knowledge claims, constructs meanings, and interprets his or her experiences. When an individual’s epistemological dimension experiences a qualitative shift in his or her perspectives, it expands the contextual view of knowledge to include multiple perspectives. This capacity leads to critical reflection for developing one’s cognitive maturity (Baxter Magolda et al., 2009).

The intrapersonal dimension focuses on how individuals view and construct their identities. The question of who I am is accompanied by various characteristics, including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and social class. This interpersonal dimension can be enhanced through internal approval from the self to construct an integrated identity rather than an adopted one to accept the external approval of others. Through this integrated identity, individuals are able to understand their histories, gain confidence, and increase their capacities for viewing the self as related to others (Baxter Magolda et al., 2009). The third dimension is the interpersonal dimension. This is the way in which a person views the self in relation to others and how he or she constructs relationships. With an increased interpersonal capacity, individuals can build mature relationships by respecting both self and others and integrating multiple perspectives. From this point, facing the different contexts of others is no longer threatening to the individual in building relationships.
In summary, the evolution of each structure of order and its capacities acknowledges that “differentiation always precedes integration” (Kegan, 1994, p. 326). Each transition occurs when the self is able to differentiate what the self is influenced by and identify with and move to integrate the past to the current self for reappropriation. There is much more fluidity in how adoptees integrate and enlarge their sense of self and identity as they experience the conflicts, contradictions, and diversity of expectations in their encounters with their birth families. As Kegan identified the two utmost yearnings in the human experience are to be included and to have a sense of agency, AKAs’ evolving relationships with their birth families are essentially related to finding senses of self and relating the self within the birth family relationships. Therefore, the inquiry into the self as an adoptee and the understanding of self in relation to birth families can be better understood within the constructive-developmental theory.

**Chapter Summary**

The purpose of this literature review is to draw attention to the significant understanding of adult inter-country adoptees’ reunion experiences and highlight this study’s importance in fulfilling the need for further research focused on adult Korean adoptees. In this chapter, four sections were presented to survey the literature on adult adoptees’ reunion experiences. In the first section, I addressed the historical background on international Korean adoptions by reviewing its social, cultural, and political contexts. The second section highlighted inter-country adoptees’ development as transracial adoptees and their development issues. In particular, this section looked at how race, culture, and ethnicity continually matter as they enter into society and experience a unique development process as adults. Following this, I reviewed studies on adoptees’ reunions and highlighted adoptees’ significant motivations, purposes, and barriers in continuing relationships. This review proves a deficiency in research focused on
inter-country adult adoptees, including adult Korean adoptees, and the absent of understanding about the complexities and dynamics of adoptees’ reunion experiences. Third, the concept of self is addressed as relational and narrative, and ways to explore this inquiry with adult Korean adoptees was discussed. Finally, Kegan’s constructive-developmental theory is presented as a theoretical framework for exploring adult Korean adoptees’ way of knowing and their developmental capacities. Taken as a whole, the aim of this chapter is to offer the significant literature and attempt to propose how this study can bridge gaps in the existing literature and provide a knowledge base in the field for this particular population.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore how Adult Korean Adoptees’ (AKAs) evolving relationships with their birth families affect their developing senses of self. The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do AKAs describe their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ2. How have AKAs’ sense of self developed through their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ3. What meaning do AKAs attach to the experience of reuniting with their birth families?

This chapter provides a detailed description of the methodology applied in exploring these research questions. The sections are organized in the following order: research design, narrative inquiry, sample, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, research positionality and assumptions, pilot study, and chapter summary.

Research Design

For this study, a qualitative approach implementing narrative inquiry was used. Patton (2002) describes qualitative designs as naturalistic in that the research focus is on “real-world settings,” and thus, the phenomenon “unfolds naturally” (p. 39). Rather than determining cause and effect by implementing an experimental design, qualitative researchers are interested in individuals’ real life interactions and how they interpret their social worlds (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). This implies that qualitative study aims not only to understand what happens to those individuals, but also how that meaning is perceived by them in natural settings.
In designing a qualitative study, it is important to understand its characteristics. Merriam and Simpson (2000) describe the characteristics of qualitative research. First, qualitative study researchers seek to understand the meanings people construct and explore phenomena or cultures that are related to people and society. The second characteristic in qualitative research is the role of the qualitative researcher. The authors describe a qualitative researcher as the principal player in collecting and analyzing the data. Creswell (2013) also highlighted the role of the qualitative researcher as one who builds “complex, holistic pictures; analyzes words; reports detailed views of participants; and conducts the study in a natural setting” (p. 300). In conducting a qualitative study, researchers interact with participants through interviews, continuously take field notes and memos to reflect on their processes, and interpret and analyze the data. For this reason, research findings are different depending on how the researcher interacts with the participants and what theoretical framework influences their viewpoint (Roulston, 2010).

Another characteristic of qualitative research is that researchers do field work to collect data (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). A qualitative researcher observes the research site and reflects on his or her experience for a better understanding of a phenomenon. Finally, qualitative research is primarily an “inductive research strategy” (p. 99). This approach to research is appropriate when there is little known about a particular phenomenon or lack of explanation about the situation. In that case, the researcher is involved in designing the study and explores what is uncovered through his or her interpretation and analysis. A qualitative research design enables the researcher to understand a societal phenomenon and attempt to uncover its meaning by interacting with the participants and being involved in the whole process of the research.

Through reviewing the characteristics of qualitative research, I have confirmed that using a qualitative research design is useful for my study of adult Korean adoptees and exploring their
continued relationships with their birth families. Since little is known about this topic and this phenomenon hasn’t been explored, there are few theories or explanations for understanding this group of people. As my research questions focused on their experience and how they make meaning of the phenomenon, a qualitative research design enabled me to explore the phenomenon inductively and provided me with insights to analyze the data.

**Narrative Inquiry**

In order to focus on meaning and how meaning is constructed, understanding one’s life story, or one’s narrative, is essential in qualitative study. The term *narrative* is understood as the way humans comprehend their actions and the events around them and connect consequences of events over time (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1988). Bruner (1990) argued that the main concept of a human world is “meaning” and “the processes and transactions involved in the construction of meaning” (p. 33). His work privileges an individual’s lived experience in which meaning is constructed not only in the actions of the individual but also through his or her cultural and social world.

Herman (2009) characterized narratives into four categories: (1) situatedness, (2) event sequencing, (3) world-making/ world disruption, and (4) what it’s like. The first characteristic describes narrative as “a mode of representation” (p. 9) that is situated in a particular discourse or embedded in occasions for telling. According to Herman, narrative as representation includes both “the text” used in the representing medium, and “characters, situations, and event” represented by that text (p. 17). This illuminates the main character of a narrative in that making sense of one’s story is embedded in particular contexts. Thus, researchers interpret a text to reconstruct the story-world by considering the specific event of the telling.
The second characteristic of a narrative is event sequencing, because it describes paths taken by a particular person with his or her own decision points to make temporal storylines. These paths lead to consequences of stories for interpreting and reconstructing the story-world. The third characteristic of a narrative is world-making/world disruption. Bruner (1990) describes this narrative as the primary resource for understanding how people think and make meaning everyday. The function of a story is to “find an intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from a canonical cultural pattern” (Bruner, 1990, p. 50). Thus, a narrative requires more than sequenced events; it involves active meaning making between “what was expected and what actually takes place” in everyday experience (p. 50). The last characteristic of a narrative is that it captures what it is like to experience a certain event, not only making meaning in a cognitive way but also expressing emotion (Herman, 2009).

Based on these four elements of narrative, narrative inquiry as a research methodology guides my research design enabling me to explore my topic in a more specific way. Narrative inquiry is an in-depth means of understanding experience. This design focuses on the participants’ life stories in their own terms as they are invited to narrate aspects of their experiences. Essentially, this approach leads to an in-depth understanding of the participants focused on a particular topic of interest (Josselson, 2009). The purpose of using this method is to seek patterns that are inductively presented, documented, and conceptualized (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Polkinghorne, 1988).

Clandinin and Connolly (2000) define narrative inquiry as “a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interactions with milieus” (p. 20). An inquirer invites the narrators to tell the stories of the experiences that construct their living worlds. Rather than just listening to one’s story, a narrative inquirer is
“always in an inquirer relationship” with the narrator’s life (Clandinin & Rosie, 2007, p. 69). This highlights the role of inquirers who should carefully interact with narrators and be aware of their influence on representing narratives in relation to their participants. Researchers who employ narrative inquiry essentially take part in an interpretation process, because narratives are representations of one’s experience. Narrative analysis refers to “a variety of procedures for interpreting the narratives or stories generated in research” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 302). Through narrative analysis, the researcher endeavors to engage in the narrator’s stories rather than present stories of the participants (Josselson, 2009).

Narrative inquiry is a good approach for the design of this study, because this study aims to understand adult Korean adoptees’ experiences as they explore their continued relationships with their birth families. The adoptees’ narratives of events as they have continued their relationships with their birth families present explorations of their meaning making and how they construct those meanings to experience growth and development in their adulthood. Furthermore, social, cultural, and political contexts are inextricably linked to the AKAs’ narratives, since they are inevitably connecting themselves with others and their surroundings in their stories. An understanding of AKAs’ narratives is necessary to place their personal narratives in cultural and social contexts and include the active voice of the researcher in the interpretation to resonate the AKAs’ stories. Thus, narrative inquiry sheds light on their stories and makes the research meaningful.

Sample Selection

A qualitative study typically focuses in depth on comparatively small samples (Patton, 2002). In this qualitative study, I needed participants who identify as Adult Korean Adoptees (AKAs) who had have reunion experiences with their birth families and have a continuing
relationship with their birth families. According to Patton (2002), “the logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding” (p. 46). Through purposeful sampling, a researcher selects individuals to participate in a study as they purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2013). Thus, purposeful sampling allowed me to implement my study focusing on a specific population whose identities were AKAs. In addition, a snowball sampling is “an approach for locating an information-rich key” (p. 237). The chain of recommended informants provides rich information to enable researchers to get key participants who fit the purpose of the study.

For this study, the basic requirement for participation was that the participants self-identify as Adult Korean Adoptees. However, the specific criteria guiding participation in this study included: a) AKAs who had reunion experiences at least three years ago and b) AKAs who have continued contact with their birth families since their reunions. The basic criterion for being an AKA implied one who was born in Korea and adopted by an American family when he or she was an infant. For the specific criteria, I chose to interview AKAs who had reunions with their birth families at least three years ago. Gladstone and Westhues (1998) describe seven types of post-reunion relationships and set the period of reunification at least three years prior to the research interview. The authors identify three factors that affect the development of these post-reunion relationships. The first factor is a structural issue including time, distance and transport. The second factor is an interactive concern, such as the amount of support given to and received from the adoptive family and the frequency of contact between the adoptees and their birth families. Lastly, a motivational factor in maintaining contact includes a sense of involvement, pleasure, obligation, and guilt (Gladstone & Westhues, 1998). Considering a three-year period gives adoptees and their birth families time to establish familiarity with each other and these
three factors add to the establishment of customary practices in the relationships, I concluded that, minimally, a three-year period of reunification prior to the research interview would be appropriate for this study, as well.

For the second criterion, there were several reasons why I chose to study adult Korean adoptees that have continued relationships with their birth families. First, although they are the first and largest group of international adoptees (Ahn-Redding & Simon, 2007; Kaanta, 2010), there are gaps in the existing literature on this group. Furthermore, while literature indicates that there are an increased number of international adoptees who search and reunite with their birth families (Kim, 2007), little is known about their reunion experiences and how these experiences influence their lives. Lastly, I focused on adult Korean adoptees as transracial adoptees, because studies on transracial adoptees reveal that race and ethnicity continually matter from their childhoods into adulthoods. In adulthood, they experience different developmental paths, constantly adjusting their senses of self and reflecting on their birth origins and the culture in which they were raised (Shiao & Tuan, 2008).

For recruiting research participants, I used several methods, such as networking, referrals, and listservs. I used my connections with participating volunteer translators for a Korean international adult adoptees’ reunion program at G.O.A.'L (Global Overseas Adoptee’s Link). Also, I contacted associations formed by adult Korean adoptees, Korean Adoptees of Hawai'i (KAHI) in Hawaii and Korean Adoptees Ministry Center (KAM Center) in Minnesota. To contact these adults for possible participation, I developed a letter of recruitment for participation in the study (Appendix A). I sent the invitation letter to AKAs who unilaterally expressed an interest in participating in this study. Also, contacting participants by phone was another method that I used to recruit participants, making the sample more representative. I
developed a Telephone Eligibility Screening Script (Appendix E) to prepare for any phone conversations by providing information on the study. This script included the purpose of the study, the benefits and risks of participating, and questions for gaining their permissions to include them in this study. The most significant characteristic of a qualitative study is determining the sample size. As a qualitative study focuses on a relatively small sample, emphasizing in-depth findings, it is hard to define the right sample size. A common way of determining the sample size in qualitative research is to continue interviewing participants until the researcher reaches the point in the data where no new additional findings are found (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After I conducted six interviews, I began to reach the saturation point at which the participants provided me little additional information. By the eighth interview, I concluded that there were no new findings.

Data Collection

The nature of qualitative research lies in how individuals engage in their lives, interact with other individuals, and make meaning of their experiences (Glesne, 2006). Given this aim, in qualitative research, interviewing is the most commonly used method for collecting data, because interviews “allow us to enter into the other person’s perspective” (Patton, 2002, p. 341), and conducting interviews is essential, because it helps qualitative researchers to gain data that “we cannot directly observe” (p. 340). Qualitative research interviews use the researcher as the primary research tool as the researcher asks questions and interacts with the research participants (Glesne, 2006). The interviews that take place between interviewee and interviewers are “a joint product” of “what” they talk about together and “how they talk to each other” (Mishler, 1986, p. vii). Rather than just asking questions and listening to answers, interviewing is guided by the researcher and involves active interaction between the interviewee and the researcher.
In *Reflective Interviewing: A Guide to Theory and Practice*, Roulston (2010) introduced six conceptions of qualitative interviewing that underlie assumptions of *neo-positivist, romantic, constructions, postmodern, transformative, and decolonizing*. Presenting these six conceptions about qualitative interviews, Roulston argued that researchers should design their research interviews carefully so that their knowledge production fits with their epistemological and theoretical assumptions. A constructionist conception of an interview, for instance, is a co-construction by the interviewer and interviewee. As speakers engage in meaning-making through describing, reflecting, and explaining, researchers collect the data and use analytic methods. In this approach, data can be analyzed both in structure and topic as focusing on how the interview is co-constructed and what is revealed (Roulston, 2010). Understanding a constructionist conception of an interview is important for my study, because my research sought to understand adult Korean adoptees’ meaning-making regarding their continued relationships with their birth families, which revealed how the adoptees interpret their experiences and what that means to them.

For this study, eight Korean adult adoptees were interviewed through unstructured interviews, using general guiding questions and an informal conversational format for in-depth interviews. I implemented an unstructured interview format, because this method offers “maximum flexibility to pursue information” and “responsiveness to individual differences” (Patton, 2002, p. 342-343). Each participant had a different experience, and his or her values and beliefs were different. Using an unstructured interview approach provided me with multiple aspects of their experiences. However, although I let the participants talk as much as they wanted, I made a general interview guide (Appendix B) to focus on the study topic. Therefore, the interviews were informal conversational interviews that preceded along interview guidelines.
Obtaining consent forms is “a process by which necessary information is communicated to the participant by the researcher” (Fischman, 2010, p. 37). I provided a consent form to the participants and asked them to sign two copies of the study consent form (Appendix C).

Beginning with the interviews, I intended to spend time, at least a half hour to an hour, getting to know the interviewees and letting them get to know me by talking generally and asking some common questions to build rapport. Glesne (2006) defines rapport as “a distance-reducing, anxiety-quieting, trust-building mechanism that primarily serves the interest of the researcher” (p. 100). Through breaking the ice, both the participants and I became more flexible in talking and listening to each other.

Throughout the interviews, I wrote field notes. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), field notes allow the researcher to “hear, see, experience, and think in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data” in a qualitative study (p. 111). By recording field notes, I captured detailed expressions of the participants and better understood the contexts of the interviews. Moreover, field notes offered me a chance to track my own reflections, insights, interpretations and feelings (Patton, 2002). Thus, after each interview, I continually recorded field notes about my feelings regarding my interactions with the participants and reflections on the interview process, while beginning to analyze what happened during the interviews. The field notes were added into the interview data, which were transcribed without adding or deleting any words.

**Document Data Sources**

In collecting the data, more than a single method can be used. Through bringing in different methods, researchers can minimize the weaknesses of any single approach and add strengths in mixing methods (Patton, 2002). In addition to conducting the interviews, I collected documents as a secondary source of data in order to better understand the participants’
experiences and increase my knowledge about my research topic. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) addressed three types of documents: personal documents produced by individuals for private purpose; official documents produced by organizational employees for record-keeping; and popular culture documents produced for commercial purposes.

In this study, some of the participants shared their personal notes and letters. By reading these documents containing their reflections, feelings, and emotions about their reunion experiences with their birth families, I had a deeper understanding of the participants, which was not revealed in the interviews. Also, I visited G.O.A.'L (Global Overseas Adoptee’s Link), which is a non-profit organization consisting of overseas Korean adoptees and native Koreans working together to help find birth families and provide Korean life and cultural experiences. I purchased two journals published by G.O.A.'L., which included a collection of adoptees’ life stories. Lastly, I collected several memoirs written by Korean adoptees and watched documentary movies and YouTube clips about reunification experiences. These different types of documents helped widen my perspectives on adoptees’ reunion experiences with their birth families and deepen my insight and understanding about this study.

Data Analysis

Analyzing data is the process of transforming data into findings and making meaning out of words from people’s lived experiences (Patton, 2002). And, a qualitative researcher is one who interprets this meaning for others (Denzin, 2001). The first process of data analysis was to transcribe the interviews from an audio format into a textual format. As the initial process, transcribing was beneficial, because it enabled me to be an active listener as well as offered me the opportunity to interpret ideas in context (Ezzy, 2002; Riessman, 2008). While transcribing, I took memos when I was interested, curious, or impressed as I listened to the participants’ stories
(Saldana, 2009). After transcribing an interview, I sent a copy of the transcript to the participant and asked the participant to make comments or express any discrepancies in the data. Referring to the participants’ responses on the transcripts, the next step was removing the interview questions from the transcripts. In effect, removing the interview questions from a transcription resembles “a cohesive first-person statement, and at this point, the oral narrative looked like a written autobiographical account” without much intrusion from the interviewer (Johnson-Bailey, 2002, p. 324). Since this study was a narrative inquiry, describing participants’ stories of experiences and reflecting on their living worlds were the primary interests. Thus, through removing the interview questions from the transcripts, the data emphasized the participants’ stories and provided in-depth descriptions.

After the initial data analysis, a second process was implemented. In this process, I adopted Polkinghorne’s (2007) concept regarding narrative data analysis. Polkinghorne makes a distinction between the analysis of narratives and narrative analysis. He articulates that the analysis of narratives is when “narratives are analyzed into themes and categories”; however, narrative analysis “fits within narrative inquiry which understands lives as unfolding temporally, as particular events within a particular individual’s life” (p. 636). Put simply, the analysis of narratives separates the data into certain categories and themes that allow the researcher to pay closer attention to the data. On the other hand, narrative analysis integrates stories as an interpretative process that provides meaning to the collaborative work between the subject and the researcher. Because of their crucial roles in understanding narratives as texts and contexts, these two processes need to be followed from analysis to the interpretative steps.
The Analysis of Narratives

The analysis of narratives is designed to separate the data into categories and themes (Polkinghorne, 2007). For this purpose, I used the constant comparative method. This analysis method was first introduced in Glaser and Strauss’ s (1967) book, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (as cited in Butler-Kisber, 2010). The constant comparative method continuously compares the data and reveals similarities and differences that enable the researcher to discover patterns and themes (Charmaz, 2006). Butler-Kisber (2010) argued that there are many helpful ways of applying constant comparison tools that “acknowledges subjectivity and multiple realities, enacts ethical practices, and drives social action” (p. 26).

The first process of the constant comparative method is called coding. This process allows the researcher to simultaneously identify concepts, categories, and summaries from each piece of data (Charmaz, 2006). By reading each transcript, I coded the data and highlighted significant words and phrases that predominantly emerged in the data. Following this coding process, I constantly wrote memos to reflect on how I came to a decision on particular codes and questions that I had about the data (Saldana, 2009). Each code was highlighted into different colors according to codes’ commonalities and differences. Then, I created a code table and separated the codes according to their colors.

The second process entails organizing these codes to generate categories. During this process, similar to how I provided the code names, I tried to name the categories using words directly from the data. As a result, this helped “push the analysis further and get at the insider/emic perspectives” (Butler-Kisber, 2010). I continued writing analytic memos to reflect on the connection between codes, categories and possible concepts as well as emerging questions and directions for the study (Saldana, 2009). Throughout the process of coding to
categorizing, I was reminded of Corbin’s (2009) statement: “I used these concepts to capture various pieces of data within and between participants looking for similarities and differences” (p. 44). This statement helped me focus on the data and scrutinize the differences and similarities among the data. Indeed, I was able to learn how the data revealed patterns and important keywords, which essentially led to creating codes and narrowing down and categorizing the codes into themes. The constant comparative method essentially offered me the ability to scrutinize the data and stick closely to the participants’ words (Charmaz, 2006).

**The Narrative Analysis**

Since this study implements narrative inquiry, describing the participants’ experiences and integrating the stories as a collaborative work between the participants and the researcher are crucial. As Polkinghorne (2007) articulates, narrative inquiry seeks understanding of a particular individual’s life experiences. Thus, it is necessary to know detailed situations and backgrounds of the stories in order to capture the meaning and understand one’s life story.

