LEARNING THROUGH ADOPTION:
THE INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION EXPERIENCES OF CANADIAN AND
DUTCH ADOPTERS OF CHILDREN FROM THE UNITED STATES

A Dissertation in
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by
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ABSTRACT

Renowned as a receiving country of intercountry adoptees, the United States is, paradoxically, sought out by foreign families as a source of adoptable children. Over the last decade, approximately 1500 children were placed in Canada, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Austria, and other nations (Selman, 2012a). Known as “outgoing cases” these adoptions pivot on the birthparents’ choice of a foreign family, and placement usually occurs within hours or days after birth. Birthparents may request ongoing contact with the adoptive family, a practice differing radically from the dominant paradigm of international adoption (ICA). In contrast to the formidable volume of psychological, legal, educational, and policy-focused research related to ICA, there exists almost no empirical literature on the experience of outgoing U.S. adoptions, even as the practice continues. This study’s purpose was to explore and describe (a) the historical, legal, and socio-cultural context of U.S. outgoing adoptions to Canada and the Netherlands, (b) the pre-and post-adoption education, preparation, and informal learning activities Canadian and Dutch adopters engaged in when adopting U.S. infants, and (c) how adopting children from the United States affected meanings of self, family, community, culture, country, and worldview for Canadian and Dutch adoptive parents.

A narrative inquiry approach, and cross-national case study design was used to explore the ICA experience of 12 Canadian and eight Dutch families that had adopted U.S. infants over the last 15 years. Participants’ narratives revealed several key findings: (a) The ICA experience of Canadian and Dutch adopters’ of children from the U.S. differs substantially from that found in the contemporary paradigm of intercountry adoption; (b) Canadian and Dutch families substantially adapted and expanded their adoption-related learning beyond mandated or sponsored adoption agency, organization or state-based trainings; (c), the presence or possibility of a level of open adoption in an intercountry adoption process was a mediating agent in parent
learning, experience and meaning; and, (d) U.S. outgoing intercountry adoptions reveal a new model of intercountry adoption practice. This research indicates that outgoing U.S. adoptions reflect a new, hybrid form of intercountry adoption, which calls for new content in training and preparation for prospective parents, new levels of pre-and post-adoption support for all members of the adoption triad, and provocative new considerations for intercountry adoption stakeholders.
### TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .................................................................................................................. viii  
List of Tables ................................................................................................................... ix  
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... x  

Chapter 1 Exiting or Going Forth? ................................................................................. 1  
  Statement of the Problem .............................................................................................. 4  
  Purpose of the Study and Research Questions ............................................................... 5  
  Research Design ........................................................................................................... 6  
  Significance, Contributions, and Limitations of the Study .............................................. 8  
  Overview of the Dissertation ......................................................................................... 9  

Chapter 2 Background .................................................................................................... 11  
  Overview of U.S. Outgoing Adoptions ...................................................................... 11  
  Outgoing U.S. Adoptions in Adoption Scholarship ...................................................... 13  
  The Process for Outgoing U.S. Adoptions .................................................................. 15  
  Adoption Agency Websites and the Promotion of U.S. Adoptions ......................... 22  
  Canadian-U.S. Adoption Process ............................................................................... 22  
  Netherlands–U.S Adoption Context and Process ....................................................... 24  

Chapter 3 Review of the Literature and Theoretical Perspectives ................................. 28  
  Situating U.S. Outgoing Adoption in Intercountry Adoption Discourse ................... 30  
  Intercountry Adoption as Child Rescue and a Global South to Global North Migration .................................................................................................................. 34  
  Intercountry Adoption: Hierarchies, Race, and the Economics of Child Preferences .... 36  
  Birthmothers (and Birth Family) Absence and Presence in Intercountry Adoption ...... 40  
  Closed and Open Adoptions in Domestic and Intercountry Adoption ...................... 43  
  Parent Training and Preparation in Transracial and Intercountry Adoption ............ 46  
  Intercountry Adoptive Parent Training, Education, and Research .......................... 47  
  Developing Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Competencies ............................................ 50  
    Bi-cultural socialization .............................................................................................. 50  
    Cultural socialization .............................................................................................. 51  
    Racial socialization and/or cultural competency ...................................................... 52  
    Narrative or descriptive accounts of parent training programs ............................. 53  
  Literature Review Conclusion ...................................................................................... 53  
  Theoretical Perspectives .............................................................................................. 55  
  Non-formal Education and Informal Learning on the Home Front ............................ 55  
  Tough and Knowles on Learning Projects and Self-Directed Learning .................. 55  
  Formal and Non-Formal Education, Informal Learning, and Informal Education ...... 59
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 2-1. Summary of Steps in an Outgoing Case.......................................................... 21

Figure 4-1. Multi-level Coding Structure, as Seen in NVivo Screen Shot......................... 101

Figure 4-2. Operational Definitions of Codes. .................................................................... 102

Figure 4-3. Coding Process, Leading to the Identification of Themes............................... 103
LIST OF TABLES

Table 2-1. *Outgoing Adoption Statistics to Seven Receiving Nations* .......................... 15
Table 4-1. *Participants—Dutch and Canadian Families* .................................................. 85
Table 4-2. *Research Design Summary* ............................................................................. 106
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Chapter 1

Exiting or Going Forth?

I already was an experienced social worker when I began work at a social service agency that provided social work intervention across international borders. One aspect of this work involved reviewing and approving intercountry adoption files, mostly adoptions by U.S. military families or expatriates living abroad whose adoption files needed to be certified by a U.S. agency. However, I can still recall my initial confusion regarding a small, but steady stream of files that came across my desk, notable because they seemed to be going the wrong way. These adoptions involved U.S.-born minority children, and they were emigrating out of the country to be adopted by families in Canada, the Netherlands, or Switzerland.

This adoption journey, I knew, did not fit the paradigm of intercountry adoption policy or practice. Although I came to understand the (contentious) legal and policy issues that promoted or hindered these adoptions, it was the lived experience of these placements that intrigued me. How, I wondered, did European parents help their Black or biracial child understand and create a racial identity or experience African American and U.S. life and culture? How did Canadian families tell their intercountry adoption story to their child and others? Did they map it against familiar tropes of rescue or humanitarian assistance or did our contiguous border result in a view of the U.S. as simply offering an extended pool of adoptable children? How did they discuss with their child that his or her birth parents determined not just that another family was in the child’s best interest, but another culture and country as well? How did foreign parents prepare to adopt a U.S. child: What culturally related readings, training, resources, or activities did they draw upon before and after adoption, and what was the subsequent experience of the adoptive family as they engaged with their family, community and culture?
Over time, I discovered these outgoing cases\textsuperscript{1,2} would be noted, at least in popular media, either because of their uniqueness (Davenport, 2004; Glaser, 2004; O’Neil, 2005; Stahl, 2005) or because of issues relating to unscrupulous adoption practices (Elgood, 2001) or sometimes both. For example, the confluence of these two attributes led Adam Pertman (2006), an adoption policy expert, to note the following about the alleged sale of U.S. infant twins to families in California and in the United Kingdom:

The second couple who adopted the little girls lived in England, which means that people in other countries are adopting American children. That is occurring to this day, and no one to my knowledge has done a serious examination of the practice or of its implications. (p. 64)

Years later, this situation remained the same, and the experience of outgoing U.S. adoptees and their families is still almost wholly unknown even as the practice has increased (Avitan, 2007; Brown, 2013; United States Department of State [U.S. DOS], 2010). My previous experience with outgoing adoptions came to bear, then, as I considered topics for my doctoral thesis that would intersect with my interests in adult, international and comparative education and cohere with my long term career in social work. Testing out this fit, in 2010 I conducted a pilot study with U.S. and Canadian adoption professionals to gain an understanding of some of the sending factors (why birth parents would choose a foreign home for a child) and receiving issues (why foreign families look to the U.S. to adopt) operating in these adoptions. Because of time and financial constraints, that study was conducted by telephone and only with U.S. and Canadian adoption providers. Canadian adoption professionals were chosen because Canada has long been the top receiving nation of U.S. children.

\textsuperscript{1} The Department of State (U.S. DOS) is the central authority charged with oversight of intercountry adoptions for the United States. The U.S. DOS (2011) identifies outgoing cases as “those cases involving adoptive children who will be emigrating from the United States to a Hague Adoption Convention country with whom the United States has a treaty relationship” (p. 4).

\textsuperscript{2} Outgoing cases in this study are adoptions of U.S. infants through private agencies or attorneys and not adoptions of children from public care. More recently there has been a movement to facilitate adoptions of children from the U.S. foster care system (c.f. AdoptUSkids, 2013).
Participants were agency directors, attorneys, and social workers and their experience ranged from one year to over 25 years in practice—a span that offered insights of the practice over time. Several participants commented on the past histories of cross-border adoptions, with the contiguous border seemingly facilitating a practice of adoptions through social networking. Participants noted the changing demographics with available infants in the U.S. now being mostly Black and biracial children, a shift from early years when many White infants were also placed across the border. Moreover, Canada had its own history of transborder adoptions, notably the placement of White infants born out of wedlock in Quebec and moved to homes in New York (cf. Balcom, 2011). Concerning influences on the decision of U.S. birthparents (and most professionals framed this as birthmothers) to place a child with a Canadian family and Canadian parents’ choice of a U.S. adoption, they offered the following insights (Naughton, 2012):

- Idealized perceptions of Canada as racially integrated and diverse, with less racial divisiveness and better social care—offering better opportunities for a Black or mixed race child;

- Experience of the U.S. as a racially divisive society where Black and biracial families face significant discrimination and a belief that a child’s best interests existed outside of the country;

- U.S. birthmothers’ increased desire for more openness in adoption and more post-adoption contact, which they perceived as more likely to be considered by foreign families;

- Canadian prospective adoptive families looked to the U.S. because of the availability of infants for adoption, an understanding that the medical and psychosocial histories of children would be well documented, and a belief that some level of openness or contact between adoption triad members might be maintained.

These observations stimulated the current research endeavor. Professionals in the pilot study suggested I expand locations to include participants from outside Canada because many children were being adopted by families in Western Europe, particularly the Netherlands. The pilot study informed my understanding of some facets of the phenomenon of U.S. outgoing adoptions, in particular revealing it as a process that deviated from the traditionally held model of
intercountry adoption practice. How these differences were experienced by one segment of the adoption triad—the foreign adoptive parents—is the subject of this study.

“Outgoing U.S. cases” seems a cold, value-neutral way to describe such a profoundly intimate yet family and society-altering practice. An infant born in a delivery room in Illinois, California, Arizona, or elsewhere in the U.S. meets—perhaps at birth, maybe days later—its adoptive parents and in relatively short order moves across an ocean or other international border and becomes a citizen of a new land. A mother is photographed, holding her child—a picture to be hung in a child’s bedroom in Canada, the Netherlands, or another country—the mother’s wishes and hopes connecting the infant, the new family, the new country. Outgoing, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (OED, 2013), may mean “departing, exiting, or going forth” (OED, 2013), semantic distinctions with nuance enough to hold the polarities of social and legal policies, as well as the lived experiences, that frame this adoption phenomenon.

Statement of the Problem

Renowned as a receiving country of intercountry adoptees, the United States is, paradoxically, sought out by foreign families as a source of adoptable children. Over the last decade, approximately 1,500 children have been placed in Canada, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, Austria, Ireland, Italy, France, and other nations (U.S. DOS, 2010; Selman, 2012). These intercountry adoptions (ICA) are known as outgoing cases (U.S. DOS, 2008, 2011) and mostly involve Black and biracial infants (Balcom, 2011; Brooks, Simmel, Wind & Barth, 2005; Brown, 2013; Riben, 2012). They are exceptional in several ways. First, intercountry adoption is almost universally seen as the transfer of children from low-resource countries characterized by poverty and conflict to high-resource, Western nations (Dubinsky, 2008; Olsen, 2003; Solinger, 2001). The migratory journey of U.S. adoptees to other Western nations contradicts this pattern. Second, these adoptions occur within a complex racialized and socio-
legal landscape. For example, at a time when infant adoptions are increasingly rare in intercountry adoption and infants remain the most desired group of adoptable children, U.S. Black and minority infants are regularly being placed for adoption outside the United States (Brooks, Simmel, Wind, & Barth, 2005). Third, in conventional ICA practice, birthparent roles are highly marginalized (Högbacka, 2012; Kelly, 2005), and young infants are rarely available. Outgoing adoptions hinge on the birthparents choosing a foreign family, and placement usually occurs within days after birth. Moreover, birthparents may request contact with the adoptive family before and/or after a child’s birth—a practice that falls well outside of the dominant paradigm of international adoption. In stark contrast to the formidable volume of psychological, legal, educational, and policy-focused research related to intercountry adoption, there exists no empirical literature on the experience of outgoing U.S. adoptions, even as the practice continues (Avitan, 2007; Brown, 2013; Naughton, 2012; U.S.DOS, 2010).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe (a) the historical, legal, and socio-cultural context of U.S. outgoing adoptions to Canada and the Netherlands; (b) the pre- and post-adoption education, preparation, and “culture keeping” (Jacobson, 2008) activities Canadian and Dutch adopters engage in when adopting U.S. minority children; and (c) how adopting children from the United States affects meanings of self, family, community, culture, country, and worldview for Canadian and Dutch adoptive parents. Specifically, I asked:

- In what ways do personal experiences, knowledge, attitudes, or beliefs influence the decision of a Canadian or Dutch citizen to adopt a U.S. child?
- How do Canadian or Dutch parents educate or prepare themselves—formally or informally—to adopt across racial, cultural, and international borders? How have these experiences supported their adoption of a U.S. child, if at all?
• How do the accounts of Canadian and Dutch adopters of U.S. children conform to or differ from discourses of ICA practice?
• In what ways has the adoption affected meanings of self, family, community, culture, country, or worldview for the adoptive parents?

Thus, this study was constructed to expand the earlier investigation and provide a more robust exploration of U.S. adoptions through the perceptions of foreign adoptive parents.

Research Design

This study was based in a qualitative narrative tradition that focuses on the participant’s account (story) of his or her life, specifically the narrative of becoming a family through international adoption. I used a cross-national, multi-perspective case study design (Creswell, 2007; Hantrais & Mangen, 2007; Shkedi, 2005; Stake, 1995,2000). Purposive sampling (M. Patton, 2002) was used to identify families that had adopted in the last 15 years (pre- and post-Hague Convention [see Chapter Two]), had finalized their adoptions, and were fluent in English. In both countries, the sample included families located in rural and urban settings in order to understand differences based on racial diversity or isolation. In all, I interviewed 30 adoptive parents representing 20 families in key receiving countries for U.S.-born children: 12 families in Canada and 8 in the Netherlands. Data collection for this study included (a) completion of a demographic questionnaire; (b) 19 in-person interviews and one telephone interview; (c) on-site observation of adoptive family settings (neighborhood, playgrounds, etc.); (d) review of adoptive family artifacts such as family pictures and memorabilia; and (e) document analysis of adoptive parent training materials and curricula, and public documents relating to Dutch, Canadian, and U.S. adoption laws, policies and processes. All interviews were digitally audio-recorded, transcribed by myself or an authorized transcriptionist. I drew on Riessman’s (2003, 2008) conceptions of thematic and dialogic/performance analysis as my analytic strategy.
**Assumptions.** Based on my pre-thesis professional work and the aforementioned pilot study four assumptions were made regarding this study. First, U.S. outgoing adoptions suggest a new construct of intercountry adoption, one that is both similar to and different from a U.S. private adoption—in effect, a hybrid model. This assumption is based on pilot study findings and ongoing investigation of the phenomenon.

Second, this hybrid location, the disjunctive gap between how intercountry adoptions usually proceed and how outgoing U.S. adoptions unfold, is a site of learning and requires foreign prospective and adoptive parents to conduct research and engage in learning activities beyond prototypical pre-adoption training when parenting a child from the United States. This assumption is guided by an understanding of mature adults as capable of undertaking planning and direction for their own learning and by pilot study findings indicating that informal learning networks are created by foreign parents to meet various adoption needs. Considering how, when, why, where, and to what effect foreign parents of U.S. adoptees seek out, negotiate, and incorporate adoption-related knowledge is a goal of this study.

Third, and relatedly, learning is viewed as a sociocultural process (Vygotsky, 1978), a view that grounds learning in a social context, “emphasizes the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge,” and holds that “human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbolic systems, and can best be understood when investigated within their historical development” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 191). Finally, social, political, legal, economic, and cultural trends govern who becomes an adoptive family and who becomes a birth family through intercountry adoption. This assumption is based on an awareness of constantly shifting discourses and practices in intercountry adoptions, with some countries closing programs and others expanding their role as sending nations, or new populations such as single parents or same sex couples seeking to adopt children.
Significance, Contributions, and Limitations of the Study

Adoption professionals in the U.S. and abroad have been facilitating outgoing adoptions for decades with no empirical data to guide them. This study offers a crucial beginning to rectify this practice. Canadian and Dutch families that have adopted U.S. children are forging an intercountry adoption experience that tracks new ground for adoptees, adoptive parents, birth families, and the countries involved. These adoptions ask new questions and need new responses from those found in extant intercountry adoption scholarship, policy, and practices. As one participant noted in response to my recruitment materials:

Thank you for sending out the information package for your Intercountry Adoption research. We certainly agree that information is very limited in this area. I have definitely found that there is little support for those of us adopting from the USA. I can find parent support groups for China, Ethiopian or Russian adoptions, but we are finding that our adoption just doesn’t “fit.” On a transracial front, the research is focused on racism towards African Americans in a USA context, I haven’t been able to find any information on raising an African American child in Canada…There definitely is work to be done, and we give you our support on your journey.

This study provides empirical evidence of Canadian and Dutch families’ lived experience of adopting children from the United States. It contributes to scholarship, practice, and policy by offering first-person narratives of the experiences (challenges and impact) of the adoptions on those involved; findings from this study indicated the need for new lines of inquiry not previously considered in intercountry adoption practice. A specific example of this is consideration of what are best practices when adoptive and birth families negotiate relationships across borders, from birth onwards, and adoptees are keenly aware of not just their birth country heritage (as is typically noted in ICA literature) but of a birth family living a contemporaneous life in the United States.

This research contributes to international adoption, adult education, and comparative and international education scholarship in several key ways. (1) Policy makers will benefit by gaining a deeper understanding of the immigration, psychological, economic, and legal challenges faced
by foreign families when adopting U.S. children. (2) Social workers and other adoption professionals will benefit through knowledge gained from narrative accounts of adoptive parents which may lead to better prepare foreign nationals for these adoptions. (3) Prospective adoptive families of U.S.-born children lack information that is tailored specifically to their form of international adoption practice. The narrative accounts of Canadian and Dutch parents can inform prospective families about preparing to adopt from the U.S. and deepen understanding of the ongoing adjustment process of outgoing adoption families. 4) This study contributes to adult education and comparative and international education scholarship through its focus on and analysis of adult learning strategies and adult education in the context of intercountry adoption. It adds to adult education scholarship on learning through transitions, and it argues a need for scholarship of adult and lifelong informal learning in the context of the home (in support of adoptive parent preparation and enactments of parenting). It extends scholarship in comparative and international education, lifelong learning, and globalization by recognizing intercountry adoption training, which is mandated by international conventions, as a fertile site for the exploration of lifelong learning. Key limitations of this study are that it offers examples from parents in only two of the many countries that receive U.S. children, and that it presents the experiences of only one key member-group of the adoption triad: adoptive parents.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

The central argument of this study is that the intercountry adoption experiences of Canadian and Dutch adoptive parents of U.S. children differ in processes, outcomes, and meanings from those found in the contemporary paradigm of intercountry adoption. These aggregate differences, I argue, presage a need to reconsider pre- and post-adoption training and education efforts for parents.
This dissertation is presented in seven chapters. This initial chapter considered the research problem and presented my research questions and the significance, contributions, and limitations of the study. Chapter Two provides a background on outgoing U.S. adoptions, their notability in popular press over academic scholarship, and an outline of how they are processed in the U.S., Canada, and the Netherlands. In Chapter Three, I review literature relevant to intercountry adoption discourse and present an overview of current topics in training and preparation of intercountry adoptive parents. The second half of the chapter presents self-directed learning and informal learning as a theoretical perspective to understand learning efforts of study participants as they prepared for and entered parenthood through a transnational and transracial process. Chapter Four discusses the research design and use of a case-based narrative inquiry to carry out the research. Chapters Five and Six offer results from the data analysis, focusing first on outgoing adoptions as a new paradigm of intercountry adoption and then more intimately considering learning as the “work” of new parenthood and the dialectic of learning and meaning for adoptive parents of U.S. children. Chapter Seven summarizes and outlines conclusions drawn from the work, considers its significance, and presents suggestions for further research.
Chapter 2

Background

This chapter is constructed to offer background information on the following study-related topics: an overview of outgoing adoption representation in public media and academic scholarship, and discussion of the legal framework of the Canadian and Dutch adoption processes relevant to U.S. outgoing adoptions. Although I was familiar with ICA processes and even the outgoing adoption framework and debates, fieldwork in Canada and the Netherlands instructed me in the different ways in which each country approaches the phenomenon. In Canada, this intercountry process is similar to the U.S. and Canadian private adoption systems. At the time Dutch participants in this study were adopting their U.S. children, Dutch adoption agencies did not process U.S. adoptions, thereby leaving parents to largely direct their own efforts. This process has subsequently changed and Dutch prospective adoptive parents must now work with Dutch agencies that are affiliated with U.S. accredited adoption providers.

Overview of U.S. Outgoing Adoptions

Adoption of U.S. children by non-U.S. citizens has been occurring quietly for decades. In its 1992 cover story on international adoption, The London Observer Magazine offered a section on how to adopt from the “Land of Plenty,” (O’Hanlon & Selway, 1992, p. 24) and noted that adoptions from the U.S. had been occurring since at least the 1970s. Time Magazine followed up with a story in 1994, and during ICAs’ phenomenal growth period of 1997–2006, numerous stories on outgoing adoptions were published or reported in a range of U.S. domestic and

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3 In this study, the United States is used extensively as a subject, noun, or adjective. For convenience, however, the abbreviation U.S. is used except when U.S. falls at the end of a sentence.

Despite the suggestion of critique of the U.S. as a sending country in some of the articles’ titles (e.g., *Babies for Export*, Smolowe & Blackman, 1994), on the whole, the above accounts reveal that although nearly all the infants and children were Black or bi-racial and went to White homes, the few birth parents who were interviewed were pleased with the placements and had retained contact with their children. Moreover, the very few children interviewed also seemed aware and accepting of their dual heritages. Reportedly, foreign adoptive families looked to the U.S. because of limited domestic options in their countries (e.g., the Netherlands), the availability of infants, and the short wait time between application and placement. Although some U.S. adoption workers who were interviewed reported that birthmothers look to Canada and Europe because of beliefs that the countries are less racist than the U.S., adoptive families interviewed seemed aware that racism even in their countries would likely be an issue.

An alternative view was offered by Balcom and Dubinsky (2005) in their *Globe and Mail* article, *Babies across borders; Canadians like to think that adopting black U.S. infants is an act of rescue. Others call it ‘kidnap.’ Let’s outgrow both terms* (p. A21). These historians concisely outlined the cross-border history of U.S-Canadian adoptions, which includes a 30-year history of baby selling and trafficking as thousands of White children of unwed mothers in Quebec were moved to U.S. adoptive homes. Paradoxically, Canadian adoption professionals and adoptive families in the 1960s were among the first globally to undertake transracial adoptions within their society—an approach that garnered endorsement from Martin Luther King Jr.. Balcom and Dubinsky argued that the renewed Canadian interest in adopting across color lines and expanding this effort across the U.S. border must not be couched in discourse of cultural or racial rescue or
kidnap but should lead to critiques and action regarding the “local, national and transnational forces that create terrible conditions of children and parents” (p. A21).

An article written during the writing of this study (Brown, 2013) emphasized the recent rise in outgoing adoptions of Black children at a time when intercountry adoption is decreasing. Interviews with an adoptee, a birth parent and several Dutch adoptive parents confirmed earlier reports that adoptees are well-apprised of their dual heritages, that birthmothers choose families, and that these adoptions often follow a pattern of open adoption communication across international borders (Brown, 2013).

**Outgoing U.S. Adoptions in Adoption Scholarship**

Scholarly literature specific to outgoing adoptions is scant (Avitan, 2007; Balcom, 2011; Naughton, 2012). In 2001, U.S. and British colleagues and I (c.f. Selinske, Naughton, Flanagan, Fry, & Pickles, 2001), published an article in *Child Welfare* calling for safer standards in intercountry adoption following a baby trafficking scandal between a U.S. birthmother and British prospective adoptive parents. As social workers employed in an international social service organization involved in the resolution of this case, we used a case study approach to illustrate best practices in cross-border adoptions. Avitan (2007), a legal scholar, offered a three-part treatise on the subject creating a case study of the phenomenon drawn from the aforementioned public media accounts, reviewing aspects of the U.S. implementation of the Hague Convention, which she argues deleteriously affects minority children in need of adoptive homes, and offering what she calls a child-centered proposal in which she suggests amendment to U.S. intercountry adoption laws and more attention to domestic recruitment.

Balcom (2011), noted above, expanded her work on the Quebec based U.S.-Canadian cross border adoptions in her book, *The Traffic in Babies, Cross-Border Adoption and Baby-Selling between the United States and Canada 1930-1972*, and devoted a substantial portion of
her conclusion to the reversal of this flow with the U.S. now a dominant sending country to Canada. She challenges the “romanticized notion of Canada as a racism-free zone” (p. 241) and emphasizes the Canadian experience of the U.S. as a straightforward source country with an always in-demand infant market. Additionally, she takes issue with the discrepancies between the outgoing tracking numbers offered by the State Department (in its role as the Central Authority, they are in charge of tracking outgoing U.S. adoptions) and the incoming immigration numbers in Canada and other countries. These are not insignificant; the State Department recorded “seven children sent to Canada between 1 October 2008 and 30 September 2009,” while Canada “reported 253 incoming children in 2009” (p. 242).