The concept of thick description was used here, because it offered the researcher the ability to present not only the facts of a person’s experience but also his or her “context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). In other words, thick description goes beyond merely presenting facts to involving understanding and captivating the context of the situation or experience. It is the interpretive elements of description rather than a rich description of experience. The concept of thick description was originally introduced by Geertz, who borrowed Ryle’s philosophical term “thick” to describe the work of ethnography (as cited in Ponterotto, 2006, p. 539). Denzin (2001) articulates the concept of thick description as inviting individual’s emotions, self-feelings, actions, voices, and meanings into the experience that “creates verisimilitude, a space for the reader to imagine his or
her way into the life experience of another” (p. 99). Thick description can be obtained from one’s observations, stories, narratives, biographies and autobiographies (Denzin, 1989).

Describing thick description as inscription, Denzin (2001) classifies eleven types of thick description. However, the author states that thick description in literature does not have to take the form of all eleven types of thick description; rather, the author believes that complete thick description will present five of the primary typologies: biographical, historical, situational, relational, and interactional. According to Denzin, biographical thick description focuses on an individual to describe his or her actions, physical features, and explain family history.

Individuals describe themselves related to situations or others. For instance, when I did my pilot study, I indicated that biographical thick description would be used when there were moments describing the actions and feelings of a participant. Here is an example from Ashley’s data to explain this category.

After I met my mother, there were things that happened, and she got sick, and I went to Vegas to Los Angeles. I drove to take care of her in the hospital. It was really stressful, because we were just in our two months of meeting, and after that, it was just overwhelming, so I knew I needed to talk to someone. I had two therapists, and I was talking throughout the whole process.

Historical thick description makes an effort to bring “an earlier historical moment or experience alive in vivid detail” (p. 107). Ashley brings up her past memories and explains her initial contact from the adoption agency. This reveals how individual action adds to historical events.

I remember in 7th grade I was questioned…diagnosed depression, and I was just sad. I just had immense sadness inside of me, but I didn’t know why. It was just sadness, anger, and just rage. I was wondering about my family, and my parents contacted the adoption
agency to do a search for any of my relatives. And, when I was in 7th grade, we got a letter from our adoption agency saying they found my relatives.

Situational thick description creates a visual image of a situation. In the next description, Ashley illustrates a visual picture and describes a smell to explain the situation.

We had eaten dinner, and we were going to bed, and I slept with my sister in her room, and my brother was on the floor, and when I got up to go to the bathroom, when I came and opened the bedroom door, it smelled like garlic. It was, I mean, we had both eaten raw garlic at dinner, and when I asked for raw garlic, my sister had said, you are brothers and sisters, because he is the only one that eats raw garlic in the family.

Relational thick description “brings a relationship alive” (p. 109). Through vivid description, relationships and re-creations of relational experiences are revealed. Here, Ashley describes her difficulties in communicating with her birth family and their relationship.

I call them sometimes, sometimes e-mail…and I am usually the one who initiate it. I brought up to my sister why don’t they ever call me and don’t they ever think of me. Do they ever miss me… and they do, but they can’t speak English, so they don’t want to call me, because we can’t speak to each other. I think, also, part of it is realizing that it’s not their way …it’s not the way they are… but last year, they did call me on my birthday, and that was really sweet.

Interactional thick description highlights interactions between two or more persons, which are also both situational and relational. The next description indicates interactions between Ashley and her birth mother.

When I saw my birth mother, I asked her, “Are you Mrs. Lee?” She said, “Yes.” “Is this your date of birth? Is this your id? Do you know this man who was my father?” I told her,
“I am your daughter,” and she looked at me just… she seemed as if she had seen a ghost.

When I knew that she accepted that I was indeed her daughter, I forgave her.

Similar to my pilot study, I reflected on the above five categories of thick description for capturing the participant’s lived experience and focusing on the participant’s situation, relationships, and interactions. This approach enabled me to analyze meanings in the findings (Denzin, 2001). In other words, thick description provides a strong foundation for making meaning and creating an accurate and shareable understanding of the life experiences of another. This process became a bridge that connected me to the participants and created a shareable understanding of participants’ life experiences as well as inviting readers into that space.

After thick description, lastly, the narrative text moved into another level of interpretation to provide deeper meanings for constructing a story. For this purpose, I used the experience-centered approach, which defines narratives as “stories of experience rather than events” (Squire, 2008, p. 41). This approach assumes that personal narratives include all sequential stories that people produce, so that it focuses more on contents than structures. Also, an experience-centered narrative views narratives as human sense-making that is not just “characteristic of humans, but makes us human” (p. 43). A third assumption of the experience-centered perspective on narratives is that narratives are reconstructed and performed differently at different times and in different places and situations. Also, the experience-centered approach believes that narratives represent personal changes rather than just presenting how stories end.

As I believe the narratives of adult Korean adoptees are valuable and meaningful, by talking about their stories related to themselves, their families, and their social worlds, this experience-centered approach assisted in an apt analysis of these narratives texts. Focusing on their relationships within the reunion contexts and what these mean to them, this approach
served to illuminate their meaning making and how they understand themselves. Furthermore, adoptees’ experiences with family reunions can be major life events that change their views on life. By analyzing the sequence and progression of themes, the experience-centered approach illuminated multilayered meanings to provide a better understanding of adoptees’ narratives.

**Trustworthiness**

In a qualitative study, evaluating quality and credibility requires a different validation of proof through the intersection of the “audience and intended inquiry process” by the researcher (Patton, 2002, p. 542). In other words, the common criteria of validity and reliability applied in qualitative study takes a different approach as opposed to a quantitative study or traditional scientific research. According to Polkinghorne (2007), validity is the matter of its degrees rather than a claim being made to be either valid or not valid. This means that validity is not just a knowledge statement, rather validity comes from “intersubjective judgment” (p. 473). In qualitative research, particularly approaching it from a social constructionist perspective, the belief is that reality is constructed by individuals through interactions between human beings and within social contexts (Crotty, 1998). Indeed, a qualitative researcher is interested in a deeper understanding of people’s meaning of their experiences within multiple perspectives rather than as a single phenomenon. As a result, findings in a study vary depending on the study’s research methods and the researcher’s perspectives. Thus, rather than evaluating reliability, consistency or dependability should be assessed (Guba & Lincoln, 1992).

In qualitative studies, the participants’ narratives heavily depend on the researcher’s interpretation, as the researcher is directly involved in data collection and analysis as opposed to using an instrument, as in quantitative studies. In order to establish a solid internal validity, several strategies are discussed, such as triangulation, member checks, and a statement of the
researcher positionality and assumptions (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). First of all, this study was triangulated by implementing multiple data sources, including interview data, the researchers’ memos, and literature related to the field. In particular, the researcher’s memos recorded how I personally related to the participants, the emergence of patterns, themes, and concepts, any problems with conducting the study, and finally, analytic reflections of the study (Saldana, 2009). Along with the memos, I wrote a researcher journal to reflect on my research process. This provided another means of verifying my research process. Second, a member check followed the interview process. Member checking enabled the qualitative researcher to develop credibility by examining the accordance between the participants’ and the researcher’s accounts (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). I sent copies of the transcripts to the participants and asked them to review the transcripts and provide further comments on the data, if they deem it necessary. Finally, I wrote a statement of researcher positionality and assumptions to indicate my position and any issues that might influence this study.

Another criterion for accessing a qualitative study is external validity in which results can be applied to other populations. Merriam and Simpson (2000) argued that generalizability should be approached differently in qualitative studies and suggest “reader or user generalizability” (p. 103). This implies that findings from the study can be assessed by the people who are in those particular situations to determine their validity. To increase the external validity, I used thick description to provide rich description and information that readers can determine as being transferable to their situations (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Thus, varying methods, such as triangulation, researcher’s memos, member checks, and thick description, assured both the degrees of the internal and external validity of this study.
Researcher Positionality and Assumptions

The unique feature of a qualitative study is that the researcher is the primary instrument in the overall process. At the same time, this notion implies that researchers enter into research relationships with their own values, beliefs, and assumptions (Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, Lee, Ntseane, & Mazanah, 2001). It is inevitable that the research will, to some extent, reflect their worldviews or perspectives on the research process. The researcher, as an instrument, brings up several concerns in the research process. As qualitative research is a discovery-oriented approach, it offers open-ended questions to gain rich data regarding the participants’ experiences and lives. While this method lets participants talk about themselves, it may cause them to be placed in vulnerable situations by revealing their stories (Chenail, 2011). During the interview, the researcher facilitates the interview process, and the participants follow the researcher’s lead. Poggenpoel and Myburgh (2003) stated that “the researcher as an instrument can be the greatest threat to trustworthiness” if they are not well prepared to conduct an interview and have not reflected on their process (p. 320). As the researcher has a great influence on the interview process, the researcher should take appropriate responsibility in the research process to acknowledge their possibility for usurping the research as well as their preconceptions that may affect the outcomes. Through acknowledging the researcher’s role, the interview process was more upstanding and produced a collaborative work.

Another concern arose with the data analysis process. Approaching narrative inquiry, the participants tell their stories and experiences to the researcher, and through narrative analysis, the data are interpreted from the researchers’ perspectives. In this process, the researcher may abuse their positions as they omit or selectively choose some quotes to avoid conflicts (Borland, 1991). In fact, at the center of all of the analysis processes is the researcher who codes, sorts,
categorizes, and interprets. Josselson (1993) confessed her own discomfort, “the dread, guilt, and shame that go with writing about others” (p. 69). In narrative research, writing and analyzing others’ stories are inevitable, and the researcher should have a conviction to express these stories with the same fervor as they were told to the researcher by the narrators. Being an insider and outsider to the research study is an important concern in qualitative study. The debate, whether or not qualitative researchers should be members of the population which they intend to study has been discussed in qualitative research (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Distinguishing membership roles, Adler and Adler (1987) describe three types of researchers: (a) peripheral member researchers who do not have any involvement in group activities or as members of the group; (b) active researchers, who are involved in the group without fully identifying themselves as members of the group; and (c) complete member researchers, who fully identify themselves with members of the group. These three types of membership roles raise questions about how these different roles influence researchers’ abilities to conduct the research. Dwyer and Buckle (2009) addressed both benefits and challenges of either being an insider or an outsider. The insider role allows researchers to experience more acceptance from their participants by sharing culture, language, and identity (Kanuha, 2000). Participants are more open to the researcher so that they may gather in-depth data. However, at the same time, there are challenges to being an insider. For instance, an insider’s position can result in role confusion when they analyze the data, because they have dual perspectives as an insider member and as a researcher (Armstrong, 2001; Asselin, 2003).

As opposed to being an insider researcher, an outsider researcher may face some difficulties in accessing the participants and gaining in-depth data because of the suspicions their participants might have of their intentions. Dwyer confesses her concern about her outsider
status by questioning her ability to appreciate her research participants’ experiences (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009). Despite the concerns of being an outsider, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) argued that qualitative researchers are not separate from the study, as they are definitely involved in all aspects of the research process, so “a distant researcher role” isn’t possible (p. 61). Therefore, the authors conclude that rather than making an issue of the dichotomous perspective between insider and outsider, researchers should take the space between to afford both the contests and benefits of these statuses.

In this research, studying adult Korean adoptees’ relationships with their birth families and exploring meaning in understanding adoptees’ senses of self, my research stance occupies a space somewhere between insider and outsider. Although I am not an adoptee, my interest in adoption has been an important concern for me, because one of my family members is an adoptee. Since 2009, I have been involved with adoptee groups and have met several adult Korean adoptees. From that time, I recognize that there is a serious lack of support and attention paid to this group by the Korean society and government. I have been truly interested in post-adoption issues and have considered using my role as a researcher and an adult educator to illuminate these adoptees’ experiences.

My membership in these groups is that of a committed researcher who actively participates in an adoptee group without being a member of the group (Adler & Adler, 1987). So, my positionality is neither as a third party who observes adoptees from an outsider’s perspective nor as a first party who is an adoptee. Indeed, my position, being a birth family member, offers me acceptance from the study participants as they recognize me as one of the members in the adoption triangle – adoptees, birth families, and adoptive parents. Also, even though my understanding and interpretation of their stories might not completely preserve their
voices and resonate their stories to the audience, my own experience with an adopted sister allows me to have a rich understanding of the participants’ experiences with their birth families. However, Korean society has been very closed in discussing adoption, particularly when it comes to birth families, and there is a strong stigma toward adoptees in society. For this reason, my approach to this study is very cautious in terms of my positionality; thus, I place my position between the insider and the outsider according to my discretion as a researcher. Thus, I believe that approaching this study with sincere appreciation, acknowledging the adoptees’ concerns, having the ability to listen to them, and mindfully interpreting the stories that have been entrusted to me by the participants will support me in remaining firmly in a stance between participant and researcher.

**The Pilot Study**

Prior to designing this study, a pilot study was conducted in hopes of providing better guidelines for attempting a full study. Implementing the purposeful sampling, I used networking with participating volunteer translators for a Korean international adult adoptees’ reunion program at G.O.A.’L (Global Overseas Adoptee’s Link). After contacting four participants through electronic mail, only two participants agreed to participate in the study. Two individual interviews were conducted on March 15 and March 17, 2012 for an hour and an hour and a half at a preferred location/caféd identified by the participants. The two participants met the following criteria: a) AKAs who have had reunion experiences at least three year ago; and b) AKAs who have continued contact with their birth families. Although one participant asked me to use her own name, I asked them to choose pseudonyms in order to assure their anonymity.

The first participant, Ashley, is a thirty-three year old Korean adoptee. Ashley reunited with her birth parents when she was twenty-four years old and has continued a relationship since
then. The second respondent, Michelle, is thirty-eight years old and was reunited with her birth mother three years ago. Both interviews were conducted for approximately one hour and were audio recorded. Each interview was transcribed and analyzed using narrative analysis.

The study revealed two major findings. The first finding indicated that AKAs’ reunion experiences described that AKAs had positive perspectives regarding continuing relationships with their birth families. Although there were concerns about language and cultural gaps, overall, AKAs were satisfied with their continued experiences. Another main finding was that both the participants revealed their satisfaction by resolving questions about their birth histories and birth families. Knowing about these contexts helped them gain a greater sense of self and made them feel much more comfortable about who they are. Among the key outcomes of reunions, knowing who “I” am and building a better sense of self as an adoptee are the most important outcomes (Trinder, Feast & Howe, 2004). As the literature discusses, adult Korean adoptees re-construct their understandings about self and continue family relationships with both their birth families and adoptive families.

Throughout the process of this pilot study, I gained two extremely pertinent insights in designing this study. First, building rapport prior to the interviews provided comfort to the participants, and they seemed more relaxed in relaying their stories. Following this building of rapport, I used an unstructured interview format with an interview guide to allow them flexibility in relaying their experiences. This method was successful, as the participants freely talked about their experiences and I gained rich and descriptive data. The second insight was that due to a lack of studies on post reunion experiences, particularly on international adoptees, I was cautious about broaching the research topic with the participants. However, the findings in this study have assured me that post-reunion relationships have had a marked influence on adult Korean
adoptees in terms of constructing and reconstructing their senses of self. Thus, it is believed that this study will fill an important missing piece in the literature and provide a better understanding on post-reunion relationships as lifelong journeys.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I described the methodological process and methods that will be implemented to explore adult Korean adoptees narratives on continued reunion relationships with their birth families and their developing senses of self. With this expressed purpose, I provided a detailed research design, including the use of narrative inquiry, the sample selection, and the collection and analysis of the data. The steps taken to assure the study’s validity and reliability were addressed, as it is a crucial issue in qualitative research. Finally, I included the results of a pilot study, which I conducted prior to designing this study to support the effective implementation of the current research.
CHAPTER IV

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

The purpose of this study was to explore how Adult Korean Adoptees’ (AKAs) evolving relationships with their birth families affect their developing senses of self.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do AKAs describe their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ2. How have AKAs’ sense of self developed through their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ3. What meaning do AKAs attach to the experience of reuniting with their birth families?

This chapter offers participants’ profiles in two sections. The first section includes the demographic information about the eight participants, which was collected using a demographic questionnaire. The demographic information is presented in table format (see Table 4.1) that provides basic descriptive characteristics of the participants. The second section includes summarized narratives of the participants’ interviews. An average of one and half hours was spent on each interview, the data was transcribed, and participants were emailed the transcribed interviews.

Each summarized narrative includes the following synopsis: 1) background information on the adoptee’s reunion process, 2) the relationship with his/her birth family, and 3) a self-reflection on the AKA’s reunion experience. Through this process, each participant’s narrative was highlighted. While the summarized narratives vary, they also share some similarities. In essence, the summarized narratives provide each participant’s story individually as each person
has a unique reunion experience with his/her birth family. Meanwhile, the narratives, as a whole, offer a bigger picture for understanding the reunion contexts of AKAs.

**Demographic Information**

A total of eight adult Korean adoptees (AKAs) were invited to participate in interviews for this study. After each participant agreed to be interviewed, a demographic questionnaire was sent to the participants prior to conducting the individual interviews (Appendix D). The demographic questionnaire was divided into two-parts, which included personal information and reunion information. Table 4.1 presents demographic information about the eight AKAs using their pseudonyms. Six participants selected a preferred European/ Anglo first name, and one participant modified his Korean middle name. Interestingly, K-M-T’s pseudonym is her actual initials. The table includes their ages, ethnic identifications, ages at the time of the reunions, and their frequencies of contact with their birth families after their initial reunions.

Table 4.1

*Demographic Profiles of the Nine Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Identification</th>
<th>Age at the Time of the Reunion</th>
<th>Frequency of Contact with His/Her Birth Family</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Frequency changes each year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>3 times per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimmee</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Frequency changes each year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-M-T</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>1-2 times per year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>1-2 times per year</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Amy

Amy recalled her childhood and youth as being very positive. Her mother advocated for her, and they were actively engaged in a Korean adoptee playgroup. So, since Amy’s early childhood, she socialized with Korean adoptees and attended cultural camps that exposed her to the Korean culture. In addition, her mother came to her school and used these visits as teaching moments to educate Amy’s classmates about Korea. Amy thinks it was the best way to combat bullying and racism, because her classmates were being educated about and acknowledged different cultures. According to Amy, although she grew up relatively happy, she felt something was missing and wanted to see people who looked like her.

At college, she met a Korean friend who helped her search for her birth family, and they called the Korean adoption agency that was responsible for her adoption. As if expecting the inquiry, the Korean adoption agency revealed Amy’s information over the phone. Soon after Amy got the information about her birth family, she visited Korea to meet them. Describing their first meeting, Amy recalled that her birth mother got very emotional and that she seems to have an immediate connection with her. On the other hand, for Amy, although she was a little emotional, it was so weird to her, because she felt like her birth mother could have been any stranger off the street. Once Amy came back to the U.S., she did not stay in contact with her birth family, because writing them e-mails or calling was pointless, since she didn’t know
Korean. Amy made a second visit to Korea to do some research for a college project and stayed with her birth mother and sisters. Amy described one episode while staying with her birth mother. Every day, her birth mother brought her food from McDonald’s, because she thought Amy only ate Western food. Indeed, her birth mother and sisters tried to do their best to oblige Amy as per their assumptions about Americans, but it just made her feel like she was a guest and not a member of their family. However, as Amy made another visit to Korea and spent more time with her birth family, the relationship between Amy and her birth family has changed:

I knew them longer. We really reached that point, and I am very happy about that.

Language is always challenging. I would love to talk to them more, about more in-depth stuff, so they can get to know me better. But, I feel like I know them better just spending time with them, like their personality and energy. You don’t need to always talk to them…

Amy also explained that, at the beginning, she had difficulty understanding her birth mother’s need for physical closeness, wanting to always be close to her, wanting to sleep in her bed, and hold her hands. But, Amy’s initial feelings of awkwardness have lessened, also, and she feels much more comfortable accepting this kind of physical contact with her birth mother, although there are still some cultural gaps that she doesn’t fully understand.

While language and cultural gaps are obvious difficulties in the relationship, Amy wishes that her birth family had a better understanding of adoption as a historical occurrence in Korea as opposed to an individual situation. Amy has recognized social problems and stigmas in Korea about international adoption. So, she wants to discuss these problems with her birth family and hopes that her birth family doesn’t consider their decision with personal regret or shame. One time, Amy organized a meeting with other birth families to share their stories and to create a kind
of support group. Unfortunately, it did not work out as she had expected. At this point, Amy views her birth family as extended family, like uncles, aunts, and cousins. Although she definitely recognizes these relationships are moving towards a deeper bond, she doubts that it will ever be like the relationship she shares with her adoptive parents. Indeed, Amy explained that the reunification with birth family made her relationship with her adoptive parents stronger.

My birth mother is going to be an important part of my life, and we are gonna build a relationship, but it doesn’t amount to the years my mom has spent getting to know me and understand me. When I am with her, I am much more appreciative about what I have. I see what I don’t have with my birth mother and what I don’t share with her. That made me more grateful for what I have with my adoptive family.

Nonetheless, Amy’s expectation for continuing the relationship with her birth family is very positive. She and her partner are planning to have children in Korea, because she missed out on being raised by her birth family. Amy thinks it’s a really exciting prospect that her children can have just as strong of a bond with her birth family as they can with her adoptive family and her partner’s family. She is looking forward to getting to know her birth family more through future experiences.

**Ana**

Ana grew up in a town where there were very few Asians. She has two sisters who were the biological children of her adoptive parents. Since Ana was twelve years old, her mother was sick with multiple health problems. Although she did not think about it very consciously, being a perfect person and perfect daughter was very important to her. One of her main motivations was that she wanted to make her mother proud of her and create a good relationship with her. For instance, Ana always tried very hard at school and wanted to be the very best in order to gain
some kind of external validation that she was doing okay. Recalling her childhood, Ana describes her experiences with racism. People often made fun of her physical appearance and asked questions about her adoption. These experiences made her realize that she is very different from others. Ana felt very isolated, because she thought nobody really understood her. Indeed, although she tried to be perfect and looked content on the outside, she felt very alone inside.