In a chapter on outgoing adoptions that I wrote for Gibbons and Rotabi’s (2012) book, *Intercountry Adoption: Policies, Practices and Outcomes*, I offered an overview of the outgoing adoption process as well as a brief summary of my findings from a 2009 qualitative pilot study with U.S. and Canadian adoption professionals involved in cross-border adoptions. The purpose of that study was to gain an understanding of the sending and receiving factors involved with these adoptions from the perspective of the service providers involved. Findings from that study aligned with much of what was reported in popular press accounts: birth parents’ experience of racism or psychosocial difficulties in the U.S. can lead them to hope for better opportunities in another country for their child and many seem to hold an understanding of Canada as a more diverse and less racially divisive nation than the United States. Some birth parents are attracted to the sense of Canadian lifestyle and political and social environment, including nationalize healthcare, conveyed through Canadian family books presented to birth parents. Other birth parents choose families, foreign or domestic, for seemingly more capricious reasons such as having a family member with the adoptive parents’ name or a gut response to a photo. Adoption professionals in both countries confirmed that the availability of infants is a tremendous draw for Canadian parents, as are the routinized processes and good psychosocial and medical histories on
the children and birth families involved. Proximity to the U.S. and familiarity with the language and culture are also influencing factors.

Finally, demographer Peter Selman (2000, 2002, 2006, 2012a) tracks migration trends in intercountry adoptions, in which he also includes outgoing U.S. adoption statistics. Selman also commented on the discrepancy between State Department outgoing numbers and those of receiving nations of U.S. children (Selman, 2012a). Selman (2012b), noted that the U.S. now “sends more children for intercountry adoption that many countries of Latin America” (p. 19) with most of the children going to Canada and the Netherlands.

Table 2-1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>2004</th>
<th>2005</th>
<th>2006</th>
<th>2007</th>
<th>2008</th>
<th>2009</th>
<th>2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>Canada</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>182</td>
<td>254</td>
<td>148</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
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<td>32</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
<td>&lt;5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
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<td>178</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>315</td>
<td>205</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Adapted from Selman, 2012b, retrieved from https://www.adoptioncouncil.org/publications/adoption-advocate-no-44.html

The Process for Outgoing U.S. Adoptions

Although outgoing U.S. adoptions have been occurring for decades, they have most recently been affected by implementation of the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (the HAC), which took effect in the U.S. in April, 2008. This instrument, implemented in the United States through the Intercountry Adoption Act (IAA) of 2000 (Pub. L. 106–279, 42 U.S.C. 14901–14954), identifies the U.S. Department of State (U.S. DOS) as its enforcement entity, working in concert with state adoption courts to determine that intercountry adoption is in a child’s best interests. The HAC establishes international standards of practices for intercountry adoptions, requires all countries party to the
Convention to establish a central authorities (CA) in charge of implementing and providing information about the Convention, and aims “to prevent the abduction, sale of, or traffic in children” (U.S. DOS, Intercountry Adoption, n.d.) and works to ensure that intercountry adoptions are in the best interests of children.

Intercountry adoption, under the HAC, is viewed as an option for adoptable children only after efforts have been made to find a domestic placement. If no domestic placements are found, then the intercountry adoption must be deemed as being in the best interests of the child. The IAA paved the way for implementation of the HAC in the United States. The IAA (2000), which affects only adoptive placements of U.S. children to other Convention nations, states as one of its three purposes “to improve the ability of the Federal Government to assist United States citizens seeking to adopt children from abroad and residents of other countries party to the Convention seeking to adopt children from the United States” (para. 2). The HAC requires designation of a state entity—a Central Authority—to carry out enforcement and monitoring of convention responsibilities, and, as noted, U.S. DOS was identified as the Central Authority. When the HAC entered into force in the United States on April 1, 2008, it outlined a structure of outgoing adoptions in terms of how they are defined, processed, and for the first time, tracked. On its website, U.S. DOS offers web page summaries as well as longer documents to guide state authorities, approved service providers (ASPs; the agencies or individuals allowed to engage in intercountry adoption), and prospective adoptive parents (PAPs). The following is a summary of the outgoing adoption process as described in the U.S. DOS publication, The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption: A Guide to Outgoing Cases from the United States (U.S. DOS, 2011).

The outgoing process appears relatively direct and very similar to any ICA process. It includes:

- identifying a child in need of placement,
- conducting a background study on the child prepared by an appropriate provider,
• ensuring that prospective adoptive parents have been approved in their home country and have filed with the Central Authority in their country,

• verifying (by a U.S. adoption provider) that reasonable efforts to locate a domestic family have been made,

• approving the application (including approval by Central Authorities in both countries),

• agreeing that placement with the family is in the best interests of the child, and

• submitting a formal placement proposal, and

• securing documentation that allows the child entry to the adoptive country.

Prospective adoptive parents petition the state court with jurisdiction over the adoption, and the court may either undertake a preliminary review which would grant guardianship to the prospective adoptive parents and allow the parents to return to the receiving country pending finalization of the adoption abroad, or, to (if needed) return to the U.S. for finalization. In either case, before the order for adoption or custody can be issued, the IAA stipulates that the U.S. court must provide evidence that the best interests of the child are met with the proposed placement, that standards for the child home study were upheld, that a home study has been conducted on the proposed parents, that the child will be allowed to enter the receiving country, and that the respective Central Authorities approve the adoption. Further, ASPs cannot facilitate contact between birth and adoptive families. Indeed, birth parent agency to choose a foreign family is contingent on their having done so “without the assistance of the ASP or its agents” (Klarberg, 2010, para. 7). However it is the state law in which the birth parent resides that determines if pre-contact can be conducted, or if birth parents can review prospective parent profiles.

Detractors of outgoing adoption see these prohibitions on contact and emphasis on domestic recruitment as necessary protections for the U.S. child, and birth parents, aimed at keeping the child in its birth land and protecting birth parents from coercion or abuse. Some
supporters see these prohibitions as racism. Avitan (2007) argues that Black families may not seek adoption of non-relatives because of a culture of kinship in which families care for other family or community members’ children. A culture of kinship care may mean that fewer Black families pursue non-relative adoption. In withholding a population of foreign parents who may be interested in an infant regardless of its race, Avitan argues that protections can also serve to discriminate against the child and birthmother and cause unnecessary delays in placement.

Finally, U.S. states vary in their adherence to the subsidiarity principle\(^4\) and to the IAA requirement for reasonable efforts to find placement in the United States. So while the IAA promulgates one set of procedures, the reality is that state law can override the IAA. In numerous states, birth parents can choose foreign adoptive families if they have also considered domestic families and have received counseling regarding the implication of the adoption, and if state law permits. Moreover, ASPs can assist with the placement with the international family if state law permits and the court determines that the choice of the birthparent is in the best interest of the child. Additionally, reasonable efforts to recruit domestic adoptive families may be exempted in states that “permit a birth parent to select a related or unrelated identified prospective adoptive parent in another Convention country” (Hollinger, 2008, p. 119). These variances in adoption court practices and state regulations are of concern to some adoption experts. Balcom (2011), for example, warns that some U.S. states may be seen as “easier locales” from which to adopt U.S. children. Moreover, these exemptions mean that in outgoing cases, U.S. birth parents are in a unique situation: in making an adoption plan, their choice means a new family and a new country for the child.

As a Hague Convention signatory, the U.S., along with Canada, the Netherlands, and 86 other countries, must complete country profile reports to The Hague Conference on Private

\(^4\) The principle of subsidiarity in reference to intercountry adoption holds that the best interest of a child in need of placement follows a hierarchical decision process, with intercountry adoption as a last resort when domestic kin, foster, or adoption placements cannot be secured.
International Law (HCCH). Unlike Canada and most of the countries in Western Europe, the U.S. is notable as a Western nation in that its profile includes reports as a receiving state and as a state of origin. In the latter profile, the U.S. must describe conditions or criteria to establish that a child is adoptable, in the same way that other sending Hague Convention countries, such as China, or Colombia do. For U.S. private adoptions, the U.S. Country profile, written by the Department of State as the Central Authority, indicates:

In the case of private adoptions, where permitted, the child is considered to be adoptable when all consents to adoption have been obtained in accordance with U.S. State law such that the State court has no impediment to making best interests of the child determination in a permanent adoption placement. (United States of America: country profile, 2.1 Adoptability of a child (Art.4 a) HCCH, 2010)

For children adopted privately, the birth parent(s) have given their informed consent to termination of their parental rights, making the child in the case ready to be placed permanently in a new home if the court determines such a placement is in the best interests of the child. (United States of America: country profile, 2.1 Adoptability of a child (Art.4c) HCCH, 2010)

Further, adoptable children who are considered “children with special needs” represent a group of children for whom foreign homes may especially be considered. While acknowledging that “children with special needs” is “not defined in the U.S. implementing legislation for the Convention” (p. 9), the U.S. profile report does reference the Child Welfare Gateway definition ([CWLA], 2004), which includes children:

1. Six years of age or older
2. A member of a minority group
3. A member of a sibling group of two or more children placed together for adoption
4. Diagnosed as having a physical, mental or emotional disability
5. Recognized to be at high risk of developing a physical, mental or emotional disability. (United States of America: country profile, 2.1 Adoptability of a child (Art.4 a) HCCH, 2010, p. 10)
This confluence of birth parent and state court decision making, emphasis for finding homes for children with special needs (which includes a designation of membership in a minority group), and conditions under which the principle of subsidiarity may be deflected, suggest some insights as to why outgoing adoptees are more likely to be Black or bi-racial. This appears to be the case in most, though not all, outgoing cases. Outgoing adoption cases have almost always involved infants whose birth parent(s) relinquish at birth (Avitan, 2007), and the focus of this study is on outgoing newborn adoptions. However, the U.S. foster care system has recently begun a program whereby children in public care may be considered for foreign placements. In these cases, careful attention is given to the child in terms of counseling related to a foreign placement and agreement to it. Figure 2-1 outlines the outgoing adoption process as described by the U.S. DOS.
Figure 2.1: Summary of Steps in an Outgoing Case. (Retrieved from Department of State, 2009).

Adapted from http://adoption.state.gov/
Adoption Agency Websites and the Promotion of U.S. Adoptions

Adoption agencies, whether in Canada, the Netherlands, or the United States, offer a variety of adoption programs and services. As one study participant put it, “First the adoption agencies divide up the world.” In other words, he was suggesting that agencies work with select countries through agreements with contacts in other countries. Some agencies may only do adoptions in one or two foreign countries; others have panels of several countries. They typically will identify the country requirements, describe the types of children available, and outline the time frame, process, and (ideally) fees involved. Adoption agencies in Canada that have U.S. programs usually indicate that birth parents choose adoptive families, that most adoptions are of infants and adoptive parents might assume care of the child directly from the hospital, and that the children may be racially or ethnically mixed.

U.S. adoption agencies working with Dutch adoption providers uniformly describe available U.S. children as follows:

**Age of the children:** It is expected that only newborns and young infants (under 6 months) will be available for adoption.

**Background of the children:** One basic principle of the Hague Treaty is that prospective adoptive families in the child's own country should be considered first. Children who are part or full African American heritage, who have a substantial family medical or mental health history (and resulting risk), who have been during pregnancy exposed to drugs, alcohol, medications or who have other conditions will be more likely to comprise the children available for outgoing international adoption. (Nederlandse Adoptie Stichting [NAS], 2013; USA Adoptions, §11.)

Thus, adoption providers’ websites in both Canada and the Netherlands reveal anomalies in this intercountry adoption process including a focus on newborn adoptions and an understanding of birth parent agency (choice) in intercountry adoption

**Canadian-U.S. Adoption Process**

As indicated, Canadians looking to adopt from the U.S. often do so because of the
availability of infants or very young children, comprehensive medical and psychosocial histories on the child and birth family, familiarity with U.S. culture, and proximity to Canada, which reduces travel costs. According to the 2012 Canadian Foster Care Adoption Attitudes Survey (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption, Canada, 2013), 21% of Canadians have considered or are considering adoption, and 48% of them have or are considering international adoption (p. 8). With few infants available through private or public domestic adoptions, Canadians frequently look to the U.S. to adopt. Moreover, my interviews with Canadian families suggest that some families may look to the U.S. because of the long wait period in domestic private or public infant adoptions. Other families may consider transracial U.S. adoptions over adoption of available First Nations children because of a concern of drug or alcohol issues with these children or fear that following a period of foster care they will be returned to their families and communities.

The U.S. signed The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (Hague Adoption Convention), and it entered into force in 2008. In the U.S, this means that all intercountry adoptions are processed through the Department of State (U.S. DOS) in its capacity as the nation’s Central Authority (CA), with oversight of all intercountry adoptions, whether incoming or outgoing. Although individual states may have different laws governing adoptions, all international ones must be approved by the U.S. DOS. In Canada, CAs are located in provincial governments, which then regulate adoption laws and consequently laws may vary somewhat across provinces. In general, however, families may adopt from the Canadian child welfare system (public adoption), adopt privately, adopt from other countries (international), or adopt stepchildren or birth relatives (Adoption Council of Canada [ACC], 2013).

Canadian pre-adoption requirements include completing a homestudy prepared by a qualified social worker, and, in many provinces, completing adoption readiness training or preparation. Training cost, content areas, and delivery methods may be different across
provinces. Adoption fees may vary from up to $3,000 for a foster care (public) adoption to $20,000-$30,000 for an international adoption (ACC, 2010). U.S adoptions costs are estimated to be between $30,000 and $50,000 (USD) (Canada Adopts!, n.d.). Single adults and gays or lesbian couples can adopt in Canada, though each of these groups may be restricted by sending country requirements if adopting internationally. For example, single individuals can adopt from Russia, but South Korea prohibits single-parent adoptions. From 2000 to 2010 over a thousand U.S children were adopted by Canadians, and the U.S. is often identified as the 3rd or 4th source country for children.

**Netherlands–U.S Adoption Context and Process**

van Hooff (2010) writes of the “heated debate” regarding the intercountry adoption of U.S. children by Dutch nationals. He notes that the U.S. has long been considered the most aggressive receiving country of internationally adopted children and thus most be critiqued as a state of origin because it allows foreign adoption of its own infants. Of particular concern is the brief relinquishment period required for birth parents, the result of which is “that the biological mother has little time to consider her decision” (van Hooff, Court Appointed Special Advocates [CASA], 2010, para 2). Because of strong social programs, little stigma regarding out of wedlock pregnancies and single parenting, and access to contraception and sexual education, there are few available infants and children available for adoption in the Netherlands. Thus while over 1,000 children were available for domestic adoption in 1970, this fell to 25 by 2009.

Writing in 2010, van Hoof predicted that Dutch-US adoptions would end or significantly stall because of changes undertaken with the U.S. implementation of the Hague Convention, in particular because of the impact of the principle of subsidiarity and the efforts to find U.S. homes for U.S. infants. This has not, however, been the case since outgoing adoptions still pivot on
birthmothers’ and state court decisions to allow foreign adoptions and most recent estimates indicate that the U.S. remains in the top three nations of origin for Dutch intercountry adoptees.

Although the Canadian process of adopting U.S. children mimics to a degree both Canadian and U.S. private adoption practices, Dutch-U.S. adoptions prior to 2008 followed a unique zelfdoeners, (“do-it-yourself”) process. In the Netherlands, adoption organizations with child-family matching responsibilities are called license holders, and they can be involved in complete or partial mediation (child matching). Complete mediation involves the adoption agency throughout the process, and agencies can have formal adoption programs such as for China, Colombia, and so on. Partial mediation means that the prospective adoptive family pursues adoption contacts on its own, although the process must be reviewed by a license holder. Before the U.S. implemented the Hague Convention in 2008, U.S. adoptions were partial mediated adoptions or zelfdoeners. Thus, Dutch families that wished to adopt from the U.S. generally located U.S. adoption agencies on their own, learned the U.S. and Dutch requirements for intercountry adoption, and completed much of the paperwork and processes on their own initiative or with some help from their U.S. agency (Stichting Adoptievoorzieningen [Foundation Adoption Services, FAS], 2013, p. 18). The Ministry of Security and Justice is the designated Central Authority in the Netherlands, the Foundation for Adoption Services “provides general information on adoption to prospective adoptive parents” and the Child Care and Protection Board undertakes PAP home studies (Hague Conference on Private International Law, Netherlands Country Profile for Intercountry Adoption Receiving State, 2010). Incoming children must have special needs\(^5\) and be under the age of six. Single adults and persons in same-sex partnerships may adopt, but the PAPs must be under age 42 at the time of the adoption.

\(^5\) In the U.S., membership in a minority is one of the six criteria to meet “special needs” designation. Thus, insofar as adoption into the Netherlands is concerned, U.S. minority children available for adoption would meet this receiving nation requirement. However, as noted below, U.S. children do not need to meet this criteria, since the decision to choose adoptive parents rests with U.S. birth parents.
The Netherlands requires all PAPs to apply to adopt a child and then attend adoption preparation courses. Length of time between applying to adopt and being entered in a mandatory education course can typically take one to two years. Courses are held in person, usually with groups of six to ten adoptive parents, have a required text, are only offered through the Dutch Foundation for Adoption Services (FAS), and cost approximately $1200. Course content includes sessions on birth parents, child background, attachment and loss, identity, and reflection on PAP decisions (HCCH, Netherlands Country Profile, 2010, §3.2).

On October 17, 2011, the Dutch Department of Security and Justice, in cooperation with several of the Dutch adoption license holders, posted a letter on its website outlining changes to the U.S.-Dutch intercountry adoption process. This letter identified prospective adoptive parent criteria for U.S. adoptions, new requirements to use U.S. adoption entities that have contractual relationships with Dutch license holders (and thus a use of mediation services), a listing of Dutch agencies now involved in U.S. adoptions, and the estimated costs for U.S. adoptions. Specifically, it stated that both heterosexual and homosexual couples [sic] were eligible to adopt, that average time to adopt was 2½ years, and that contact with birth parents prior to a child’s birth was allowed but only under the aegis of Dutch and U.S. adoption providers. Nonetheless, this was significant because Dutch adoption law forbids pre-birth contact, and this allowance was in deference to U.S. law that permits contact between birth and adoptive parents. Relatedly, a Dutch adoption law that requires a strict 60-day revocation period, in which a birth parent can revoke an adoption decision, was amended in cases from the United States if done “under the condition that adequate counseling was offered to the birth parents” (Ministry of Security and Justice, 2011; p. 3). And, significantly, the principle of subsidiarity, the international adoption principle stipulating that children should be placed domestically and that intercountry adoption is a solution of last resort, was modified in the case of U.S.–Dutch adoptions. Dutch law previously required
U.S. agencies to provide proof that no U.S. families could be found for a child before a Dutch family could be considered. New procedures now indicate:

Because the birth parents receive counseling helping them in the process of giving up their child for adoption and making a decision who should be allowed to adopt their child, US-law states the process is completed correctly, in accordance with the subsidiarity principle. Dutch Central Authority agrees with this US procedure. (Ministry of Security and Justice, 2011, p. 3)

In aggregate, these are significant changes which reveal shifts in how the Dutch apply their adoption laws when involved in U.S. adoptions. Both van Hooff (CASA, 2010) and Klarsberg (CASA, 2010) projected the end or a large diminishment of U.S. outgoing adoptions. They were proven wrong, and current statistics and projections indicate such adoptions are on the rise (Brown, 2013).

**Summary**

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the outgoing adoption literature (public and academic) and detailed outline of the outgoing adoption process relevant to Canada and the Netherlands. Although Canada’s adoption process holds similarities to Canadian and Dutch private domestic adoption arrangements, families in the Netherlands often must chart their own course, create their own alliances, and seek out their own resources in order to successfully adopt from the United States. Using narrative inquiry and the naturally unfolding of a case-based approach in the chapters ahead, I consider the adoption experiences of families in each of these countries.
Chapter 3

Review of the Literature and Theoretical Perspectives

The purpose of this multicase, cross-national study was to explore the intercountry adoption (ICA) experience of Canadian and Dutch adopters of children from the United States. Specifically, I sought to understand ways in which their ICA experience aligned with or diverged from the contemporary paradigm of international adoption, and parents’ pre- and post-adoption educational or training needs. Although substantial literature explores the experience of transracial and/or ICA and parent training, education, and learning, this scholarship has neither addressed the experience of foreign adopters of U.S. children nor approached the topic from an adult education and learning perspective.

This marginalized location, the disjunctive space between contemporary intercountry adoption practice and U.S. outgoing adopters’ experience, I argue, is a site of learning for Canadian and Dutch adoptive parents as they seek, adapt, create, or discard pre- and post-adoption activities, tools, and resources to their contexts. Consequently, two areas of adoption-related literature are reviewed: (a) prevailing discourses relevant to contemporary intercountry adoption practice and policy and (b) scholarship on parent education, training, and learning in transracial and/or intercountry adoption practice.

I begin these sections by situating U.S. outgoing adoptions in intercountry adoption discourse. I identify terms used to describe countries involved in the practice, outline “push” and “pull” factors, and discuss trends in Northern European adoptions (a receiving group in this study). I cite scholarship that addresses various intercountry adoption discourses and topics (e.g.,

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6 I use and/or as a qualifier as not all adoptions in the study were transracial adoptions. Two of the 20 families adopted internationally, but they were same-race adoptions.
closed or open adoptions), a background necessary to consider the relationship of U.S. outgoing adoptions to contemporary intercountry practice. The second portion of this adoption-related literature orients the reader to foci in adoptive parent preparation and training, the underpinning that informs the study’s findings and purpose.

A second section of this chapter identifies adult education and learning and Critical Race Theory as theoretical frameworks used to approach this work. I argue that adult learning concepts—non-formal education, non-formal and informal learning, narrative learning, and communities of practice—offer a valuable framework for understanding the knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors adoptive parents perceived as needed when adopting U.S. children and the ways in which they acquired this knowledge.

This framework, which considers a variety of learning activities and styles that are linked by an emphasis on self-directed learning, is informed by my pilot study with adoption professionals in the U.S. and Canada, my own experience as an adoptive parent, and the view of this study as an exploratory endeavor with multiple cases found across two countries. As such, my aim was to gain familiarity with the phenomenon of outgoing adoptions through the parents’ lived experiences, including understanding of learning content and methods used pre- and post-adoption. I chose not to apply a singular template (e.g., communities of practice) to fit across all cases or cultures but wished to remain open to what was revealed in the narratives. Because all participants were adults and learning occurs outside of a formal education setting, I chose the fluidity of self-directed learning as a lens from which to explore parent education.

U.S. children available for intercountry adoption are identified as children with special needs, a category that includes membership in a minority as one of its attributes. It is this inclusion that most frequently facilitates their international placement. I end this review of the literature and theoretical framework with a brief discussion of key concepts of Critical Race Theory as a way of considering outgoing adoptions as an equivocal form of institutionalized
The following section begins the review of the literature that situates U.S. outgoing adoptions within the discourses of intercountry adoption and ends with a review of studies and topics relating to prospective adoptive parent training and intercountry adoption. The second section of this chapter picks up with the theoretical perspectives and concludes with an overview of Critical Race Theory.

**Literature Review**

**Situating U.S. Outgoing Adoption in Intercountry Adoption Discourse**

Adoption of U.S. children by foreign nationals falls into several categories of adoption lexicon. It is an international or intercountry adoption (terms used interchangeably), which involves the legal adoption of a child from his or her country of origin into the country of the adoptive parent. All parental rights are transferred to the adoptive parent, and the child immigrates to the adoptive parents’ country through a permanent, legal relationship (U.S. DOS Office of Consular Affairs, 2009a). Because most of these emigrating children are Black or bi-racial children going to White families (Davenport, 2004), they are also frequently transracial adoptions (TRA). These adoptions are also considered outgoing cases, a term used to mean:

(a) The child being adopted is resident in the United States; (b) the prospective adoptive parent(s) is (are) resident in a foreign Convention country, where they will move the child after adoption in the U.S. or plan to move the child for the purpose of adoption; and (c) the prospective adoptive parents initiated the adoption process by applying to the Central Authority in their country of residence on or after April 1, 2008. (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2009, Part II (b))

In intercountry adoption parlance, countries are identified as “sending” or “source” countries or alternatively, “countries of origin,” terms meant to designate countries that allow international adoption of its children while “receiving” country identifies the destination country of the adoptee. Collectively, these terms—also used to describe migratory patterns of refugees, migrants, displaced peoples, and other emigrants (International Office for Migration [IOM],
Intercountry adoption has been described as occurring in migratory waves (Lovelock, 2000), with the First Wave beginning just following World War II and lasting through the early 1960s; the most recent, Fifth Wave began in the late 1990s and is characterized by a migratory flow of children from African nations to the United States (Davies, 2011). Each wave has been marked by socio-political and economic sending or “push” forces ranging from war and civil unrest, as in the case of Greek and German adoptions to the U.S. after World War II, or the child abductions that formed the supply source of adoptions from Ecuador, Guatemala and Argentina in the 1960s through 1990s. Sub-Saharan African countries, Kapstein (2003) noted, have not been “an important source for international adoptions because of cultural and religious strictures on that practice” (p. 118), but these strictures have loosened considerably because of extensive, unremitting poverty, the HIV epidemic. As he suggested, “the baby trade…is no longer simply a response to wars and humanitarian crises…it behaves much like a commodities market, with demand informing supply” (p. 117).

Receiving nations are animated by their own “pull” factors, often perceived as a surfeit of White middle or upper-class, highly educated adults in search of adoptable children (Briggs, 2012; Gailey, 2010; Martin, 2007; Riben, 2007). Infertility issues related to later-staged marriages or partnerships and unsuccessful reproductive technology attempts are frequently cited reasons that attract people to pursue domestic or intercountry adoption (Masson, 2001; McKay & Ross, 2010; Pertman, 2011). Intercountry adoptions are often pursued over domestic adoption possibilities because of preferences for closed over open adoptions7—specifically concern about

7 Birth parents in intercountry adoptions are usually absent, either because relinquishment must be anonymous as in cases such as China where abandonment is illegal, or children are in public care with little documented history or adoption agencies acting as the child’s agent, and other reasons. This birth parent absence represents, for some prospective adopters, a preferred “clean break” from a birth family and leads
post-adoption birth parent involvement, availability of infants and young children rather than older and special needs children, and perceptions that intercountry adoptions are quicker and more economical than and domestic public and/or private adoptions (Hollingsworth & Ruffin, 2002; Welsh, Viana, Petrill & Mathias, 2008; Zhang & Lee, 2011). Moreover, single, gay and lesbian adults and couples made up a significant population of the surge that led to the rise in intercountry adoptions through 2004.

Notably, not all these White adopters are from the U.S.: The highest per capita rate of international adoptions is found in Sweden, where one in 50 children are adopted (Center for Adoption Policy, n.d.). Hoksbergen and ter Laak (2005) reference Canadian sociologist David Kirk’s (1964) “concept of rejection or acknowledgment of differences in relation to biological versus adoptive family life” (p. 28) as a framework from which to describe the evolution of Northern European adoptive parents’ attitudes over the last 50 years. Adoptive parents, according to Kirk (1981, cited in Hoksbergen & ter Laak, 2005, p. 28) have specific role handicaps that distinguish them from biological parents. These include accepting that there is not a biological connection between adopted child and adoptive parent, sharing this with the child, supporting children’s adjustment to adoption, and the need to search for their origins. Accordingly, adoptive parents respond to their children’s adoptions by either rejecting or accepting these differences. In their research, Hoksbergen and ter Laak (2005) looked at these patterns of coping along with societal and cultural factors to argue the existence of four “generations” of adoptive parents in Northern Europe, and in particular, the Netherlands (p. 29). By applying a historical-cultural lens to different generations of Northern European adopters, these researchers argue that their analysis reveals that each cohort is defined by different “attitudes, values, and behaviors regarding adoption” (p. 46). They describe these generations as “…the traditional-closed generation
(adoptions between 1950 and 1970), the open-idealistic generation (adoptions between 1971 and 1981), the materialistic-realistic generation (adoptions between 1982 and 1992), and the optimistic-demanding generation (adoptions since 1993; p. 46).

All the adoptions in this study fall during what the researchers identify as the optimistic-demanding generation, a time characterized by “improved economic conditions” that permitted consideration of high-cost ICAs and an increased sense of individualism that subsequently saw parenting as a “right” rather than, as in earlier generations, a focus on “best interests of a child” (p. 29). During this phase, Hoksbergen and ter Laak (2005) noted “more and more Northern European adoptive parents are insisting on young, healthy children” (p. 49) over medically compromised and special needs children. Moreover, these parents privilege integration into the adopted country over a focus on racial and cultural issues relevant to the child’s birth and adoptive identity development or a focus on differences between adopted and birth cultures.

The U.S. has long been the world’s leading receiving nation. However, intercountry adoptions throughout the world have sharply declined since 2004, and as of this writing (2013) are at their lowest point to the U.S. since 1995 (Center for Adoption Policy, 2013) and lowest globally since 1998 (Selman, 2012). Selman (2012) argued that reasons for the decline included shifts in sending countries’ social welfare practices (e.g., the promotion of domestic adoption in South Korea and China), more stringent adoptive parent requirements (e.g., Chinese ban on single parent and gay adoptions, or new weight, age, and mental health requirements), or closing of country programs because of child trafficking scandals (Vietnam, Cambodia) or because of country choice. For example, Argentina has banned intercountry adoption of its children; Romania, which famously opened its borders for intercountry adoption with the fall of Ceausescu in the early 1990s, prohibited them by 2005 (Kapstein, 2003; Selman, 2012); and China “has shifted mainly to releasing ‘special needs’ children for adoption” (Rotabi & Bromfield, 2012, p. 130).
Ironically, at a time when “…the USA is facing a major shortfall in the number of children available as the moratorium on adoptions from Guatemala and Vietnam continues” (Selman, 2012, p. 27), when more children are being adopted to Europe than to the U.S., the U.S. itself has become a significant supply source of children for adopters in Canada, the Netherlands and several other countries around the world. In positioning itself as a sending State and facilitating adoption of its infants and increasingly older children in public care, the U.S. has upended several key discourses found in contemporary intercountry adoption practice.

**Intercountry Adoption as Child Rescue and a Global South to Global North Migration**

This discourse serves to link adopters’ motivations to adopt internationally to the nations from which they adopt. Rescuing or saving children from poverty, war, natural or human disasters, or state-enforced family policy, or gender-based child preferences is perhaps the most recognized adoption discourse and has become a cornerstone in contemporary descriptions of the adoption choices of Western families (Alstein & Simon, 1991; Davies, 2011; Hubinette, 2003; Joyce, 2013; McGinnis, 2005). Between 1999 and 2009, well over 400,000 children were adopted from approximately 23 countries; roughly half of these children were placed with U.S. parents (Graff, 2010). Countries in Western Europe primarily comprise the remaining 22 receiving countries, leading scholars to see ICAs as a migration of children from the global south to the global north, that is, from less-developed and socio-economically impoverished countries to wealthy Western nations (Breuning, 2012; Rotabi & Gibbons, 2012; Worthington, 2009).

Altruistic and humanitarian motivated adoptions are not without controversy. For example, Brookfield (2008) noted the inauspicious start of Canada’s involvement in ICA when four Canadian mothers enacted their own transnational child-protection response to the plight of children of war in Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1970s by facilitating their removal from those countries and placement with Canadian families. These “maverick mothers,” who among
themselves adopted 50 children, created a maelstrom of controversy (Brookfield, 2008, p. 307). Their nonprofessional status, “bleeding heart mentality” (p. 307), and unauthorized actions served to nearly derail nascent Canadian intercountry adoption professional practice while earning them a degree of public respect and authority. Similar actions by religious groups, nonprofessionals, and some adoption agencies in the U.S, Canada, Italy, and France following the tsunami in Sri Lanka in 2004, the earthquake in Haiti in 2010, and other events highlight the tenuous line between adoption as rescue and robbery (Joyce, 2012; King, 2012; Selman, 2011).

Critiques of intercountry adoption are manifold, and the schism between proponents and opponents often tracks along the fault line between discourses of kidnap and of rescue. Critics have argued against child welfare practices that legally and permanently transfer children to families in foreign countries when underlying national issues of poverty, civil strife, natural disasters, or other phenomena affecting entire populations are root causes of child endangerment and vulnerability (Bunkers, Groza, & Lauer, 2009; Davies, 2011; Smolin, 2007). Taking children under these circumstances is an exploitative practice that satisfies “the needs of the growing numbers of childless couples in the overdeveloped world” (Davies, 2011, p. 50); and aims toward facilitating adoptions rather than marshaling resources to prevent them (Fronek & Cuthbert, 2012). Recently, many scholars have realigned this discourse from the rhetoric of altruism and humanitarianism to that of colonialism and discrimination (Briggs, 2003; Dorow, 2006a, 2006b; Louie, 2009; S. Patton, 2000; Rothman, 2006; Solinger, 2001).

The import of this discourse to outgoing U.S. adoptions leads to questions regarding how foreign nationals frame their adoption choice of a U.S. child: Are choices simply a pragmatic solution to building a family through intercountry adoption or are there underlying notions of rescuing U.S. minority children from poverty or a racially divisive country? Are Canadian adoptive parents who adopt U.S. children doing so, as Balcom and Dubinsky (2005) suggested,
not just because of the child’s young age, but because they are also motivated by beliefs that their country is less racially divisive than the United States?

**Intercountry Adoption: Hierarchies, Race, and the Economics of Child Preferences**

Researchers note the uniformity with which Western parents’ adoption preferences run “along the lines of race, age, and ability status” (Jacobson, 2013, p. 4). The desire for an infant adoption is a major criterion in domestic and intercountry adoptive parent decision making (Fisher, 2003; Jacobson, 2013; O’Neill, 2005; Stein, 2001; Zhang & Lee, 2012). This demand has led to a discourse of a commodification of infants, a “baby trade” (Kapstein, 2003) in which “babies have become big business, commodities openly exchanged in many marketplaces…a relatively new form of commodification of human beings” (Bhabha, 2004, p. 182). A tacit expression of this discourse operates in U.S. outgoing adoptions: foreign prospective adoptive parents cite infant adoption as an adoptive preference and the availability of infants is a leading factor in their decision to adopt from the United States (Brown, 2013; Davenport, 2004, Glaser, 2004; O’Neill 2004; Stahl, 2005). However, these debates are themselves layered with complexities. For example, many prospective adoptive parents do not make adoption choices in isolation but may base some preferences, such as age and ability status, on adoption research, particularly studies correlating early-age placements with enhanced infant-parent attachment or fears on the effects of institutionalization and multiple foster homes on child development (Zhang & Lee, 2011). The baby trade may be stimulated by desires to parent children as early as possible, but this desire may in turn, stem from fears of being incapable of managing the complex needs of traumatized children.

Researchers argue that White U.S. adoptive families bypass African American and biracial infants in favor of “less Black” children (from China, Eastern Europe, or Russia) or foreign-born Black children (from Ethiopia or Haiti) whose adoptions can be tethered to
humanitarian notions of rescue over the baggage of U.S. slavery and racial history (Dorow, 2006a; Gailey, 2010; S. Patton, 2000; Quiroz, 2007; Rothman, 2005). These researchers suggest that U.S. adopters privilege race over age, leaving a surfeit of Black children and even Black infants as possibly entering the public welfare system. In the U.S., children adopted from foster care are most likely to be Black, internationally adopted children are more likely to be Asian, and the majority of domestic private adoptions are of White children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS], 2007). A related outcome, noted in media accounts as well as adoption scholarship, is that U.S. Black children are least likely to be adopted and their adoptions can cost considerably less than White infant adoptions (Avitan, 2007; Glaser, 2004; Norris, 2013; Stall, 2005; Williams, 1993).

Using data involving more than 800 children whose adoptions were arranged through a facilitating agency (child matching function), economists Baccara, Collard-Wexler, Felli, and Yariv (2010) found adoptive parent preferences correlated to race, age, and gender of born and unborn children and that these preferences profoundly affect adoption economics. The preference for non-African American girls over non-African American boys for example, revealed that prospective adoptive parents were willing to pay up to $16,000 more in adoption finalization costs (p. 43) for non-African American girls and up to $38,000 for non-African American infants (gender unknown) over African American infants (p. 45). A surprising feature of this study was its inclusion of an estimated foreign prospective adoptive parent pool in the data, which allowed the researchers to investigate foreign adopters’ preferences when considering U.S. adoptions, birthmothers’ considerations of foreign adopters for their children, and the impact on children if foreign adopters are prohibited from adopting U.S. children. Excluding foreign couples from adopting U.S. children would reduce the number of adopted children by 33% and have a disproportionate effect on African American children (Baccara et al., 2010).
Avitan (2007) linked U.S. adoption preferences for White children over Black children and infants over older children to argue in support of outgoing adoptions for minority children. Commenting on studies indicating that newborn African Americans are only as likely to be adopted as White three-to-five year olds, she argued that child-centered policy and practice should advocate for child placement as early as possible, even if that placement lies outside of the United States. Avitan argued that opening up the pool of prospective adoptive parents to foreign families that are less racially selective can “curb placement delays of minority children” (p. 512).

Quiroz (2007) studied the U.S. private adoption market and process as well as racial discourse on Internet-based adoption sites, including adoption agency web pages and adoption forums in which adoption triad members or other interested groups participated. Her findings indicated that race plays a critical role in how children are identified or how they are marginalized to one type of adoption program over another. She offered several examples of U.S. adoption agencies’ descriptions of special needs children available for adoption, such as “four African-American infants…twelve bi-racial infants…healthy newborn infants directly from the hospital” (p. 44), newborns and infants whose race alone placed them in a less desired subgroup of adoptable children.

Regarding race, some states, such as Arkansas identify a child with special needs as “Two years of age or older and a child of color” while others, such as, Florida note: “African American or racially mixed parentage.” Some states, such as Georgia, do not use race as a marker at all (Child Welfare Information Gateway, Adoption Assistance by State, 2004). This fickle use is further misleading since the term is meant to determine which children in U.S. foster care are available for adoption subsidies, but its usage now seems to have migrated to include which children can more likely be considered for outgoing adoptions. Used as it is in adoption (domestic and international), the term “special needs” when applied to Black or minority children is unethical and serves to obfuscate the issue of racialization of adoption policy and practice. The
Canadian and Dutch families in this study that adopted across race lines did not need the extra labeling of “special needs”; they learned from U.S., and Canadian adoption providers, listservs and online research that Black and minority infants were available and what made them available was their race, not some other health or mental health issue. However, again (see Chapter Two), it is the United States’ adoption laws which privilege birth parents’ right to choose adoptive parents (and state court concurrence of best interests of the child), that facilitate outgoing U.S. adoptions.

Quiroz’s descriptions support her observation that Black children may be marginalized by being placed in groups and labeled as special-needs, but her account does not reveal if White or Black homes were found for the infants and if this categorizing, however offensive, hindered or helped placement. Indeed, this issue remains unclear: What does happen to Black or other minority infants whose birth parents make an adoption plan? Are there really no families for these infants anywhere in the United States? What happens when adoption agencies or other authorized adoption providers do not consider foreign parents? How or when are these infants adopted? How many of them are placed at birth and how many, if any, move to public care? These unanswered questions obscure outgoing adoption discourse: popular media accounts written on this topic consistently interview adoption professionals who indicate a shortage of U.S. parents for African American or biracial infants (see Chapter Two). However, what remains unknown is the disposition of infants who are not placed outside of the U.S. and an understanding of how large or small these numbers are.

Against these discourses—infants as commodities, hierarchies and economies of adoption preferences, and race-based adoption practices—Canadian and Dutch adopters can paradoxically be viewed as either contributors to the global marketplace in infants or a disquieting solution to systemic racism in the U.S. in general, and its child welfare policy and practice specifically. In aggregate, these discourses inform this study by identifying socio-cultural and socio-political factors that lead to outgoing U.S. adoptions: on the U.S. side, least racially desired children are
placed out for adoption to countries in which adopters privilege age (infants) over race of a child. An ironic view of the process recalibrates the global marketplace and commodities analogy to reveal a global circulation of prospective adoptive parents whose “Dear Birth Parent” letters and family portfolios are uploaded on U.S. adoption websites, and reviewed across the U.S., allowing birthmothers to view an international pool of prospective parent candidates for a child.

**Birthmothers (and Birth Family) Absence and Presence in Intercountry Adoption**

When birth family contact is referenced vis-à-vis intercountry adoption, it is almost always within the context of birth parent search and reunion, endeavors usually undertaken by adult adoptees to locate and connect with birth kin, or in recent trends, by intercountry adoptive parents who jump start this effort while their children are still young (Yngvesson, 2010). Volkman (2003) argued that although Chinese birthmothers and birth families are unknown to adoptive families and adoptees due to the illegality of child relinquishment in China, adoptive families may substitute orphanages, early caregivers, or significant places as representations of the “absent birthmother” (p. 29). Pointe, Wang, and Fan (2010), in their study of motivations of adopted Chinese children (ages 8-11 at time of travel) and their U.S. families to visit China, found that parents visited China in an effort to learn more about their child’s history and hope to forge links between their children and their birth land. Some children in the study felt they should have had the choice to travel or decline but all appreciated the opportunity to see China, their orphanages, caregivers or other signifiers of their pre-adoption life. No families met birth parents or kin in the study. Similar processes are undertaken by adoptive families and adoptees from other countries in which birth kin are usually unknown (Jacobson, 2008; Homans, 2010; Pointe, Wang & Fan, 2011). Some “roots trips” are motivated by adoptive parents’ fears that their children may have been victims of trafficking and seek to confirm that theirs is not a child stolen from another family (Larson, 2007, 2012).
Because in many countries birth families remain anonymous, intercountry adoptees have historically had little recourse in terms of locating birth parents—a situation that to some degree appears to be changing. Dutch researchers (Tieman, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2008) found that in a sample of 1,417 adult intercountry adoptees (none from the U.S.) 30% searched for or had reunited with their birth families, and half of the adoptees who had not yet done so were interested in more knowledge of their birth families.

Insider writing (generally, studies by adoptees) is also contributing to the literature on the experience of birth parent or culture reunions in the context of international adoption. South Korean adoptee and adoption scholar, Eleana Kim (2003), for example, described attending a staged performance of a Korean wedding that was part of a ten-day trip, “Summer Cultural Awareness Training Program for Overseas Adopted Koreans,” sponsored by the Korean government, in which it invited Korean adoptees from across the world to return to South Korea and experience its culture. This program fell under the Overseas Koreans Foundation (OKF), an official initiative of Korea’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade that has (it continues), as its mission, to connect Korean transnational adoptees to “the motherland” (p. 58). Kim argued that the effort of re-acculturation for the diaspora of transnational Korean adoptees was problematic because even as the government professed commitment to support adoptees connection to Korea, it remained a significant sending country of children. Korea’s culture stigmatizes children born outside of marriage, and the women who bear them. There are no social programs to support unwed mothers who wish to keep their children, although there are a range of services for women who plan to place them for adoption (Chan; 2013, Kim, 2003). More recently there have been reforms, largely enacted because of fierce advocacy of returning Korean adoptees (Chan, 2013), and aimed to increase domestic adoptions, reduce intercountry adoption of children, and require birthmothers to register infants. Under the new Special Adoption Law, enacted by the Korean National Assembly in 2012, birthmothers must register their infants and nurse them for seven
days post-birth. Additionally, birthmothers now have up to six months to revoke an adoption and if a child is placed for adoption, the birthmother’s name is removed from the birth record. The latter stipulation is to allow the birthmother to re-instate her anonymity once the child does have a family. This element then frees her to marry without evidence of having given birth. The law has been controversial: advocates claim it is a step forward and infants will now at least have a record of parentage, while detractors believe that the law still stigmatizes birthmothers by forcing them to register births, does nothing to offer programs and help to pregnant women, and has no effect on the subjugation and stigmatization of pregnant women in Korean culture.

Deann Borshay-Liem, an adult Korean-U.S. adoptee, and Clara, a young adult Chilean-Swedish adoptee, offer insights regarding the impact of having two mothers and the experience of being in the presence of both of them at the same time. Adopted by a U.S. family in 1966, filmmaker Deann Borshay-Liem documented her return to South Korea and her reunion with her Korean family in *First Person Plural* (2000). At one point in her film, she painfully shared: “There wasn’t room in my mind for two mothers.” Clara, a young woman adopted as a child from Chile by a Swedish family, offers this exchange in Barbara Yngvesson’s (2003) account of a Swedish-Chilean roots trip:

One thing I had thought a lot about was sitting in the same room with two mothers. I thought it would feel very strange [Barbara: And when it actually happened?] It felt good, partly because I could speak Swedish with my mother from Sweden, and then I had, you [Yngvesson] who could translate. I felt supported to have mamma along, someone from Sweden. It was something one could return to, that one wasn’t alone in Chile. (pp. 20-21)

The contrasting perspectives powerfully illustrate how life altering such reunions can be: in one case creating a fractured psychic chasm and in another knitting together past and future lives. In intercountry adoption practice, birthmothers in particular, and birth families in general, are most frequently understood as a shadow presence (Kendal, 2005; Volkman, 2005) or mythic entities, ever elusive, welcomed and feared, and beyond the tangible grasp of adoptees or their
adoptive families (Borshay-Liem, 2000; Hogbacka, 2012; Homans, 2006; Kelly, 2005; Larsen, 2007, 2012). In general, to the extent that it is discussed at all, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers (Larson, 2012; Pertman, 2011; Sotiropoulos, 2008) acknowledge a vast lacuna regarding what a more open intercountry adoption model would look like in policy and practice (Cox, 2013; Smolin, 2012).

This discourse is provocative in light of U.S. outgoing cases in which birth parents identify and choose a foreign family. The birth parents’ decision-making process, which may involve review of adoptive parent “Dear Birth Parent” profiles in print or via Internet, lies well outside of all intercountry adoption protocols. Although there is a limited but growing body of knowledge that considers the birthmother’s voice in intercountry adoption (Bos, 2007; Gibbons, Wilson, & Schnell, 2009; Högbacka, 2012; Perry, 1998; Roby & Matsumura, 2002), these studies draw against the context of children abandoned because of poverty, war, or social policy or seek to address birthmother anonymity in intercountry adoption practice. Birthmother choice in outgoing adoptions is a dominant focus in legal studies (Avitan, 2007; Hollinger, 2008); at this point, this is the only discipline to offer scholarly investigation of the issues that regulate, promote, and impede the intercountry adoption of U.S. children. Birth parent agency in outgoing adoptions differs radically from those in traditional ICA practice in that they are not anonymous (as in China), birth and adoptive parents may be in contact throughout a pregnancy, birthmothers may even invite adoptive parents to the child’s birth, and birthmothers frequently expect post-adoption contact as part of the adoption placement plan.

**Closed and Open Adoptions in Domestic and Intercountry Adoption**

The deleterious effects of birth parent, and in particular birthmother, anonymity or secrecy in adoption are found throughout accounts of the lived experience of all members of the adoption triad, in adoption literature and scholarship, and across all levels of policy and practice
(Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIA], 2004; Fravel, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2002; Jones, 2000; Melina, 2010; Wadia-Ellis, 1995). The traumatizing effects of closed or confidential adoption include unresolved birth parent grief, psychological pain and identity confusion in adopted children, and parental stress of adopters left ignorant of psychosocial and medical backgrounds that prohibit them from addressing the needs or questions of their adopted children (Siegel, 2006).

Open adoption is one practice believed to redress these issues, although boundaries of open adoption are difficult to disambiguate, even as the practice has become increasingly common. Miall and March (2006), for example, noted that open adoption is “characterized by some kind of contact between birth parents and adoptive parents after adoption has taken place” (p. 49); however, Siegel (2006) used the term to refer “to adoptions in which at least one birth family member and one adoptive family member have exchanged identifying information with one another and are able to maintain ongoing contact” (p. 178). Current views hold that openness in adoption falls along a continuum; it may be mediated by adoption agencies, may involve multiple modes of communication (exchanging pictures, phone calls, in-person meetings), and is not static (Grotevant, 2000; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). For instance, a birthmother who indicates a desire for ongoing contact with her birth child may decide differently over time; adoptive parents may initially wish for non-identifying information exchange but eventually move to full disclosure and unmediated contact (i.e., no intervention from adoption agencies or providers); and adoptees may vacillate in their desire for openness.

Brodzinsky (2005) further distinguishes between open adoption and openness in adoption, with the latter “emphasizing the adoption communication process, both informational

\footnotetext{I use Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute’s (2012) definitions of these concepts. “Closed” refers to adoptions also “sometimes called ‘confidential’ meaning there is no contact between the birth and adoptive families and usually little if any knowledge by their members about each other” (p. 6). Mediated adoptions are ones in which the adoption agency “facilitates the periodic exchange of pictures and letters, but typically there is no direct contact” (p. 6). In open or “fully disclosed” adoptions, “there is ongoing contact among those involved, including the child” (p. 6).}
and emotional within the individual, between adoptive family members, and, for those individuals involved in a structurally open arrangement, between members of the two family systems” (p. 150). For Brodzinsky, healthy psychological adjustment of adoptees is facilitated not by whether or not an adoption is open, semi-opened or confidential. Rather, it is created via “an open, honest, non-defensive, and emotionally attuned family dialogue not only about adoption-related issues but in fact about any issue that impacts on the child’s and family’s life” (p. 51). In general, researchers seem to agree that there is “no one size fits all” model and questions remain about how best to instruct and support adoptive families when promoting communicative openness (Grotevant, Perry, & McRoy, 2005; Jones & Hackett, 2007; MacDonald & McSherry, 2011; Siegel, 2006).

In domestic U.S. adoption, deepening understanding of the nocuous effects of anonymity and adoption secrecy has changed practice and policy so that “an overwhelming proportion of contemporary birthmothers have met the adoptive parents of their children” and “almost all of the remaining birthmothers helped to choose the new parents through profiles” (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007, p. 4). Such changes in attitude and practice have yet to permeate intercountry practice, with countries such as China, India, and South Korea continuing to stigmatize unwed parents and endorse practices that promote closed adoptions. Birth parents in Taiwan and Ethiopia may meet adoptive parents when they travel to those countries to adopt children, but unlike the U.S. system, the birth parents have no role in adoptive parent selection.

For Canadian, Dutch, and other foreign adopters of U.S. children, properties of adoptions such as open, closed, or open communication are operationalized differently from contemporary intercountry practice. Outgoing adoptions proceed similarly to U.S private adoptions, and decisions regarding levels of openness or being closed are made with the birthmother or birth parents. Contact may be mediated through an adoption service provider with confidentiality maintained, but even in these cases, information often is forthcoming and exchanged via the
agency from adoptive family to birth family. Post-placement reports are still required from adoptive parents to U.S. adoption agencies, but various communications also transport to birth parents themselves. This is a very different process from contemporary practice, in which child updates, post-placement reports, and other information moves from adoptive parents to state (country) entities. Additionally, openness in outgoing adoptions is amplified; children not only are exposed to adoption language or made aware of their status as adoptees but pictures, videos, and other artifacts and resources (e.g., Internet, telephone) are often directly used to link adoptive and birth families.

**Parent Training and Preparation in Transracial and Intercountry Adoption**

How transracial intercountry adoptees adapt to their dominant race adoptive families, communities, and culture is a prevailing topic in adoption scholarship, as is the study of the role of parents in facilitating and negotiating acculturation between birth and adoptive cultures. However, findings demonstrating that adoptee self-esteem and sense of identity are improved with interventions promoting identification with his or her birth culture and country (Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994; Cederblad, Höök, Irhammer & Mercke, 1999; Feigelman, 2000; Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, & Gunnar, 2006; Roberson, 2003) do not include sampling data from the hundreds of internationally adopted U.S. children adjusting to their adoptive countries. For example, studies situated in Canada indicated that adopted Black and bi-racial children were significantly more likely to have had unpleasant experiences because of racial and ethnic backgrounds; however, these studies did not include Black or bi-racial children adopted from the U.S (Bagley 1991; Westhues & Cohen, 1997). Researchers in the Netherlands (Juffer & Tieman, 2009; Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2007; Stams, Juffer, Rispens, & Hoksbergen, 2000) have long explored adjustment of internationally adopted children in that country, but none of their studies indicated sampling U.S.-born children, despite the fact that the United States is a
dominant sending country to the Netherlands. Dutch studies revealed that transracial adoptees face discrimination (Juffer, 2006), cope with negative racial comments, may express desires to be White, and wish they’d been born in their adoptive families (Juffer & Tieman, 2009). These researchers noted the importance of “counseling and parent education about adoption communication and cultural and racial socialization” (Juffer & Tieman, 2009 p. 645), but Dutch studies have not explored adoptive parent education and training models.