In 2001, Ana received a message that was left on her answering machine. It was from a social worker from an adoption agency. Ana felt so strange, because she had neither initiated any birth search nor looked for her birth family. Later, she found that it was her birth family in Korea that was searching for her and contacted her through the adoption agency. Ana was very surprised hearing from her birth family, and she felt as if her privacy had been invaded a little bit, as she hadn’t searched for them. At that time, Ana exchanged some letters and photos with her birth family, because she wanted to let them know that she is doing well and, also, wanted to see what they looked like. After contacting her birth family, sadly, Ana’s adoptive mother passed away, and a few years later, her adoptive father was killed in a motorcycle accident. Also, during this time, she had gotten married, which made her feel like she had more room for self-exploration. Describing what she was going through, Ana explained that not having parents alive made her feel like she wouldn’t make anybody feel bad or threatened.

Ana made the decision to visit Korea with her husband and met her birth family in 2009. Meeting her birth family, she did not have high expectations, because she hadn’t expected this event to complete her. She just wanted to meet them in person, as she was very curious as to who they were. However, meeting them in person was quite unnerving. Although the situation was very overwhelming, it was good to meet her birth mother, brothers and sister, and she
enjoyed their warm hospitality. Her birth mother especially wanted to tell her that she had not thrown her away. When her birth mother went back to find her, she was already gone. By spending time with her birth mother, Ana could feel how hard her life was, suffering from the loss of her child,

I think that meeting them make me realize that they are real people, and they care for me a lot. I want to know if something happens to any of my birth family. I just feel a connection to them that I don’t want to give up. I don’t think it feels like a family connection, but a special connection to them that I don’t want to give up. I just care for them in a really unique way. It’s not that I feel like they are my family, but it’s not that I don’t think they are not my family either…I care about them as people who occupy a special place in my life.

After Ana came back home, she has only contacted her older brother through e-mail. Although she wants to keep in touch with her mother and her sister, they don’t use e-mail. Ana explains that even writing e-mail to her older brother is not easy, because he hasn’t been a part of her life. She does not really know about them, so she wonders, “what should I write, and what should I not write?” Although Ana met her birth family, she did not think it was for a sufficient time to get to know them well. Also, there are cultural differences between Ana and her birth family, and she is cautious, trying not to give them the wrong impression. So, continuing the relationship with her birth family takes a lot of effort. While there are difficulties in continuing the relationship, Ana hopes to keep in touch with them and let them know that she cares.

In terms of identity, Ana states that her relationship with her birth family made her feel more comfortable about who she is. In particular, having a birth brother who looks a lot like her is extremely meaningful to her, because she found a connection to somebody that visibly
confirms her origin. Also, the whole experience gives her a sense of a connection to Korea that used to be abstract. Now, her understanding of Korea has become more tangible. It gives her a much stronger sense of herself in terms of the way she sees the world and values that she has. As this has been important to her, she wants her children to have a sense of connection to Korea, because it might give them a useful understanding of their identities, as well.

**Kimme**

Unlike many adoptees who grew up in a predominately White neighborhood, Kimme was raised in an area that was predominately Asian. There is a large Korean community, and she had opportunities to be exposed to Korean people, food, and the culture. As Kimme got older, she became more interested in Korea. Since middle school, she focused particularly on subjects or projects related to Korea or having something to do with Korea. While she was very interested in Korea and wanted to explore more about its culture, it was a dark period for her. She didn’t understand why she was adopted and why this had happened to her.

When she was 18 years old, she searched for her biological family, but she didn’t find any information about them at that time. Six years later, she decided to visit Korea with a study abroad program, and she met Korean adoptees who had been reunited with their birth families. Through interacting with them, she gained information about an adoption agency in Korea and contacted the agency. Unexpectedly, it only took about two weeks to find her birth family, and the agency arranged a meeting with her birth family.

Meeting her birth family at the agency, Kimme was expecting her birth family to look very similar to her, but they didn’t. At that time, she thought, “Oh, my god. I was so excited when they told me they found my family. Maybe, I should ask for a DNA test. What if it’s not, because I don’t look like them?” Although Kimme doubted the connection, her birth family
thought that she looked very much like they do. Also, when she showed a photo of her birth family to her friends, they said, “You look very much alike.” Kimme felt so strange, because she never had someone that resembled her, and now, she had a family with her physical features.

In meeting her birth family, Kimme found that she was the youngest of seven siblings from the same parents. Compared to her adoptive family, having only one older brother and her parents, her birth family is a very large family. So, meeting with her birth parents, seven siblings, and nephews and nieces was a unique experience for her. Kimme decided to move back to Korea, because she wanted to know her biological family better, and she had also been offered a job. Since she has been living in Korea, she has been visiting her siblings who live in different areas of Korea and trying to get to know them better.

Like many Korean adoptees that have reunited with their birth families, Kimme experienced a huge difficulty with communication. Throughout the years, her Korean has improved. Kimme explains that her ability to understand the language by listening is so much better than being able to speak the language; by listening, she can understand what her family is saying. However, she feels very frustrated that she can’t respond. Cultural differences are also a barrier. For instance, she has a boyfriend, and her birth family keeps asking her when she plans on getting married. In Korea, it is quite normal that when one gets engaged, he or she will get married quickly. Even though she tries to explain her culture, it is difficult for them. Kimme states, “This is something I think is difficult for them to understand, because their primary interaction with westerners comes from television.” In addition, geographical distances have been challenging to her. Although she wants to visit her parents and siblings more often, they live quite a long way away from her. Indeed, Kimme feels like she has to make a lot of effort to continue having relationships with them. Even though she is getting better about understanding
the Korean culture and her language has been improving, it is still not enough to build a closer relationship with her birth family. She doubts how intimately she and her birth family will get to know each other. Despite all of these concerns, Kimme says:

I still want to get to know them. I feel like I am not gonna leave Korea for the rest of my life. It took me over twenty years to find them. And, so, if I have this chance now to interact with them on a very regular basis, I want to do that, because I have the ability to do it now. Later, if I get marry or have kids, just decide to move back to the U.S., I won’t have that kind of access. So, and also, both of my parents are older; they are in their 70s. You know, I don’t know how much I will get to see them and spend time with them.

Kimme describes her relationship with her birth family as a moving relationship. Reflecting on her relationship with her birth family, she considers it a very unique opportunity and a valuable experience in terms of her identity. She has always known and considered herself Korean. As she has gotten older, she has thought of herself more as a Korean-American. But, coming to Korea, she accepts how American she actually is in the way she thinks and the way she lives her life. Kimme states that she was “feeling sad that I will never really be Korean in the ways that I thought I would. Even if I perceived myself to be that way, other people wouldn’t.” She explains that, although she lives in Korea, it is really hard for her to identify herself, because she doesn’t really fit into being either American or Korean.

For Kimme, meeting her birth family was a life changing experience. According to her, it changed a lot of things in her life. First, she never thought of living in Korea, but because she had the opportunity to meet her biological family, it intrigued her. So, she made the decision to live in Korea. In addition, it has helped to change how she perceives herself and her adoption. As she got answers to her many questions, she finds peace with the answers, and she no longer
has to wonder about the why questions. Moreover, she has a better understanding of Korean society and the cultural backdrop for the practice of international adoption. She has become actively involved in an adoptee community to support other Korean adoptees.

**K-M-T**

K-M-T was raised by very conservative evangelical Christian parents and went to a private Christian school. Living in a White conservative setting, she supposed that she was White but just in an incompatible Korean body. At school, her friends viewed her as White, and at that time, she thought this was a good thing. Although her parents loved her and cared for her very much, they did not really address race issues. Looking back, K-M-T recounts that these experiences were actually damaging for understanding her race and ethnicity.

Growing up, she was told that it was impossible to find her birth family, so she was kind of accepting that she wouldn’t be able to find them. Nevertheless, in her mind, she still wanted to know about her origins. In 2007, she visited Korea and went to the adoption agency which had handled her adoption process. From the agency, K-M-T got her birth mother’s address and found that her grandmother still lived in the same place. Unlike a usual first meeting with the birth family at the agency, K-M-T visited her grandmother’s house with the help of her friend. Describing that moment, she states:

"It was a completely coincidental miracle. I don’t even know the words for it. My mother lives in Seoul, and my grandmother lives in this really tiny village. My mother just happened to be there that day, and actually, she never planned to go to her mother’s house. So, it was very much like a miracle. Nothing can take that moment from me no matter what happens."
Meeting her birth mother at her grandmother’s house was a total coincidence. K-M-T was very emotional about that moment and recalled thinking “this is the first moment finding my own, and I am finally in control in terms of adoption.”

K-M-T extended her stay in Korea for several months. During this time, she met with her birth mother frequently, and their visits got to a point which had become too much for her emotionally. K-M-T explained that, at the beginning, it was really a “wow” experience to get to know each other. However, it became too intense, because her birth mother got too emotional and was crying all the time. K-M-T didn’t know how to react to that situation, and communication was always difficult without having a translator. More importantly, there is a deep-down conflict between K-M-T and her birth mother that went beyond language.

I think language, on one hand, is maybe the easiest thing to pin point to the problems. But, I think there is also her guilt. Maybe, this is a very Korean way of pushing everything down, saying everything is okay, and like, not going to talk about what happened in the past, just move forward. It is a really hard thing to talk about questions for giving me up. Even if I speak Korean fluently or she speaks English fluently, I don’t know if we would ever be able to talk about those things.

For K-M-T, in order to look forward to the future, it is important to address how things happened in the past and address the “why” questions regarding her adoption. However, her birth mother has a different position. Her guilt at having given up her daughter for adoption and the shame for what she did haunts her deeply, resulting in her refusal to talk about it. To help her birth mother, K-M-T tried to introduce her mother to a support group and a counseling service, but she realized that it was a very westernized way of approaching the problem that did not really work for her birth mother. So, their different ways of approaching their relationship has made the
relationship very irreconcilable. While there are challenges and difficulties with the relationship with her birth mother, K-M-T perceives that she and her birth mother are connected to each other no matter what.

Through all these experiences with her birth mother and having the opportunity to explore Korea, her perceptions and understandings of herself have changed. K-M-T identifies herself as a Korean American adoptee as opposed to just being Korean American. She thinks that there is a significant difference, because adoption really has shaped her identity in becoming who she is now. According to K-M-T, in her early twenties, she felt grateful and lucky to be adopted. Indeed, being adopted was not really a matter to her. However, after going to Korea and meeting her birth mother, she realized that it really does matter to her. Also, she learned about the stigma on adoption practices in Korea society and the social problems involved with adoption. In knowing these things, she changed her views on accepting international adoption and has become a strong advocate against its practice. In addition, as she has gone through the searching and reuniting process, she feels like she has a certain responsibility toward adoptees who are in the process of searching for their birth families or are in the reunion stages. She would like to share her experiences and provide support to adoptees when they are needed. Overall, the way she perceives herself and her interests in life have changed. That’s why, for her, it is important to include adoptee as part of her identity.

Peter

Growing up in a small town, Peter was aware of his physical differences, as all of the people around him were White. He was adopted when he was three years old and remembers always wondering throughout his childhood what happened to his family in Korea and longing to meet his birth family. When he reached adolescence, he became very uncomfortable living in
his hometown, because not only did he look different, but there was no one to talk about his hardships with in school, in his family, or even with friends. For instance, although his parents were very supportive of Peter, they had lived in the same hometown their whole lives and had no idea about Korea. Peter wanted to go abroad and his parents allowed him to study in Canada. This opportunity was a life changing experience. Most of the friends he made came from immigrant backgrounds and identified themselves as immigrants. From these friendships, Peter realized that he didn’t have to identify himself with a national identification. Therefore, he felt much more comfortable accepting his origin and who he was.

As Peter had always longed for his birth family, he completed an official birth family search at eighteen by contacting the adoption agency that had handled his adoption. This attempt was not very successful, so he tried to contact them again after two years. Although the agency gave him the little information they had, they did not have any more information on his birth family. Again, in his late twenties, he applied directly to Korea’s social services for a birth family search. Finally, seven months later, he got a phone call from the agency saying that they had found his father, who had also been looking for him for over twenty years, because Peter had been placed up for adoption without his consent. His birth father wrote him three letters and asked him to visit Korea. So, in the same year that he located his birth father, Peter visited Korea and met his birth father, older brother, and two half-brothers. As Peter always longed for his birth family and searched for them for thirty years, he felt very ambivalence about meeting them. It was a really long journey for him to finally meet them, and all of his memories and efforts played over and over in his head.

They spent the first night together and his older brother told him stories about his birth mother’s death three months after Peter was born and his birth father’s remarriage to another
woman. After his biological mother’s death, Peter’s older brother was basically assigned to take care of him; however, while his birth father was away, his uncle and aunt sent Peter to an orphanage. Knowing these stories about his mother and how he was put up for adoption, Peter felt very emotional, because he had recollections of an older brother taking care of him. Surprisingly, since Peter was young, he always longed for an older brother without being able to recall that he, at one time, had an older brother with whom he was very close. His older brother was subconsciously in his reflections.

Being with his birth father and older brother was a unique experience. Peter’s birth father and older brother both traveled abroad a lot because of their jobs. They were very open-minded and independent people. So, when Peter was with them, they understood his different ways of living and did not try to fit him into a Korean mold. Peter states, “That kind of understanding, that I had grown up in a different culture, I think it has been very very important in keeping the relationship.” This makes Peter feel very comfortable being with them and being able to share his stories with them.

Although language is an obvious gap in continuing the relationship with his birth father and older brother, fortunately Peter has a cousin who speaks English very fluently. She works as an English language editor for a publication, so she has acted as a translator between him and his birth family. However, beyond the language, Peter feels it’s hard to talk with his birth father and ask him about himself. Peter explains that he really wanted to know about his birth father’s history and about his life. Moreover, his mother passed away when he was three months old, and she had no relatives since she was a war orphan. So, his father is his only means of knowing about his birth mother, but his birth father just keeps answering, “I will tell you the whole story when you understand.”
Overall, reflecting on the relationship with his birth father and his older brother, Peter describes that the relationship has become deeper, and it has normalized into a family relationship. For instance, in the beginning, Peter and his birth father and older brother tried very hard to please each other, but as they have come to know more about each other, they have built mutually respectful relationships and an unconditional family bond. Moreover, once his birth father told him about his family history and his work with migrant workers, he started to look much deeper into Korean history, politics, and social issues. Since then, his views on Korea have changed, and he has developed a more critical understanding of Korea instead of just accepting a romanticized view of it.

More importantly, through his reunion experience, he realizes his suppression and “how much energy I used in my life to not only find my birth family, but also to please other people to fit in. I was afraid of not fitting in…I spent so much energy on being accepted.” Now, Peter has turned his thought processes around, and he doesn’t really try to fit in to any certain groups or categories. In terms of identity, he tries not to identity himself, as well, and views his identification as very contextual. He considers the most constant identification for understanding himself is migration. For Peter, he explains, “I would not ever be able to completely fit in either place…” His understanding of himself as a migrant has been strengthened, and he feels more secure about himself.

Sara

Sara was raised with two older brothers who are biological children of her adoptive parents. Raised in a White family in the White culture, it was so natural for her to think of herself as being White, and she never questioned her Korean heritage. However, when Sara was seven years old and as she entered school, she started realizing that she looked different than her
friends. Looking different than the others and coming from an Asian heritage made her uncomfortable, because she was “different.” For Sara, difference didn’t mean unique, but it was something that made her feel distanced from others. Throughout her teenage years, Sara felt emptiness within her, and she didn’t know that what she was experiencing was really a cultural void. In fact, her parents never spoke to her about Korea, and she didn’t have any opportunities to explore the Korean culture, so Sara had no idea what it meant to be Korean. Although Sara had no relationship to Korea, she always longed to meet her birth mother. Because of this, she decided to go to Korea and initiated a search for her birth mother.

As the basic process, Sara first contacted the adoption agency, which had handled her adoption. Sara also contacted a television program to publicize her search for her birth mother, and she thought, “It didn’t matter that I had to appear on a TV show. I would do whatever it took to find her.” However, neither the adoption agency nor the TV program provided any information. Sara was very disappointed. Sara examined the paper, which was provided at her adoption. All of a sudden, the name of a hospital caught Sara’s attention. It was the hospital which Sara’s mother visited when she was pregnant. Anxiously, Sara searched for information about the hospital and sent an e-mail inquiring about her mother. After two months, she received an answer from a pastor saying that they had found her birth father and grandmother. And, she flew to Korea and met her father for the very first time at the airport.

Sara recounted the first meeting with her birth father as being a very weird meeting, because he was a total stranger to her, and she only acknowledged him as being her birth father. In discussing her adoption with him, Sara found, that because she was born out of wedlock, she was put up for adoption. Her birth father and birth mother live separately and have their own families. Since Sara was young, she so desperately wanted to meet her birth mother. The pastor
again helped her to arrange a meeting with her birth mother. However, the first meeting with her birth mother was unpleasant because of her birth mother’s alcoholism. Sara was very disappointed upon meeting her, as she had always wanted to meet her and had dreamed about how this meeting might go. After meeting her birth mother, Sara has only maintained contact with her birth father and visits his family often.

Sara explained that, because she is curious about her background and also wanted to belong to a family in Korea in a way in which she never fully belonged to her adoptive family, she kept in contact with her birth father. Describing one of the moments with her father, Sara remembers:

My father and I were sitting down on a balcony, and he held my hands without being able to explain anything. He started crying, and I could tell he was very very sorry for a lot of things that he couldn’t express. And, that moment and that time was very emotional for both of us, because there were so many feelings that we both felt about each other, and we couldn’t express it anyway, but still, we could show it. That was one of the strongest memory I had from that trip.

Despite this good memory, Sara explained difficulties in continuing the relationship with her birth father. For instance, when she visits him, he is very considerate, brings her to nice restaurants and does nice things for her. Although he does these things with good will, Sara feels like she is just a visitor from another country, and this treatment makes her aware of the limitations to this family relationship. According to her, the situation would be different if they could speak with each other. Ultimately, the language barrier is a huge factor limiting their relationship. Even though she can ask for a translator, it is difficult to discuss one’s personal feelings through an impersonal third party. Another difficulty is their different perspectives in
approaching this relationship. Sara states that her birth father looks at her as if she is his “only Korean daughter returning to Korea.” However, Sara grew up in a different context with two other parents, which makes the way in which she perceives her relationship with her birth father much more complicated. Sara wishes that her birth father would recognize where she is coming from and how that makes her different. Indeed, different perspectives in the way they have approached their relationship have exacerbated their interactions.

Despite experiencing challenges in the relationship with her birth father, overall, Sara feels blessed and happy to have met him and his relatives. Through this experience, she is able to explore her Korean background and get answers for which she has been longing. In particular, discovering physical similarities with and experiencing some common personality traits as her birth family means a lot to Sara, because that was a missing part that she couldn’t experience with her adoptive family.

Once I found my Korean family, I was able to leave…this was one way to leave adoption behind me and become Sara. Before, I was always adopted Sara, because I was so much focused on hiding that, and that was so important to me. But, once I received some answers and once I met them, I was able to, in one way, to get closer and to leave a little bit of my adoption history behind me and become Sara much more than before.

As she has been getting to know her birth family and visiting Korea, she is comfortable with being Asian and is so proud of her Korean heritage. Sara can now embrace her Korean side, which she has never done before, and she wishes for the chance to stay in Korea.

**Sheri**

Raised in a small town with a predominately White population, Sheri was one of two Asians in the whole town. Because of her physical difference, she got teased a lot throughout
her school years. Describing her youth as the hardest time in her life, Sheri recounts that she even attempted suicide twice, during her seventh and tenth grade years. She wished she was never adopted and became infinitely curious about her biological family, wanting to know who she looked like and her family background. When she was twelve years old, her adoptive parents asked if she wanted to search for her biological family, and at that time, they contacted the adoption agency, who located her biological brothers and sisters in Korea. Once she got information about her birth family, she started writing letters to her biological brothers, and they exchanged stories about their lives with each other.

Their first meeting was after she graduated from high school. Sheri visited Korea with her adopted parents for two weeks. During the first meeting, Sheri met her biological brothers and their families at the adoption agency. She described her feelings as being very overwhelmed, simultaneously feeling very happy and scared:

I remember thinking what if these are not my family members, what if they were just actors who were hired by the adoption agency to come and pretend they are my family. But, they aren’t. And, I was just very scared, because I was scared that they would not accept me, because I was not raised in Korea. I was just scared they wouldn’t accept me.

However, Sheri’s birth family welcomed her, and she was excited to spend time with them. At the same time, she felt very confused and frightened, because she waited all her life to find her birth family; but, now, she only had a few days to spend with them and get to know them. After she came back to America, she wrote many letters to her birth family, letting them know how happy she was meeting them and asking how they were doing. According to her, it was important for her to continue the relationship with her birth family, because it is a part of her history. Not only were they her family members, but they also played an important role in
telling her story, as she hadn’t met her father and other family members. For this reason, she felt her birth family had a great deal of significance in her life.

While Sheri feels a strong connection to her birth family, she has experienced challenges continuing the relationship. Beyond the language barrier, Sheri explained different expectations between her and her birth family in terms of modes and frequency of communication. For instance, she desired to have frequent contact with her birth family through phone calls or e-mails; however, her birth family didn’t contact her as often as Sheri contacted them. She wondered if they didn’t want to keep in contact with her, although she was hoping to hear from them as often as possible. As time passed, she realized, “Even though they don’t call me often, it kind of subsided in me. We were together in spirit.” In fact, it took several years to understand the way in which her birth family was approaching their relationships with her. The different expectations in continuing these relationships between Sheri and her birth family have since become more balanced.

Reflecting on her current relationship with her birth family, Sheri is very satisfied with what she has experienced so far. Before meeting her birth family, she knew, of course, that she was Korean, but she had no idea what came along with being Korean. After she met her birth family and as she got older, she understood more things about being Korean, not only the language, but also a cultural understanding about the relationships between family and friends. All of these experiences gave her more confidence in being Korean. Describing herself as Korean-American, Sheri states that Korean signifies that she was born in Korea and raised in America. Indeed, meeting her birth family has been a life changing experience.