**Intercountry Adoptive Parent Training, Education, and Research**

Intercountry adoptive parent education and training is enshrined in the Hague Convention and mandated into law in the United States through the Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000. In the U.S., adoptive parents are required to receive at least 10 hours of parent training (U.S. DOS, 2013), although they may receive considerably more based on requirements of sending countries, adoption agencies, state laws, or other entities. Articles 5 and 9 of The Hague Convention endorse prospective adoptive parent counseling and post-adoptive services but do not mandate training or education. Canada and the Netherlands, the two countries explored in this study, do address prospective adoptive parent training. As noted in Chapter 2, each Canadian province sets its own requirements, and the Netherlands has a national training program that covers content on birth parents, child backgrounds, attachment, loss and grief, identity, and other issues (Foundation Adoption Services, 2013, p. 15).

Scholarship specific to ICA adoptive parent training and education is limited (Vonk, 2001) and scattered across the literature on transracial adoptive parent education (Vonk & Angaran, 2001; 2003), adoptive parenting skill building (Selwyn, del Tufo, & Frazer, 2009), and works relating to parent racial, ethnic, and cultural competencies and practices in the context of adoptive parenting (versus immigrant parent studies which may have some overlap; Crolley-Simic & Vonk, 2008; Hollingsworth, 1997; Mohanty, Keokse & Sales, 2006). It is also woven
into accounts of adoptive parents’ experiences in transnational adoption (Dorow, 2006; Jacobson, 2008; Volkman, 2005; Yngvesson, 2010). Studies by or about adult adoptees’ perspectives on the racial, ethnic, and cultural socialization practices of their adoptive families’ offer additional insights (Docan-Morgan, 2011; Samuels, 2009; Smith, Juarez, & Jacobson, 2011; Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006).

In his policy paper on adoptive parent preparation for the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2007), David Brodzinsky outlined 12 obstacles to parent preparation and education and offered 16 principal recommendations across multiple content areas as “a foundation for best-practice guidelines” (p. 2) for preparing adoption professionals in their education efforts with parents. He argued the need for mandatory prospective parent education and noted that programs should be “guided by adult learning theory, which emphasizes the efficacy of an active, multi-source, multi-method strategy of instruction” (p. 3). He also acknowledged the support and learning that is achieved through interacting with successful adoptive parents, adult adoptees, and birth families and by utilizing using web-based learning and distant-education opportunities. The paper advised parent training to cover mental health and developmental issues in adoption, open communication, grief and loss in adoption, identity issues, search for birth families, and ongoing support needs (p. 4). Brodzinsky also offered additional direction for parenting children through international and transracial adoption, as well as recommendations in cases of open and gay and lesbian adoption. Outgoing U.S. adoptions fall into most of these categories and thus, parents would be advised on more than 30 additional topics (see Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007, pp. 14-16).

Although not precisely a training rubric, adoptive parents are, as Pertman (2011) noted, given recommendations by adoption professionals to provide cultural, racial, and ethnic socialization opportunities for their transracial and internationally adopted children. These recommendations vary in intensity from initiating or maintaining relationships with racial, ethnic
and culturally diverse individuals to moving into diverse environments. Dorow (2006) further
categorized these types of efforts into four domains: assimilation, celebrating plurality, balancing
act, and immersion. Paulsen and Merighi (2009) drew on structural family theory to indicate how
adoptive parents use various resources such as attending cultural camps, building interracial
relationships, introducing culturally relevant books and music, joining social and ethnically
diverse communities and organizations, and supporting same-race mentorships for their child to
permeate familial borders and facilitate adoptees well-being (Paulsen & Merighi, 2009, p. 4).
Informed by a social work perspective, their observations link parent activities with learning
opportunities and projected outcomes:

Specifically, resources from external systems such as information, advice, medicine,
books, adaptive devices and cultural artifacts are instrumental in preparing adoptive
families for the unique and sometimes complex needs of adoptees. These resources assist
adoptive parents in developing a sense of mastery as they interact with and care for their
adopted child. Having the appropriate knowledge and skills necessary to provide optimal
care to adoptees will likely enhance a parent’s perception of preparedness and increase
their satisfaction with the adoption experience. (p. 4)

Two British studies offer insights into adoptive parent training in the United Kingdom.
Gilkes and Capstick (2008) described a mentoring group for adoptive parents in which adoptive
parents received training to become “buddies” (p. 69) to new parents. In this case, the training
described was for buddies and included content on “relationship building, attitudes, values and
prejudices; confidentiality and respect; supervision sessions” (p. 70); and other areas. Within the
context of their article they noted (but did not describe) that adoptive parents do attend parenting
groups prior to adoption. The authors noted that research indicates that new (non-adoptive)
parents frequently seek support from experienced parents over professionals, and this had led to
numerous successful parenting mentorship programs. The adoptive parent mentoring model was
subsequently based on past success with parent mentoring. Contact between parents and buddies
occurred weekly or every few weeks, and it could extend over several months. Adoptive parents

used buddies for guidance on “challenging or aggressive behaviors, attachment, legal and social
services information, school issues, contact with birth parents and advocacy” (p. 71). The program indicated that new parents most appreciated the safe and confidential exchange between themselves and others who shared the adoption experience.

Selwyn, del Tufo, and Frazer (2009) described an adopter training program in which trainers are also adoptive parents. The program operates from a nonprofit adoption support group organization run by and for adopters and aims to enhance parenting skills, recognize adoptive family strengths, focus on child-family attachment issues, and facilitate adopters’ confidence in parenting special needs children and endorsing parent self-care (p. 31). The researchers did a pre- and post-training testing for the six-module training and found that adoptive parents appreciated the peer support, wished for more training, and indicated that participation sometimes resulted in increased parental participation of adoptive fathers. Additionally, the group setting and peer support in some cases facilitated long-term friendships and mutual support.

**Developing Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Competencies**

Studies concerned with intercountry and/or transracial adoption and parent preparation almost uniformly argue that a necessary step in ensuring adoptee well-being with regard to racial, ethnic, and/or adoptee identity requires adoptive families to engage in racial and culturally socializing activities aimed toward linking children to their racial, ethnic and cultural heritage (Lee, 2003; Lee & Quintana, 2005; Mohanty, Keoske, & Sales, 2006; Yoon, 2004). However, studies are inconclusive regarding the duration or intensity of these activities or even confirming whether parents follow up on these recommendations (Thomas & Tessler, 2007; Vonk & Angaran, 2003). The following sections illustrate the foci of these studies.

**Bi-cultural socialization.** Thomas and Tessler (2007) identify three components to bi-cultural competence: “knowledge of cultural values, ability to communicate, and sense of being grounded in the culture” (p. 1193). To gain knowledge of cultural values, adoptive parents can
engage in multiple activities: reading about institutions and rituals, using of resources and artifacts, or even seeking immersion or exposure in cultural communities. Communication skills could range from learning phrases to gaining in-depth knowledge of a language, and cultural grounding refers to a developing “durable social and support networks in both cultures” (p. 1194).

In their longitudinal study of U.S. adopters of Chinese children, these researchers found that adopted children whose parents were highly committed to engaging in bi-cultural socialization practices developed bi-cultural competencies and identities. Sustained engagement orchestrated by adoptive parents included maintaining cultural networks, living in Asian-populated areas, and establishing mentoring relationships and role models for adoptees. The authors argued the need for adoption professionals to educate prospective adoptive parents of these efforts and their outcomes to adoptees’ well-being.

**Cultural socialization.** These are outcome and process studies that attempt to understand the “racial and ethnic experiences of transracial adoptees and their families that promote or hinder racial/ethnic identity development” (Lee, 2003, p. 719) and the effects of these practices on adoptee adjustment. Paulsen and Merighi (2009), for example, found that parental support for and engagement in cultural activities with their adopted children was positively associated with adoption preparation and satisfaction. Smith, Juarez, and Jacobson (2011) used Feagin’s concept of White racial framing to investigate how White adoptive parents learn and then transmit race socialization strategies to their Black children. This study offered in-depth narrative accounts from White adopters and their Black adopted children as they negotiated these issues and described efforts to teach their children racialized messages. These authors argue that White parents’ understanding of race converts to cultural socialization practices that inform the “race lessons” (p. 27) taught or transmitted by White adopters to their Black children. White parents in this study challenged notions of color-blindness, affirmed racial differences, and attempted to “infuse race into the identity development” (p. 28) of adoptees, lessons the authors
noted are aligned with Black parenting. They further argue that White parenting diverged from Black parenting in the ways adoptees were taught to handle racialized issues with Whites—using caretaking, education and assumptions of White’s “innocence and ignorance” (p. 28) in matters of race.

Korean adult adoptees in Docan-Morgan’s (2011) study of transracially adopted families also reported adoptive parent racial and topic avoidance as correlating to adoptees resignation and anger at parent unresponsiveness. They concur with the work of de Haymes and Simon (2003, see below) and argue for educating pre-adoptive and adoptive parents on how to respond when minority children are confronted with acts of racism.

**Racial socialization and/or cultural competency.** Baden and Steward (2000) developed a model to assess the “compelling roles of both race and culture within families” (p. 310), which focuses on support for adoptee cultural identity. Vonk (2001) developed a model assessing three racial-cultural competencies that adoptive parents should achieve: racial awareness, multicultural planning, and survival skills, and she specifically addressed adoptive parent training regarding these areas. Racial awareness indicates the parents’ understanding of effects of race, ethnicity, culture and language difference on families’ lives; multicultural planning attends to parents’ ability to identify and engage opportunities to foster their child’s cultural/racial and ethnic identity; and survival skills refers to parents’ preparation to respond to effects and instances of racism in child’s life (Vonk, 2001, p. 54). Vonk and Angaran (2003) surveyed adoptive parent training programs across 196 agencies, 50% of which were public agencies and 50% of which were private, where 80% of the agencies facilitated transracial adoptions. They engaged in domestic and international adoptions, but only half of the agencies offered cultural competency training for adoptive parents. Agencies that did provide cultural competency education spent the most time facilitating racial awareness and used a variety of methods, including didactic, role-plays, and group work to accomplish educational goals.
Narrative or descriptive accounts of parent training programs. Zuniga (1991) and de Haymes and Simon (2003) offered direct accounts from parents who have adopted (domestic and international) regarding their lived experience of becoming transracial families in a racist culture. The adoptive parents’ accounts of their own evolution, deepened awareness of cultural and racial issues, and critical reflection on their educative needs could easily find a home in adult education literature dealing with transformative learning, critical reflection, lifelong learning, self-directed learning, and social justice-related works.

Literature Review Conclusion

Ku (2005) and Hollingsworth (2003), from law and social work respectively, posited that parental training and evidence of cross-cultural competencies should be mandated prior to approval of an intercountry adoption. Ku based her argument on a statistical analysis and accounts of Asian adoptees who described being in a liminal space between cultures. Noting the high percentages of incoming adoptions (which have since declined significantly), she advocated for legislation calling for required training. Hollingsworth (1997) conducted meta-analyses of six cross-sectional and longitudinal studies comparing racial/ethnic identity in domestic transracial and same-race, non-White adoptions. She argues that U.S. agencies and social workers involved in intercountry adoptions “have an ethical responsibility to inform potential parents of current research knowledge” including “that related to culture, interventions found efficacious in building children’s cultural identity.” (2008, p. 379).

However, just as intercountry adoption is a contentious practice, adoptive parent training and subsequent parenting strategies are not met with wholesale acceptance. Adoption professionals and scholars and practitioners in law, social work, and psychology endorse efforts of adoptive parents to gain cultural and ethnic competencies, encourage racial awareness over color-blind ideologies, and recommend consideration of a vast array of activities to support
adoptee well-being and identity formation. Such measures, however, are critiqued by affiliated scholars in history, women studies, anthropology, or other areas. For example, Gailey (2010), Eng (2003), and Briggs (2012) presented alternative views of parents’ engagement in cultural activities on behalf of their adopted child’s development. In Gailey’s study, parents who “provide [their son] with African American history books or go to black cultural events” (p. 36) are expressing their awareness of racism “through consumption” (p. 36) by purchasing exposure to artifacts or guidance in lieu of having African American friends or peers. Eng (2003) suggested an intractable gulf between efforts to socialize adoptees through exposure to diverse environments and the experience of severed ties to a birth culture. Briggs (2012) summarized the National Association of Black Social Workers’ (NABSW) critiques of Whites’ attempts to “learn” Black culture by seeking Black mentors or taking on projects like learning hair care or becoming Black when adopting Black children (p. 46). These concerns surfaced during the 1970s debates on transracial adoption when the NABSW argued that transracial placements should not be supported but should be seen as an attempt to fragment Black communities. These countervailing perspectives add depth to discourse but leave adoptive parents in a learning bind in which their activities can alternatively be presented as efforts informed by burgeoning evidence-based research or as misdirected and inadequate efforts that fall far short of any helpful intention and intervention.

In the following section, I present self-directed learning and relational concepts in adult learning theory as a lens to understand the milieu of adoptive parents’ learning-seeking activities. The studies noted throughout this chapter indicate that adoption agencies develop, provide, and monitor parenting education; however this is but half the story. Adoptive parents, both pre-and post-adoption, employ a host of strategies to accomplish learning goals, only some of which are operationalized in the non-formal learning environments of professional adoption organizations.
Theoretical Perspectives

Non-formal Education and Informal Learning on the Home Front

The goal of this section is to review current conceptions of informal learning and application as a lens toward understanding the learning and education activities and processes that take place in everyday settings when Canadian and Dutch adopters parent U.S.-born children. My emphasis is on these settings and processes because this is the learning environment of my participants who, in aggregate, conformed to intercountry adoption demographics of being middle-class, well-educated, White professionals in their 30s to 40s when they adopted (Jones, 2007; Zhang & Lee, 2011). As individuals, couples, and sometimes as groups, they engaged in a course of learning to meet provincial and state (national) adoption preparation requirements (a nonformal learning structure); understand international adoption, immigration laws, transracial adoption issues; and explore issues regarding adoption across the life cycle, among other topics. Provincial or State requirements stipulated that a segment of this preparation be formally presented by authorized teachers and followed a prescribed curriculum. Overall, the corpus of these adult learning activities was often experienced in the homes, communities, and network of relationships that were the lifeworld of each adoptive family. In this way, I am using informal learning theory and practice as a theoretical lens from which to explore Dutch and Canadian experiences when adopting U.S. children.

Tough and Knowles on Learning Projects and Self-Directed Learning

Allen Tough and Malcolm Knowles both conducted research in the 1970s that has informed almost all subsequent adult education and adult learning scholarship related to self-directed learning and discourse along the continuum of formal and informal education and learning. Tough (1978, 1979, 2002) contributed a view of self-directed learning as “learning
projects,” which he described as “highly deliberate efforts to gain and retain certain definite knowledge and skill, or to change in some other way” (Tough, 1978, p. 250). Learning projects are made up of “learning episodes,” discrete focused-learning activities where the “primary motivation is to gain and retain certain knowledge and skill” (Tough, 1999, p. 3). Tough believed learner-initiated projects were widespread occurrences of everyday life, undertaken independent of formal settings or instructors by learners who prefer autonomy in choosing and directing their own learning when possible (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999).

Relatedly, Knowles’s contribution to adult education during the last century included his work on informal education, the professionalization of adult education and the development of his concept of andragogy as a distinctly adult learning process. He understood self-directed learning as a key component of his theory of andragogy and defined it as:

a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, in identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (1975, p. 18)

Knowles argued that adults were motivated to learn when their “reservoir of experience” was insufficient to meet their needs, and relatedly that they were motivated to put learning outcomes to practice (Jarvis, 2006). Although Knowles’s description of self-directed learning remains widely used, his attempt to delineate adult learning as a separate form of learning from that of child learners, a concept he called andragogy, has been widely critiqued and has fallen out of use (c.f. Smith, 2002, for a summary of critiques). In sum, the works of Knowles and Tough emphasized learner agency in planning activities to obtain knowledge and skills, and they wedded informal learning to the overarching concept of self-directed learning (Percy, 1997).

Both Knowles and Tough have been significantly critiqued: Knowles expressly for his conception of an adult pedagogy he identified as andragogy, and his work not contributing to an
overall understanding of adult learning (Jarvis, 2006); and Tough for the implied linearity of
decision making in self-directed learning suggested by his model (Roberson & Merriam, 2005).

Brookfield (2007) reflected on what was the promise of self-directed learning as a fecund
and provocative approach to adult learning theory, but argued that its contribution has been
diluted by misplaced emphasis on concepts of the self and the absence of problematizing areas of
that foreclose learning. Specifically, he drew on Fromm’s (1941) concept of “automation
conformity” to indicate the pull of forces (e.g., secure jobs, health, the need to imagine oneself
like everyone else) that lead individuals to conform and resist challenging authority. The danger
of this conformity, Brookfield states, is that it becomes a powerful internal drive, a need for
homeostasis, that can lead people to abdicate control of their interests, desires, and, in this case,
learning. Brookfield also referenced Marcuse’s (1964) notion of “one-dimensional
thought,”...“instrumental thought focused on how to make the current system work better and
perform more effectively” (p. 336) — to reveal another way that authentic self-directed learning is
co-opted. In this argument, Brookfield outlined how individuals choose self-directed learning
projects through a filter that always bows to the good of society, a society built on consumerism,
technology, and confirmation of “the correctness of the existing order” (p. 337). Establishing this
foundation, Brookfield argued that self-directed scholarship with its focus on the self or
individual, is misguided and fails to recognize the power of hegemonic forces that constrain,
withhold, or foreclose enactments of self-directed learning. What is needed, Brookfield argued, is
re-conceptualizing self-directed learning as an “oppositional practice” where individuals
recognize “the possibility of hegemony” (p. 342), that is, the ways they may have self-censored
learning and learning interests because of external controls (e.g., “I can’t learn this because…it is
unpatriotic, subversive, deviant…”; p. 338).

This notion of the “oppositional potential” (Brookfield, 2007, p. 340) in self-directed
learning is useful in considering the experience of Dutch adoptive parents in this study. As noted
in chapters two and five, Dutch parents recognized themselves as a marginal group among families in the Netherlands that adopt internationally. As they affirmed their choices to adopt from the U.S., they were both challenged and abandoned by Dutch adoption professionals who questioned preferences for infant adoptions and adoption from another Western country. Consequently, participants took it upon themselves to seek out the information they needed and in doing so formed an informal network of parents helping (prospective) parents to adopt.

Pre- and post-adoption training and learning by adoptive parents is a hybrid affair; a discrete foundational base in specific topic areas is initiated by external agencies such as adoption agency staff or other entities charged with overseeing state or provincial adoption requirements. However, to use Livingstone’s (2002) and Tough’s (1999) words, this learning is often the “tip of the iceberg” that sets parents off in myriad directions depending on the type of adoption they pursue (i.e., domestic, international, transracial, open, etc.). Intentional informal learning (Livingstone, 2001) characterizes much of this learning effort, while Knowles’s description of self-directed learning is the overarching analog I employ to situate this hybrid.

Looking at turning points, the multiple juncture points in the journey of adoptive parents to parenthood, it seemed as if many episodes became a chain of self-directed projects. Conceptually, the process in adoption has much in common with the use of a self-directed learning framework in patient education. Harris (1998) and Rager (2003, 2004, 2007, 2009) both look at the patient’s quest for information and utilization of a variety of resources (patient support groups, patient education written materials, family support) along the disease continuum. Both Baumgartner (2011) and Rager (2003) used Knowles’s view of self-directed learning as a referent from which to review patient learning activities. To some extent I recognized a mirrored process in the adoption trajectory of these parents (a decision point leading to adoption, learning the process, completing the homestudy, completing adoption classes, choosing a country, preparing to visit the country, meeting a child, and so on) with the step-wise, albeit emotional, journey of
patients (learning about a disease, obtaining information, making treatment choices, learning the medical system, using community support, and so on). Adults in both situations follow Knowles’s process of learning as they seek out information, assess needs to move to further a process or treatment, seek support and knowledge from professionals and peers, and learn through the embodied experience of disease or parenting.

These concepts are relevant to this study because they get close to describing the miscellany of deliberative learning activities that participants engaged in as they transitioned from childless couples to parents. In this study, taking on learning projects embodied a facet of the “work” of parenting—the intentional, skill-building, information-seeking, and identity-forming efforts aimed to gain knowledge and competencies they gauged as necessary for parenting effectively or for even achieving parenthood through adopting. For example, numerous Dutch families spent significant time learning the complex immigration and adoption laws of their country and the United States because no one entity was responsible for sharing this knowledge. Both Canadian and Dutch parents taught themselves how to care and style their child’s Black-textured hair, because they knew they needed to know this as parents of Black children.

**Formal Education, Non-Formal Education, Informal Learning, and Informal Education**

Learning contexts and learner autonomy over learning processes are markers used by some theorists to distinguish learning characterized as formal or informal learning (Bennett, 2012; Livingstone, 2007; Werquin, 2010). Livingstone (1999) succinctly identified these sites as “formal schooling, further education, and informal learning” (p. 1). *Formal schooling* is compulsory education that typically extends through adolescence, provides credentialing, and may continue formally through university or postgraduate level. Adults may return for *further education* such as training programs, workshops, or courses through educational or social
institutions on a part time or short-term basis (Livingstone, 1999, p. 1). This study employs Livingstone’s concept of informal learning which he described as:

Any activity involving the pursuit of understanding, knowledge or skill which occurs outside the curricula of educational institutions, or the courses or workshops offered by educational or social agencies. The basic terms of informal learning (e.g., objectives, content, means and processes of acquisition, duration, evaluation of outcomes, applications) are determined by the individuals and group that choose to engage in it. Informal learning is undertaken on one’s own; either individually or collectively, without either externally imposed criteria or the presence of an institutionally authorized instructor. (p. 2)

Livingstone (1999; 2000) adds an additional type of informal learning—*explicit informal learning*—to capture individuals’ awareness of the significance of their learning over less conscious learning processes such as tacit learning or learning through socialization.

In a subsequent paper, Livingstone (2001) articulated a typology of learning that largely correlates to his sites of learning. In a typology similar to other theorists, he offered attributes to distinguish between formal education, non-formal education, and further education; Livingstone used the latter two terms interchangeably. He also distinguished between informal education and informal training, noting that all other learning not based on an “externally-organized curriculum” or not teacher facilitated is “self-directed or collective informal learning,” and is “most simply understood as learning that is undertaken by the learner or learners’ own terms without either prescribed curricular requirements of a designated instructor” (p. 3).

Helpful to this study is Livingstone’s (2001) attention to intentional informal learning—learning that is characterized by the person’s “conscious identification of the activity as significant learning or training” (p. 4). Furthermore, Livingstone acknowledged learner recognition of the learning as significant, identification of new knowledge acquired outside of a prescribed curriculum, and awareness for the self-directed effort in acquiring the knowledge. This distinction, he argued, is necessary to identify learning separate from the diffuse forms of “general socialization and tacit informal learning” (p. 4).
Concepts of self-directed learning and informal learning are not static; they can conflict or overlap. However, they are useful heuristics for understanding learning that takes place outside of formal settings (Colley, Hodkinson, & Malcolm, 2003; Hager & Halliday, 2009). Livingstone’s descriptions of intentional informal learning, Brookfield’s argument for self-directed learning as an oppositional activity, Tough’s notion of learning activities, and Knowles’s general view of self-directed learning offer a touchstone from which to draw out similarities and identify differences in adoptive parent learning within and across the two countries. For instance, as noted in the background chapter of this dissertation, preparatory adoptive parent training is required when adopting children internationally. How this training is conducted varies across countries, provinces, or (U.S.) states. In this study, Dutch families recalled a distinctive nationalized process that seems more aligned to Livingstone’s non-formal education process, complete with a uniform curriculum, a standard text, and an externally designated instructor (Livingstone, 2001). The Canadian training process and requirements varied by province and did not use a nationalized curriculum. Moreover, threaded through many participants’ narratives were important themes of learning and becoming, the outcomes of the intentional informal learning reflected in stories of gained competencies. For example, two parents described how compliments from Black women of their daughters’ braided and beaded hair, gave them confidence in their ability to style hair, as well as their ability to teach their daughters self (hair) care.

**Sensitizing Concepts: Narrative Learning and Communities of Practice**

Sensitizing concepts are elements often associated with a grounded theory methodology. Bowen (2006) presented a useful review of their function and utility as described by Blumer and Charmaz. My overviews of narrative learning and communities of practice (CoP) in the following sections are informed by Bowen’s work. Referencing Blumer, Bowen noted that
sensitizing concepts “give a general sense of reference and guidance in approaching empirical instances, and “merely suggest directions along which to look” (Blumer, 1954, p. 7, as cited in Bowen, 2006, p. 13). Bowen also refers to Charmaz’s understanding of this idea: “Sensitizing concepts offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience…they provide starting points for building analysis…points of departure from which to study the data (Charmaz, 2003, p. 259, as cited in Bowen, 2006, p. 14).

Engaging in an exploratory study of the adoption experience of 20 adoptive families across two countries, I was reluctant to apply a comprehensive theoretical template to describe their learning experiences. For example, I was aware that adoptive families often bond with other adoptive families, especially those that adopt from the same country (Dorow, 2006; Jacobson, 2008). However, I was not sure if this would either exist or rise to the level of a community of practice (CoP) in either or both countries. (I argue below that it did in the Netherlands, but not in Canada.)