If I hadn’t had a biological reunion, I would have, I would still have so much anger inside of me. And, I just look back at the way that I thought about the things, the way I saw the
world; it was, it was so unhappy. After I met my birth family, I was able to get some answers and resolutions. It helps me become more, not happy, but understand myself more, and that just, understanding myself makes me a happier person.

She has also become very interested in learning the Korean language and its culture. She has been actively engaged in learning Korean and is taking several Korean courses. Sheri hopes that one day she will have the ability to have deeper conversations and interactions with her birth family and be able to share more stories.

**Young**

Young recalled his childhood as easy going, as he tended to respect his parents who were quite strict. When he was young, there were always people who pointed out his physical differences, and although they were unpleasant experiences, he didn’t really linger over these moments, because he was aware that there are always people who are immature and make fun of others’ differences. In terms of his original roots and birth family, Young explains that he was never interested in dwelling on his birth family. He thought it was a kind of mission impossible, because Korea was thousands of miles away from his home, and he has no idea about its language and culture. He had no idea of where and how to start searching for his birth family.

When he was thirty-eight years old, he got a letter through the mail from an adoption agency, which said that there was a person claiming to be his biological sister that was looking for him. Young describes his feelings about the letter: “I was like no…no. Korea is totally far away from me, and I don’t have any contacts at all. It was like a bomb.” Indeed, it didn’t make any sense to hear from his birth sister after all that time. Young couldn’t really trust that the letter was really from his biological sister. However, the adoption agency staff convinced him, and he agreed to accept a phone call from her. Through this phone call via Skype, he found out
that his birth mother had passed away when he was two months old, and his father had passed away one year later.

Six months after their initial meeting over Skype, Young visited Korea to meet his birth sister. Young acknowledged that meeting his biological sister was a very weird but special moment in which he felt simultaneously strange and good to meet her after almost forty years. During that visit, he stayed at his birth sister’s house for four weeks and visited tourist attractions in Korea. Fortunately, his niece, the daughter of his sister, spoke fluent English and was able to interpret the whole time he was there. Describing the moment, Young states that it was pleasant spending time with his sister and her family. He noted that she was an excellent cook, so he really enjoyed the delicious Korean foods she made. His sister tried to accommodate him as much as was possible, which is usual Korean etiquette, and Young appreciatively accepted her hospitality. One surprising revelation was learning that his birth father was a carpenter, because Young was also very passionate about carpentry. He described: “I got emotional. That was very special to me, because I didn’t know it. I have such a great passion for making furniture; I’ve made tables, and I’ve made chairs in my free time. That’s quite striking.”

After four weeks, Young returned home and realized that his life was not in Korea. Although he had a good time with his birth family, he was raised in the western culture and spent all his life here. He felt very secure in returning home. A year later, his older sister visited his house, because she had questions about his life. Young describes that she takes on an older sister’s role, caring for him as a younger brother, which he thinks is very much a part of the Korean culture. In terms of defining the relationship, he states that

She is my sister-sister, and I behave like a brother and listen to her as a younger brother.

But, I have my own life here, really. Although somehow I feel related, it’s not a normal
family relationship. It’s not a normal sister or normal brother. It’s something that only
Korean adoptees can connect to these feelings about it. It’s not like a sister. It’s like a sister
of a Korean adoptee. Although there are language and cultural gaps in continuing the relationship with his birth sister, he doesn’t have many difficulties or challenges. So, now and then, he contacts his birth sister via Skype or telephone, but it has been very occasionally, as they have different life styles. He expects that the relationship will stay like this or may fade out gradually. His birth sister, who is his main contact with his Korean relations, is not in good health. So, Young wonders, if she passed away, would the family members still be interested in staying in contact with him.

Reflecting on his experience with his birth family and his visit to Korea, Young explains that he became very interested in Korea. Every time he visits Korea, he is very motivated to learn the Korean language, but daily life doesn’t allow much time for him to focus on studying Korean. In addition to his interests in Korea and the language, Young describes its influence on his identity as:

I think it made me more mature and more understanding about me. I am very conscious about my identity. I am Young with Korean roots. It just made it stronger about my identity, that’s me…I’ve just become more confidence in myself. I really know who I am. If I supposed that I wouldn’t meet my birth family, I never would have had this strong consciousness about myself and be interested in Korea.

In particular, there is a customary cause that has attached Young to Korea. Every time he has visited Korea, he has gone to the place where his birth parents are buried. For Young, this is the only way to show his respect to his birth parents. He vows that every visit he makes to Korea, he will continue to visit his birth parents’ graves.
Chapter Summary

This chapter offered background information on eight adult Korean adoptees (AKAs) who participated in interviews for this study. The demographic data provided basic information on the AKAs’ ages, racial identifications, and reunion backgrounds. For instance, indicating their ages at the time of their reunions and the frequency of their contact with their birth families gave a general sense about their relationship circumstances. This information is significant for creating a blueprint of AKAs’ reunion stories.

The summarized narratives following the demographic information contained detailed contexts of the reunion experiences of each participant. Writing the summarized narratives, I was reminded of the participants’ emotions and voices during their interviews and tried to highlight what I perceived as being profound in their stories. Each participant had a different and unique experience in the way in which he/she sincerely and earnestly expressed his/her stories. Moreover, some of the participants acknowledged the significance of participating in this study and being able to share their own reunion experiences. For example, movies or the media often show only external aspects or linear sequences of adoptees’ reunions with their birth families instead of revealing genuine complex vacillating multi-dimensional stories. While each story was tinged with sorrow and painful memories, resilience of the self, accepting what one has been through, was also found. Although this form of summarized narrative did not include the whole story of each participant, this chapter created introductions from which to advance their narratives. Each summarized narrative presented inimitable experiences as well as some commonalities.
CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore how Adult Korean Adoptees’ (AKAs) evolving relationships with their birth families affect their developing senses of self.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do AKAs describe their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ2. How have AKAs’ sense of self developed through their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ3. What meaning do AKAs attach to the experience of reuniting with their birth families?

This chapter offers findings from the eight participants’ interview transcriptions and researcher’s notes through the analysis of collective themes that emerged from the data. Based on the research questions, four significant themes were generated along with sub-categories. To present the findings, a data display (Table 5.1) is provided as an overview of the findings of this study. Second, the themes are presented and discussed in four sections: Building a Distinctive Family Relationship, Working through Challenges in the Relationships within Multicultural Families, Validating Who I am, and Constructing a New Sense of Self. Finally, this chapter concludes with a chapter summary.

Data Display

Table 5.1

Four Prevalent Themes in the AKAs’ Narratives

I. Theme One: Building a Distinctive Family Relationship
A. Moving From Strangers to Family

B. Re-constructing Family for Korean Adoptees

II. Theme Two: Working through Challenges in the Relationships within Multicultural Families

A. Negotiating Two Languages

B. Negotiating Two Cultures

C. Negotiating Beyond Languages and Cultures

III. Theme Three: Validating Who I am

A. Fulfilling What Was Missing

IV. Theme Four: Constructing a New Sense of Self

A. Being Me

B. Becoming More than Being Me

Theme One: Building a Distinctive Family Relationship

Through an analysis of the eight Adult Korean Adoptees’ (AKAs) interviews, the first theme emerged, Building a Distinctive Family Relationship. This theme reveals that AKAs develop family relationships with their birth families that are not all alike. Amy, Ana, Young, Kimme, K-M-T, Peter, Sara, and Sheri all described their relationships with their birth families as a family relationship. While their degree of closeness and attachment to their birth families are varied, it is significant that they perceive their birth families as family members. AKAs commonly reported their feelings upon meeting their birth families as being overwhelming as well as feeling as if their birth families were strangers to them, because no commonalities were
shared between AKAs and their birth families except their biological connections. Ironically, however, these biological bonds inevitably connect AKAs with their birth families.

Family connections were gradually developed as they have continued contact and have made additional visits to Korea. In developing these relationships, it is significant that their relationships are much more complicated. As adoption implies a separation in time, space, and memories between AKAs and their birth families, these gaps are not easily bridged as they continue these relationships. In other words, the adoption circumstances are deeply embedded in their relationships, as the AKAs have created unique and different forms of family relationships that only AKAs can experience. In the following narratives, AKAs share how these circumstances have gradually shaped their relationships with their birth families.

**Moving From Strangers to Family**

All of the AKAs grew up in White adoptive households in Western culture. According to their stories, their physical differences from their adoptive parents and siblings were significant, and they knew they were adopted. Amy, Kimme, K-M-T, Peter, Sara, and Sheri shared their feelings about longing since they were very young to know about their birth families and their origins. With these motivations, they put forth a great deal of effort searching for and finally meeting their birth families. While there were momentary tears from the birth families, most AKAs described that they could not feel anything at that moment, because it was so overwhelming to meet their birth families, about which they had previously only imagined. It was an awkward situation to meet people who were simultaneously family members and strangers.

Sheri always longed to meet her birth family and imagined whom she looked like. She was the only adopted child in her family with two brothers, both biologically conceived by her
adoptive parents. Her physical difference from her adoptive family made her feel isolated from the family bond, and she wondered about her birth parents and longed to know who they were. To Sheri, meeting her birth family was a moment of she had always dreamed. Finally, she would see whom she resembled:

My first meeting was at the adoption agency, and it was very weird. I remember just seeing my oldest brother and thinking, ‘Oh, well. I do not look like you.’ And, then, I saw all my brothers and sisters. That was when I thought, ‘Oh, we look alike.’ But it was weird, and I remember feeling very overwhelmed because I was not emotionally mature enough at that time to understand or know how to process everything that was happening. So it was very overwhelming, and I didn’t really understand. I knew everything was happening, but I couldn’t associate myself with it.

Peter had a similar story. He was raised in a small town where all of the people were White. His physical difference was very obvious, and being different was uncomfortable for him. He remembers always wondering about his birth family in Korea and longing to meet them. However, he was not successful after contacting various adoption agencies, and it took over 10 years to find his birth family. When he met his birth family, he felt very ambivalent because he thought, “It’s crazy to meet somebody you’ve looked for thirty years.”

Sara, like Peter, put great effort into locating her birth family because she always longed to meet her birth mother. In order to find her birth mother, she contacted the adoption agency, a television program, and the hospital where she was born. In searching for her birth mother, she thought, “I would do whatever it takes to find her.” Ironically, however, she was only able to locate her birth father and met him at the airport. She described the moment as “a weird meeting,” because although she knew he was her father, he looked like a total stranger to her.
Unlike Peter and Sara who spent so much time searching for their birth families, Amy obtained her birth family’s information from the adoption agency over the phone. Without much hesitation, Amy visited Korea to meet her birth family. During the first meeting, she was with her adoptive father and her friend, who was translating between her and her birth family.

I could hear her before I could see her. Once she was coming down the corridor, she was just crying, really really crying, so I heard it…oh, God. She just kind of grabbed me. Really really emotional. I was a little emotional, but very…kind of real, so it could have been any person off the street that came and gave me a hug. I didn’t know her at all. I think mothers know their children, and I think, for her, she could feel that connection immediately. But, for me, it was like, ‘okay, I think you are my mom’, you know. It was more than emotion. I definitely know it’s my family. If you see the pictures of my family, you don’t even question.

Although Amy was very excited to meet her birth family, the whole situation was very unfamiliar, and it was hard for her to make a connection with her birth family. To Kimme, meeting her birth family was a destination, a goal to find out answers to questions about her adoption and to meet her birth family face to face. However, the real situation was very different than what she expected.

It was very strange, because I hadn’t realized, but I thought that, when I saw them, we will look very similar. I remember them walking toward me, thinking, ‘Is that them? I don’t know; I can’t tell.’ I guess I thought when I saw them, it would be immediate recognition. So, I thought ‘Oh my God! I was so excited when they told me they found my family. Maybe I should ask for a DNA test. What if it’s not, because I don’t look like them?’ But one of the first things they said to me when they sat and met me was
that…my brother said, ‘she looks like us.’ So, I thought that was very interesting. Even to this day, I have a hard time seeing a family resemblance between us. But I have had a lot of people who have seen photos of us and said, ‘you look very much alike.’ So, I don’t know if it’s me, just never having looked like someone that it’s very strange suddenly to have family that I look like.

Young and K-M-T described meeting their birth families as very special occasions. Although Young felt very weird meeting his birth family members who looked like strangers to him, he felt it was a very special feeling, a mixture of strange and good. Indeed, all AKAs shared their feelings of being overwhelmed when meeting their birth family members who looked like strangers to them. These stories not only describe the dramatic situation of meeting one’s birth family after over twenty years of living a totally separate life, but the stories underline the long separation and time lapse between AKAs and their birth families in which their stories are situated.

After the initial reunion, all of the AKAs in this study have continued relationships with their birth families. Ana shared her feelings about meeting her birth family: “They are real people, and they care for me a lot.” Sheri, Sara, Amy, Young and Peter described similar feelings in terms of continuing the relationships with their birth families. Sara specifically mentioned her curiosity about getting to know her birth family and wanting to belong to them. Kimme also shared similar feelings toward her birth family and stated that “I want to get to know them…It took me over twenty years to find them. So, if I have this chance now to interact with them on a very regular basis, I want to do that, because I have the ability to do it now.”

In continuing these relationships between the AKAs and their birth families, the most common way these contacts continue is when the AKAs visit Korea. They described how their
relationships with their birth families have developed from being strangers into being family.

Young shared his experiences staying at his birth sister’s house:

They had plans. We went to Mockpo, because my mother was originally from Mockpo, and my father was from Seoul. So, we went to visit family in Mockpo. And we did tourist things, you know, going to Namsan Tower, all these things... They tried to accommodate me as much as they possibly could, but of course very Korean style. I knew most of the well known Korean dishes. But my sister, she is an excellent cook; she’s really, she knows how to make difficult things actually. And every time, she even brings me to very good restaurants, or she prepares homemade dumplings.

During this time, Young stayed four weeks with his birth sister’s family and also met his extended birth family. He states that it was a great opportunity for him to explore his family history and know more about his origin and birth family. After Young came back home, he continued contact with his sister by phone and Skype. Over time the frequency of the contacts with his sister has decreased; it has become normal for them to contact each other two or three times a year to catch up on each other’s lives.

In terms of continuing a relationship with his birth family, Peter described it as “very easy.” Unlike a typical Korean family, his birth father and birth brother travel a lot for their work. They are very open-minded in accepting different cultures and acknowledging where Peter comes from:

I think one thing that was very obvious was they were not trying to tell me to do anything. They are not saying act like this, do like this. There was none of the requirements to become Korean. And, I think that made things a lot easier. They know that I grew up in very different circumstances. For example, I don’t bow correctly, any of
these things. Especially my father, he doesn’t like those things himself very much, so he
doesn’t care so much. That kind of understanding…that I grew up in a different culture, I
think it has been very very important in keeping the relationship.

Peter regularly makes visits to Korea because of his work. While he is in Korea, he sees his
birth family, and they spend time together. Otherwise, he doesn’t really contact his birth family
when he is away, and he does the same thing with his adoptive family. For Peter, although he
perceives his birth family as his family and feels close to them, they are all very independent and
have busy lives in that calling and e-mailing are not necessary for maintaining their relationship.

Amy, like Peter, doesn’t contact her birth family by e-mail or phone. Instead, when she
has an opportunity to stay in Korea because of her studies, she stays with her birth family. As
she spends time with them, she gets to know them better, both their personalities and their
culture. Continuing the relationship has given her a close family connection. In contrast with
Amy, Sheri was quite frustrated when her birth family didn’t readily respond to her e-mails.
However, when she visited Korea and stayed with them, she truly felt a family connection and
realized that their way of continuing the relationship was simply different from her expectations.
So, although there is not much contact between Sheri and her birth family, she feels that “they
are together in spirit.” Interestingly, Sara described her relationship with her birth family as “a
love story” in which the story is initially very passionate and exciting, but over time, their
feelings are leveling out and have even faded a little bit. Despite this fact, she is very thankful
for having had the opportunity to meet her birth family and perceives them as her Korean family.

**Re-constructing Family for Korean Adoptees**

In this study, the average age of the AKAs at the time of their adoption was one year old.
They had no memories of their birth families and birth origins at all. So, meeting and
developing these relationships with their birth families in their adulthood was like entering a new world. In these stories, it was found that although AKAs perceive their relationships with their birth families as family relationships, it is a different form of family in that the relationship is anchored in a complicated adoption background.

Kimme has moved to Korea since she met her birth family because she thought this would be a great opportunity for her to interact with her birth family and get to know them better. While living in Korea, she visits her birth parents and her sisters who live in different areas on a regular basis and tries to get to know them. However, her birth family takes a different viewpoint in approaching relationships with Kimme.

My sister, one of my sisters, explained to me one time that she felt like it was like when you have a weekend visitor...she said ‘you know it’s good that you just come and visit on the weekend for a couple of days, and you don’t see us yelling at our kids or like having fights with our husbands.’ And that was a part of the conversation, ‘I don’t think it is a good idea for you to ever move to Korea. I think it’s good for you to come and visit, or like come and visit us so that way you can see the best side of us.’ And that’s what they want me to see. I understand that, but at the same time, I really want to get to know these people as individuals and as my family. When you do that you cannot connect in that way. So, that was hard, and they didn’t want me to know about problems the family had...they just wanted to show me everything was good about the family.

Although Kimme understands why they don’t want to show or tell her negative occurrences in the family, as they don’t want Kimme to worry about family situations or have the wrong impression of them, Kimme feels distanced from them, and that makes it hard for her to belong to her birth family. She continues by sharing another example of her experiences.
It was my mother’s 70’s birthday. All my sisters and brothers had gotten together and put in money to give to her. But they didn’t ask me about it. So, I was the only sibling who hadn’t contributed to her gift. So, these things are just…I understand that part of that is they don’t want to burden me and because I am adopted, so this make circumstances a little bit different. But it has also made it hard to connect to those cultural experiences, because I don’t know if it’s going to be accepted or rejected. You know, they told me don’t worry about it; it doesn’t apply to you. So, it’s hard to try to be a part of something when people are not allowing you to be.

Sara also shared a similar story in which she has reached a point where she feels a limit to her sense of belonging to her birth family. In the beginning, she felt amazing learning the importance of the family bond in the Korean culture, which she had never felt with her adoptive family. So, Sara was expecting to share this strong connection and a strong sense of belonging with her birth family. However, the reality was that her birth family was quite different than what she had imagined:

Every time I see my Korean father and grandmother, they treat me like a visitor, someone coming to visit them. So, they take me to all these nice restaurants and even small like…small things. I remember, last time, I went to Kwangjoo, for example; it was really hot outside, and we were sitting in the car, and it takes some time for the air conditioner to start working. Because my father wanted to please me, he went to his friend’s house and…to like, shower the car in cold water to just make the car cool inside. And things like that… He treats me, both my grandmother treats me like I am a foreign visitor coming from another country, so it’s not a very laid back relationship.
The above excerpt from Sara’s interview illustrates her discomfort being with her birth family. Even though time has passed, Sara’s birth father and grandmother still treat her the same way as they did before. It made her realize that she is coming from Western culture and was not raised in Korea, making her aware of limitations in their relationships.

Unlike Sara, Amy perceives the relationship with her birth family as a deeper and transforming relationship. However, she states, “I don’t think it would ever be like a relationship like with my adoptive parents.” Indeed, she continued to explain that there is no shared history between herself and her birth family. And, as a result, there are obvious time gaps that exist between them in their relationship.

I remember being in a jewelry store with my Umma (birth mother). She wanted to buy me gold types of jewelry. But, I don’t wear gold; I wear silver. My adoptive mom knows that. She buys silver jewelry every Christmas. And, it immediately made me feel…yes, my birth mother is going to be an important part of my life, and we are gonna build a relationship, but it doesn’t amount to the years my mom spent getting to know me and understanding me. When I came home, I was much more appreciative about what we have. You just see what you don’t have with your birth family, and you don’t share, so that made me more grateful for what I have with my adoptive family.

Kimme shares another story in which her brother once told her, “We all have a hard life. This is what I have to go through; you have a hard life, because you are adopted. This is what you go through. But, automatically, we both have a hard life, and you know, this is kind of the end point that we are at, so just go from here.” Although Kimme thought of this as a truce, she thought, “it’s more complicated” than that. She also realizes that “they don’t treat me the same way they treat other people of the family.” Despite all the complicated stories, Kimme perceives
the relationship with her birth family members as “brother and sister relationships, and child-parents relationships, but it’s different.”

Among the AKAs, Young particularly described his relationship as “it’s not like a normal family relationship; it’s not a normal sister or normal brother. It’s not like a sister sister; it’s like a sister for Korean adoptees.” These relationships are very different and distinctive because “it’s something that only Korean adoptees can connect to these feelings about it” Indeed, Young’s statement overall embraces relationships that were described by AKAs. As Young mentioned, “only Korean adoptees can connect” and understand what it is to form these distinctive family relationships.

Summary

The first major theme in the findings of this study was Building a Distinctive Family Relationship. This theme revealed that each AKAs formed varying types of family relationships. Although their relationships are not like those of a conventional family, their closeness and contacts vary, and their meanings of family are different, their stories commonly disclosed that they have gradually developed family connections and ties with their birth families. However, these long-awaited moments of meeting their birth families turned out to be uneasy, as they were in unfamiliar surroundings where they had never been before. Nevertheless, the birth families’ hospitality and the AKAs’ curiosity about their birth families connected one to the other and gradually fostered family relationships. In developing these relationships, AKAs realized that their family relationships with their birth families would never be the same as a conventional family, which they have experienced with their adoptive families. Indeed, the forms of family relationships between AKAs and their birth families are unique and distinctive in that their relationships are shaped and influenced by the context of Korean international adoption.
Theme Two: Working through Challenges in the Relationships within Multicultural Families

In the study of AKAs’ relationships with their birth families, challenges were addressed throughout their narratives. As they were all raised in Western countries by White parents, opportunities for being exposed to Korean culture or coming into contact with other Koreans were limited. For instance, when Peter was young, he was very curious about Korea; however, his parents had no idea how to cultivate his interests, as they lived in a small town. Indeed, most AKAs stated that their awareness of Korea was very superficial in that they encountered cultural challenges after meeting their birth families. As can be expected, different languages and cultures between adoptees and birth families have emerged as the main barriers. AKAs commonly experience difficulties with communication and feel adversity in continuing their relationships. Furthermore, AKAs feel the social stigma on adoption in Korean society is difficult to navigate. Although the Korean government remains silent about international adoption and have neglected supporting their own citizens’ children, birth parents solely take the burden for relinquishing their children. In turn, birth parents’ feelings of guilt and shame about sending their children away have hindered active interactions between the adoptees and their birth parents. Under this theme three subcategories emerged: a) negotiating two languages, b) negotiating two cultures, and c) negotiating beyond languages and cultures.

Negotiating Two Languages

The first subcategory presents difficulties in communication between AKAs and their birth families because of their different languages. As mentioned above, all AKAs were raised in Western countries without much access to their birth culture, so none of them were familiar with the Korean language. Most of the AKAs in this study reported language as the biggest
Language, in fact, is the basic instrument for communicating with each other in every relationship. However, as AKAs and their birth families do not share the same language, it has become the main challenge that they must negotiate in their relationships.

All of the AKAs except for Peter and Young have no birth family members who speak English fluently. Although AKAs could ask for translator services, these are not always available when they need them. Or, it is inconvenient for AKAs to request translator services as only a few organizations offer them. Ana felt language was a big impediment in approaching her birth family, because she can only speak three or four Korean words and her birth family doesn’t really know any English. When she contacts her birth family through e-mail or over the phone, she always has to look for someone who can translate between her and her birth family:

My friend was translating a little bit for me, e-mails and stuff…. phone calls. Then, it became too difficult for her. And, so, then after that, I basically cycled through other people, you know, some people…. I had a Korean friend who, she is kind of Korean American, she lives here…very very long time here... she was doing it. But, she got too busy with her dissertation, and then, I had another friend who was doing it. Then, she was kind of unreliable, and so now, I use INKAS, Korean national adoptee services…so it is kind of a troublesome process to get done.

The above excerpt from Ana described difficulties in finding a reliable person for translating when she contacts her birth family. Not surprisingly, these difficulties were commonly revealed in AKAs’ stories in that they seldom ask for translator services. Under these circumstances, several AKAs reported language as “a huge barrier” in developing relationships with their birth families. Sara expressed that, because of the language barrier, she wasn’t able to have a deep
conversation with her birth family, and that made her feel distanced and made it harder to keep her relationship going. Sheri, like Sara, also described difficulties in communicating with her birth family:

When we are not together physically, language is the biggest barrier. I don’t speak Korean well, and they don’t speak English. They tell me to learn Korean. I tell them to learn in English. Without language, we cannot communicate feelings, emotions, and understand what each other are saying.

As Sheri wants to have a closer relationship and share more with her birth family, she took some Korean courses. However, learning a new language was not an easy task for her, so it didn’t really work as she had anticipated.

Amy shared how language has affected her relationship with her birth family and the burden that she felt to learn Korean. Unfortunately, although both birth families and AKAs face the same situation of not speaking each other’s language, the burden of learning language was primarily left up to the AKAs.

I would say that I just wanna get to know them better. However, because of the language issue, language is always frustrating. And, I’d like to communicate with them more. I think a lot of adoptees are frustrated, because we feel like we make an effort to learn Korean, but they don’t. They are not interested in learning English. The burden is usually on us learning language. They are like, ‘you are young, so, you know…you have to learn Korean.’

Not only does Amy share the fact that she felt frustrated because of her inability to speak Korean, but she also mentioned her birth family’s passive attitude regarding learning the adoptee’s language. The passive attitudes of birth families were commonly reported from the
adoptees in that it makes them feel discouraged in continuing an interactive relationship. K-M-T also spoke about the language challenge as well as the burden she felt to learn Korean. She stated that in the beginning, she had a “wow” experience and was amazed to meet her birth mother. However, as she spent more time with her birth mother, the language barrier inevitably surfaced in their relationship:

I really really don’t speak Korean; so, I think, in part, language makes it so very difficult, but even just having that, it’s like the hugest barrier. She had the attitude that ‘Oh, I am 50 years old woman. It is too hard for me to learn English. You should learn Korean.’ I am like, ‘I am in my 30s. It’s not easy for me to learn a new language.’ Also, my reason I don’t speak Korean is because it was something you did, so it gets very complicated.

Interestingly, K-M-T not only stated her birth mother’s passive attitude about learning English, but she pointed out why she was not able to speak and may harbor some animosity for having to learn Korean. For K-M-T, her birth mother unilaterally asking her to learn Korean was not acceptable, because it was not her choice to speak another language. Learning Korean is not simply learning a new language; it includes a mixture of feelings, sorrow, and anger towards the birth family. The “complicated” concern about language has gone awry in her relationship with her birth mother with neither one of them willing to concede for very different reasons.

Among the AKAs, Kimme has actively learned Korean since she met her birth family. However, learning a new language takes a great deal of time:

Throughout the years, my Korean has improved, so it’s where I can…I have a like intermediate level. My grammar was not very good, so we have the ability to communicate enough, but still frustrating, because I can’t express myself in a way that I
want to… um… because my listening is so much better than speaking. My family would say a lot of things to me; they just talked to me normally, because I can understand them. I just can’t respond. And, also, the frustrating part was that they tell me a lot of things about family, and I can’t say anything back to them. I just listen.

Kimme also expressed feelings of pressure from her birth family because they expect her to speak Korean fluently. Her birth father in particular asked her once why it took her so long to learn Korean and why she was not able to speak it well. At the time Kimme felt uncomfortable and embarrassed; on one hand, she understood that her birth parents are too old to learn English, and it’s harder for them to learn a new language. After all, the burden of learning Korean and the birth family’s expectations on her to speak Korean fluently have challenged Kimme in approaching her birth family.

Several AKAs expressed their aspirations to learn Korean. Although Young’s niece speaks English fluently and translates for him, he plans to learn Korean in order to have a better understanding of things that are going on with his birth family members and have better communication with them. Young said, “I wish I spoke Korean; I mean, of course… every time I came back from Korea, I am very motivated, and every time, I say to my friend, ‘I am going to study Korean; I am going to study Korean.’ But, daily life just simply doesn’t allow much time.” Ana similarly stated, “It is on my bucket list, someday, to study Korean in Korea, so I will see if that happens.” While both Young and Ana expressed their desires to learn Korean, their statements also imply how challenging it is to learn Korean in reality.

Overall, in the stories of AKAs, it was revealed that language is the primary obstacle to developing close relationships with their birth families. Although their degrees of experiencing difficulties with communications vary, it was commonly described in their stories that difficulties
with communication have made them feel limited in having deeper and closer relationships with their birth families. Language is, indeed, the way of expressing one’s thoughts and sharing each other’s stories. However, as two separate languages exist between AKAs and their birth families, it has consequentially become a barrier between them.

**Negotiating Two Cultures**

Culture, like language, is conceived where we live in that our social context shape how we think, behave, etc. As AKAs were raised in Western countries, their cultural perspectives are formed against a Western backdrop. Although some of the AKAs reported their participation in Korean cultural camps and eating Korean food, most of them had little knowledge of Korean culture. Within this context, experiencing cultural incongruities emerged between AKAs and their birth families. Similar to the language barrier, cultural gaps have made AKAs realize how different they truly are from their birth families. Stories from K-M-T describe how she felt distanced from her birth mother when she learned that there were very few commonalities between her and her birth mother:

> I’ve been so Westernized, you know, where I am having this, oh, maybe we need to talk to a counselor, like I had a super-Western mindset; she has a very Korean mindset. I mean language is the easiest thing to say is a problem … because looking at us, we are culturally weird that we are biologically related, that in the case of my Umma, I am actually the one who looks identical to her…we have real similarities in terms of our character…I can see we just have nothing in common. I can’t understand her.

For K-M-T, she holds the American perspective that meeting with a counselor is a common way of dealing with issues. So, when she found it difficult to handle her birth mother’s emotions, K-M-T suggested to her birth mother that they see a counselor. However, for her birth mother, this
is a very unfamiliar way to handle situations, and she rejected what K-M-T’s suggestion. 

Although they are similar in appearance, their ways of approaching a relationship with each other are very different, and the relationship becomes “incompatible”.

Kimme, who has lived in Korea since meeting her birth family, shared her stories experiencing cultural incompatibility within her birth family as well. Although she is becoming familiar with the Korean culture, she certainly holds Western perspectives in the way she thinks and does things. Even though Kimme attempted to explain different cultural aspects to her birth family members, it was not easy for them to accept:

I have a boyfriend now, and so, they keep asking me when I am going to get married. And, of course, in Korea, you get engaged and marry quickly. But, in the U.S. or other Western cultures, you can get engaged and be engaged one or two years and, then, get marry. That’s totally normal…I tried to explain things to them every time I see them. I am trying to explain, in the U.S., it’s different; it works differently than Korea. Even though we are engaged, it doesn’t mean we are getting married, by the way. This is something I think is difficult for them to understand, because their primary interaction with Westerners comes from television. So, it’s just very difficult.

Other stories were shared by Sara and Young. Both of their birth families attempted to accommodate them with courteousness and show how much they care about them. For instance, Sara’s father always asked her to go and eat Korean beef with him because it is expensive, and he wanted to treat her well. However, Sara doesn’t really like to eat beef, since it’s not her favorite food. Although she wanted to tell him this, she was not sure how it would be accepted culturally not to show her appreciation. Young also shared an experience with his birth sister. As his birth parents passed away when he was young, his eldest sister cared for him like his
mother. He really appreciated her hospitality and felt her sincerity in caring about him.

However, when he was leaving Korea, at the airport, he argued with her at the airport because she asked him to bring homemade Korean food, *kimchi*, with him:

She insisted so much, and I had like two times the 30 kilograms in luggage. I flew business, so I was quite lucky, but then, I couldn’t take a lot of luggage with me. She really wanted me to bring homemade *kimchi* with me. But, I am flying into a European country. When they see fresh food, they will give me a serious penalty. So, I got into a really big fight with her, and then I told my friend, ‘hey listen, can we fly with totally not appropriate homemade *kimchi*?’ Because she felt really offended, because she was like, “You don’t like *kimchi*?” “Of course, I really like it very very much, but not this way.” And, in the end, my friend convinced her.

Sheri also experienced cultural gaps when she stayed with her birth brother. During her stay, her sister-in-law and nieces asked her to join them in a sauna, because having a sauna is a popular leisure activity among Koreans. However, for Sheri it was a very unfamiliar experience that she had never had before:

My sister-in-law and nieces always wanted to go to the sauna. And, I don’t understand why. I finally said that I will go to sauna and tried it. I don’t understand. I mean, it was fun, and they have really good drinks and good snacks. It was interesting. Um, I just don’t understand, because I didn’t grow up with it. I don’t understand the importance of it. But, we have cultural gaps. But, I tried very hard to um, I guess, be more Korean when I am with them and talking to them and be very cognitive and aware of things that are more Korean-oriented than trying to be so American.
As she stated, although she tried to make an effort to respect Korean culture and follow what they did, these cultural gaps made her realize how American she really was.

While most of the AKAs described cultural gaps that they had with their birth families, Ana and Peter felt less pressure regarding cultural differences. Both Ana and Peter’s birth families recognized where they came from in that they did not expect them to act Korean. For example, Ana’s older brother told her birth mother, “You can’t expect her to act like a Korean daughter, because she’s American.” Ana stated that before she met her birth family, she was afraid they might expect her to exhibit Korean values, “because I was definitely raised here since I was four months old, so I don’t have other values than American ones….I can appreciate other values and see the differences in values, but I don’t hold them. I only hold my values that I have being American.” So, Ana really appreciated her brother’s perspective, understanding her as American. Nonetheless, Ana said that although she feels less burdened about following the Korean culture, she is constantly concerned about things such as “how should people behave in a brother and sister relationship and how should I treat people who are older than me.”

All of the AKAs in this study expressed that cultural differences were inevitable when interacting with their birth families. Although not all of the challenges were as obvious as language, AKAs have persistently faced cultural differences while interacting with their birth families. The gaps between the two cultures have remained another challenge to negotiate in terms of maintaining their familial connection.

**Negotiating Beyond Languages and Cultures**

In the AKAs’ stories, it was revealed that AKAs’ relationships with their birth families are much more complicated. This was not only because of the different languages and cultures, but it was because of the social stigma on adoption that is ingrained in Korean society. Several
AKAs talked about their birth parents’ guilt and shame about sending them away and how this burden has hindered their interactions.

Amy shared that when she initially found her birth mother, her birth mother didn’t want to meet Amy, because she was afraid that Amy would hate her and blame her for what she did. Furthermore, the adoption story was completely secret to the rest of her family, because her birth mother hid this for her entire life. So, during their first meeting, Amy assured her birth mother that she didn’t hate her and embraced her adoption. Nevertheless, when Amy had time with her birth mother, her birth mother’s feelings of guilt and shame about what she had done tacitly came into their conversations. It made Amy feel very uncomfortable, especially because she learned about how the Korean government neglected its citizens’ welfare in the past, silenced the practice of international adoption and did not take any particular action to oversee the care of its own country’s children:

I wish that my birth family had a better understanding of adoption as a historical part of Korea as opposed to just an individual situation. Um, I invited them to dinner with other adoptee families. In the states, if I got raped or something, I could meet with other people who have been raped or I can…we have a culture, like a support group. This really makes you feel better to meet someone who has had that experience. But, when my birth mother met the other birth mothers, it was really awkward. It wasn’t a coming together. That was not how they do things, you know …it was your private life, but I think only until people come together and share their stories and realize part of the bigger problem in Korea, that’s only like Korea never changes. Because it’s all private hurts and shame.

Although she wished her birth mother would not harbor guilty feelings about the adoption and offered joining a support group with other birth families, it did not work as she expected. Social
and cultural stigmas about adoption remained solely with the birth family. Amy’s birth mother’s grief and sorrow are not easily healed.

Like Amy, K-M-T also suggested that her birth mother join a support group because her birth mother was very emotional, and K-M-T didn’t know how to comfort her. She actually said that “language on one hand is maybe the easiest thing to pinpoint to the problems, but I think there is also her guilt that she has.” While K-M-T attempted to address the adoption story and tried to dispel negative emotional feelings, her mother refused to talk about it at all:

I may understand or keep in mind, oh …like you know, her generation pushes things down, and that’s how it is, but that doesn’t mean I understand in my heart. I assume she has her guilt for giving me up, and then, I also have my own set of emotions about questions, about anger for giving me up, so those are really hard things to talk about.

Even if I speak Korean fluently or she speaks English fluently, I don’t know if we would ever be able to talk about those things…

In the end, K-M-T couldn’t have an open dialogue about the past and her feelings, and this has made she and her birth mother feel distanced about approaching each other. Ana also described her birth parents’ burden of guilt. When Ana met her birth mother, it was very important for her birth mother to tell her that “she hadn’t thrown me away.” Ana could feel how hard her birth mother’s life had been. The social stigma of shame on adoption is solely imposed on the adoptees’ birth parents; they mostly kept the adoptees’ existence secret from the other birth family members. Several AKAs talked about how difficult it was to negotiate this shame and feeling hurt when their birth family was still not sure how to introduce them to others. Kimme shared one of her experiences:
With my siblings, we’ve gone out at times. Like, people in store are confused, because my siblings speak Korean, but I can’t really. I’d just be like saying ‘yes, yes.’ Or, if I speak Korean, you know, I am very obviously not a native speaker. So, then, the store owner will say like, ‘Oh, is she Korean?’ or ‘Is she your daughter?’ You know they are trying to figure out what’s going on, and you know, also, I am not even sure if they told their friends, if like other people know. Because even my auntie, my mom’s younger sister, she didn’t know about me. So, when we met, it was a big surprise to her, because she hadn’t known that her sister had given up her child for adoption. So, this is a little bit awkward for me, too. Because, when we go out to public places, I am not sure what to say and what to ask. Um...because I don’t know who they have told and who they haven’t.

For Kimme, this was another hard moment, because not only did she feel uncomfortable, but she also realized that there was no way of dealing with this kind of situation. According to Kimme, “I think it’s difficult for both sides, because we are not sure how to communicate about it even.” It is an intricate situation mixed with complicated emotions and feelings that challenged both the birth family and Kimme.

Among the AKAs, some of their birth families have different viewpoints on introducing them to other family members. This was especially the case for AKAs who were born out of wedlock, in which each birth parent had his or her own family. For instance, Sara wanted to contact her siblings on her birth mother’s side as well as on her birth father’s side. However, when Sara met her birth mother, she was too emotional to control herself, and it ended badly. Despite the situation, Sara wanted to meet a half-brother on her mother’s side, but her birth mother didn’t want him to meet Sara, and the meeting did not happen. Similar experiences were
shared by K-M-T. She found only her birth mother and knew that she had three half-siblings from a different father. Although she really wanted to meet them, her birth mother wouldn’t let the meeting take place. According to K-M-T, her birth mother “wanted to be like ‘oh let’s just be happy,’” but for K-M-T, she “can’t just be happy like that.” Reflecting on her experience, K-M-T expressed that after the reunion there was so much to deal with that she didn’t expect before she met her birth mother.

Another concern is that there are often questions about the past and wondering what happened to the birth family. These are common inquires for the AKAs. However, birth parents’ embarrassment and guilt about the adoption have made them shut down when talking about it. Peter, who felt less pressure concerning cultural and language differences, shared his difficulties in getting answers about the past:

I have a lot of questions about my mother, because my mother was an orphan. She has no relatives. She is an orphan from the Korean War, so...no relatives. And, she died when I was three months old. There is no access to know her story other than through my father, and so, that’s the thing that I want to talk about. Those are more difficult things to talk about. He keeps saying I will tell you the whole story when you understand.

Peter also wanted to know more stories about his family background; however, his birth father would hardly share any information. Like Peter, Kimme also mentioned that on several occasions her birth family declined to tell her inside family stories. Kimme stated, “For them, I understand cultural aspects and the reasons why they, you know, lie to me, because they want to protect me and protect themselves and save face.” Although it was very hurtful for Kimme, she just adjusted the way she feels about their deception.
The experiences of the AKAs’ difficulties in communicating and interacting with their birth families were triggered by birth parents’ feelings of embarrassment and disgrace in sending their children away. Unlike challenges with language and culture, this involves deeper and more complex emotions and feelings that have hindered the development of the relationships between the AKAs and their birth families.

Summary

The second theme in the findings of this study was Working through Challenges in the Relationships within Multicultural Families. The initial commonality between the AKAs and their birth families is that they are tied by biological connection, but nothing else is shared. As they didn’t grow up with their birth families, the AKAs don’t share the same language, culture, and memories. With few commonalities existing between them, they experience challenges in negotiating and navigating those gaps and trying to adjust their interactions accordingly. Furthermore, there is a prevailing social stigma on the birth parents in which they feel shame and guilt about relinquishing their children. The pressure these birth parents and families feel not to let these children down again or to share their painful pasts with these adoptees have caused AKAs to experience more barriers in developing familial bonds.

Theme Three: Validating Who I Am

Despite challenges that AKAs have with their birth families, it is commonly revealed that they are satisfied with their experiences in terms of confirming that they were in fact adopted. Since they were young, they knew they were adopted because they looked different than their adoptive families. Most of the AKAs shared that their physical differences from their adoptive family members were very obvious and questions like “Who do I look like?” and “Why was I adopted?” were common for them. In addition to having these questions, a majority of AKAs
experienced feelings of emptiness and loneliness throughout their childhoods. Meeting and developing relationships with their birth families facilitated the resolution of many inquiries that they had related to their adoptions, which is essential in understanding the self. Subsequently, as they gained information about their origins and birth families, it helped to resolve the feelings of emptiness and loneliness they had experienced throughout their childhoods because of their physical differences from others. In other words, AKAs were able to expand their understandings about themselves in relation to their adoptions in that their identities were validated by integrating knowledge about who they are and fulfilling what they were missing in their psyches.

**Fulfilling What Was Missing**

One positive outcome of reunions with birth families was assuring the adoptees of their origins. In the AKAs’ stories, most of them talked about how their physical difference from their adoptive family members in and other members of their communities made them uncomfortable and wonder who they did look like and from where they came. These are, indeed, very basic questions common to all adoptees who were adopted as infants. So, through meeting their birth families, they finally resolved some of their questions. Sara shared an exchange she had with her cousin and described the “wow” feeling at discovering their similarities:

> When I met the extended birth family, I was sitting down on the balcony with my cousin. We had bare feet, because it was summer. And, I looked at her feet, and I realized that the shape of her feet was exactly the same as mine. It was so weird, and something is silly. But, for me, someone had the same feet as me, and it was a ‘wow’ moment. Having that experience and knowing, also, even though we are not able to communicate, I can see that there are some personalities in siblings. My father is very easygoing, and he laughs a
lot, and that’s… my grandmother and I are always like that. I am always laughing and have positive feelings inside me.

For Sara, it was very interesting to find that she had a physical resemblance to her cousin, because growing up she was with her White adoptive parents and their two biological white sons. Moreover, discovering that she had a personality similar to that of her birth father was a very meaningful moment to her, because now she could envision from where and from whom she came and its essentiality in understanding herself. Sara recalled her childhood and shared her painful memories:

I grew up. I have two older brothers; they are biological children of my parents, so they are White. And, I think…because of that, I always thought I was a White person. I didn’t even question or think about my Korean heritage until I entered school, actually. Other children in that environment reminded me of looking different. So, they teased me and called me Asian names, something like that. So, that was the first time I realized that I looked different…But in my teenage years, it was very difficult for me to accept or to, like, be very pleased with my Asian heritage… I was also brought up thinking that I looked different and different means several meanings …different means something negative, so I think I always grew up thinking that I was less beautiful than people around me, because I looked different.