Learning from the stories of others, hearing of the experiences of successful adopters, is often a fundamental and orienting step for prospective families as they begin to imagine the life they may lead as parents. The concept of narrative learning captures this learning dynamic. I also understood the existence of communities of adopters, especially in the Netherlands, as a network of learners and informal teachers and mentors that come together intentionally to inform each other and exchange adoption knowledge in that country. Communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger, 2010) offered a helpful way to consider the intentional engagement of families to share knowledge, guide newcomers, and create resources for their community of prospective and experience adoptive families.

Narrative Learning

Narrative learning in adoption is a form of learning that seems almost indigenous to the
adoption process. It is hard to overestimate the interconnectedness of narrative forms to adoption experiences. For prospective adoptive parents, hearing the stories told by successful adoptive parents and subsequent exchanges is a powerful experience that can shift adults from curious onlookers to envisioning themselves as adoptive parents (see Chapter Five). Adoption agencies rely on the use of the narratives of adoption triad members to sensitize and excite prospective families through adoption orientation meetings intended to educate families about the adoption process and through adoption triad panels convened to reveal adoption issues through the lived experience of adopters, adoptees, and birth parents. Stories in the form of role-playing are also found to bring about attitude change, develop social skills, and work as a method to promote changes in behaviors or attitudes, and as such are sometimes used in adoption agency-based trainings (Noy-Sharav, 2005; Noordegraaf, vanNijnatten, & Ebers, 2008).

Narrative learning in adult education is just gaining traction (Clark & Rossiter, 2006). Storytelling—narrating experiences and giving meaning to those experiences—is a means to forging identities. In telling stores, we exist in our social worlds, and we use narratives to give visual details and cues to our developmental stages and share evidence of our developmental growth (Clark & Rossiter, 2006, p. 63). Telling stories is knowledge sharing and involves a dialectical relationship between narrator and audience.

A testament to narrative learning, perhaps, is the extent to which researchers learn from the narratives of others and circulate analyses of the narratives to promote further learning. Mattingly and Lawlor (2000) illustrated this point in their work on “Learning from Stories” (p. 4) and use of narrative interviews in the study of child disabilities and family caregiving. Their work serves as a meta-analysis: It described the use of participant narratives to instruct occupational therapists, the use of narratives by patient/family members, and the use of narrative differences across stories for the instruction of professionals. Furthermore, the study uses the narrators’ voices (researchers) to instruct a scholarly audience. In much the same way, the
learning shared through this research effort is a metacognitive effort. Participants attracted to this study often indicated that their interest in participating was motivated by a desire to instruct policy-makers, practitioners, and future prospective adoptive parents on an experience that had largely remained invisible in adoption-themed research. They told stories of learning about adoption issues through narratives shared by adoptees and birth parents and subsequently contextualized the learning by revealing how they used what they had learned in their own lives. Additionally, their position as research participants and self-awareness of that subjectivity drove another layer of learning whereby the saw themselves as instruments of future learning.

Strategic and spontaneous storytelling influences understanding of the process and experience of adoption. Researchers have studied this phenomenon from several vantage points. A prominent canon of research analyzes aspects of adoption narratives largely for the benefit of the adoption scholar community; that is, the research is intended to shed light on various features and intents of adoption stories and the intended audience is other scholars. Adoption-related narratives analyzed in these works can be independently produced by prospective or current adoptive parents, birth family members, adult adoptees or constructed at the request of researchers through research studies.

For example, Norwood and Baxter (2011) studied stories embedded in letters to birthmothers written by prospective adoptive parents found on the Internet. These are letters written by prospective adoptive parents and placed on adoption boards (some agency-based) throughout the country. Although the letters are written to a non-specific birthmother and only selected identifying information is provided for the prospective parents, the narrative profile itself is written to elicit curiosity, provide information, and hopefully persuade a potential birthmother to consider a particular family. Harrigan (2010) studied the adoption stories of adoptive mothers to explore functions of the storytelling for adoptees, adoptive parents and others. Adoption stories told by parents to adopted children serve multiple purposes. They serve to normalize
adoption, facilitate adoption openness and communication, and provide medical, psychological and familial background for children. They are told to extended family or within the public arena to educate on the adoption process and preferred adoption language, as well as to correct misinformation or serve other purposes.

A related group of studies looked at the role of visual cultures in promoting or projecting aspects of adoption. Cartwright (2003) wrote about her personal journey to become an adoptive parent. A scholar of visual culture, her experience led her to analyze the use of photographs of waiting children (and attendant text) used by adoption agencies to educate on and promote child adoption. These visual/text narratives are circulated across agency brochures, on the web in child profiles, and through other public venues. Concerns about the unfettered and prolific circulation of child narratives are the subject of her essay, and she connected the intent of the photos (to educate, to elicit emotional responses) to her own learning from this exposure.

In this study, it was the circulation of “Dear Birthmother” (see Appendix D) letters and image-packed family portfolios (intended to capture the curiosity or interest of a birth parent) that drove the outgoing adoption process. Participants in this study vividly recalled designing their letters and portfolios, the expectant and hopeful waiting time that proceeded a referral, followed by calls from U.S. or Canadian adoption service providers that told families of a U.S. birth parent’s interest in contacting or considering them. Several participants poignantly mimed imagined scenarios of birthmothers viewing and discarding family books (provided by U.S. adoption service providers) until they considered theirs.

**Communities of Practice**

This concept is introduced as a lens through which to consider the learning experiences of Dutch adopters in this study. The eight Dutch families had adopted children over the last 15 years, and most of them had done so before new regulations were introduced in the Netherlands
that changed how U.S. adoptions proceed. Prior to the changes that began in 2008 and were written into Dutch policy in 2011, U.S. adoptions fell under *zelfdoener* adoptions or do-it-yourself adoptions (see Chapter 2), a process where families initiated their own contact with U.S. adoption providers (agencies or attorneys) and worked through them to identify a birthmother or child. Narrative accounts of the Dutch parents revealed an adoption trajectory often tethered to a social learning process coherent with Lave and Wenger’s (1991), and Wenger’s (1998, 2000, 2010) concept of communities of practice (see below and Chapter Six). This model was developed by anthropologists Jane Lave, Barbara Rogoff, and Etienne Wenger in the 1980s-1990s to understand “the social nature of human learning” and drew upon the works of Bourdieu, Foucault, Giddens, Vygotsky, and others (Wenger, 2010, p. 1). Lave and Wenger articulated communities of practice as a constituent of situated learning (Jarvis, 2007; Smith, 2003/2009).

Wenger (2010) argued that meaningful learning in a community of practice requires two elements: social participation through engagement in “activities, conversations, reflections” and production of “physical and conceptual artifacts—words, tools, concepts, stories, documents, resource links…and other forms of reification” (p. 1). Both elements are required; each anchors the other to shared experiences and learning emanating in a particular community and becomes constitutive to the individual and collective experiences that form the social learning history of the community. This shared learning history builds perimeters around the community and fosters internal understandings (shared group interests and perspectives, requirements for participation, and use of group resources) and expectations that become recognized as membership criteria.

Wenger noted: “Over time, a history of learning becomes an informal and dynamic social structure among the participants, and this is what a community of practice is” (p. 2). Communities of practice develop in innumerable locations and are viewed as informal learning networks that cannot be externally mandated (Merriam, Courtnay, & Baumgartner, 2003; Snyder, Wenger, & Briggs, 2003).
CoPs are built upon three core structural components: domain, community, and practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 2010):

- **The domain.** The membership in a CoP coalesces around its shared interests and members’ competences and commitment to the shared domain of interests. These distinctions identify CoPs from other (groups or networks) of people.

- **The community.** The relationship of members as they engage in activities, discussions, and the exchange of help, knowledge and support. These interactions are critical to being identified as a CoP. This component pivots on developing relational interactions that foster “trust, belonging, and reciprocity” (Snyder & Wenger, 2010, p. 2).

- **The practice.** Through sustained interaction practitioners build a repertoire of tools, methods, and skills that in aggregate characterize and define their shared practice (Smith, 2003; Snyder, Wenger, & Briggs, 2003).

In addition to these components, a central tenet of the model is that learning occurs through participation in the community, a process that Lave and Wenger (1991) call legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). As individuals become interested and involved in a community, they interact with members and through their deepening social relations develop, exchange, and create knowledge. Learners can move from being peripheral learners to occasional, active, or core group members (Wenger-Trayner, n.d.). Levels of membership are fluid, but a learner’s engagement and intent to learn forges his or her identity within the community.

Early work of Lave and Wenger was criticized for proposing an almost lock-step, uni-directional process that moved adults from a peripheral to full participation in a CoP (Jarvis, 2007). Wenger (1998) adapted the model to include a more diverse repertoire of participation. However, because identity is forged in part through participation in a CoP, Wenger’s call for more diverse levels (marginal, contingent, or no involvement), can still be critiqued; movement
between levels may create tension by creating a compromised or ambiguous identity within the CoP (Handley, Sturdy, Fincham, & Clark, 2006). In a rigorous analysis of Wenger’s (1998) iteration of CoP, Storberg-Walker (2008) maintained that the model offers insights into “learning, meaning, identity and practice” (p. 555) but overall does not constitute a theory, in part because of imprecise or fluid terminology of its constituent parts, and its over-applied use across diffuse areas. Questions of whether CoP rises to the level of theory notwithstanding, the concept — with its focus on learning through participation, creation of tools and resources for other participants, and recognition of sense of membership with others — remains a helpful heuristic from which to consider the communal learning among Dutch parents in this study.

Use of Critical Race Theory in this Study

Although not used specifically as an analytical framework for this study, Critical Race Theory (CRT) must be acknowledged as a backdrop to it. CRT is forged in an amalgam of beliefs stemming from a critique of liberalism, which holds that White supremacy is still culturally reproduced in U.S. law and social policies. Although it does not have a finite set of doctrines, CRT nonetheless has several identifying tenets, which include: an assertion that race and racism remain central, endemic components of U.S. culture; that the voice of minorities, amplified through narratives (counter-narratives), are an authentic and viable method of representation, and relatedly, that majoritarian narratives are never objective but are rooted in hegemony (Crenshaw, 1994; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Harris, 1993; McDowell & Jeris, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2010; Matsuda, 1987). In CRT, colorblindness is understood as a mechanism that denies evidence of racial discrimination, superiority, or injustices (Taylor, 2000). In addition, CRT values subjective experience, recognizing both individual perspective and historical context (Delgado & Stefancic, 2000, 2001; Hill-Collins, 1997; Parker, 1998). This latter point is salient and forms another tenet, differential racialization, that challenges
ahistoricism and asserts the need to contextualize dominant social discourse and ideological views fused in laws and social policy (Banks, 1998; Delgado & Stefancic, 2007). Critical race theorists argue that differential racialization is a process whereby the dominant culture racializes different groups at different times for different purposes (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Matsuda, 1987; Taylor 2000).

These features come to bear prominently in intercountry and transracial adoption policy, practice, and discourse. For example, it is hard to sidestep the fact that a lubricating factor in outgoing cases is the identification, in some U.S states, of minority children as special needs children. This labeling, initially meant to identify children with health and mental health vulnerabilities, now has “come to be used alternately with ‘hard to place,’ with many adoption organization considering children and infants who are Black or biracial to be children with special needs” (Adamec & Miller, 2007, p. 126). Transracial adoption, challenged by the National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), remains a hallmark of controversy as evidenced by the shifting discourses noted earlier, in which culture keeping strategies may be viewed as less challenging (and less needed) than racial socialization activities, and perceptions of adoption choice based on preferences for non- or “less”-Black children. By using CRT as a touchstone, a reference point, I hope to bring attention to these and other racially charged issues while remaining open to all interpretations of participant experiences.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided an overview of the location of outgoing U.S. adoptions within the discourse of intercountry adoptions. I subsequently reviewed primary discourses of the phenomenon and identified shared or divergent elements between the contemporary paradigm of intercountry practice and the practice of outgoing adoptions. These debates and discourses, I
argue, find public and private resonance when considering the experience of Canadian and Dutch adopters of children from the United States.

Adoptive parent preparation and education is of concern to parents themselves, to the sending and receiving nations that engage in intercountry adoption, and to the adoption agencies and other providers that conduct adoption-related trainings. In this review of the literature, I offered an overview of these efforts, studies of parent training, and the content they emphasize.

Self-directed learning, informal, and nonformal learning and education concepts were introduced as a theoretical lens from which to explore outgoing U.S. adoptions (although it is also appropriate for the larger phenomenon of adoption). In addition, narrative learning and communities of practice (CoP) were introduced as sensitizing concepts to suggest how adoptive parents learn from other members of the adoption community or adoption triad. Adults in this study are all well-educated professionals whose adoption-based learning occurs outside of formal education settings. A component of adoptive parent training is often mandated by international, national, provincial, or state entities (a nonformal learning experience according to some theorists). However, the gathering of knowledgeable sources, the identification and utilization of resources, and the engagement in deliberative activities, I argue, forms a self-directed learning plan that parents construct to help achieve competency in adoptive parenting. These activities are the sites and processes of self-directed and informal learning. This exploratory study then offers vivid, thick descriptions of learning outside of workplace or healthcare settings, two of the most common locations of prior studies on self-directed or informal learning.

Finally, Critical Race Theory (CRT) was introduced as a relevant framework from which to understand the United States as a sending nation of children. Almost all of the adopted children of families in this study were minority children. This racially-based membership is, according to U.S. child welfare standards, the attribute that marks them as “special needs” children and candidates for adoption.
Chapter 4

Research Design

My goal in conducting this exploratory study was to gain understanding of the intercountry adoption experience of foreign parents when adopting children from the United States. A critical element was to include adoptive families from at least two receiving nations of U.S. children; that is, I wanted to understand the phenomenon and process of outgoing adoptions within and across more than one country. This decision emerged from my pilot study with Canadian and U.S. adoption professionals involved in outgoing U.S. adoptions, which indicated likely cultural differences in parent motivations to adopt U.S. children, and national differences in intercountry adoption processes and discourses.

Informed by this data, I chose a cross-national\(^9\) multiple case study research design with participants in Canada and the Netherlands—the leading receiving nations of U.S. children. I drew upon Stake’s (2000) understanding of multiple case study (alternatively, collective case study) as used to “investigate a phenomenon, population, or general condition” (p. 445). Cases within the collection can be similar or dissimilar, but they are chosen “because it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding...better theorizing about a still larger collection of cases” (pp. 445-446). These attributes of case study research suggested girth enough

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\(^9\) A cross-national study assumes participants “are members of a particular national culture, which affects their attitudes and behavior” (Steenkamp, ter Hostede, & Wedel, 1999, p. 55). Cross-national studies are concerned with observing “social phenomena across nations,” observing “similarities or differences and their outcomes, and gaining understanding of how social processes operate” (Hantras, 2007, p. 3). In using this term, rather than cross-cultural study, I am recognizing within limits, nation states (Canada, the Netherlands) as unit of analysis. Hantras and Mangen (2007) argue, “The rationale for selecting nation states as a unit of analysis or frame of reference for comparative research is relatively easy to justify in studies where the criterion for inclusion is their membership of an international organization” (p. 7). They further note, “Nations...afford a convenient frame of reference for comparative studies since they possess clearly defined territorial borders, and their own characteristic administrative and legal structures” (p. 8).
to gain understanding of a rather large phenomenon (ICA experience) while revealing more intimate illustrations of the phenomenon within and across families and cultures. Relatedly, I employed aspects of Frederick Erickson’s (2004) form of discourse analysis: a method of creating linkages between situated, everyday talk to past and present global contexts and discourses. This work enriched my understanding of the myriad ways in which localized conversations have genesis from multiple sources—historical and current, local and global.

This study is a qualitative research endeavor. I embraced this research tradition because it resonated with my goals to privilege participant experiences and the sociocultural context of their lives (Yin, 2009). It also offered a postmodern understanding that emergent findings would not produce “one truth” but rather would be built upon, to paraphrase William James (1902), the varieties of adoption experiences, as lived by study participants. This study is, above all, a narrative inquiry, aiming to reveal “the subjective experience of participants as they interpret the events and conditions of their everyday lives” (Miller, 2005, as cited in Coulter & Smith, 2009, p. 578). It is a mode of transforming knowing into telling (Mishler, 1995). I understood that these features of narrative inquiry, when animated through the individual accounts of adoptive parents (the “cases” of my research design) could convey knowledge and meanings of outgoing adoptions as revealed through stories of adopting and parenting. Accordingly, I used this research method to address the following questions:

1. What personal experiences, knowledge, attitudes, or beliefs influence the decision of a Canadian or Dutch citizen to adopt a U.S. child?
2. How do Canadian and Dutch parents educate or prepare themselves to adopt across racial, cultural, and international borders when adopting a U.S. child?
3. In what ways do the experiences of Canadian and Dutch adopters align with or differ from traditional discourses of intercountry adoption (ICA) practice?
4. In what ways, if at all, has the adoption affected meanings of self, family, community, culture, country, or worldview for the adoptive parents and their families?

Narrative Inquiry and the Researcher in Search of Narratives

In the social sciences, narrative inquiry is a subset of qualitative research, undergirded by the use of stories to explore human actions (Chase, 2011; Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative inquiry is well-suited to explore a social phenomenon characterized by its sequenced turning points: choosing to adopt, preparing to parent, meeting a child, creating family, and negotiating adoptive and birth family relationships. Using a storytelling method to understand stories of adoption is a bit of linking method to metonym. The narrative presence in adoption literature or the presence of adoption in narratives is ubiquitous, seemingly agitating in the DNA of human ethos that links back to stories of Moses and Oedipus and across the works of Brontë, Dickens, Kingsolver, and a pantheon of playwrights, novelists, filmmakers, historians, and academics.

For Bruner (2004), the telling of our lives is a constructivist endeavor, linking meaning and “world-making” with the medium of narrative: “We seem to have no other way of describing “lived time” save in the form of a narrative….When someone tells you his life…it is always a cognitive achievement… [I]n the end, it is a narrative achievement” (p. 692). Applying a narrative inquiry approach to the study of Canadian and Dutch families’ experience of adopting U.S. children allowed a fractal view of the experience, layering each family’s personal journey against the sociocultural forces that helped produce and shape it (Creswell, 2007; Polkinghorne, 1988; Riessman, 2008). For example, a distinguishing feature of outgoing adoptions is their place “off the map” of traditional intercountry discourse. Except in these outgoing cases, adoptive parents from one resource-rich Western nation are not, as a matter of practice, chosen across boundaries of race, culture, and national borders by birth parents in another resource-rich
Western nation. To investigate some of the influencing sending and receiving nations’ factors and circumstances that account for the uniqueness of this process, I depended on this notably culturally responsive approach (Lee, Rosenfeld, Mendenhall, Rivers, & Tynes, 2004; M. Patton, 2002), a methodological attribute also shared with a case study design. A call for narrative research in comparative and international education has been asserted by Fox (2006), and this study can be seen perhaps as endorsement of her encouragement “to embrace narrative as a method of listening to and heeding the voices of experience across borders.” (p. 48).

**Researcher role in narrative research.** Narrative inquiry involves multiple relationships: narrator and self; narrator and researcher; narrator, researcher and audience; and researcher and self. Narrative researchers recount narrators’ stories. These researchers analyze key elements; configure the stories based on time, plot, spatial and temporal location, and sequencing; and interpret them through the attributed meanings of the narrator (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Cortazzi, 1993; Fraser, 2004; Ollenrenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Polkinghorne emphasized “narrative configuration,” the use of a plot around which to draw connections of actions and create meanings, as a “fundamental way in which narrative inquiry differs from other qualitative approaches” (King & Horrocks, 2010, p. 220). Emplotment weaves nascent or well-defined thematic threads to form the beginning, middle, and end of narrative events. Explicit to this narrative process is the researcher’s role as procurer and even editor of narratives and as such, the researcher-participant role is understood as collaborative (Atkinson, 2002; Josselson, 2007).

In this study, I worked not to foreclose storytelling options. This in turn affected my analysis (although I did not know it at the time). For example, and as noted above, replete in intercountry adoption studies and related literature is a sense that adopting is a naturally sequenced enterprise with a plot that moves women and men from desiring and searching for children to becoming mothers and fathers of children—frequently after they have met multiple
domestic and international challenges. Although this narrative arc held true in all accounts with participants in this study, it turned out that the narrative landscape itself, when expressed through individual accounts, was remarkably varied. This was not unexpected: Riessman (2008) gave her own example of a study in India in which some women gave straightforward medically oriented accounts of why they thought they could not bear children and other women shaped non-medical events and actions to form meanings around their childlessness. But it brought home the point of what an interpretive and collaborative process this is.

For example, my prompt, “Can you tell me about when you first met your child?” elicited some straightforward accounts of getting off planes from Canada or the Netherlands, driving to a hospital nursery, and being introduced to an infant that would become a daughter or son. Other accounts, however, were far more discursive, requiring gestures and even role-playing. One account began at a mortgage broker, another began with opening a computer screen to a sonogram, and another involved a locked car, a missing set of keys, a birth grandmother, and a dash to a plane with a cooler of cord blood.

I entered these narratives in at least three ways, and my role was different in each. At times, I needed to ask clarifying questions (e.g., who sent the sonogram—A birthmother? An adoption agency staff member?), and I remained the adoption researcher. Other times, narrator-raconteurs caused me to shift, and I became an “on the edge of my seat” audience member, soaking in a story whose outcome I had yet to divine. A third way I entered was when additional discussion within an interview would suggest to a participant linkages and new connections between some actions or events to others and subsequently form new meanings. An example of this occurred when the mother who spoke about receiving a sonogram from a birthmother spoke later in the interview about an invitation from the birthmother to become friends through Facebook. The adoptive mother made an in-the-moment connection linking these two events, and I became both sounding board and co-constructor of a theme that emerged for the narrator
about the power of technology to facilitate kinship. This occurrence (among others), in which I joined with the parent to speculate on the meaning of events, aligned these narrative episodes with Riessman’s (2008) notion of dialogic/performance analysis in which the researcher “adopts an active voice” and “intersubjectivity and reflexivity come to the fore as there is a dialogue between the researcher and the researched” (p. 137).

**Voice in narrative research.** Voice in narrative inquiry can pertain to an individual and the researcher or to a collection of individuals and the researcher (Coulter & Smith, 2009; Moen, 2008). Further, the notion of the collective—voices—is used by narrative researchers to indicate recognition that participant stories are products shaped over time and through experiences, knowledge, and values, in the “cultural, historical and institutional settings in which they occur” (Moen, 2006, p. 61). Although dialogue/text is a common manifestation of voice in narrative research, other media such as art, photography, poetry and journal writing can also reveal meanings and recount experience (Coulter & Smith, 2009).

In this study, adoptive parents at times shifted voice, moving from the singular (their own perspective) to the collective (responding as members of the group of adoptive parents). Narratives can be used as an agentic force by individuals or groups to argue, persuade, entertain, call to action, or other purposes (Andrews, 2007; Riessman, 2006). Participants seemed to be aware of these functions, as suggested by an email I received from one family interested in participating in the study. In the excerpt below, the adoptive mother comments on her family’s experience, identifies their marginalized place, and connects this to her endorsement of research as a vehicle to ameliorate this. Moreover, in noting “work to be done,” there is an implication of a joint venture, a co-constructed endeavor.

I have definitely found that there is little support for those of us adopting from the USA. I can find parent support groups for China, Ethiopian or Russian adoptions, but we are finding that our adoption just doesn’t “fit.” I haven’t been able to find any information on raising an African American child in Canada… There definitely is work to be done, and we give you our support on your journey.
Applying thematic-dialogical/performance approach. Riessman (2008) organized narrative approaches according to analytic methods. Narrative analysis, she noted, is a component of narrative inquiry that refers to a “family of interpretive approaches to spoken, written, and visual texts” (p. 183). She offered four dominant analytical approaches: thematic, structural, dialogical/performance, and visual. Each has as its intent “interrogating….the how and why events are storied…not simply to the referred content” (Riessman, 2005, p. 394). Riessman acknowledged that her typology can be fuzzy and that hybrids of the four approaches are possible. I used elements of two of these approaches, thematic and dialogical/performance, to explore the experiences of Canadian and Dutch parents.

In identifying with Riessman’s use of thematic analysis, I applied the strategy to focus on narrators’ accounts: the stories they individually shared with me and the themes that are revealed in their content. In thematic analysis, narrative content emphasizes “what” is said rather than “how” something is said. By scrutinizing the content of participants’ narratives, I aimed to understand conceptual elements that, when grouped together, offered insight to their adoptions and experience as adoptive parents of U.S. children. This approach, Riessman (2005) noted, “is useful for theorizing across a number of cases–finding common thematic elements across research participants and the events they report” (p. 3).

In discussing dialogic/performance analysis, Riessman (2008) described a process that seeks to understand the narrator’s interactional activities and processes, that is, the roles they take on or the stances they share as they create narratives from their lived experiences (Duque, 2010). She related performativity to the narrators’ shifting, enacted identity, which can be mediated by the narrator’s assessment of an intended audience. The approach is conceptually informed by Bakhtin’s notion of polyphony or multi-voicedness; it understands the narrator’s voice as containing ideologies and meanings well beyond the individual experience of the speaker.
My goal in using a dialogic/performance method was to consider the multi-voicedness of the stories being told. For example, a Canadian or Dutch parent speaking to me, a U.S. citizen, about the meaning he or she has ascribed to adopting a U.S. citizen, contains implicit views of the United States, meanings of intercountry adoption, and often, views on race and cultural identity with regard to the U.S., Canada, or the Netherlands. As indicated in Chapter 2, I am also influenced by Frederick Erickson’s (2004) book, *Talk and Social Theory*, which also links micro-level talk with macro-level issues of temporal and spatial settings.

**Units of analysis.** The purpose of this study was to explore the intercountry adoption experience of Canadian and Dutch adopters of children from the United States. To produce a robust, exploratory study capable of understanding the phenomenon from the perspectives of individual and collective families (i.e., Canadian adopters’ experiences, Dutch adopters’ experiences) I used a narrative inquiry and case study approach. This methodological strategy allowed me to focus on the individual and collective adopters’ experiences and the nation-state intercountry adoption context in which they exist. This study focused on 20 U.S. adoptive families in two countries engaged in a particular phenomenon—U.S. outgoing adoptions, a subset of intercountry adoptions. Accordingly, this study presents three levels of data: outgoing U.S. adoptions as a bounded system; each country (Canadian, Dutch) case as an embedded case; and each participant as an embedded sub-case within each country case. I am aware that there are multiple nested cases (M. Patton, 2002) that could be analyzed within and across these variables; for example cases could be tracked along racial lines, and so on.