The above excerpt from Sara indicates how her physical difference and being the only Asian in her family and at her school was painful. Furthermore, her adoptive parents never spoke about Korea with her, and she couldn’t relate to Korea in any way. As a result, being Asian and looking different became negative attributes to her. However, through meeting her birth family, Sara feels “so blessed and thankful.” According to Sara, her physical appearance is exactly like
her birth mother’s; she feels a “connection having this reflection of someone I lacked my whole life, because my brothers are like blue eyes.” Although there are difficulties and challenges in keeping the relationship with her birth family, she stated, “for me, it is so important to meet them and see my Korean background. ‘Oh, these are the people who gave birth to me, and I actually look like them physically.’”

Sheri also shared her experience about being thrilled to recognize a physical similarity when she met her birth mother for the first time. Sheri described, “I opened the door and looked at her. She was lying down, and she sat up, and as soon as I looked at her, I knew that was her, because we have a similar nose.” Sheri recognizing her own physical qualities in her birth mother was an amazing moment to her, because when she was young, she got teased a lot by her classmates and even her cousin:

When I was in elementary school, my cousin used to tease me, as well. And, then, when I got to high school, it got, you know, worse …it got really bad. And, there was a lot of teasing, and I went through a stage when I was rebellious and hung out with bad kids, you know, drinking and smoking and sneaking out…being a kind of bad kid. And, then, in middle school, it was still the same…it was in my 10th grade year, was my worse year that was, um, in 7th grade, I tried to commit suicide, and then again, 10th grade, I also tried to commit suicide by taking too many pills, but obviously, it didn’t work. And, then, my senior year, I think the last year in high school, everybody just wants to be done with school, so they didn’t care…So, my last year in high school was better.

Sheri grew up in a very small, predominately White town, where only two people were not White, including her. So in her town, her physical difference was very obvious and made her very uncomfortable. Sheri once told her adoptive mom, “I wish you, I wish you never adopted
me.” Sheri was always curious about her birth family and wondered about who they were and what they looked like. So, for Sheri, meeting her birth family meant a lot in terms of explaining her origin and answering questions. She felt “very resolved.”

Sara and Sheri’s experiences were similar to those of others in this study. Ana stated, “I think that having a birth brother who looks a lot like me is really extremely meaningful.” She recounted that when she was young, people made fun of her eyes, nose, and hair and asked about her adoption. Being different was not a pleasant experience for her in that she thought nobody could really understand her feelings. So meeting her brother who resembles her created a connection that she had longed for since she was young. Peter shared another story. When he met his birth family, he felt a connection not only because he noticed physical resemblances, but he also discovered similar personalities in which he could truly sense his origins.

Following the question “Who do I look like?”, another common question was “Why was I adopted?” This study found this to be an extremely fundamental question most adoptees contemplated. Kimme, who was the only participant of this study raised in a multicultural area, did not have a negative experience due to looking Asian. However, she had many questions about her adoption:

I think as early as middle school usually…started in middle school and in high school…started doing a lot more, and especially in college. And, I actually… I ended up getting one of my degrees in Asian studies with a specialization in Korea. So, I always had an interest in it. But, that was definitely, um…a very dark period in my life. I didn’t really understand why these things happened to me, why I was adopted. So, I was a junior in high school; I was diagnosed with depression. And so I started seeking counseling for that, and that helped a lot. It was really difficult for me to really start to
understand why this had happened to me, what effect this choice had on me, what that meant.

These questions seemed to be inhibiting Kimme, because without knowing the answers, she felt incomplete in her ability to understand herself and kept wondering about her birth family. And, although she had new concerns and questions when she eventually met her birth family, the ability to meet them was nonetheless very meaningful to her:

For me, finding my biological family provided me with a sense of closure in that I was able to get answers to questions that I had. It might not have been the answer that I was thinking I would get because some of the answers have changed and that had been very hurtful. But, the fact that I was able to ask those questions and receive answers was very significant for me instead of always wondering these things, like why…

The above excerpt from Kimme was commonly shared by other AKAs, as those “why” questions were essential in understanding their adoption backgrounds and, more importantly, fundamental to their real identities. Sara shared similar experiences:

I had so many questions about my adoption when I was growing up. I don’t know if I was able to get closer without seeing them. It has had a very big impact on my life… But, I also realize that it is a very difficult process, and we have unrealistic expectations in the beginning of the search process that cannot really match with reality. But, I feel much more at peace with myself, because of the fact that I met them, and because I received some answers about my background.

Sheri also stated, “I just felt like those questions I had so long that finally…I knew the answers to. So, just not completed, but I just felt very resolved.” The stories of Kimme, Sara, and Sheri were similar to those of other AKAs in this study. In addition to gaining answers for which they
had longed, they also discovered family histories and their origins. These were all unknown to the AKAs before they met their birth families. Young shared his surprise when he found that his birth father was a carpenter, because Young did not know that his own talents and interests had come from a birth father that he hadn’t been able to meet:

My friend called me and says, ‘Can you imagine, your father, your Korean father was a carpenter; this is crazy. This cannot be a coincidence. Genes must be very strong, very very strong.’ And at that moment, I got emotional. That was very special to me, because I didn’t know it before. And, I have such a great passion for making furniture. I made furniture; I made a table; I made chairs in my free time. That’s quite striking…because when I have free time, I am a very passionate carpenter. Everything is wood.

Young described himself as a very rational person who did not show much emotion and who perceived things in a realistic way even before meeting his birth siblings. However, discovering the fact that his birth father, who passed away a year after Young was born, had been a carpenter meant a lot to him, because he realized a strong family connection which he didn’t really feel when he met his birth sisters. Experiences like those of the AKAs in the above examples illustrate how their reunions with their birth families helped them resolve questions that they had in relation to their adoption and discover things that were veiled about their adoptions.

Not only does meeting birth families help the AKAs to resolve questions, but it also fulfills the feelings of emptiness and loneliness they experienced growing up. Actually these two factors are interrelated, because questions about their birth families and experiencing physical differences often made them feel isolated and lonely. Peter, who was the only foreign-looking child in his town, shared his childhood memories of how he longed for his birth family:
Even I remember, when I was third or fourth grade, that time, when I walked home from school, I turned the corner, and around the home, I played like if I closed my eyes until, like, back home, my birth family will be there. I had all this...I really missed my birth family. You know, that time, all the information I had was I was an orphan… I have a lot of childhood memories, like thinking about what happened to my original family, my family in Korea…When I was twelve or thirteen, I started to go to the library to find books about Korea. There were three books, one history book, one cookbook and one…but there was no access to knowing about it, and my parents didn’t participate in any adoptee community. So, that way it was very lonely.

Similarly, Sara shared her feelings of loneliness and emptiness as a teenager. Sara, unlike other AKAs in this study, did not express a wish to learn about Korea at all:

I never grew up watching Korean films, longing for Korea. But, at the same time, I would still say that I had some emptiness within me. I couldn’t really work or say this emptiness is because of… without knowing because of it. But after that now, I see that it was really about Korea. But, at that time, I couldn’t. Then, it was expressed through anger, feeling very lost as a teenager.…I think I always, in some ways, even though I don’t have a relationship to Korea, I was always longing to see my Korean mom. Never my father. And, it was kind of, I had always longed to meet her when I was growing up.

Interestingly, Sara had a strong desire to meet only her birth mother. However, when Sara met her birth mother, she was not what Sara expected or imagined. So, unfortunately, the relationship with her birth mother did not work out well and now Sara has a continued relationship only with her birth father. Despite what she experienced with her birth mother, Sara felt satisfied after meeting her because her fantasy about her birth mother was now gone, and she
is able to see the reality of her birth family and accept who they are. Sharing the meaning of
birth family reunions, Sheri described how fulfilling it was to meet her birth family and feel a
strong connection with them. Remarkably, Sheri expressed the strongest attachment to her birth
family compared to other AKAs, who expressed having relatively fair or less developed
relationships with their adoptive family:

If I hadn’t met my birth family, I think my life would be so much more empty, because I
look at my brother and I see that we are related. You know, I see that we are blood, and
my sister-in-law always takes care of me when I go there and, of course, cooks good
food, but just knowing that they are my family, that they are my own family, if that
makes sense. They are my own family. Even though I am adopted and have my adopted
family, this is my family. I don’t know how to describe it, but I have an American
family. But, I feel like my Korean family is my own family.

The experiences of feeling loneliness and emptiness and longing for their birth families
were commonly expressed by other AKAs, including Amy, K-M-T, and Kimme. In their stories,
they commonly shared how their reunions with their birth families fulfilled what they were
missing in their psyches. In other words, reuniting with their birth families provided
opportunities for them to explore their identities in relation to their adoption. As they were able
to attain what they have missed, whether it turned out positively or negatively, it was significant
in that reuniting with their birth families helped them feel content and brought them peace in
terms of achieving a better understanding of themselves.

Summary

The third major theme in the findings of this study was Validating Who I am.

Having questions about who they look like and their origins answered significantly adds to their
identities. As shared in the stories above, being different was not a pleasant experience for the AKAs. To the AKAs, being different was not positive in a unique sense, but it was isolating. As a consequence, they experienced feeling loneliness and emptiness wondering about their birth families and longing to meet them. So, for AKAs, meeting their birth families offered significant meaning not only in terms of gaining information, but also fulfilling what they looked for in understanding themselves.

**Theme Four: Constructing a New Sense of Self**

The last theme, Constructing a New Sense of Self indicates how the AKAs’ perceptions on self have been influenced by their overall experiences with their birth families. A majority of the AKAs in this study (Amy, Kimme, Sara, K-M-T, and Sheri) stated that meeting their birth families and developing relationships with them have changed their views of themselves, while the rest of the AKAs (Ana, Young, and Peter) indicated that their experiences with their birth families and exploring Korea have strengthened their understandings about who they are and have influenced their lives and interests. Overall, a majority of the AKAs in this study reveal that their reunions with their birth families have had significant impacts on how they understand and view themselves. Furthermore, these impacts influence their interests, careers, and studies, which are related to learning Korean and exploring Korean culture, politics, and history. These reunions simultaneously increased their attachment to their origin of birth.

**Being Me**

In analyzing the AKAs’ stories, it was found that they experienced changed views about their selves. Through reunion with their birth families, they were able to gain information related to their adoptions, learn about their birth culture, explore family stories, among other things. Integrating these experiences made them reflect on who they are and influenced them to
reconstruct their senses of self. In essence, when one comes to perceive his or her sense of self, it is inevitably required to acknowledge his or her birth family, because it naturally confirms one’s origin of birth and connects one with family bonds. The following excerpt from K-M-T illustrates how her perceptions about herself have changed after the reunion with her birth family and how that has changed her identity:

Growing up, I just thought I was in the wrong body. I was actually White, and for some unfair reason, I had been put in this Korean body. I think a lot of the time, I was ashamed of being Korean. I didn’t see myself as a Korean. Like, I used to be really shocked when I was looking at a mirror… I thought that there was something wrong. I didn’t look like them… I think even just before…I think when I was twenty, I felt like ‘Oh, I am grateful. I should feel lucky. I am only lucky I have been adopted.’ I just felt like I am not affected, being adopted – like, whatever strikes someone who is weak, but I am fine. And, in my later twenties, it does matter, and I am affected… Now, I do feel I identify now as a Korean American adoptee. I don’t identify just as a Korean American, because I think that’s something different. I think I’m both Korean and American, but I think, to me, it’s important to have adoptee in that. And now, I am proud and happy to have Korean blood, and I do feel a sense of pride in having been born in this area. It’s important to me.

She has learned about Korean culture, the Korean people, and their values and beliefs. Although K-M-T occasionally faces difficulties and challenges, she realizes being Korean is not something to be ashamed of but something of which to be proud. In addition to that, K-M-T became aware of the fact that her adoption was not just an individual event, but it was also related to social problems and politics in the Korean society. Indeed, K-M-T realizes how her adoption was perceived unfairly and has influenced her life living as a transracial adoptee in a
western country. So, for K-M-T, identifying herself as a Korean American adoptee is a significant change in that she embraces her adoption as an important component in understanding and defining herself.

Like K-M-T, Sara shared her reflections on experiences with her birth family, which she felt made a huge impact on how she viewed herself and changed her perceptions about being Korean:

Going back to Korea, being able to visit here a couple of times, also being able to find my Korean family and getting to know the Korean culture a little bit more every time I go back to Korea does definitely change the way I view myself. Nowadays, I would say that…I wouldn’t say that I am more Korean or I am more …because I don’t want to put myself in a fixed position. But, I definitely say that I am adopted. I want to embrace my Korean side today. That was never the case before. I am proud of being Korean. When I grew up in Sweden, I always felt my Asian part was something bad or wrong. Something bad…maybe, stick out as a minority, but now I am like…I am so proud of my Korean heritage. Yeah, if you want to put a name on it, you would say, yeah, I become more Korean. And, at the same time, I want to embrace those Asian sides of me much more.

And, I am more proud of it.

After meeting her birth family and exploring Korea, the way of viewing herself as being Asian has changed from negative to something of which to be proud. There were no more abstractions of what it meant to be Korean to Sara in that she was able to construct new images of herself and embrace her Korean side. These changes made her comfortable being who she is and have helped her to feel “peace” of mind.
Sheri also shared her feelings of being comfortable with herself and states, “being different isn’t something to be ashamed of, but something to celebrate.” In terms of viewing herself, she mentioned that she has gained more confidence than ever before, because now she is able to understand what it means to be Korean:

Before I met my family, I knew I was Korean, but I had no idea about anything what came along with being Korean. After I met my family, especially after I met my biological mother, as I got older, I understood more things about being Korean and not only the language, but I mean even different mannerisms, um, things about family and things about friends, but little things about the culture that I couldn’t understand. Um, I definitely identify as being a Korean… sometimes Korean-American, but typically I am a Korean. I am saying I am Korean.

While K-M-T, Sara, and Sheri shared their experiences of their changed views about themselves and embraced their Koreanness, Kimme and Amy expressed opposite experiences in terms of changed views about themselves. For instance, Amy said that through her reunion with her birth family and experiences in Korea, her perspective has changed. When she was in Korea, everyone treated her like she was Korean. However, she is a part of American culture in that she realizes “how American Western” and “how not Korean” she is in some ways. Similarly, Kimme shared that in terms of ethnicity, she realizes “how much American I am in ways that I thought maybe I was more Korean.” Indeed, as she came to Korea and kept interacting with her birth family, she came to accept that she is more American in the way she thinks and the way she does things:

I think… deep down inside, we really…a part of our self thinks about being Korean. But, then, another part of us rejects that, because we know that we are Westerners, and that we
are not Korean. And, there were so many cultural things we don’t understand or don’t like or…but I think it’s really hard. It was really hard for me to live in Korea. People would be like, ‘Wow, you are so American.’ Because I have never seen myself being, like, American… So for me, I’ve always gone around knowing and thinking I am Korean. However, realizing that…like, feeling sad that I will never be really Korean in the ways that I thought I would.

In fact, unlike other AKAs in this study, Kimme was the adoptee with relatively more exposure to the Korean culture. Growing up, Kimme was very interested in learning about Korea in that she participated actively in Korean culture. Her association of her identity with what it means to be Korean turned out to be different than what she initially thought. It changed her perceptions of herself to be more closely tied to the American part of her identity.

In contrast with the AKAs who changed their perspectives on themselves, embracing either their origin of birth or their adoptive culture, Peter has different perceptions on viewing himself after the reunion. It took Peter almost 30 years for him to find his birth family. He experienced difficulties in gaining information and finding his birth family through contacting different adoption agencies and people. He recalled a time when he felt very “frustrated” because all of the information about his birth family was in one particular adoption agency in Korea. Without knowing about this agency, he spent so much effort searching for his birth family. When he finally found his family in Korea, all of his thoughts about his past came together. Peter realized “how much energy I used throughout my life to not only find my birth family but to please other people to fit in...Being afraid of not fitting in. I spent so much energy.” Through meeting his birth family, he was able to reflect on what he had looked for in his life and how that had suppressed the way he had conducted his relationships with others:
When I found my family in Korea, I thought ‘Oh, you spent so much time out of your life to fit in and contacting other people. That was…I think that was changed. I think I am almost extremely the other way now, really not trying to fit in. That’s why I am not in the gathering, too. I don’t even want to have community. It’s almost like I went to, in the other…I don’t want community. I just want to have friends here and there, but I don’t want to be part of there. I don’t know…like...so…That thing was the biggest change. I think being more secure, self-confident. Okay, I am strange and aware. That’s okay. I don’t have to pretend to be something else.

His most constant identification is with “migration,” because he prefers to be himself wherever he is without identifying himself with particular groups, associations, or national identities.

While a majority of AKAs reported their changed views on their selves as a result of their experiences with their birth families, Young and Ana shared how their experiences enhanced their understandings of who they are. In other words, through their relationships with their birth families and learning about their origins, they were able to expand on their understandings of their backgrounds. It added another layer to strengthen their perceptions about how they view themselves. For instance, in Young’s case, in contrast with other AKAs in this study, he did not search for his birth family because he just accepted the fact that he was adopted for some reason and thought that there was no way to find his birth family. So he was not interested in searching for his roots because it was a “mission impossible” to find them. The questions “Where do I start?” and “How do I start?” made it feel like an impossibility. However, his birth sister searched for him, and Young visited Korea to reunite with her. Although initially he did not expect much from meeting his birth family, it gave him a special means of reflecting on who he is and his origins:
Suppose I won’t meet my birth family? I never had this strong consciousness about myself. I just became more confident in myself, and you really know who you are, I think. You really know; you really can identify yourself. Okay, that’s you. I think it made me more and more mature and more understanding. Now, I am very conscious about my identity…It just made it stronger about your identity, that’s me. It’s quite unique.

Young’s notion of reunion with his birth family as a “mission impossible” actually became possible, and he integrated his Korean origin and his birth family into how he identifies himself. It helped give him a concrete understanding of himself by recognizing his unique amalgamation as an adoptee from Korea who had lived his whole life in a Western country. Integrating both sides, he felt confident in ascertaining, “that’s me” and feels more comfortable in being himself.

Ana told another story that illustrated how her ability to understand her complex identity has strengthened through the overall experience of the reunion:

I think that I got a struggle sense of being Asian American as opposed to Korean. You know, I think that I am Korean in terms of my origin and in terms of my ethnicity. I am Asian American, and I identify as an American with Asian skin. So, I think that meeting them and even just traveling to Korea, it generally gives me a stronger sense of who I am in terms of the way I see the world …

Interestingly, compared to other AKAs in this study, the impact on Ana upon meeting her birth family was relatively less. However, as she mentioned, her reunion with her birth family and visiting Korea offered her the opportunity to reflect on her sense of being between Asian American and Korean. Now, she has a more concrete understanding of being Korean in that it influences her approach to life.
Overall, from the stories of the AKAs in this study it was evident that a majority of the AKAs’ experiences either changed or strengthened their understandings of themselves through their reunions and relationships with their birth families. Through interacting with their birth families and exploring their origins, they were able to discover what it means to be born in Korea and how that has shaped their identities. In other words, they felt content and could truly be themselves as Korean-born adoptees.

**Becoming More than Being Me**

The experiences of being themselves not only changed their perspectives on themselves, but it affected their interests, careers, and relationships with others. They had opportunities to learn more about their country of origin, including its history, politics, and culture. Several AKAs described how their interest in Korea has changed. For instance, Young experienced a big change in his interest in learning the Korean language. He states, “I mean, I can read and write Korean. I mean, I can read, and I can write it, but I don’t have any vocabulary.” Although it is hard for him to study Korean on a consistent basis as he is busy with his job, he shows a strong passion nonetheless for learning Korean. Like Young, Sheri also took several Korean courses, not only because she wanted to have better communication with her birth family, but also because she became very interested in Korean culture.

Other interests included learning more about Korean history, politics, and society. Once Peter met his birth family, he discovered family stories and learned more about Korean culture and politics:

I think, once I found my family, I started to look much deeper into Korean history. Also, because my father did tell...one time, he told me about my family history. My great-grandfather was an assistant fighter in the Japanese colonization. My father has been very
active… So, as I started reading more critical Korean history, instead of that official narrative, I became very interested in Korean politics, economics and social issues. Most of my Korean friends are activists. So, it definitely changed my view on Korea. I think that’s what happens to adoptees’ gathering. One thing I was very angry about was they had this session on North Korea. They had a North Korea defender come and talk about how horrible it is. But, they never have any workshops on all the social problems in South Korea. Why don’t they have a workshop on national security law and how it completely limits what you can do as a NGO in Korea? Why don’t you ask these questions? So that’s, I think, totally changed my view on Korea.

As Peter got more interested in the history, politics, and social issues of Korea, he also learned about the negative aspects of Korean society and became aware of critical issues in Korea. In other words, his view on Korea changed from a “romantic view of Korea” to a more “critical stance.” Moreover, Peter’s new perspective on Korea increased his curiosity about his birth family, wondering how Korean society influenced his family and what happened to them.

Kimme shared that, as she spent more time with her birth family and learned about Korean culture, she gained a better understanding of “how and why society here is the way it is.” In particular, Kimme learned about Korean society’s view of international adoption, their lack of services for post-reunion services, and a birth family’s stigma due to adoption. She has become dynamically involved in the adoptee community:

I’ve been very active with the adoptee community in the U.S. and Korea. So, for example, GOA’L has been doing post reunion discussions, and so I had attended those and that was very helpful… Um, for a while, they were also doing classes for birth families, and I have volunteered for that as well. So, just meeting birth families… I think
that was really good, because there were things that they didn’t understand about their children…. And for them, that’s very difficult, because they see their children as Korean. They look Korean. But they are foreigners, and everything they do is difficult for them to understand, because they don’t understand western culture, and then, so, there is a very large disconnect between the two groups. So, for those birth families to be able to ask me, someone who is an adoptee but not their own child, to try to explain these things, I think that was really helpful.

Kimme explained that she never expected to be actively involved in an adoptees’ group. Indeed, this is a big change for her in that she has become a part of the adoptees’ community and has worked voluntarily helping returning adoptees and their birth families. She thus has been able to help others as well in the course of reflecting on how she fits into Korean society and what it means to live in Korea as an adoptee.