Accordingly, this study required several units of analysis. Units of analysis, Baptiste (2008) noted, must have the capacity to produce or reveal the topic under study, while a unit of observation serves to reflect further or shed light on a unit of analysis. The collection of Canadian adopters and of Dutch adopters were each units of analysis capable of revealing outgoing adoption experiences but were units of observation when considering the systemic,
comparative similarities or difference between Canadian or Dutch U.S.-outgoing adoptions. For this perspective I drew from M. Patton (2002):

The analytical focus in…multisite studies is on variations among project sites more than on variations among individuals within projects. Different units of analysis are not mutually exclusive. Neighborhoods can be units of analysis or communities, cities…even nations in the case of international programs….The key issue in selecting and making decisions about the appropriate unit of analysis is to decide what it is you want to be able to say about something at the end of the study. (pp. 228-229, emphasis in the original)

Although not to the same granularity of scrutiny as in the narratives of adoptive families, my intent with this study was to explore outgoing adoptions through a comparative lens with each country’s participant group as a unit of analysis (case study focus). The groups could be observed and described through discussion of adoption experience and process in the two nations-state laws, membership in the Hague Adoption Conference, writings or observations on outgoing adoptions in the Canadian and Dutch public sphere and the adoptive parent narratives.

**Research Sites**

A guiding hypothesis of this study was a conceptualization of outgoing U.S. adoptions as falling outside the contemporary practice of ICA (see Chapters 1 and 2). From this perspective, I approached U.S. outgoing adoptions as a “critical case” (Flyvbjerg, 2006; Marshall & Rossman 2010; M. Patton, 2002; Yin, 2009) in ICA practice, a descriptor used by M. Patton to indicate “cases…that can make a point quite dramatically, or are, for some reason, particularly important in the scheme of things” (p. 236). With this perspective in mind, when choosing a research site for the study, I took M. Patton’s (2002) advice: “pick the site that would yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the development of knowledge” (p. 236).

I identified Canada and the Netherlands as my field sites for several reasons. These countries are the two largest receiving nations of U.S. children, and adoptions to these countries
have been going on the longest amount of time (U.S. DOS, 2012). In addition, English is spoken by approximately 85% of the population in the Netherlands (European Union, 2005) and is an official language of Canada (Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Fact Book, 2013), making logistics, access, and communication for the researcher and participants easier. Furthermore, I determined that a focus in countries where adoptions are ongoing and increasing (U.S. DOS, 2011) would be of more value to families, scholars, policy makers, and practitioners engaged in outgoing adoptions. This last attribute I hoped would support M. Patton’s critical case sampling assertion: “logical generalizations can often be made from the weight of evidence produced in studying a single, critical case” (p. 237), an argument that Flyvbjerg (2006) also made.

In this study, I describe where participants live in broad strokes to preserve confidentiality of individual participants, the adoption agencies, and other entities that distributed materials about this research. There are few agencies involved in outgoing adoptions in each of the countries (U.S., Canada, and the Netherlands), and they are known by region (for example, if I were to say participants were in Eastern Canada or that the U.S. children came from the Midwest, particular agencies would have likely been involved). For these reasons, with regard to research sites, countries are the primary reference point, although many families did discuss attributes of their particular villages, towns, cities or communities.

**Sampling and Recruitment Strategies**

**Sampling strategies.** Purposeful sampling (Berg, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Rossman & Rallis, 2003; Sandelowski, 1995) is a form of non-probability sampling used to acquire the “information-rich” (M. Patton, 2002) cases needed for this study. This strategy is frequently used after some field investigation and when the intent of sampling is to ensure that participants or entities display the characteristics under study (Berg, 1989). Within the rubric of a

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10 For example, the U.S. and Ireland just formalized a process to facilitate adoptions to that country in 2013, though some adoptions have occurred over the years.
purposeful sampling strategy, I used snowball and criterion-based strategies. A snowball strategy was used to recruit participants by asking adoption professionals and other key informants involved in my 2009 pilot study for assistance in promoting the study to Canadian and Dutch adopters of U.S. children. In qualitative research, criterion sampling is frequently identified with quality assurance (Creswell, 2007; Miles & Huberman, 1994; M. Patton, 2002) and is intended to select participants “that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (M. Patton, 2002, p. 238). I used criterion sampling because outgoing adoptions are defined by the Department of State (see Chapter 2), and I wanted to ensure that participants met that criterion. Although scholarly sources and public media accounts indicate that most outgoing adoptees are African American or bi-racial children, I chose not to qualify this study by race because I sought to explore the intercountry adoption experiences of foreign adopters of U.S. children and not limit this to a study of transracial/transnational experiences.

Finally, I wanted to include adopters that had adopted before and after the U.S. had implemented the Hague Adoption Treaty (April 1, 2008), since this Treaty brought with it key changes in the adoption process. I considered a 15-year range sufficient to capture this population as well as adoptions during the prolific intercountry adoption era of the late 1990s through mid 2000s. This time frame was short enough to facilitate easy recall of experiences and long enough to offer rich, thick descriptions of family life markers such as parenting an infant, creating awareness of birth culture and adoption story, preparing for school, and socializing within and across communities.

Key exclusion criteria for the study were Canadian or Dutch adopters who had not retained primary custody of their adopted child following a divorce or separation, prospective adoptive parents in the application process, and adoptive parents of children whose adoptions were not yet finalized. Key criteria for study inclusion were:

- nationals and citizens of Canada or the Netherlands,
• adopted a U.S. child in the last 15 years,
• retained custody of their adopted child or have shared custody if divorced,
• English language speaking ability.

Additionally, families were asked to commit to an in-person or telephone/video conference interview and to complete an initial demographic questionnaire.

Sample size in qualitative studies is not static or specifically defined (M. Patton, 2002) but is generally small (Kuzel, 1992; Mason, 2010; Sandelowski, 1995). Creswell (2006) noted that narrative research may be conducted with one or two participants, or it may include more participants if the goal is “to develop a collective story” (p. 126) – a goal of this research. I applied through the university Institutional Review Board (IRB) for a sample to include up to 40 participants, a sum that was based on my review of other qualitative intercountry adoption studies, as well as my material and time constraints for conducting research in two countries.

**Participant recruitment and selection.** I developed recruitment materials in English and Dutch. Although a participant requirement was English language facility, I thought that recruitment and consent materials should be in Dutch, and I hired an authorized translator to create these documents. I sent these materials to adoption professionals I met through my 2009 pilot study, as well as to other contacts found through the U.S. DOS’s intercountry adoption agency website, and through Google searching of agencies involved in outgoing adoptions. Entities contacted were located in the U.S., Canada, and the Netherlands. Prospective participants were directed to contact me directly for study information. I indicated to referral sources that their efforts and identities would remain anonymous.

This recruitment strategy was effective, and I was contacted by adoptive parents in both countries (with all contacting me in English). Subsequently, I called or emailed families with detailed information about the study and answered their questions. If they agreed to participate I sent a consent form (in English and Dutch to Dutch families), and we began to arrange interview
times. Families were offered in-person, telephone, or Skype interviews, and they were asked if they preferred to be interviewed individually, as a couple, or if only one member of a two-parent family wished to involved. Because of time and distance, one family chose a telephone interview; all other interviews were in person. In sum, parents from 25 families contacted me for additional information and 18 families initially consented to participate. Upon consent, I began data collection by sending participants the demographic questionnaire, which was to be completed prior to the interview.

Three families asked that I call them about their questions concerning the study and to provide them with additional information about my background, goals for the study, and intent of the work. One of the three families asked if I was an adoptive parent; the other two did not inquire. I had anticipated this question (in these situations as well as throughout the interview process) and answered affirmatively. In this first instance, the family’s inquiry seemed intended to accomplish two goals: to identify me as an adoption insider or outsider, and to determine how familiar I was to the adoption experience personally and professionally (i.e., credibility checking). I will discuss more how I negotiated personal and professional queries later in this study, but mention it here as an initial recruitment issue. Of the two other families that asked for additional information prior to consenting to the study, one asked for more detail regarding the purpose of the study and how I hoped to help other current or future adoptive families. The other family asked about the types of questions I would be asking during the interview, what general topics would be covered, and how the findings would be used. Both families entered the study.

In both countries, an additional family was consented after being referred by a family in that country. Families that contacted me initially and then did not respond to my follow-up emails did not give reasons for their decision not to participate. One family in each country could not accommodate my fieldwork schedule and did not wish to participate via phone, video conferencing or any other type of contact that was not in-person. Overall, the recruitment process
proceeded more quickly than I had anticipated. Within approximately six weeks, I had enough participants to plan my fieldwork, and at this point I decided to go first to the Netherlands and then to Canada.

**Participants**

Thirty participants representing 20 adoptive families enrolled in this study (see Table 4-1 below). Twelve families were from Canada, and eight were from the Netherlands. Ten families chose to be interviewed as couples; one couple was lesbian and nine were heterosexual. One father was interviewed individually and nine mothers were interviewed individually. One Canadian interview was conducted by telephone; all others in both countries were conducted in person. Of the 12 Canadian adoptive families, seven were located in or on the periphery of large cities, and five were in suburban areas bordering smaller cities. In the Netherlands, three families lived in larger metropolitan areas, and five lived in villages that were outliers to towns. In the Netherlands, I traveled by train and bus throughout the country to visit study participants. Six families chose to meet in their homes; I met one parent at a restaurant and one couple in a hotel meeting room. I conducted one Canadian interview via telephone, and met one adoptive mother at a convenient Canadian location and another at a local coffee shop. All other interviews were conducted in families’ homes.

Whether or not I interviewed an individual parent or a couple together, within the study I refer to participants as Canadian families, Dutch families, or a Canadian or Dutch mother or father. No attempt was made to analyze data along the lines of specific parental roles (e.g., “Dutch mothers discussed” or “Canadian fathers indicated,” etc.), and statements I make about Dutch or Canadian families apply whether I interviewed one or two parents. Two Canadian adoptees were White; all other adoptions were transracial adoptions of African-American, Hispanic, or bi-or multi-racial children by White parents.
**Participant descriptions.** Table 4-1 summarizes information about each family interviewed, with M and F used to note mother and father, and includes data regarding child age at placement. Participants are identified by a self-or researcher-chosen pseudonym for their family name, and no occupations are revealed in order to preserve confidentially. All but three participants were university- or college-educated, and those who were not, worked in public and civil service professions.

Age at placement indicates the child’s age when placed with adoptive parents. In many cases, finalized adoptions did not occur until up to six months post-placement and when the child and adoptive family were in Canada or the Netherlands. Also, several families were chosen by birthmothers or parents weeks or months before the child’s birth. When this occurred with Canadian families, birth and adoptive parents could meet in person or be in contact via phone or email. Pre-birth, in-person contact was not allowed in Dutch adoptions, although phone and computer contact were allowed if requested by a birthmother. Contact was usually mediated by adoption agencies or professionals, and even in cases of adoptive parents and birth parents meetings or contact, full identifiers (home addresses, last names) were not always exchanged.

Table 4-1.

*Participants—Dutch and Canadian Families*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dutch Families</th>
<th># of children</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age at placement</th>
<th>Age at study</th>
<th>Met birth family?</th>
<th>Ongoing contact?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DeVries M</td>
<td>1 son</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>Days</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flintstone M &amp; F</td>
<td>2 sons</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>Days</td>
<td>4, 1½</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hollander M &amp; F</td>
<td>2 daughters</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>Days</td>
<td>15, 14</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janssen M</td>
<td>1 son 1 daughter</td>
<td>African</td>
<td>4 weeks 10 days</td>
<td>5, 2</td>
<td>No Yes</td>
<td>No Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maartin F</td>
<td>1 daughter</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>Days</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanders M</td>
<td>1 son</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>Days</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canadian Families</td>
<td># of children</td>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Age at placement</td>
<td>Age at study</td>
<td>Met birth family?</td>
<td>Ongoing contact?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atkinson M</td>
<td>1 daughter</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>3 days</td>
<td>2½</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baker M&amp;F</td>
<td>1 son</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>AP present at hospital</td>
<td>9 months</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bryant M</td>
<td>1 daughter</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>5 weeks</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buchanan M</td>
<td>1 son</td>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>6 weeks</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cameron M</td>
<td>1 daughter</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>APs present at birth</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fabrey M</td>
<td>1 son</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>Days old</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hall M &amp; M</td>
<td>1 daughter</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>APs present at birth</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Limited</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucas M &amp; F</td>
<td>1 son</td>
<td>Bi-racial</td>
<td>APs present at birth</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magrite M</td>
<td>1 daughter</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>≤ 1 week</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richards M &amp; F</td>
<td>1 daughter</td>
<td>Haitian-African American</td>
<td>8 days</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes – one way APs to BM</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanderlinden M &amp; F</td>
<td>2 sons</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>2 weeks, 1 week</td>
<td>5, 4</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>For first few years, stopped due to BP choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilson M &amp; F</td>
<td>2 daughters</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>APs present at birth</td>
<td>5, 3</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes for one child</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Collection

Use of multiple methods of data collection is critical to achieving triangulation, a key strategy in qualitative research used to enhance comprehension of the phenomena under study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2009; King & Horrocks, 2010; Maxwell, 2005; Yin, 2010) and to reduce risk of threats to study validity such as “systemic biases or limitations of a specific source or method” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 93). I required multiple data sources to deepen my understanding of participants’ intercountry adoption experiences, the socio-cultural context of their lives, and the socio-political climate toward intercountry adoption and U.S. outgoing adoptions specifically, in Canada and the Netherlands. Data collection sources for narrative inquiry and a case study approach overlap and include collecting documents, archival materials, interviews, and observation (Creswell, 2007).

This study included the following data sources:

- pre-study compilation of media and scholarly articles used for my 2009 outgoing adoption pilot study and for a subsequent book chapter;
- findings from the 2009 pilot study;
- a demographic questionnaire (translated into Dutch) administered prior to in-person interviews;
- in-person interviews with 28 participants and one telephone interview;
- observations of the participants in their homes and community settings (café, neighborhoods and villages, playgrounds, daycares, health clinic, restaurant);
- ongoing compilation and analysis of documents, reports, newspaper and scholarly articles, agency and organizational websites;
- ongoing email correspondence with participants post fieldwork; and
- researcher fieldwork notes and journal.
The next sections present a brief account of the early data collection phase, followed by description of the different data sources, my rationale and experience using them, how I conducted my analysis, and reflection on my role in this research process.

**The early data collection phase.** As adoption professionals and other contacts distributed my recruitment materials, interested parents began emailing me of their interest in the study. Primary data collection began once informed consent was received. I sent participants the questionnaire and upon receipt of the completed form (by email) we corresponded until we could confirm a mutually agreeable meeting date, time, and location. I decided to begin fieldwork in the Netherlands chiefly because parents there responded very rapidly to the request for participants. Some key contacts had facilitated this, an approach that M. Patton (2002) calls the “known sponsor approach” (p. 312), a process by which my credibility was in part established with the endorsement of key contacts in the community who already had legitimacy. Additionally, to my great benefit, key informants emerged in the Netherlands who, in turn, recruited additional parents for the study. The email correspondence during this time helped build relationships with participants as they wrote to me of train schedules and bus locations; described their houses, their communities, their work schedules; and frequently offered to pick me up if their homes were distant from a transport hub.

Key contacts in Canada who disseminated materials also facilitated rapid recruitment. Although the process was different in that no key informants emerged, the relationship-building effects of corresponding and arranging travel were similar. By the time I met participants in person, there usually had been a flurry of emails between us, and several participants had sent me photos and descriptions of their families. By the time I met participants, some of the conversational ice was broken; we usually seemed to engage quite easily.

By the time I left the U.S. for the Netherlands, seven Dutch families and nine Canadian families had confirmed participation (others were recruited in-country). In the Netherlands, I
used Amsterdam as a base but traveled throughout the country, staying at small hotels as needed. I visited for 18 days, meeting with eight families. My Canadian fieldwork occurred over 13 days, during which I met with 11 families.

**Questionnaire.** This form (see Appendix A) was created to solicit demographic information such as nationality, age at adopting, educational data, and information regarding number of U.S. children adopted, age at placement, and race and sex of children. Fixed-choice questions inquired how adopters had learned about adopting from the U.S and how they prepared to do so. Open-ended questions inquired about birth parent contact (at birth and ongoing) and how, if appropriate, their child self-identified in terms of nationality (e.g., Dutch, American-Dutch, Canadian, Canadian-American, etc.). Questionnaires are frequently used to supplement interviews in case studies (Rossman & Rallis, 2012), and I developed this questionnaire in response to the challenges I faced in doing cross-national research, such as “high data collection costs and likelihood of non-repeatability” (Mangen, 2007, p. 27). Questions used in this tool drew from my pilot study findings and review of adoptive parent-focused scholarship; the questions were reviewed by my advisor and approved by the university’s IRB. I reviewed all questions with a Dutch translator, and only one family chose to use the Dutch version. All but three families completed the questionnaire. In these cases, I asked the questions during our in-person interview or the content from their interviews revealed the answers.

I was really surprised at how helpful this tool turned out to be: it rapidly provided evidence of possible comparative differences and, more significantly, made me aware of critical issues in U.S. adoptions practices. Specifically, analysis of the responses revealed differences in how Dutch and Canadians learned about adopting from the U.S. (Dutch families generally indicated learning about U.S. adoptions through word-of-mouth networking, Canadians frequently heard from adoption agencies) or how they prepared for adoption (e.g., mandated national training for prospective Dutch parents; Canadians referred to agency-based training they
completed). Moreover, responses from participants in both countries generally verified the very young age at which U.S. adoptees are placed with parents and also indicated that these international adoptions are frequently, to varying degrees, open adoptions.

At this point, I became quite conscious that I was on some precipice of discovery, and began to feel a tangible level of excitement as I received the completed questionnaires. The responses began to indicate some key features unique to the outgoing adoption process and experience, and unequivocally offered some new discoveries. I felt my commitment and my researcher identity shift and solidify on some level that I hadn’t previously felt. In ways that I could not have anticipated, this initial data collection strategy was extraordinarily helpful in setting the course of this exploratory project and being deeply meaningful to me.

Participant interviews. Interviews play a central role in narrative inquiry data collection (Chase, 2005; Creswell, 2007) and are generally viewed as collaborative activities forged from a collaborative alliance between participants and interviewers to render events and experiences meaningful (Riessman, 2008). I chose to use a semi-structured interview guide (See Appendix B). Although I did not want to wholly control the interviews or direction of narratives, I also did not want to forget to attend to comparative or structural components of the outgoing U.S. adoption process that could be inadvertently usurped by a wholesale focus on the emotional and narrative-driven accounts of adopting a child across international borders. M. Patton (2002) noted that “interview guides can be developed in more or less detail” (p. 344), a helpful description that allowed for early dependence and less dependence over time and experience.

In creating topics and questions for the guide I loosely followed Spradley’s (1979) ethnographic typology of descriptive, structural, and contrast questions. Descriptive questions are open-ended and are sometimes considered “grand tour questions” (Spradley, 1979, p. 49) aimed to encourage detailed descriptions of experiences, activities, people or culture (Rossman & Rallis, 2002; Spradley, 1979). These questions, although content-directed on my part (e.g., “Tell me
about the when you first met your child” or “How did you first hear about adopting a child from the U.S.?”), were open-ended and content-driven by the narrative choices of the participants. Structural questions are used to define or confirm terms or processes and are repeated within an interview and across interviews (Parfitt, 1996). These types of questions were needed to help me understand legal, procedural, and other components of the outgoing adoption process for Canadian and Dutch families. For example, when inquiring about how they adopted a child from the U.S., the first Dutch family interviewed told me they were zelfdoeners (self-doers, do-it-yourselfers). When I asked for clarification, my first understanding was that they were conflating process with personal attributes and a preference for independence. It took an interview with another family to help me understand that this was a formal name of the type of process U.S. adoptions followed in the Netherlands, and subsequent questions with all the families bore this out. Contrast questions are used to help distinguish differences between terms used or to elaborate “the meaning use of terms used” (Parfitt, 1996, p. 343; Rossman & Rallis, 2002). Contrast questions were needed to help me understand how participants understood U.S. adoptions as being the same or different from other ICAs or how they changed over time.

I also engaged in multiple, less formal, but still far-reaching discussions with participants over dinners, in transit to various locations, or walking around in neighborhoods. Most of these were unrecorded, and note-taking had to wait until I was alone.

**Dutch adoptive parent interviews.** During the 20 days I was in the Netherlands, I met with couples or individuals from eight families: five couples, two mothers, and one father. All were two parent families; none were same-sex couples. Each family chose their interview site. An unusual feature of the interview schedule was the amount of collaboration and coordination it required between me and participants. (In many instances, I took trains or busses and would be

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11 I mention this because van Hoof (2010), Selman (2012), and others have indicated that a rise in U.S.–Dutch adoptions may be due to U.S. laws allowing same sex couples to adopt, something that is not common in other sending countries.
marooned in an area until some later time, at which point participants would drop me off at a bus or train station.) Consequently, with six of the eight Dutch families, I spent significant time with them in their home or in their community, sharing lunch or dinners, and attending to some errands with them. Frequently our discussions became conversations covering a scope well beyond topics identified in the interview guide.

Interviews varied in length, with the shortest lasting approximately 45 minutes and the longest ones, inclusive of travel and dining together, up to six hours. All the participants were fluent in English, although there were times I needed to clarify words or ask for elaboration. Four families lived in smaller villages; four lived in larger towns or cities.

I modified interview questions over time. All parents were asked versions of the questions, however, during the early interviews I was much more dependent on learning about the Dutch and Dutch–U.S. adoption process from parents’ responses to the structural questions than I was later on in the process. By the end of the interviews, much of the legal, mandated parent education, social welfare, and other system-content had been provided in detail and confirmed or modified through other parent interviews. This coverage (saturation of at least one topic) allowed me to extend or enhance other areas of exploration.

It was humbling to be conducting interviews with Dutch nationals in English. Dutch is not commonly spoken outside of the Netherlands, but the issue was simply how facile each participant was in English and how the society itself values multilingualism. In almost all interviews, it was surprisingly comfortable to engage in interviewing or more general conversation. I suspect this was because of the rapport established by the email flurries, and the participants’ commitment to the process.

**Canadian adoptive parent interviews.** Most of the interviews were in one region of Canada, allowing me to visit 11 of the families in a two-week period. Similar to the Dutch interviews, these interviews varied in length from 1½ hours to five hours. Although three of the
families lived on the outskirts of larger towns, none of the Canadian families lived in rural settings or small villages, as did several of the Dutch families.

**Site and participant observation.** Site observation added depth to my understanding of static and changing political and social contexts affecting the lived experience of participants. Participant observation was critical to this investigation because it allowed me to “investigate experience and represent the social life and social processes that occur in a setting” (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2001, p. 352). I observed three of the Dutch adoptive families in their communities—at parks, a school, and a health clinic. I observed two of the Canadian families in their towns or cities and two at daycare centers. Accompanying participants within these settings generated dialogical triggers as participants offered commentary on what we were seeing and contextualized the settings and activities for me. I will describe two such experiences here.

As I walked with Wilma, a Dutch mother, to pick up her son at his daycare, she shared with me concern for his racial isolation (he is one of only two Black children at the school), noting that one of the reasons she and her husband adopted a second child was to ameliorate some of this, “so he won’t be the only Black kid in the school or village.” She shared that at times she has had to educate her son’s teachers about transracial or adoption issues. “For instance,” she told me by way of example, “he could tell them about having a family in the U.S.,” and “it’s up to him if when he draws cards for Mother’s Day, if he wants to draw one or two, one for me and one for his birthmother.” It was important, she asserted, that they knew he knew his history and that it could be integrated and normalized in his school. Wilma clarified for me that these sensitivities come from her roles as an adoptive parent and as a primary school teacher herself.

Meanwhile, as the swirling mass of children came out of the school to the gathering of waiting Dutch parents, I saw vividly that this four-year-old child was indeed the only Black person across both groups. Wilma and I re-entered the school so she could give me a brief tour of her son’s class while he played with other children. Wilma told me that one of her son’s teachers
had recently married. On the day of her (weekday) wedding, the teacher returned to the school to celebrate with the children (there was a colorful, decorated boat in the middle of the school’s atrium upon which two chairs had been placed in honor of the bride and groom). Prior to the wedding the children’s lessons had been about Dutch weddings, ceremonies, and celebrations, and low along the classroom wall were pictures of the children walking down an aisle, each male child matched with a female, little grooms and brides (although they ran out of grooms and doubled up on brides). Wilma’s son was the only Black groom alongside a bride and this photo generated a brief and thoughtful exchange about his dating future. Her son, she told me, is social and popular, with friends over to his house and he to theirs. She joked that although only four years old, “he is quite a ladies’ man.” But the confluence of our being there together in front of this photo suggestive of an imagined future offered a powerful albeit brief exchange that seemed laced with confidence, worry, and hope.

In Canada, I accompanied William, an adoptive father, in picking up his three-year-old from daycare. This daycare was located in a tall, elegant office building in the heart of a large city. As we took the elevator up to the school, William spoke about the racially and ethnically diverse classroom his son is in, and the school’s equally racially diverse staff and faculty. The school, William pointed out to me, is very expensive. But, he noted, the racial and ethnic diversity present in the teacher and student population, he and his wife believe, are critical to his son’s development. The setting is one in which on a near daily basis, their bi-racial son is with other children and adults of color. The school is expensive, but currently it offers an incomparable and, they hope, foundational socialization experience for their child.

Maxwell (2005) notes that observation “often provides a direct and powerful way of learning about people’s behavior and the context in which this occurs” (p. 94). This proved true as I observed, spoke with, and listened to adoptive parents across multiple settings. Some situations seemed to beg commentary—like the picture of the child groom, and some needed
none—such as a schoolyard of White Dutch adults and children and one Black U.S.–Dutch adoptee. As I crisscrossed the Netherlands by train visiting families, I wrote my fieldnotes and reflections. In Canada, car travel did not allow for the same memorable fieldnote writing experience but the observation opportunities, especially in the company of participants, were equally powerful in contextualizing and rooting experiences.

**Material culture and artifacts.** In addition to the questionnaires, interviews, and observations, a significant amount of data reviewed and collected involved “material culture” which can include:

> …artifacts and written material that may be available in or about the setting or the individuals. These may include documents, minutes of meetings, most e-mails, newspaper articles, clothing, diaries, personal objects, and decorations—anything relevant that may reveal information about the person, setting or event. Material culture also is found on websites and blogs that contain photos, videos, stories, poems. (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 169)

These data served different purposes depending on the unit of analysis under investigation. For example, when individual families were the unit of analysis for the lived experience of outgoing adoptions, family photographs, whether individual photos or bounded in scrapbooks, “Dear Birthmother” letters and brochures, baby books, Facebook images, or other formats served as visual narratives and narrative events to participants’ stories. Most often, these images offered a view of becoming and then being adoptive parents. Parents told me of their hope to create a family through adoption, but the pictures of a man or a woman painting what is clearly a bedroom for a baby, building a crib, or crying with a plane ticket to the U.S. in hand imprinted this phase into the narrative for me. A photo of a Black infant in a Black woman’s arms and another of the same newborn curled in sleeping White woman’s arms imprinted another

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12 Some data, such as family scrapbooks, birth parent letters, baby books, participants’ computer files of family pictures and adoption documents, and other items I viewed on site but permission was not given to publish, reproduce, or print.
part of the story. Participants used images, most often in the form of photographs in one of the above formats, to fill in or fill out narratives.

When the nation-states were the unit of analysis I used adoption statistical reports; Canadian, Dutch, and U.S. provincial or national ICA websites; and documents found on the website of the Hague Conference on Private International Law, Intercountry Adoption Section as units of observation. Study of artifacts such as these can be used in qualitative research to “learn about the belief systems—the values, ideas, attitudes, and assumptions—of a particular community or society, usually across time” (O’Toole & Were, 2008, p. 617).

These materials and others sometimes worked to support or contradict participant narratives or vice versa. Either way, they served as important resources for data triangulation (Maxwell, 2005; Miller & Alvarado, 2005; O’Toole & Were, 2008; M. Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2012). For example, multiple Canadian participants indicated that their decision to adopt internationally was in part founded on concerns that children in the Canadian public welfare system had experienced irrevocable trauma or were affected by fetal alcohol syndrome. Similarly, Dutch parents indicated that they turned to international adoption because domestic adoptions are rare in the Netherlands with almost no children available for adoption. In both cases, these accounts matched academic or national publications indicating reasons Dutch and Canadian families consider intercountry adoption.

Adoption researchers have written extensively on the use and importance to adoptive parents of birth culture artifacts in promoting ties to birth culture and families of their internationally adopted children (De Graeve, 2013; Dorow, 2006; Jacobson, 2008; Moosnick 2004; Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001; Traver, 2007). Jacobson calls this form of collecting (of ethnic artifacts or experiences and activities) “culture keeping” and describes it as follows:

Culture keeping has become standard practice within the adoption community. International adoptive parents are often told by the adoption community that their children should engage in their native cultures; some are told they must…Culture keeping
is framed as a mechanism for facilitating a solid ethnic identity and sense of self-worth in children who may experience difficulties because of their racial, ethnic, and adoptive status. Culture keeping is meant to replicate partially the cultural education internationally adopted children would receive if they were being raised within a family of their own ethnic heritage. …Online adoption shops and malls provide parents with Asian dolls, Russian Christmas ornaments, Korean textbooks, Vietnamese videos…Travel companies specializing in “roots tours” or “heritage tours” arrange for families to visit the countries or even the orphanages where the adoptees spent time as young children. (pp. 2-3)

Sensitized to this concept, when writing the proposal for this study I referenced such works because I wondered about how U.S. culture was categorized and collected in service to acculturation of U.S. adoptees by foreign parents. In this study, some families celebrated Thanksgiving or the Fourth of July, and some had brought back souvenir license plates or sports-logoed shirts with the names of the state or sports team from the adoptees’ state. Overall, however, the notable absence of any abundance of U.S. artifacts in Canadian and Dutch adoptive homes was a particular and salient finding of the study.

**Researcher journal.** I created a researcher journal to log decision points, note ideas, and record feelings and actions about the study. I tried not to conflate journal entries and analytic memos but often the boundaries were blurred. The researcher journal was most helpful to me in identifying and committing to print issues related to my experience of being an adoptive parent and researcher on a study focused on intercountry adoption, as well as my past experience as an adoption professional. I wrote, for example, about how I felt (mostly defensive) when the tables were turned and I was asked questions about my adoption choices or when participants asked—almost to themselves—why it was that the U.S. sends newborns out of the country for homes in foreign lands. Through jottings and writings, journals captured contemporaneous issues of concern to me and were also used as sanctuary and sounding board.

**Fieldnotes.** Following prescriptions offered by Babbie (2007), Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw (2001), Lofland & Lofland, (2006), Maxwell, (2005), Yin (2010), and others, I wrote fieldnotes following each interview or observation. These were completed usually within a 24- to 48-hour
period. Fieldnotes were an integral part of the analysis, helping me create an audit trail of activities and evidence, verifications, and reminders. I used fieldnotes not only to capture impressions and reflections following each interview, but also to catch accounts from informal conversations that filled out my understanding of the social milieu (see Appendix C for an example of a fieldnote).

In summary: I met eight Dutch families. Two I interviewed at restaurants; six I met with in their homes. I conducted interviews with 12 families in Canada: one interview was by telephone, 10 interviews were in participants’ homes, and one was conducted at a hotel. Types of artifacts reviewed included photographs, computer files, adoption files, family portfolios, family homes including pictures, souvenirs and other memorabilia from the United States, children’s books, and video tapes.

**Data Analysis**

Narrative inquiry, with its intense, comprehensive investigation, is a case-centered approach focusing on a relatively small set of individuals (Creswell, 2007; Riessman, 2005, 2008). As noted, I used Riessman’s process of thematic analysis, but also drew from M. Patton (2002) and his use of themes in content analysis. Distinguishing thematic analysis in narrative inquiry from grounded theory, Riessman (2008) clarified that analysis in narrative research does not separate text or other sources into small bits for assignment to various categories in an attempt to isolate thematic components. Rather, Riessman (2008) noted, “narrative scholars keep a story ‘intact’ by theorizing from the case rather than from component themes (categories) across cases” (p. 53). This case-centeredness is important to this study that has several case foci: cases of individual participants, Dutch cases, Canadian cases, and the case of U.S. outgoing adoptions as a subset of intercountry adoptions. This complexity initially slowed down my analysis considerably as I struggled with the need to reduce data, the impulse to code or consider
everything, and the fear that I was focusing on one level of inquiry (e.g., the individual adoption narratives) at the expense of other ways and levels of interpretation.

**Use and construction of narratives in this study.** Narratives are found in a variety of forms including oral accounts, documents, reports, and other materials. In this study, I use Denzin’s (1989) definition of narrative:

A “narrative” is a story that tells a sequence of events that are significant for the narrator and his or her audience. A narrative as a story has a plot, a beginning, a middle, and an end. It has an internal logic that makes sense to the narrator. A narrative relates events in a temporal, causal sequence. Every narrative describes a sequence of events that have happened. (p. 37)

The narratives in this study are the stories of the adoption of a child from the U.S. by Canadian and Dutch adoptive parents. In telling these stories I generally use “narrative units, or…bounded segments” (Riessman, 2008, p. 74) relevant to particular incidents.

**Preparation and analysis of transcripts.** I used the time on train rides, international flights, and while I waited for transcriptions to be returned to me to listen to the interview recordings and any audio fieldnotes I had recorded. I wrote during this time of what I thought I was hearing in terms of individual stories, beginning to identify ways in which these adoptions differed or were the same from other ICAs. Transcription was verbatim, inclusive of the breaks, sentence repeats, interruptions, and sentence completion when couples were interviewed together. Pseudonyms were used to replace family or first names used in audio-recordings so that finished transcripts preserved participant confidentiality. I used NVivo 10 to manage the data, to code transcripts, to write memos, and to store and code some portions of the literature. Once I received transcriptions, I listened to each audio recording while reading the transcript to confirm its accuracy and deepen familiarity with each narrative (Creswell, 2007; Reissman, 2008).

**Analysis of data.** I began early data analysis by creating three files in NVivo for analytic, methodological, and researcher memos. Analytic memos captured evolving themes or correspondences across data, methodological memos noted changes I made in coding or
strategies, and researcher memos were used to record a variety of issues from “to-do” lists to personal reflections on the data or project. Each memo file functioned as an ongoing log that could be date-stamped, which allowed me to tack back and forth from transcript coding to recording reflections or changes relating to analysis, methodology or other areas. Continuous reading of adoption studies literature and review of public sphere information on adoption and race influenced reflections and interpretations and early coding choices. I uploaded transcripts into NVivo and began to identify themes. I started with some a priori themes or sensitizing concepts (M. Patton, 2002) that I knew were almost ubiquitously found in adoption studies that followed an adoption narrative genre. These included “looking to adopt,” “meeting one’s child,” “storying adoption for a child,” “beliefs about birth parents,” and others. It became quickly evident that when mapped along these common intercountry adoption points, Canadian and Dutch parents were engaged in a different trajectory. Meanwhile, I benefited by the gap between fieldwork visits and was able to immerse myself in at least some of the Dutch transcripts before leaving for Canada. This concretized the notion of case-ness with the groups, a point that became very evident once the Canadian interviews were underway and my nascent Dutch coding did not always seem to apply to the experiences of Canadian parents.

A more successful strategy merged the two above efforts (a priori coding and case-ness) with Denzin’s definition of narrative in mind. In other words, I looked at the bones of adoption narratives but sketched them more specifically to the “temporal and causal” sequencing of events, evident across participant accounts that led them from being childless couples to adoptive parents. Looking at it this way is similar to Polkinghorne’s (1999, 2007) notion of narrative as a thematically linked, goal-oriented collection of actions, events, and happenings. I also drew upon categorizations identified by Bazeley and Jackson (2013) that are often found in qualitative

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13 Public television had some adoption shows and ironically, a show on the Oxygen channel is about relinquishing children for adoption. There were adoption cases in the news during this time that generated public adoption discourse.
studies and include large overall concepts such as actions, activities, events strategies, issues, beliefs, culture, impact, outcomes, and so on. These somewhat generic and fixed categories were critical to holding data that had to be analyzed across multiple case levels. Not all were needed but when sufficiently particularized to the study they were helpful.

Although my primary concern in all of these efforts was that I could sacrifice the integrity of the narratives by using these conventional techniques, what I found was an intactness that seemed to ground me across individual accounts, comparative narratives, and the phenomenon of outgoing adoptions as a whole. In the end, my thematic analysis was wedded to a notion of emplotment that traversed levels of cases. For example, the data needed to work on three levels: the bounded system of U.S. outgoing adoptions; the Dutch and Canadian aggregate cases; and the individual participant cases. To undertake the analysis I worked one level at a time: reading and coding each transcript first as an individual’s narrative, then as a national narrative and finally with the view as units of observation of the phenomenon of outgoing U.S. adoptions. Tethering the analysis to events, temporal and procedural markers, helped ensure that similar notions were being compared even if the process or outcomes differed by participant or country.

Figure 4-1 provides a screen shot of NVivo, demonstrating this multilevel structure.
In this example, the category or in NVivo terms, the parent node (top-level code) is intended to capture coded text that would indicate “pulling” factors in intercountry adoption for prospective adoptive parents (PAPs). My note ANNOT was short for “annotated” and indicated that I had created reports for the nodes and had made additional comments. I also created operational definitions of code, as seen in Figure 4-2.

By focusing on one episode in the adoption narrative—coming to the decision to adopt—I scrutinized participants’ narrative segments that shed light on why they chose adoption as a means of creating a family, how they learned about adoptable U.S. children, and what criteria came to bear on their decision. From this data, it could be learned, for example, that a Dutch family—the Janssens—adopted because of medical reasons, which prevented biological children. They learned about U.S. adoptions from a friend who knew someone who had adopted and referred them to a U.S. agency. The couple was open to adopting a child of any race. Their immediate family was very perplexed about how the U.S. could send children out for adoption, but they have been fully embracing of their new Black U.S. relatives. The second-level code of
“Do It Yourself Adoptions” was an “in vivo” or emic term used by the family and ultimately by several Dutch families.

Although this data was coded, further analysis, or use of connecting strategies (Maxwell & Miller, 2008), required me to draw from the theoretical literature as well as other sources to deepen levels of interpretation. For example, within the aggregate of responses to this node, I discerned a pattern of participants feeling a sense of powerlessness prior to adoption. They felt no control in having a biological child, sometimes maligned for their desire to parent an infant, and constrained by where they could eventually adopt from because of agency or country requirements. My aim in using connecting strategies was to resist fracturing data (Maxwell, 2005; Riessman, 2008) into discrete but informative data segments and build “relationships that connect statements and events within a context into a coherent whole” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 98).

An addition example illustrates this process. Figure 4-3 reveals themes found in the narratives relating to intercountry adoption discourse.

![Coding Process, Leading to the Identification of Themes](image-url)

*Figure 4-3. Coding Process, Leading to the Identification of Themes.*
I analyzed data from the second top-level code above, “views of Canadian domestic adoption or social programs” and its Dutch counterpart with the aforementioned code, “leaning and leading toward adoption,” to understand the intercountry adoption discourses Canadian and Dutch adopters engage in, react to, or are affected by when adopting a U.S. infant. Employing Riessman’s (2008) strategy of dialogic/performance analysis, I considered the intent of the narrators in each of these segments, aware of shifting participant identities as they addressed me as a researcher, as an adoptive parent, and as a U.S. citizen. These narrative segments in turn, were triangulated with other data sources (for example, the Canadian adoption survey mentioned earlier, or the articles cited below), which helped to align data with adopters’ views.

**Analysis of documents and material data.** These data were analyzed using M. Patton’s (2002) notion of content analysis as a data reduction technique that “attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings” (p. 455) that are expressed in patterns or themes. He stated that themes are categorical or topical, while patterns are descriptive findings. He gives the following example of how a content analysis using these terms might read: “The content analysis revealed a pattern of participants reporting being afraid when rappelling down cliffs…Those patterns make “Dealing with fear” a major theme of the [experience]” (M. Patton, 2002, p. 456).

In this study, the articles I cite by van Hooff (2010), a Dutch attorney, and Klarberg (2010), a U.S. attorney, are an example of utilizing this technique. Both authors are experts in international child welfare law and policy and both wrote legal-themed briefs about U.S. outgoing adoptions. van Hooff wrote on the Dutch socio-legal and cultural factors that lead Dutch citizens to adopt from the U.S.; Klarberg wrote on U.S. implementation of the Hague Convention and potential issues in respect to upholding the principle of subsidiarity (intercountry adoption as an intervention of last resort). By emphasizing U.S. disregard for the principle of subsidiarity and Dutch interests of family-building over child welfare interests, both articles revealed patterns that suggest disapproval of U.S. outgoing adoptions.
Ethical Concerns and Data Quality

To establish and maintain an ethical research practice, I drew on Schram’s (2003) outline of key concerns: the need to consider presentation of self, consideration of effects and limits of disclosure, addressing public and private confidences, and responsibly engaging and disengaging with study participants (pp. 137-149). I provided information regarding my background, interests and credentials for research, and a thorough research protocol intended to ensure participant confidentiality and privacy. Participants were asked to choose pseudonyms, and locations and other identifiers were stripped from data. I submitted findings to participants for their review and comments. Below I offer a descriptive account of my experience regarding the need to offer some flexibility around personal disclosure.

Trustworthiness. I used several strategies to enhance trustworthiness for this study. I triangulated data across several sources. For example, interview data, adoption agency websites, and online documents about Dutch, Canadian, and U.S. adoption laws and policies gave me similar or conflicting information that allowed for in-depth analysis. My credibility as a researcher was enhanced by my experience as a program coordinator for an international adoption program, my work as a Hague evaluator (assessing adoption agencies’ compliance with the Hague Convention standards), my role as an adoptive mother, and previous research experience in outgoing U.S. adoptions. Schram (2003) recommended the use of member checks, establishing guidelines for transcriptions, and openness to considering alternative interpretations. To accomplish this, I used peer reviewers (one familiar with adoption and one not) to review my coding scheme and theme generation. In addition, I created an approximately 10-page document of findings and analysis that I sent to each participant for their review and comments.

Table 4-2 outlines my research design strategy. U.S. Outgoing Adoptions, identified in the first box are understood as the bounded case of the U.S. as a sending country and represents the phenomenon of the activity. This is in contrast to box 3, which considers the 20 families as
constituent of U.S. outgoing adoptions for this study. Boxes 2 and 3 are the collective and individual Canadian and Dutch cases.

Table 4-2.

Research Design Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cases</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Outgoing Adoptions (n=1)</td>
<td>RQ1-4(^{14})</td>
<td>• Hague Conference on International Law (HCCH)-Country Profiles&lt;br&gt;• Domestic and international media accounts,&lt;br&gt;• U.S., Canadian, and Dutch governmental documents on adoption policy and procedures&lt;br&gt;• U.S., Dutch, and Canadian adoption websites&lt;br&gt;• Researcher pilot study with adoption professionals&lt;br&gt;• Scholarship on outgoing adoptions and U.S.&lt;br&gt;• Participant interviews</td>
<td>Triangulation&lt;br&gt;Individual and collective participant interviews&lt;br&gt;Material culture and artifacts&lt;br&gt;Analysis across sources&lt;br&gt;Researcher Reflexivity&lt;br&gt;Researcher journal&lt;br&gt;Fieldnotes&lt;br&gt;Analytic memos</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collective Canadian Cases</td>
<td>RQ 1-4</td>
<td>• HCCH Canada/Netherlands Profiles&lt;br&gt;• Pilot study&lt;br&gt;• Public media and scholarly articles on Canada/Netherlands and U.S. adoptions&lt;br&gt;• Couple and individual parent interviews and email correspondence&lt;br&gt;• Canada: o 6 couples o 6 mothers&lt;br&gt;• The Netherlands: o 4 couples o 1 father o 3 mothers&lt;br&gt;• Participant and site observation&lt;br&gt;• Material culture&lt;br&gt;• Newspapers and other media&lt;br&gt;• Holiday ceremonies and decorations</td>
<td>Triangulation&lt;br&gt;Participant interviews&lt;br&gt;Pilot study findings&lt;br&gt;HCCH Canada/Dutch documents&lt;br&gt;Adoption in public media and Canadian/Dutch accounts&lt;br&gt;Member Checks&lt;br&gt;Sent to each participant for review&lt;br&gt;Researcher Review&lt;br&gt;• Analytic memos&lt;br&gt;• Fieldnotes&lt;br&gt;Researcher Reflexivity&lt;br&gt;Researcher journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>Collective Dutch Cases</td>
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\(^{14}\) RQ1: In what ways do personal experiences, knowledge, attitudes, or beliefs influence the decision of a Canadian or Dutch citizen to adopt a U.S. child?

RQ2: How do Canadian or Dutch parents educate or prepare themselves—formally or informally—to adopt across racial, cultural, and international borders?

RQ2a: How have these experiences supported their adoption of a U.S. child, if at all?

RQ3: How do the accounts of Canadian and Dutch adopters of U.S. children conform to or differ from discourses of ICA practice?

RQ4: In what ways has the adoption affected meanings of self; family; community; culture; country; or worldview for the adoptive parents?
<table>
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<th>Cases</th>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
<th>Evaluation</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Outgoing adoptive</td>
<td>RQ 1-4</td>
<td>• Artifacts (overlap with below)</td>
<td>Fieldnotes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>families (n=20)</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Interviews and emails</td>
<td>All of the above and Peer Review</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Participant and site observation</td>
<td>• PhD peer reviewers</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Artifacts</td>
<td>Researcher Reflexivity</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>U.S. decorations</td>
<td>Researcher journal</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Children’s toys</td>
<td>Fieldnotes</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Birth books</td>
<td>Analytic memos</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Family portfolios</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Adoption books, handouts, for adults</td>
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<td>Scrapbooks</td>
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<td>Computer files with pictures</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Adoption applications</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Family videos</td>
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</table>

**Researcher role.** My role in this project was complicated. As a White, well-educated, parent of an internationally adopted child, I was perceived as an insider to the participants I interviewed. The families were gracious and generous with their time. They were also direct and curious of my position as an adoptive mother of a child through intercountry adoption. In almost all cases, this needed to be addressed. The first interview paved the way for me to do this. In that interview, the couple spoke of their desire to adopt and their shock (and good fortune) that the U.S. was a sending nation of children. They spoke to me about learning of U.S. adoptions through another Dutch family and understanding that only minority children were available. Left a bit hanging was the implication of the U.S. as a racist nation (sending only minority children out), or more specifically, U.S. parents as racist adopters with preferences for White children. They were genuinely perplexed, if not somewhat censorious regarding what to make of healthy minority infants in need of homes in a country that is a huge receiving nation. Further into the interview, they asked if I had adopted, and I affirmed I had; to their query regarding if I adopted internationally, I replied I had. Quite awkwardly all points came together—the U.S. sending children out, and me as one of those parents that had chosen international adoption over domestic.
I discussed with them my family’s adoption choices to an extent, indicating that although as a couple we were open to transracial adoption, we were informed by several agencies that we stood little chance of adopting a younger child (regardless of race) because of our ages (in our 40s at the time). I explained that what I know now, nearly 15 years later, is different from what I knew then, and what adoption agencies promote now, (including emphasizing domestic options as some international programs close), is different from what I experienced then.

When I had started this interview, I had decided not to volunteer much about my position as an adoptive parent, although I would if asked. I thought premature sharing would bias or skew the interview. However, by withholding the information, I had inadvertently put the couple in a difficult spot whereby they felt that I might be offended by their comments. More importantly, I sensed that I had violated a trust in withholding this information, a response I had not anticipated. I was able to explain my position to this family, including my concern (as a researcher) about answering questions about the race or age (at placement) of my child as potentially influencing the discussion. After this interview, I decided to discuss my role as an adoptive parent briefly at the start of each interview. In all but one other interview, I brought this subject up shortly following my introduction to the study and in doing so I believe it enhanced trust. Participants did not at all seem to modify their statements following my disclosure. The one time I forgot to use this protocol, a situation similar to the first encounter ensued.

A second issue was my background as a social worker. This position afforded me credibility and expertise in adoption; however, social workers often hold a dubious place in the adoption process. Social workers undertake the long process of homestudies on prospective parents, and adoptive families often comment on the imbalances of power that exist in such assessments, along with critiques of their intrusiveness, and participants offered positive and negative critiques of their social work experiences in their adoptions. As the primary agent in this research process (Wolcott, 2008), I understood my capacity to influence and shape the study, and
to be influenced and shaped by it. The salience of my position as a U.S. citizen was a factor that I had not quite understood pre-research but became pronounced in the field. For example, many participants understood that U.S. minority children over White children were likely to be placed for outgoing adoptions, and discussions about this point could be awkward as I was clearly a member of that society. Additionally, some but not all participants indicated beliefs that their societies were less racially and ethnically divisive than the United States.

Alternatively, the first time I heard a family use the word “colored” in reference to a Black child, I was transported: In a microsecond, any images, fantasies, or knowledge I possessed about colonialism exploded in my mind, and I struggled to keep some semblance of impartiality on my face. Fortunately, I was not successful and a discussion ensued about the use of this word in Dutch-speaking nations. I was asked directly by this first family about how minorities are addressed in the U.S., and they told me they had been informed by their U.S. adoption contacts that “colored” is a derogatory term in the U.S. and should not be used. They have tried to do this and to inform their family members of this as well. They shared with me that the word is still quite commonly used in the country to reference any person of color, and that its use, though colloquial, is not derogatory. This was the only discussion about this issue that moved into a shift of position on my part, when I heard it used later in the Netherlands and Canada (notably with participants that had already identified as first- or second-generation Dutch immigrants) I remained more impassive.

Limitations of the Study

This study was conceptualized as an exploratory study of the experiences of Canadian and Dutch adoptive parents when adopting children from the United States. Exploratory studies serve to investigate “little-understood phenomena” and “generate hypotheses for further research” (Marshall & Rossman, 2010, p. 69). The approach used for the study, a case-based, narrative
inquiry design, was appropriate for this study and helped achieve both exploratory aims. In doing so, it also revealed a limitation of the study: In focusing on the general, a deep and rich level of analysis into any of the three key cases (individual participants, country-based cases, or the phenomenon of outgoing U.S. cases) was not possible within this one study. Narrative inquiry privileges participant voices, which helped balance a tension between individual and collective cases. Relatedly, the exploration generated abundant hypotheses that merit further research but that could not be explored in depth in this study. Examples of these include further querying on race relations in both countries and views of transracial dating and partnerships (a thread of which was begun in my observation at one child’s daycare and discussion with a Dutch adoptive mother), and further exploration regarding the relationships between Dutch and Canadian adoptees and their birth siblings, among others.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I described how my research project and design evolved from a pilot study conducted three years ago to a case-based, narrative inquiry with fieldwork in two countries. I reviewed why narrative inquiry is an optimal approach and identified case study as a complementary approach that allowed multiple points of analysis. I reviewed briefly an analytic process derived from Riessman’s thematic and dialogic work while noting that analysis was facilitated by privileging emplotment (Polkinghorne, 1995, 1999). I noted limitations of the study and discussed trustworthiness, validity, and my role as a researcher. The following two chapters are dedicated to reporting the research findings. As previously indicated, analysis was guided by the narrative arc of international adoption, thus, the next chapter explores adoptive parents’ journey from choosing to become adoptive parents and meeting their child(ren), followed by the a chapter that considers outgoing adoptions as a site of adult learning as well as an experience affecting constructions of family, community, and nation.
Chapter 5

Inside the Delivery Room and Outside the Box:

Canadian and Dutch Accounts of Adoption Decisions and Outcomes

This chapter begins the presentation of the findings of this study, which I map across the landscape of the study’s conceptual framework. This framework follows a processual route along the adoption trajectory, beginning with participants’ adoption decision making and culminating with reflections on the adoptions’ effects on themselves, their family and community. These topics are touchstones, representing phases in the collective intercountry adoption process but with girth enough to hold the unique and personal experiences described by individual respondents. Importantly, this semi-sequenced structure facilitates a naturalistic cross-cultural investigation; that is, citizens from both countries can and do complete a regulated, routinized, legal process (see Figure 2-1) to adopt children from the United States. However, the data revealed that although diverse but similar personal experiences led Canadian and Dutch participants to create families through adoption, personal and country-specific adoption policies, programs, and discourses influenced decisions to adopt from the United States.