Similarly, K-M-T experienced changed views on international adoption, and her interests led her to help other adoptees who plan to go through the reunion journey:

Now, I do feel like adoption of adoptees, I think one point, that doesn’t matter. And, then, a little bit different. Then, I started to think, maybe it matters. Now, I see I do have strong opinions about it. Now, I really think that international adoption is a form of legalizing human traffic…I do really care about what happens with them, even though I don’t know them…. I feel like even living in Korea, even though I am not involved in any particular group, I do feel like I have a certain responsibility, especially toward adoptees who are in the process of searching or in the stage of reunion…because I know one of the things with me being reunited is I do feel it’s more isolated even in the adopted community, because it’s a rare experience.
As she learned more about Korean society and acknowledged the complications of international Korean adoption, she learned how the Korean government has neglected providing social welfare and a child care system for its citizens and just focuses on economic prosperity. Since then, she has become very critical of the current practice of international adoption and has become a strong voice of protest.

While Young, Peter, Kimme, and K-M-T illustrated their changes in perspectives and interests related to their origins, other stories revealed how their reunions with their birth families influenced their careers. For example, Sheri previously worked in an international office at a university, and now she works in a law firm that practices immigration law:

My career, I think it maybe didn’t change it, but it validated my career, because before I worked with international students. I am the immigration monitor. Now, I work at an immigration law firm. And, I think just the fact that I am adopted, have my family in Korea, it is a kind of validation of my career path. Being with immigrants somehow makes my career different and special.

Sheri continued to explain that after she met her birth family and explored her Korean side, she realized that her job is actually connected to an international context. Although her career is not directly related to Korea, it is dealing with different cultures and provides more opportunities to understand her Korean background. Furthermore, she stated that it gives her a “special” meaning related to her Korean experience in that she is much more confidence doing her work. Kimme also experienced a big change in her career. Although she never expected to work in Korea, she got a good job opportunity working in Korea. Her decision to accept the job offer and work in Korea was not only because it provided secure benefits for her, but it also enabled her to stay in Korea to build a continuous relationship with her birth family.
Summary

The fourth major theme in the findings of this study was Constructing a New Sense of Self. In this study, the AKAs were the primary subjects in that they shared how they related their experiences in terms of reflecting on their senses of self. Indeed, AKAs’ collective narratives reveal that they experienced transitions in understanding their senses of self not only in their views of their identity, but also their interests, careers, and viewpoints on Korea. In other words, through evolving relationships with their birth families, the AKAs were able to integrate their lost pieces of self and reconstruct themselves in ways that significantly influenced their senses of self.

Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore how Adult Korean Adoptees’ (AKAs) evolving relationships with their birth families affect their developing senses of self. In order to explore their experiences with their birth families, the in-depth interview data from the eight participants was analyzed. Four major themes emerged along with subcategories in that each theme is related to the next theme, connecting the consequences of AKAs’ reunion experiences.

The first theme, Building a Distinctive Family Relationship, indicates how the AKAs have developed relationships with their birth families. It was found that AKAs gradually developed relationships with their birth families from an initial intense period of getting to know them into full-fledged family relationships. From being strangers to family members, their relationships were embedded in an adoption context that involved separation in time, space, and memories between AKAs and their birth families. Under these circumstances, they have formed unique relationships that only AKAs and their birth families share.
Following the first theme was *Working through Challenges in the Relationships within Multicultural Families*. In developing new relationships with their birth families, AKAs inevitably encountered difficulties. Three major barriers revealed in this theme included two different languages, two different cultures, and the Korean social stigma on birth parents. As the adoptees were all raised in Western countries, although they looked Korean, they barely had any knowledge about the Korean language or culture. Furthermore, it was found that birth parents often experienced a stigma or shame about sending their children away. Indeed, these factors are intertwined with one another in that they remain challenges to negotiating these relationships.

Despite difficulties and challenges in AKAs’ relationships with their birth families, the third theme indicates how their experiences are meaningful in terms of *Validating Who I am*. The reunions offered them opportunities of “finding what was unknown,” related to their physical resemblances, origins, and their adoption stories. In other words, they didn’t have to long for their birth families anymore because they were fulfilled by finding what was missing in their lives.

The last theme, *Constructing a New Sense of Self*, highlighted the purpose of this study. It was found that the AKAs’ experiences were changed or strengthened not only by their perspectives on themselves but also their interests, beliefs, and careers. In other words, through evolving relationships with their birth families and exploring their origins, they were able to reconstruct their senses of self by embracing their Koreanness, reflecting how they fit into the Korean context, and reinterpreting what it means to be a Korean adoptee.
CHAPTER VI
DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to explore how Adult Korean Adoptees’ (AKAs) evolving relationships with their birth families affect their developing senses of self.

The study addresses the following research questions:

RQ1. How do AKAs describe their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ2. How have AKAs’ sense of self developed through their evolving relationships with their birth families?

RQ3. What meaning do AKAs attach to the experience of reuniting with their birth families?

In this final chapter of the study, three conclusions are presented: 1.) AKAs increase the complexity of understanding self by building distinctive family affiliations with their birth families; 2.) AKAs generate developmental pathways by experiencing their cognitive maturation and connecting the self with others selectively; and finally, 3.) AKAs’ relationships with their birth families are turning points that precipitate the ongoing development of their senses of self in their adulthoods. These three conclusions were discussed in relation to the research questions for this study, analysis of the findings, and connections to relevant studies. Lastly, implications for both theory and practice are suggested along with recommendations for future research that hopefully will invite more research on the issues drawn from this study.

Conclusion One

The primary goal of this study was to explore how Adult Korean Adoptees’ (AKAs) evolving relationships with their birth families affect their developing senses of self.
Approaching this goal of the study, it was important to understand how the AKAs have built relationships with their birth families. The findings of this study indicate that AKAs have developed unique and different forms of family relationships with their birth families within the context of Korean international adoption. The first conclusion of this study is that AKAs increase the complexity of understanding self by building distinctive family affiliations with their birth families.

The AKAs interviewed for this study shared how they have built relationships with their birth families, since the form of family relationships is not the same type of family relationships they have with their adoptive families. Significantly, as they were adopted into Western countries as international transracial adoptees, they do not share the same language and culture as their birth families and have confronted these challenges while developing relationships with their birth families. Under this particular circumstance, they have developed more unique and differentiated family relationships than conventional family relationships, so that defining the boundaries of family relationships becomes ambiguous and singular to each adoptee.

The findings of this study indicate complexities in building reunion relationships between the adoptees and their birth families. Browning and Duncan (2005) studied the long-term experiences of adoptees’ post-reunions. They concluded that there are “no guidelines or clear pathways” (p. 171) in their relationships in that adoptees experience ambivalence about their associations with their birth families. This is consistent with the findings in this study; although the adoptees have maintained contact with their birth families and perceive them as family, they continually confront challenges and negotiate the gaps that exist between them and their birth families. In fact, each of the AKAs is building a new form of relationship with their birth families, with which they previously had no connections except for genetics.
Interestingly, the adoptees in this study perceived their relationships with their birth families as a family relationship, while the degree of closeness and attachment varied. Comparing studies on reunion relationships, for instance, Browning and Duncan (2005) found that a majority of the adoptees that participated in their study did not assign the relationships they were having with their birth mothers a kinship label. Passmore and Feeney (2009) also stated that adoptees developed either a general family or friendship relationship with their birth parents. Both of these studies were mainly conducted with participants that are domestic in-race adoptees. The differences in findings between these two studies and the AKAs in this study may be explained by observing that international adoptees may express a stronger connection to their biological families. In fact, international adoptees like AKAs experience physical dissimilarities from their adoptive families by their visible racial differences (Triseliotis, Feast, & Kyle, 2005). Since they were young, racial issues were unavoidable to them (Docan-Morgan, 2011). In particular, most of the AKAs grew up and lived in predominantly White communities and had longed to have biological connections with those with whom they shared a similar appearance. In other words, as racial differences were a main concern of the AKAs when they were growing up, meeting their biological families who shared the same race and similar appearance may have given them a more special connection than those who were adopted in-race and domestically.

In terms of relationships with adoptive families after the reunions, a majority of the AKAs in this study reported that they perceived their adoptive families as their primary family. This finding was consistent with other reunion studies (Browning & Duncan, 2005; Howe & Feast, 2001). Although adoptees stayed in long-term relationships with their birth families, their adoptive families remained their primary family affiliations. Howe and Feast (2001) concluded that adoptive parents, as caregivers, create strong socio-emotional bonds with adoptees during
their childhoods and have an enduring relationship that continues into their adulthoods. In addition to this conclusion, Howe and Feast stated that while adoptees stay in contact with their birth families, this does not necessarily mean they have “a desire for another filial relationship” (p. 365). On the other hand, in this study of AKAs, six of the adoptees in this study identified their relationships with their birth parents as parent-child and called them umma (mother in Korean) and abba (father in Korean). However, while they perceived their relationships with their birth parents as parent-child, they differentiated between their birth parents by referring to them as “Korean mom” and “Korean dad,” while they called their adoptive parents “mom” and “dad.” In other words, although they have formed biological filial relationships with their birth parents, they perceived their adoptive parents as their primary caregivers (Howe & Feast, 2001) who have taken the primary role of parents. This may be explained by observing that while the AKAs reveal a stronger sense of genealogical connections with their birth parents, their adoptive parents and siblings remain their primary family members.

In the AKAs’ stories, as expected, language and cultural differences pose a challenge the AKAs, as they were all raised in Western countries with little exposure to their origins (Tieman, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2008). Indeed, this study shows that language is the biggest barrier to developing relationships, as their knowledge of Korean is very limited, while their birth families’ English language proficiency is very low. Along with language, cultural differences also emerged as main barriers. Although the AKAs look Korean, they culturally identify with their adoptive families (Godon et al., 2014; Ramsey, Cobb, Dom, & White, 2008). While studies on international adoptees’ searches and reunions have indicated linguistic and cultural barriers, they have discussed only ostensible reasons for the adoption circumstances.
Unlike two strangers from different countries meeting, reunion between adoptees and their birth families involves a meaningful connection through biology, a very basic family formulation, from the outset. However, as adoptees and their birth families have not built foundational family ties and have maintained a separation in time, space, and memory, underlying their meetings are mixed intricate emotions related to adoption and, possibly, hard feelings toward their birth families. In this situation, language barriers are not just a matter of learning a new language. This study illustrates that AKAs are willing to learn Korean in order to have better communication with their birth families and explore the Korean culture. However, their deeper feelings revealed that since it was not their choice to be unable to speak Korean, their inability to speak the language also rested in the birth parents’ hands. The AKAs deserved some reparation to, at the very least, be met in the middle in terms of learning Korean.

Furthermore, as they learned more about their birth families, they realized how social, cultural, and political factors in Korea have instigated international Korean adoptions and have neglected their own citizens’ children (Kim, 2003; Hurdis, 2007). In other words, dealing with language and cultural difficulties not only concerns communication methods, but also includes multifaceted factors that have in many cases played a role in international Korean adoption. In short, challenges with the differences between AKAs and their birth families are much more complicated matters that only the AKAs experience.

In fact, most participants in this study had limited views on self with less exposure to their origins and little experience with dynamic learning contexts. Thus, when they are exposed to different ideas, notions, and expectations from their birth families, they experience fragmented and confused feelings. This is because they are unable to connect or relate to their birth families in terms of understanding the boundaries of the self. In other words, even though they are
situated in dynamic learning contexts, their approaches to their understandings of self are very limited. This phenomenon can be explained by a conceptualization of the self. The notion of self has widely focused on the individual in that one must be enabled to stand apart from the world, as the focus on the understanding of self is mainly from an individual viewpoint. Clark and Dirkx (2000) criticized this normative view of self as excessively individualistic and separates the self from the social world, since individuals inevitably experience confusion and ambiguities insofar as they live in a dynamic social world. Similarly, Gergen (1991) stressed that living in a world where there are increasing complexities and different cultures, we need to implement the relational approach to understand the idea of self by reflecting on how the notion of self is socially structured and, simultaneously, by recognizing the influences on the self both at personal and social levels. This study indicates that as they have opportunities to explore their birth families and learn about Korean society and its culture, they are able to connect with their own adoption stories at both personal and social levels.

In conclusion, AKAs’ understandings of their self as adoptees increased the complexity of ways they organize their experience by moving from an individual viewpoint about their birth families to an international Korean adoption context. As they have been able to perceive how their adoption stories were influenced and shaped by the social context of Korea, their perceptions of self have not only included their personal stories, feelings, and thoughts, but also the related social context.

Conclusion Two

The second conclusion of this study is that AKAs generate developmental pathways by experiencing their cognitive maturation and connecting the self with others selectively. This conclusion was reached based on an analysis of the findings of this study, which found that
Despite difficulties and challenges with continuing relationships with their birth families, they are experiencing growth and development.

This is consistent with studies related to birth family searches and reunions according to which adoptees generally have positive outcomes, because they are provided with answers about their backgrounds and are able to ask questions related to their adoptions (Howe & Feast, 2001; Lifton, 2002; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Questions like “Where did I come from?” and “Who do I look like?” are very natural inquiries and were also expressed by the AKAs, like all other adoptees (Dunbar, & Grotevant, 2004). For most adoptees, gaining information and learning about their roots are essential elements in terms of achieving a better understanding of themselves (McGinnis, Smith, Ryan, & Howard, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). According to Howe, Feast, and Coster (2000), the searcher or adoptee felt more complete as a person after he or she was reunited with his or her birth family, whether they later continued the relationship or not.

Similarly, a majority of the AKAs in this study expressed that gaining information about their adoptions made them feel more comfortable, because they no longer had to ponder the “why” and “how” questions. Although new questions emerged as they continued contact with these families, the questions that they had contemplated for so long had been addressed, even if the answers were not forthcoming or satisfying. This finding suggests that post-reunion outcomes, whether they turn out to generate continued/discontinued, good/bad relationships, fill an emotional void through the tangibility of the birth families that these adoptees experienced from a factual source.

This study also highlights that AKAs’ reunions had further meaning in relation to their race. AKAs described their negative racial experiences to varying degrees. All of them except
one reported their discomfort and feelings about looking different when they were growing up. This mirrors Docan-Morgan’s (2010) study of transracial adoptees’ experiences with racial derogation. In her study, she identified transracial adoptees’ racial derogation according to three themes: (1) appearance attacks; (2) perceived ethnicity attacks and (3) physical attacks. Appearance attacks refer to when adoptees are targeted because of their racialized physical features (Docan-Morgan, 2010). The second theme, perceived ethnicity attacks, happen when “the aggressor referenced essential cultural beliefs or stereotypes about Asians” (Docan-Morgan, 2010, p. 343).

In this study, both attacks on their appearances and perceived ethnic attacks were corroborated. Six out of the eight participants reported experiencing appearance attacks, and two of them described their experiences with being called “Chinese.” Their experiences with racial derogation may be more prevalent than transracial adoptees raised in diverse communities (McGinnis et al., 2009). Similarly, Mohanty and Newhill (2006) studied international adoptees and argued that racism and discrimination were consistent themes due to their physical appearances. Muller and Perry (2001) stated that because of this particular racial circumstance that internationally and transracially adoptees experience, their interest in searching for their birth families “deserve more attention” (p. 12). In other words, exploring biological connections to find a much-needed sense of self in relation to their racial identity provides a great deal of meaning to the AKAs.

The experiences of the AKAs in this study are explained through the constructive-developmental theory, which views development as our way of knowing related to our surroundings (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Kegan, 1982, 1994; Kitchener & King, 1994). Constructivism believes that reality does not happen to us; rather, we construct and make sense
of reality based on our ways of knowing. Kegan (1982, 1994) postulates that the meaning making process constantly works in relation to people’s cognitive, emotional, and physical activities. In this study of the stories of AKAs, the emotions, feelings, and understandings of their experiences were described as they made meaning for interpreting those experiences. When describing their reunion experiences, they shared their past stories and compared how their perceptions of self have influenced their lives after their reunions with their birth families. The ways in which they reflect and differentiate between their past and current experiences and integrate them all into new meaning is an essential process in constructive-developmental theory. Through continual meaning making, AKAs experience qualitative shifts in their meaning systems to experience growth and development (Kegan, 1982).

In order to understand one’s transitions, exploring one’s developmental capacity is important because it articulates the relationship between cognitive, individual, and contextual factors that all influence or mediate adults’ meaning making (Kegan, 1982, 1994). The cognitive approach, known as epistemology, is ways of knowing in which we perceive the certainty of knowledge to claim our understanding (Baxter Magolda et al., 2009: Drago-Severson, 2004). The inquiry of how one knows is the key point to recognizing one’s assumptions, beliefs, and values. For the AKAs, knowledge about their heritage and realities related to their birth families were missing. When they reunited with their birth families and had contact with them, they experienced making new meanings of self by meeting their birth families and learning about their cultural roots.

By discovering new information about their adoption stories and birth families, their cognitive functioning of knowing about their adoption backgrounds has expanded. In other words, their understandings of their adoption stories are no longer abstract, as they had been
since they were young. Their ways of knowing about themselves became clearer as they were able to make sense of what happened to them. In short, AKAs’ capacity to claim knowledge increased in that AKAs were able to resolve inquiries related to their adoptions and include multiple perspectives to experience cognitive maturity (Baxter Magolda et al., 2009).

In addition to increasing their knowledge and understanding of the self through the reunions, AKAs experienced changes in their perceptions of their identities. Throughout their stories, it was revealed how Western White dominant society influenced them in not being able to understand their different contexts. Rather, they were expected to fit into that particular society without reflecting on their own culture, race, and ethnicity. Fromn (2004) explained that people are striving to live in a similar way to be included in dominant society; otherwise, they become “alienated.” One of the AKAs described that after he found his birth family, he realized how much of an effort he had made to please other people to fit in and to be accepted. He was afraid of being different and isolated from others in that he had suppressed himself from expressing who he was. Similarly, several AKAs said that in their childhoods, they sought to conform to others’ expectations and wishes. Indeed, their views of self were very much influenced by others and were identified within their particular communities, and they had less confidence about being different than others. However, through their reunions with their birth families and having the opportunity to explore Korean culture, they shared similarities and discovered the unique aspects of being Korean. Although their relationships with their birth families varied from very close to ambivalent, and there were times when they experienced challenges, just connecting with their birth families gave them special meaning. In short, their perceptions on selves have changed from feeling uncomfortable about being Korean adoptees to embracing their Korean side and perceiving themselves as Korean adoptees.
This meaning making process is classified as the intrapersonal dimension that can occur through internal approval from the self to integrate one’s identity, rather than adapting to the expectations and approvals of others (Drago-Severson, 2004). Baxter Magolda et al. (2009) found in their study that through this integrated identity, individuals are able to embrace their histories, gain confidence, and enhance their capacities for viewing the self as related to others. Similarly, the AKAs’ perceptions of self no longer needed the approval of others. Rather, they integrated new meanings from their experiences to reconstruct their views of self by increasing their understanding of who they are, as well as gaining more confidence about their selves.

Interestingly, while this study observed AKAs’ increasing developmental capacities, including how they expand their knowledge of the self and reconstruct their identities, it did not distinctly show if they have increased interpersonal capacity. Interpersonal capacity allows individuals to build mature relationships by respecting both self and others (Drago-Severson, 2004). In this study, although AKAs reveal their affections toward their birth families and how they gradually engage in family ties with them, their relationships with their birth families remain uncertain as the boundaries of family relationships are ambiguous. In other words, while AKAs feel affection for their birth families and are able to recognize complexities and differences in their birth culture, they have not been fully able to integrate these differences into these relationships.

AKAs’ developmental capacities can be explained through Kegan’s constructive-developmental lens that includes the five orders. This approach offers an understanding of their developmental pathways and how they make meaning and experience transitional phases to grow and develop through their reunion experiences. Although each AKA has a distinctive context and a unique reunion story, their processes of developmental growth revealed some
aspects of commonalities that are reflected among the five orders of consciousness. Three AKAs
in this study experienced a transition from the third order to the fourth order, three remained in
the fourth order, and two are in a transitional order, which is described as being between the third
and fourth orders.

The transition from the third order to the fourth order was apparent in three of the AKAs’
narratives. In their stories, it was revealed that their views of self were very much influenced by
others and were identified within a particular society in that they were not confident in being
Korean adoptees. They were unable to differentiate or reflect on their self in relation to others.
However, through their reunions with their birth families and having the opportunity to explore
their origins of birth, they were able to appreciate the unique features of Koreans, learn about the
culture, people, and history and make meanings on what those experiences meant to them.
These meaning making processes enabled them not to be dependent on relationships with others
any longer and freed them from others’ judgments. They are able to reconstruct their identities
of being adoptees through their own reflections and achieve their own identities. In other words,
their senses of self were firmly formed through explorations of a new level of complexity in
organizing their reunion experiences in which they experienced growth.

Two of the AKAs in this study were in the transitional order between the third and fourth
orders. This term refers to when both orders of consciousness exist at the same time (2012,
Berger). This is a transitional period that holds both a self-authorship, while simultaneously
being influenced by one’s surroundings. Compared to other AKAs in this study, since they were
young, these two AKAs were actively engaged in participating in the Korean culture and
associated their identity as Korean. However, unlike what they expected, through their
experiences and interacting with their birth families and people in Korea, they realized how
“American” or “Western” they are. Their experiences with cultural gaps, language gaps, and relational gaps made them rethink how they didn’t fit into the Korean culture and their birth families. Their previous assumptions about self in relation to Korea were confused by their exposures to reality. While they were able to stand apart from how they previously viewed themselves, which enabled them to differentiate the self in relation to their birth families and people around them, they revealed their struggles with their identities between their adoptive and birth cultures. Their meaning making is at a transitional order through the merging of their past and current experiences in that they will continue to move forward to the next level.

The fourth order is a person who is able to generate his or her own values, beliefs, and authority. Three of the AKAs, who were in the fourth order, highlighted their experiences as integrating the Korean side to enhance the self. They view themselves as an independent authority that is able to embrace the complexities around them, gain greater control over their inner feelings and integrate meaning based on what they think is right. Through their post-reunion experiences, they were able to have a more concrete understanding of being Korean in that integrating those experiences led them to an increased capacity for understanding the self as well as gaining more confidence about their selves (Baxter Magolda, et al., 2009). However, the limitation of the fourth order of meaning making is to have a narrow sense of the relationship. When they encountered challenges and gaps in their relationships with their birth families, they experience conflicts and difficulties integrating in their birth families’ world. In order to have less conflict in their relationships, they desired to move to the fifth order. AKAs’ understanding of their self as adoptees increased in complexity, stimulating more differentiated, refined and integrated senses of self, since they were able to embrace both their experiences with their birth families in international Korean adoption contexts and their contexts of growing up in their
adopted families. AKAs’ capacity to embrace these two contexts would form a complexity of mind to experience growth through gaining better sense of their identities as well as building mutual relationships with others.

An understanding of AKAs’ developmental pathways of how they go through their reunion experiences, which included three different conditions of orders, were present. By reflecting on their developmental capacities and meaning making process, it was significant that the development of their senses of self are generated by increasing their cognitive maturation and connecting the self with others selectively. AKAs’ claiming of knowledge has been distinctly expanded through gaining information about themselves from their birth families, since these meetings have consequently affected their perceptions of themselves. Interestingly, their meaning making processes were observed as they selectively reflected on certain experiences that they had with their birth families.

This is supported by Constructivism, which views that reality comes to us as how we perceive and interpret particular happenings. As most of the AKAs’ purposes for the reunions with their birth families were related to achieving a better sense of self, their processes of constructing meaning were primarily focused on experiences that were related to their own adoption stories. Within this condition, their capacities of making meaning occurred partially in that they have a limited understanding of their birth families and still remain uncertain and ambiguous. However, AKAs’ relationships with their birth families are in the present progressive form, and their continued experiences may gradually and recursively affect their meaning systems in the future. Also, constructive-developmental theory supports the idea that individual adults live in different contexts; for example, adults who are in similar age brackets and life situations may still experience different developmental processes (Drago-Severson,
Thus, AKAs’ processes of developmental growth will unfold differently depending upon their circumstances and time.

This study of the AKAs confirmed studies on post-reunions, which discussed the outcomes and addressed the importance of achieving a better sense of self as a result of their reunion experiences (Trinder, Feast, & Howe, 2004; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). However, these previous studies did not contextualize how the adoptees achieve a better sense of self in relation to their experiences. Thus, while this study confirms that adoptees gain a better sense of self through their reunions, this study additionally offers detailed descriptions on international adoptees’ experiences, reflecting on their unique circumstances by examining them through the constructive-developmental theory and showing how they have experienced cognitive development by connecting their experiences between the self and others. This study expands previous studies on adoptees’ development, particularly as it focuses on Korean adoptees (Kaanta, 2010; Liberman, 2001).

In conclusion, this study of the AKAs contextualizes their growth and development through reflecting on their current experiences with their birth families and incorporating their previous thoughts in relation to their identities and redefining their ways of understanding the self. Kegan (1994) pointed out that the two utmost yearnings in the human experience are to be included and to have a sense of agency. So, although AKAs would seek to connect the self with their birth families continually, they would also simultaneously keep their self separate to some degree from their birth families.

**Conclusion Three**

The third conclusion of this study is that AKAs’ evolving relationships with their birth families is a turning point that precipitates the ongoing development of their senses of self in
their adulthoods. This conclusion embraces AKAs’ overall stories of evolving relationships with their birth families and the aftereffects these relationships have on their perceptions of self.

As expected, for adoptees, finding their biological families and knowing their origin of birth is a big event in their lives because a very basic human need is to know about and fulfill the existence of the self. However, this big event can simply be one incident in a life of experiences if adoptees view these reunions as a duty to themselves to know their self better. AKAs in this study indicate that they perceive and interpret their reunions to be meaningful and significant in their lives. Their experiences not only offered them understanding about themselves and changed their perceptions on their identities, but also led to changes in their lives such as being interested in learning Korean and learning about Korean society, joining adoptee communities, and engaging in work or studies related to Korea.

This phenomenon may instigate a turning point in AKAs’ lives, because their reunification with their birth families prompts them to embrace their origins and affects their ways of life after that (McLean & Pratt, 2006). A turning point is defined as episodes in which someone undergoes substantial changes (McAdams, 1993). Bruner (1994) states that turning point memories are examples of the process of self-development, as the narrative construction of these turning point stories influence past memories. Indeed, AKAs’ past memories include being lonely, isolated, and yearning to know their birth parents and their origin. These memories are particularly related to their own limitations and vulnerabilities on viewing the self; however, by reflecting on their current reunion experiences, their past memories no longer affect AKAs’ self.

In other words, their form of past memories about self changes as they overlap present events with reunification. Furthermore, the present events continually influence AKAs’ futures, as they affect their interests, careers, and relationships with others. Indeed, their reunion experiences
reshape their past to their present as well as their present to their future (Bruner, 2003). These changes in their lives varied from two participants deciding to move back to Korea to three participants deciding to pursue studies related to Korea, taking Korean language and culture lessons, and becoming involved in an adoptee community. So, it was commonly discovered that their birth cultures have become more instrumental in helping to compose their lives. Thus, this study suggests that AKAs’ reunions have significant meanings, as they become turning points in their lives.

Interestingly, the majority of the AKAs in this study expect that their relationships with their birth families may change in the future. As time goes by, their relationships with their birth families may take different forms; their relationships may become closer, stay the same, or fade in and out. For instance, three out of the eight participants revealed their worries about their future relationships with their birth families, such as when their birth parents pass away or if their birth siblings might cease contact with them. On the other hand, two participants described their positive views on their future relationships, as they have gradually developed comfort zones in contacting each other, and they expect their futures to include deeper family relationships. The rest of the three participants described their future relationships as doubtful, since they live so far away from their birth families. These shared stories about their futures are constructed based on their experiences of reflecting on their current situations and are based on their selective narratives. According to Polkinghorne (1988), the development of self can be viewed through one’s narrative activity as the self continuously participates and expresses its own existence, “whose form is narrativity” (p. 151). Indeed, our meaning is constructed and reconstructed within the connections or relationships among the events that we experience. Thus, as AKAs are continually engaged in interactions with their birth families and their birth
culture, they are able to make meaning according to their narrative structure (Sarbin, 1986).

Similarly, Rossiter (1999) views adult development in terms of narrative orientation and summarizes four assumptions: (1) a narrative is a basic structure of human meaning making, (2) adult development is experienced and expressed through the construction of self stories, (3) a human science approach is appropriate for the study of adult development, and (4) adult development proceeds in ways that are not necessarily predictable (p. 79). Under these assumptions, Rossiter concludes that a narrative is the result of meaning making in understanding adult development. AKAs’ abilities to share their stories and narrate their experiences validate their growth, and they are expected to constantly make meaning for themselves as their narratives go on. In short, their experiences with adult development will be a lifelong process. AKAs’ unique experiences with being adopted and reuniting with their birth families create intricate contexts to understanding themselves. By depending on AKAs’ interactions and involvements with their birth families and birth culture, their narratives in forming the self and understanding their worlds will constantly be affected in the future.

Studying development within relationships, Josselson (1996) used narrative orientation to understand one’s relationships with others by connecting and differentiating between the processes. Josselson (2009) explains that adults experience development throughout their life spans, and life experiences are reinterpreted over time and reshape their ways of understanding self. In particular, adults may increase their relatedness with others over time and may experience a “richer, broader, more complex, and more differentiated development process” (Josselson, 1996, p. 4). In addition, the developmental process is also affected by one’s age-dependent nature and cognitive maturation (Mezirow, 1991). As the average of the participants’ ages in this study is 36, it is assumed that their cognitive capacities will develop as they get older.
and constantly experience ongoing developmental processes by reconstructing their past memories and recreating meaning to hold multiple definitions of self. There are studies that have focused on adult Korean adoptees’ identity development (Kaanta, 2010; Lieberman, 2001). Similar to this study, Kaanta (2010) suggested that Korean adoptees experience an ongoing recursive process rather than a lingering stage development when they encounter a triggering life event in adulthood. In other words, Korean adoptees are continually constructing and reconstructing who they are as they experience certain life situations and transitions. While both Lieberman (2001) and Kaanta’s studies highlight adoptees’ self-formation into adulthood, they did not discuss what this might mean to the adoptees and how that might affect their lives. Thus, this study of the AKAs can be viewed as a continuation of understanding adult adoptees’ development and an extension of studies on adult Korean adoptees. In addition, this study contributes to the literature on international adoptees’ reunification and its effect on their personal developments by contextualizing adoptees’ developmental growth as an ongoing process.

In conclusion, this study postulates that AKAs’ evolving relationships with their birth families enable them to bridge their past memories to present an informed self and construct new meanings of their present self to continually influence their future self. In other words, their reunions offer them the ability to understand the self within the adoption context and invite them to engage in an ongoing development of their senses of self in their adulthoods.

Implications and Recommendations for Future Research

Based on studies regarding adoptees’ post reunions and findings and analysis from this study of the AKAs, several implications have been generated. With different approaches, there are both theoretical and practical implications discussed in hopes of contributing to adult
adoptees who may plan to reunite with their families or who are experiencing reunion aftereffects. In addition to the implications, admitting this study is just a part of the exploration of the AKAs’ experiences, future research is needed.

**Implications for Theory**

The findings of this study have significant implications for international adult adoptees in terms of approaching identity development in adulthood. Studies on adoptees’ development theory primarily focus on childhood experiences and have excluded how adoptees continually experience development in their adulthood, as well. Also, importantly, although there are an increased numbers of international adoptees who are either interested in searching or have already reunited with their birth families, none of these studies have focused on the adoptees’ experiences as they continue to develop their senses of self with newfound and significant information. In other words, the unique circumstances that are situated within international adoption have not been reflected in the literature at all. As this study of the AKAs shows, there are significant effects from these post-reunion relationships with birth families, and studies on adoptees’ development theory may wish to include these continual aspects of growth and view these adoptees’ development as a necessary lifelong process.

This study illuminates how complicated and multifaceted circumstances of international adoption have yielded the need for evolving, shifting and complex selves. Although studies have addressed viewing the self as relational and complex, these studies have not included the experiences of nonconventional populations that are particularly situated and enmeshed in different sociocultural contexts of ethnicity and race. As this study reveals AKAs cross-cultural experience between their adopted culture and birth culture with a focus on racial identity, the importance of adoptees’ cultural contradictions is significant in that they highlight how their self
undergoes an internal disorder on their way to gradually achieving a better sense of self. This finding offers implications to current adult development theory. Although culture and race issues have been addressed, this study continues to emphasize the necessity for further empirical and theoretical studies that include a mixture of different cultures and races. In this study, theorizing the notion of self for these adoptees would continue to highlight the necessity of promoting adult growth and the challenges of developing multiple views of self in relation to their complex worlds.

**Implications for Practice**

This descriptive study offers several practical implications. First, through this study, it was revealed that adoptees have confronted challenges in continuing relationships due to barriers, including different languages and cultures. Adult educators and practitioners whose work is related to adoptees and adoption issues should support these adoptees by understanding their unique cultural and racial backgrounds and should attempt to meet their special needs by empowering these adoptees’ growth and continued learning. Importantly, reunifications are not the end of adoption; it is the forming of new relationships between adoptees and their birth families and should be provided systematic supports and long-term programs.

Second, AKAs are the largest and first generation of international adoptees, and the number of these reunions are increasing significantly. This study emphasizes the need to recognize the important phenomenon that accompanies these reunions and issues related to international adoption. By illuminating this particular group, policy makers in Korea may consider legislation that speaks to adoptees’ needs and adult adoptees’ post-adoption support as well as ending international adoptions in Korea. Lastly, the most significant practical implication that can be generated through this study of AKAs is that it can be utilized by adult
Korean adoptees or international adoptees who are interested in searching for and reuniting with their birth families or who are in post-reunion circumstances. While this study has limitations by only presenting a small number of the AKAs’ post-reunion experiences, as this is the first study to approach their descriptive experiences, this may serve them in better understanding the complexities and ambiguities that come with being an international adoptee and other adoptees’ experiences with reunification and post-reunification.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

International adoption has been practiced more than 60 years and composes numerous families in Western society. As these children reach their adulthood, the numbers of adoptees who are interested in searching and reuniting with their birth families has increased. Although scholars have recognized this significant phenomenon, studies have not yet focused on this particular group in the literature. Exploring the AKAs, this study brings to the forefront the attention needed to address issues concerning international adoptees’ reunions and their post-reunion experiences in academia. The complexities of reunification that have been created within international adoption should be recognized to uncover the meaning of the phenomenon.

Based on this study, several other recommendations for the study of adult Korean adoptees are suggested. First, this study is limited in scope to the participants who have been reunited with their birth families for at least three years. The average term for continuing a relationship is eight years so that a longitudinal study is suggested on the same participants in order to know the long-term effect of post-reunion experiences. In particular, as a majority of the AKAs live in Western countries, their contacts and visits to Korea may be quite limited so that studies on their relationships over a long-term would be beneficial for uncovering their ongoing development. Second, although this study is limited to adult Korean adoptees that have
reunited with their birth families, their birth families and adoptive families also play an important role in their post-reunion experiences and may be situated in different circumstances. By including both of their voices, it would uncover their experiences compared to the adoptees in that it would provide a holistic view for understanding post-reunion in the context of international adoption. Lastly, as this study was the first step in attempting to uncover adult Korean adoptees’ post-reunion experiences, many research questions still remain, such as how they negotiate challenges in continuing relationships with their birth families, what factors facilitate and hinder the relationships between their birth families and themselves and their adoptive families and themselves. Thus, future research could be more focused on this topic by conducting varying research methods, including both qualitative and quantitative research methods, so that the reunion phenomenon could be researched from a variety of angles.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INVITATION

Dear, Sir or Madam.

My name is Sujin Son, and I am a doctoral student at the University of Georgia. I am conducting research on Adult Korean Adoptees who have reunited and continued relationship with their birth families.

The title of my study is “Sense of Self: Adult Korean Adoptees (AKAs) Evolving relationship with Birth Families.” This research will be conducted by me, Sujin Son from the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy at the University of Georgia (724-422-2158) under the direction of Dr. Talmadge C. Guy, Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy at the University of Georgia (706-542-4015). Your name and contact information was given to me by ______________.

Since I know your time is valuable, your participation in the interview will take one to two hours of your time. The way the interview is conducted will depend on your preference: over the phone, Skype, or face to face. Your name won’t be used in connection with the information you provide. A pseudonym will be used to label the information to protect your identity.

If you would like to be a part of this research, please respond by email and let me know your interest or willingness to participate.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Sujin Son, M.A
Doctoral Student and Graduate Research Assistant
Dept.of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy
University of Georgia
Phone:(724)422-2158
Email:ohjen7@uga.edu
Address: 850 College Station Rd River's Crossing, Athens, GA 30602
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW GUIDE

The following guide will be used in the study of Adult Korean Adoptees’ evolving relationships with their birth families and their developing sense of self. The questions are subject to change based on the participants’ responses.

I. Opening Question: Tell me about your reunion process.
   • motivation for search and reunion, reunion process and the first meeting with the birth family

II. Main Question: Tell me about your relationship with your birth family. (Context)
   • reasons for continuing the relationship, memorable experiences, communication skills, cultural gaps, relationships with the birth family, support from the adoptive family, friends or organizations, etc.

III. Main Question: Tell me about your sense of self through these experiences. (Process)
   • challenges, conflicts, negotiation, experiences with dilemmas, factors influencing any changes in the relationships with the birth family, reflections, transitions in sense of self, etc.

IV. Main Question: Tell me about differences in your understanding of self. (Result)
   • ways of understanding relationships with the birth family and the adoptive family
   • ways of viewing the self, racial and ethical identity, self-esteem, self-authority, etc.
   • ways of approaching life, such as career, education, religion, organizations, relationships with others, etc.

V. Closing Question: “Is there anything else that you would like to share that I have not asked you or anything else that I should know?”
APPENDIX C

CONSENT FORM

I, ________________________, agree to participate in a research study titled “Sense of Self: Adult Korean Adoptees (AKAs) Evolving relationship with Birth Families,” conducted by Sujin Son from the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy at the University of Georgia (724-422-2158) under the direction of Dr. Talmadge C. Guy, Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy at the University of Georgia (706-542-4015). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part in the research by contacting the researcher via e-mail or phone and requesting withdrawal of all my records. If I wish, I can request to be withdrawn from the study any time until the code key list, which links my pseudonym to my real name, is destroyed. In addition, such a request will be respected without giving any reason and without penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I can ask to have all of my information returned to me, removed from the research records, or destroyed.

The purpose of this study is to examine the reunion experiences of Adult Korean Adoptees (AKAs) and find out how the continuing relationships with their birth families have changed their sense of self and their lives. If I volunteer to participate in this study, I will be asked to do the following things:

1) Participate in an interview with the researcher, Sujin Son;
2) Answer a series of questions that guide the conversation;
3) Ask the researcher any questions I wish regarding the interview topic;
4) Possibly participate in a follow up interview to make sure the researcher is presenting my information accurately; and
5) Review a summary of findings from my interview and make comments, if necessary.

The way the interview(s) are conducted will depend on my preference: over the phone, Skype, or face to face. I understand that the interview will take one to two hours and will be audio-recorded. Moreover, follow-up interviews and reviews are an opportunity to participate in the research. I may be contacted within three or four weeks of the initial interview to take part in a follow-up interview or to review the findings from my interview.

Participation in this study may contribute to better understanding of my reunion experiences with my birth family and may provide opportunities to contribute insight to the field of adult learning and development by exploring how I make meaning through the reunion experience. I can skip questions that I do not feel comfortable answering. It will be an opportunity to share my feelings and experiences that may help others in the future who have similar experiences with their birth families. No risk is expected. However, the issues of international adoption and reunion are complicated. It is a slight possibility that I might experience emotional evocation by participating in the interviews.
I will not receive any compensation for taking part in this study. No individually-identifiable information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others without my written permission unless required by law. Only, the researchers will know I have participated. A pseudonym will be used to label the data, and the audio and the master code will be destroyed one year later.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project. I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and understand that I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

Name of Researcher                                Signature of Researcher                                Date
E-mail ____________                                Telephone ____________

Name of Participant                                Signature of Participant                                Date
E-mail ____________                                Telephone ____________

Please sign both copies, keep one copy and return one to the researcher.

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602; Telephone (706) 542-3199; E-Mail Address IRB@uga.edu.
APPENDIX D

DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE

Personal Background

1. Please select your preferred pseudonym.

________________________________________________________________________

2. What is your year of birth?

________________________________________________________________________

3. What is your place of birth?

________________________________________________________________________

4. What is your gender? □ Female □ Male

5. What is your educational level?

□ Less than high school □ Completed some high school
□ High school graduate □ Completed some college
□ Associate degree □ Bachelor's degree
□ Master's degree □ Ph.D., law or medical degree
□ Other advanced degree beyond a Master's degree

6. What is your marital status?

□ Single □ Married □ Divorced □ Widowed

7. Please list the number of children you have, if applicable.

________________________________________________________________________

8. What was your total household income last year before taxes?
Adoption Background

1. In what year were you adopted?

_________________________________________________________________________________________

2. What are your adoptive parents’ ethnicities (Mark all that apply)?

☐ African American  ☐ Asian  ☐ Hispanic  ☐ Pacific Islander  ☐ White  ☐ Other

3. With what racial group do you identify?

(If you are of a multi-racial background, mark all that apply).

☐ African American  ☐ Asian  ☐ Hispanic  ☐ Pacific Islander  ☐ White  ☐ Other

4. How old were you when you had your reunion with your birth family?

_________________________________________________________________________________________

5. How often do you have contact with your birth family since your first meeting with them?

_________________________________________________________________________________________

6. Have you celebrated family events/holidays with your birth family?

_________________________________________________________________________________________
APPENDIX E

TELEPHONE ELIGIBILITY SCREENING SCRIPT

Thank you for calling to find out about our research study. My name is Sujin Son, and I am a researcher from the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy at the University of Georgia under the direction of Dr. Talmadge C. Guy.

The purpose of this research study is to examine the reunion experiences of Adult Korean Adoptees (AKAs) and how continuing a relationship with their birth families has changed their lives. We hope that this study will make a contribution to adult learning by exploring how AKAs make meaning of their reunion experiences. We also hope that the study will help adoptees better understand the significance of their reunion experiences. Do you think you might be interested in participating in this study?

[If No]: Thank you very much for your time.
[If Yes]: Thank you for your willingness to participate. Before enrolling you in this study, I need to ask you a few questions about your reunion experiences with your birth family to determine if you are eligible for our main study, if you don’t mind. This should only take about 10 to 15 minutes of your time.

There is a possibility that some of these questions may make you uncomfortable. If so, please let me know. You don’t have to answer the questions, if you don’t want to.

All the information that I receive from you during this phone interview, including your name and any other information that can possibly identify you, will be strictly confidential, and any reference to your information will be linked to a pseudonym. Please remember that your participation is voluntary. You can refuse to answer any questions, or stop this phone interview at any time without cause, penalty or loss of benefits.

Do I have your permission to ask you a few questions?

[If No]: Thank you very much for your time.
[If Yes]: Are you willing to share your reunification experience with me (the researcher)?

[If No]: Thank you very much for your time.
[If Yes]: Have you continued to make stay in touch with your birth family?

[If No]: Thank you very much for your time.
[If Yes]: Are you willing to share your experience of the continued relationship with your birth family by participating in an interview?
[If No]: Thank you very much for your time.
[If Yes]: Thank you. I will contact you for to send you information on participating in the interview, and I will also be sending you a consent form.

Thank you. If you have any questions about this research project, please feel free to call me at 724-422-2158 or to call Dr. Guy at 706-542-4015. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can contact the Institutional Review Board. Their address is 612 Boyd GSRC, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; their telephone number is (706) 542-3199; and their email address is irb@uga.edu.

Thank you again for your participation.

I really appreciate it.