I discuss my findings across this and the subsequent chapter, topically following the narrative arc created by pre- and post-adoption experiences. Thus, this chapter explores participants’ experiences of adoption decision making and culminates with first-person (participant) descriptions of birth room experiences and birth family meetings. Participants’ presence at both these events, it must be noted, signals divergence from the traditional paradigm of intercountry adoption (ICA), and their accounts confirmed the study’s guiding hypothesis that the adoption experience of these families differs substantively from what is described in extant
ICA literature. Adoptive parent educational experiences—self-directed efforts, agency- or
government-mandated training, and situated learning experiences—are a key focus of the
following chapter. Data drawn from that exploration illuminated dexterous use of multiple
learning strategies by Canadian and Dutch parents as they acquired skills, knowledge, and even
new attitudes and behaviors in service to parenting their U.S.-born children.

**Creating Families through Adoption**

All journeys have beginnings: demarcation points that, in the moment or in hindsight,
represent movement forward and commitment to advance toward some identified goal while
warding off temptation to retreat, capitulate, or consider some other route altogether. Listening to
the stories of this study’s participants, a wellspring of commitment was certainly required for
many as they proceeded to adopt children from the United States. For example, some Dutch
families reported unexpected resistance from Dutch government adoption authorities whose tone
and comments surprised them in their undisguised negativity and discouragement. Although they
understood some of this as cautionary advice regarding the long wait time likely for an adoption
referral, at other times it was interpreted as a distinct prejudicial stance toward families that did
not want to adopt children with significant special needs or that desired a younger-aged child.

Two Dutch mothers recalled these attitudes:

Yeah, they’re very discouraging. In other words, you go into the process, so you go into
the procedure, they’re not like, “Oh great, it’s so wonderful that you want to do this.” It’s
more of a “You’re going to have to wait a long time.” It’s very negative, in fact it’s
almost as if there’s a policy to sort of stop people from doing this really. And I’m
absolutely 100% sure that most people will agree with that. I know it’s a pretty harsh
statement to make, but really that was our experience… And I remember them saying
“You’re not going to get a baby,” and I remember being gutted, thinking well how is
that? How can someone just say, “Well, forget about that because that’s not going to
happen. You are going to have older children, your chances are very slim?” They were
very discouraging, very negative.

And that’s the general opinion in the Netherlands. It’s not okay to adopt from the U.S.
because people who adopt from the U.S. only want healthy newborns. Yeah okay, and
they don’t want to adopt a child, an older child 4 or 5 years old. So yeah, maybe, maybe it’s true, but in our case it doesn’t apply because we wanted to adopt from any country.

Hayes (2000) presented a similar phenomenon in the United Kingdom in his article describing British social workers’ use of position and power to deter prospective adoptive parents from adopting children from abroad even though they were employed as government adoption evaluators.

Content analysis of Canadian and Dutch pre-adoption accounts of applying to adopt, completing a homestudy, being assessed by adoption service providers and being placed on an agency’s waiting-parents list revealed a pattern of many participants recalling a time marked by feelings of helplessness and lack of control. In describing her sessions with an adoption social worker, one Canadian mother recalled:

It was the most powerless relationship I was ever in. Because if you have a boss you don’t like, you quit. This is your social worker; she determines whether or not you have a child. You’re charged with a crime, you have a chance of getting a judge to listen to you.

And a Canadian father made this analogy: “It’s all about lack of control in this process. You just feel like you’re in a speeding car and you don’t have access to the steering wheel or brakes.”

For most of the participants interviewed, their lived experiences corroborated long-standing, well-established findings of dominant reasons why families pursue adoption. These included medical issues prohibiting biological births, later-aged marriages or partnerships, and delayed family planning effects on fertility, as well as more contemporary reasons, such as parenting possibilities for gay and lesbian couples (Hollingsworth, 2000; Ross, Epstein, Goldfinger, & Yager, 2013; Tizard, 1991). As one Dutch father succinctly stated, “We wanted to have children but you can’t plan for them…We weren’t that lucky. So there were only two choices—not to have kids or adopt kids.”

Accounts of being at this juncture, especially when medical interventions failed or were rejected, revealed nuanced responses and concerns about wait times for referrals, money, and
ethics as families deliberated how to proceed. For example, knowing that she wanted to be a mother, Rachel Cameron tried artificial insemination before her marriage and followed this with several rounds of in vitro fertilization (IVF) before she and her husband adopted their Canadian-born son, now age 14, and her U.S.-born daughter, age 12. But for Nell Buchanan, prohibitive funding costs of medical interventions not covered by the Canadian health system steered her more quickly to adoption:

…so my ovaries didn’t work very well and it was either go through IVF and take a bunch of hormones – and in Canada all our healthcare pays for one shot and then you have to pay for the rest. So do you spend money on operations and all this or, you know…So we decided to adopt.

And Canadians Karen and Henry Vanderlinden realized that they had ethical problems with reproductive technology measures:

We had had trouble conceiving and we had thought about the medical route and both of us just didn’t have any kind of interest in it. There were some ethical issues that I kind of got hung up on and I wasn’t quite sure. I didn’t feel totally comfortable going that route at the time. And I just got really excited about the thought of adopting. I can honestly say I never had any fears.

Of the families in which medical issues did not initiate adoption plans, one did not specify any specific reasons, only that they moved forward first with a domestic adoption and then an international one. Carol James and Ruth Hall, longtime partners in a lesbian relationship, stated that adoption seemed the most appropriate method for them to start a family. Julia Bryant, a divorced mother of four biological children and one adopted child, identified herself as “coming from a family of adoption.” She elaborated:

My parents adopted my two older brothers at birth and then had my sister and I, so I grew up in a family of adoption. And my mother was a social worker and so it was very positive, yet it was very real. There was emotion attached to it.

Prior exposure to adoption has been shown to positively influence adoption choice (Bausch, 2006; Malm & Welti, 2010; Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009) and in this study, a familial history with adoption informed participants’ adoption-related decision making in
disparate ways. For example, two participants related stories of family members who did not know they had been adopted until they were in their preteens or later. Both indicated that their relatives’ feelings of mistrust, anger, and hurt, as well as other positive and negative attitudes toward adoption, deeply affected their own attitudes and beliefs about it. In both cases, it led to an acceptance of adoption as a viable means to creating a family and specifically influenced their commitment to open adoption because they believed that adoptees have a basic human right to knowledge of their birth histories. For other participants, having nieces and nephews who were adopted forged a path of adoption as normative and led to assumptions that their adopted children would likely feel less unique and more integrated within the extended family and community.

Three participants spoke of a family member’s relationship with birth families, including situations where little or no information was available to the adult adoptee. Positive ongoing contact was described in one account of a sibling’s search for a birthmother, while two participants shared accounts of birthmother reunions that did not lead to significant contact by preference of the adoptees. Five additional participants spoke of friends, coworkers, or other acquaintances who had been adopted, and they offered examples of how these adoptees’ experiences influenced their understanding and actions related to adoption. For example, as Julia Bryant shared:

[My friend’s husband] is Black and was adopted by a White family. I spent time talking with him before we adopted because he had had that real experience and small town experience. He is still a very special, prominent person in our lives.

For another participant, a co-worker’s significant distress at learning, in his mid-30s, that he was adopted, facilitated her commitment to engage in early and consistent communication about adoption with her own daughter. Interestingly, this participant described her strong, initial preference for a closed adoption, citing concerns about life-long birth family involvement and fear of a child’s rejection of the adopted family for the birth family. This preference was irrevocably upended as she learned more about the perspectives of birthmothers through adoption
training videos featuring birthmothers, participated in online courses on adoption topics, and most significantly as she listened to her co-worker’s difficult account of his experience in a closed adoption.

**Choosing International Adoption**

In the space between the decision to adopt and the decision to adopt from the United States, participants had to decide on international adoption. The choice between domestic or intercountry adoption, though personal, is one that is generally regarded as “loaded” (Jacobson, 2008, p. 32). In her book, *Culture Keeping: White Mothers, International Adoption, and the Negotiation of Family Difference*, Jacobson seeks to explain how U.S. mothers of Russian and Chinese adopted children “construct racial and ethnic identities for their children” (p. 10). Referencing popular press accounts of adoptive mothers who face the ubiquitously conjoined queries of why they adopted and why they chose a particular country, Jacobson gets at the subtext inherent in the second question: “Why didn’t you adopt one of the 125,000 foster-care children awaiting adoption in the United States?” (p. 32). About her study’s participants, Jacobson wrote: “the possibility of adopting domestically largely went unmentioned,” and “it was as if domestic adoption was completely off the radar in the decision-making process” (p. 32). In my study, domestic adoption was the foil through which Canadian and Dutch parents explained their adoption choices.

International adoption is a Gordian knot that ties together personal attitudes, assumptions, and beliefs about adoption, with public discourse. In the public sphere, it is most notably framed in the often contentiously stated queries: Are adoption policies for children in need of homes or for adults desiring children? And, why do families consider international adoption over domestic adoption possibilities? Paradoxically, even the most child-centered practices (i.e., adoption as a strategy to find families for children) require prospective adoptive parents to articulate the type of
child they hope to adopt. For example, do they feel equipped to parent children with profound special needs? What level and types of special needs do they believe they would be equipped to handle? Do they have a gender preference? Would they adopt transracially? What age(s) of children do they hope to adopt or are they willing to adopt? These questions are not just exercises in self-reflection. They are built into adoptive parent training requirements and mandatory homestudies, (the latter of which is a method of assessment and evaluation of potential parenting knowledge and abilities, conducted by licensed adoption service providers over the course of weeks or months). Both Canada and the Netherlands have adoptive parent training and homestudy requirements.

All prospective adoptive parents must answer these and many other related questions, the responses to which often demark a path toward domestic or international adoption. When discussing why they adopted children from the United States, most participants in both countries framed their discussion around their domestic adoption options or perceived lack thereof. In no instance was the United States identified as an initial target country; rather, it was identified after considering and eliminating other domestic or international options. Adoptive parents in both countries identified access to contraception, abortion, and social welfare programs supporting pregnant women, and non-stigmatizing public attitudes toward unwed pregnancies as resulting in few infants or young children available for adoption. Nell Buchanan a Canadian mother, put it this way:

And like I said because here we have such a huge social safety net that if you are 16 and you don’t have an MTV show behind you, you can keep your baby. And, like I said - across the street, if you’re poor you can go and they have boxes of diapers; they have baby formula; they have cribs; they have all kinds of stuff.

Lucas Maartin, a Dutch father, commented about pregnancies outside of marriage: “And children from the people living here…There is always a solution for that. There are social programs so basically, well; I think it is basically impossible [to adopt a Dutch child].”
A second theme raised by both Canadian and Dutch participants about domestic adoption, related to fears that birth families of children in their foster care systems could retain a high level of influence even as their children are fostered or adopted by other families. Perceptions that birth families of fostered children or the courts monitoring the cases could have ongoing involvement with an adoptive family, or, worse, that parents would reclaim their children, dissuaded participants from considering fostering or adopting children in domestic (i.e., Canadian, Dutch) public care. For example, as a Dutch parent noted:

I think it’s a good thing to keep in touch with the birth parents but it’s too often that children are— I think that the biological parents, at some point, you have to end their rights but it’s in the best interest of the child and here in the Netherlands the biological parents get a lot of rights and I think at some point you have to provide a secure and stable environment for your children, not the anxiety of “Oh can I go back there or should I go back there or do I have to go back there?” And at that point I couldn’t live with the idea of that the children have to go back at some point. I would be devastated.

A very similar sentiment was shared by Canadian mother Rachel Cameron: “It drags on forever and not only that, after a year the parents can come claim their child and that would just be too heartbreaking for me.”

**From Canada to the U.S.: Adoption Choices**

These shared discourses notwithstanding, choosing international adoption over domestic options reflected different goals for Canadians and Dutch adopters. Canadian responses were often framed in a discourse of desire for a particular type of child to become part of a family. In Canada, children can be adopted from the public child welfare system through provincial or local social service departments such as the Children’s Aid Societies (Adoption Council of Canada, 2013). Children are most often placed in public care because of abuse, neglect, abandonment, or other psychosocial issues. The median age of children in care is 10, and 40% of children in public care are Aboriginal (Brown, George, Sintzel, & Arnault, 2010). Aboriginal includes First

Most Canadian participants reflected that they did not pursue adopting from public care because of perceptions regarding age of available children (most were likely to be older), health and mental health issues of the children and their families, the lengthy process involved, and the understanding that children, even when it is in their best interests, are often involuntarily taken from their parents. Relatedly, many Canadian families acknowledged that Aboriginal children, even much-desired young children, might be available through public or private adoption, or through foster care. However, concerns about prenatal alcohol or drug effects, fetal alcohol syndrome (FAS), complex birth family issues, and fear that Aboriginal bands would reclaim their children led families to choose not to adopt from these cultural groups; views aligned with national findings on foster/adopt issues (Dave Thomas Foundation, 2013). Several parents noted:

- We didn’t know if it was a First Nations issues, which we would not take either because we don’t want the [band] coming back when the child is five.

- So most of the children in our system do suffer the effects of FAS [fetal alcohol syndrome], but our government doesn’t like to show that they are placing FAS children and so it’s not in any statistics—FAS children—and so that makes me extremely leery.

- There is a number—there is 1,400 in the Ministry, most of them are First Nation, and a significant—well over 90% have fetal alcohol exposure. You know, these are just brutal stories…

- And [Canadian city] has a policy where they don’t prefer to place Aboriginal children in a non-Aboriginal family. Then you need to sign an agreement with the First Nations band and then the First Nations band can have a say and input into different cultural things and different ways of… I don’t really know how they can, but we didn’t feel comfortable signing that a band would have say in our family unit.

Seven of the Canadian families interviewed pursued domestic private infant adoption in Canada before considering international adoption and two families had already adopted children through this means. One of the two families had adopted a daughter who was of a First Nations
background. Differing from the sentiments above, her adoptive family lamented that her
birthmother did not wish to pursue frequent contact post adoption, a situation that was different
from that of their U.S.-adopted child. The parents speculated that cross-border psychological and
physical distance may act as a buffer in adoptive-birth kinship relations and may even facilitate
its promotion. For the domestic birthmother, proximity to her birth daughter and her child’s
adoptive family might be too difficult and painful to manage.

Both families that had adopted domestically began again with the private domestic
process but shifted to an international program and then, specifically, to a U.S. child adoption
program, when they grew concerned about the health and backgrounds of children who were
being referred (and that they declined). In another case, a family wishing to adopt a young child
from the Ukraine became discouraged by the long wait and eventual referral of a 12-year-old boy.
Feeling ill-equipped to parent an older child with a history of institutionalization, the family,
through their adoption agency, moved to a U.S. program.

Given the pattern of participants reporting concerns about the health and mental health of
adoptable children in their public child care system, it wasn’t surprising that in looking abroad the
“child criteria” of most Canadian families reflected a hope for an infant or very young child in
good health or with modest special needs. For all but the two families that adopted White
children, health and age were privileged over race or ethnicity. Many participants linked being
open to transracial adoption as forwarding twin desires of being referred an infant and a shortened
referral process. Based on their discussions with Canadian adoption providers and their U.S.
adoption-agency affiliates, Canadian parents understood that a U.S. infant would likely be
African American or a child of another minority group. In the United States, this was the
population of “special needs” children most in need of homes. Diane and Richard Baker, Ruth
Hall, and Henry Vandelinden recalled this point:
Diane B:  And they were placing babies, usually, within six months of referral so the wait time was extremely short. Unlike some of those international countries, you’re waiting like three, four... it’s crazy. And what was really attractive, once we found out, once we talked to [US adoption worker], is that if you were open to a bi-racial baby, the wait time was cut in half.

Richard B:  Yeah, you get a lot better chance of...

Diane B:  Yeah, because at the time that we applied and we went on the registry, he said that out of all the couples on his registry, only four couples were open to accept a baby from a different race or a mixed race.

Ruth H:  We were told that Caucasian babies were probably harder to come by. Come by is the wrong word but there was more African American or from multicultural heritages and for us it didn’t really matter.

Henry V:  Back in 2007, it seemed like there was a fairly strong need for adoptive parents in the Southern states. And that proved fairly true, or so it seems with [first son’s] adoption. From the time we started with the first seminars here in [Canadian city] until he came home was about nine months.

Two Canadian families considered adopting only White children and they also worked with Canadian attorneys that aligned with U.S. attorneys or adoption agencies. One family met their birthmother when she was several months into her pregnancy and were with her in the delivery room and the days thereafter. The other family’s birthmother had given birth and was in the process of finding an adoptive family through her lawyer when the families met. In both these instances, the adoptive mothers related their decisions for in-race adoptions to not wanting to become visibly adopted families. Both families had other children and parents did not want racial differences among siblings. Interestingly, both of these participant families were among the most open families in terms of adoption communication. Other families used various ways to prepare themselves to become multiracial families. Though this will be discussed in more depth in the following chapter, Henry Vandelinden gives some insight into the stages in the process:

But for myself I had to kind of work through that internally as well and just try to picture that or see it as something that’s feasible. Given where we live and where we’re at, is it feasible for us to have a trans-racial family? So I remember always looking at our friends’ family and saying “Oh, that’s unique,” but not ever having tried to put myself in their position until we started thinking about it. And then it’s like could I really get my head through that? But yeah, once we started working on the adoption process it was really one step at time. Start with baby and then toddler.
Two other key elements attracted most Canadians to a U.S. adoption program: that U.S. adoptions would likely have some openness and that birth parents chose the adoptive parents. Many families learned early in their exploration of the United States as a sending country that it would be likely for some pre- or post-adoption contact. Most, but not all, participants saw this as a benefit and cited research or familial experience in support of this adoption form. In all cases where participants were opposed or ambivalent, this attitude changed either during the adoption process or shortly thereafter. For example, one mother, who was initially opposed to open adoption, went to great lengths to connect with the birth family and subsequently the families have an ongoing relationship that includes frequent cross-border visits. For two other families, learning more about birth parent expectations either through videos or attending workshops with birth parent panels deepened understanding of and value for birth parent contact. The Bakers illuminated this shifting awareness:

Diane B: So he was really nervous until this panel. I went to this panel, there were just these birth moms telling their stories, saying, “You know what? We don’t want our babies back, we just want to know that they are okay.”

Richard B: Yeah, they want to know that they made the right decision, so they’re happy or they are at peace with themselves. And they are at peace because they know they made the right decision for the baby. Right? So then I went to the one by myself, because [wife was away]…and I was like, “Wow, yeah, that’s how I could—.” So the education, the education can tell you so much, but when you hear it firsthand, it was totally different. So it was really good to do that panel.

The Vandelindens’ recollection of their contact with their son’s birth parents reveals the importance of a bi-directional contact process that informs and connects both adoptive parents and birth parents. As Karen described:

We had a bunch of conversations; just basically they asked us quite a few questions about our home and about what we did. Inasmuch as they had our whole profile in front of them when they chose us, I think it’s such a whirlwind for the birth parents, that they didn’t have a complete picture of us. And then when they met us in person, I’m sure all the details of all that just went blank on them because they kind of had to get to know us a little bit. But she did say that it was very comforting for her to have met us and to see who we were.
In general, U.S. adoptions by Canadians might be seen as a program that almost mirrors or extends the Canadian private adoption system. In many cases, the Canadian adoption agency simply transferred the family to a U.S. program when requested. However, several parents framed their move to a U.S. program as an unplanned and profoundly fortuitous result of social networking in which co-workers, neighbors, church friends, and family members informed them of U.S. alternatives when domestic options stalled or seemed unlikely. Familiarity with U.S culture, geography, a shared language and having family residing in the United States also attracted Canadians to U.S. programs. Immigration problems, primarily related to visa applications for adopted children, sometimes were the main marker to identify the adoption as transnational, leading one Canadian father to observe, “Seth’s adoption might have been an international one, but it did not feel foreign.”

**Dutch “Do-It-Yourself” Adoptions**

Child relinquishment by Dutch nationals is exceedingly rare and has steadily declined over the last four decades. For example, in 1970 more than 1200 children were placed for adoption, compared to fewer than 25 children annually over the last decade (van Hooff, 2010). With so few domestic children available for adoption, international adoption is popular and the Netherlands has consistently held one of the highest per capita adoption rates in Western Europe (Selman, 2010). Dutch participants uniformly described a domestic adoption system that has few infants or young children available. Moreover, as noted earlier some parents also observed that within the Netherlands, public opinion and policy with regard to adoption are somewhat contentious. Indeed, for a short time in 2009, the Netherlands prohibited adoptions from the United States, with the Ministry of Justice, in charge of adoption policy and its implementation, noting that infant adoptions of U.S. children by foreign nationals should be stopped. The previous year, Dutch citizens had adopted nearly 60 U.S. infants. Ministry authorities maintained
that since most outgoing U.S. adoptions involve infants, and infants are the most sought after group of adoptable children, the U.S. should be able to find domestic homes for them, regardless of their race or ethnicity. At about the same time, a Dutch celebrity who had adopted a child from the United States devoted his talk show venue to argue in favor of these adoptions.

As noted, many of the Dutch families engaged in this study were well aware of their location within the discordant crosshairs of Dutch national discourse on ICA. Marinus Van Ilzendoorn, an internationally renowned adoption scholar from Leiden University, validated this recognition in an interview for the Rudd Adoption Research Program at the University of Massachusetts when he was asked about the “prevailing social attitude towards transracial, inter-country adoptions” in the Netherlands. He responded:

In my country times have been changing from a general acceptance and even admiration of (international) adoption to sharp and ideologically motivated criticism that might make adopting parents feel guilty. Attitudes changed because of some widely publicized cases of misuse of international adoption of babies from intact families. The accusation was child trafficking and neo-colonialism. It led to more stringent guidelines and regulations for adoption (The Hague Convention) but the public opinion had already shifted. Nowadays parents have to defend their choice of adopting a child instead of being admired for their altruism. (The Voices Project, Marinus van IJzendoorn, 2010)

Against this sociocultural context, Dutch parents largely described an adoption process that was paradoxically isolating and social network-dependent. Children in this study were adopted both prior to and after U.S. implementation of Hague Convention guidelines and thus families followed two different systems. Most families were zelfdoener: a moniker describing an adoption process driven extensively by adoptive parent research of, in this case, U.S. adoption practice, policy, and process, and facilitated through independently made arrangements with U.S. adoption attorneys. In other words, at the time of most of these adoptions, no Dutch agencies had U.S. intercountry adoption programs, leaving Dutch parents pursuing adoption from the United States to learn about and forge connections on their own. Moreover, in choosing to adopt infants from the U.S., the parents often experienced further disapprobation from Dutch adoption entities
involved in approving their homestudies or intercountry adoption paperwork. Only in the last several years have three Dutch agencies developed official affiliations with U.S. adoption agencies and U.S. adoption programs. For two families, their second adoptions fell under the new system; all others were independent, self-researched, and networked.

This independent information-gathering work was time-consuming and necessarily covered a wide swath of topics, from protocols of introducing (in English) one’s self and family to potential birth parents to understanding U.S. adoption laws and immigration requirements. Significantly, accounts of the undertaking and the autonomy it required were richly grounded in layers of meaning, with many participants self-identifying as prototypical zelfdoeners by personality, others suspecting it as a Dutch adoption strategy to discourage U.S. adoptions, and still others experiencing the enterprise as steps in the gestation of becoming parents. Ella DeVries, Eva Janssen, Anika Sanbi, and Terra and Hans Hollander shared their reflections on the process:

Ella D: And my husband and I are both not people who sit and wait a lot. We’re more of an action, we take action. We are zelfdoeners; in other words we do it on our own. We don’t put our biggest wish onto their [adoption agency] table, we just all do it ourselves and we’ll get accredited through the agency, so that we go through the right channels and formalities and all that kind of stuff.

Eva J: Oh, the name of the thing–zelfdoeners. This is [the process] for people who do their own, who handle their own adoptions, which would be us. [DN: So that’s zelfdoeners?] So it’s bypassing the system–Which is what we did. [DN: So they do give this as another option? But they don’t encourage it?] No, no, no, not really, because they all want you to go to one of those agencies. They say, “Well go to that agency if you’re interested in that particular part of the world,” but again, America is not one of the countries that they say. And that’s probably to stop the floodgate.

Anika B: And also, it’s not always that you adopt a baby. Because in the Netherlands it’s more used to adopt children two or three years old. At that time it was a little bit changing already. But adopting from the U.S. it is a do-it-yourself adoption…How do you call it? [laughing] [DN: Do-it-yourself?] There, you always need to go via an adoption agency but if you are very patient you can try to do an adoption yourself.
In the Netherlands, it’s like do-it-yourself. You need an agency to check if everything is legal and no laws are violated or broken, so that you act with caution. But open adoption was also for us doing it ourselves and we felt that was also an important aspect because we said we won’t have anybody else decide… And that’s of course— it’s a bit exaggerated perhaps—but that nobody else will decide which child will be ours. That’s the decision of the birthmother and our decision within limits of course, within the limits that are there. But taking all these steps, doing all the preparations, writing the ‘Dear Birthmother’ letter, having the first contact, the excitement of hearing that your letter was chosen, the first telephone call you had, and all the stuff that needed to be done, that you were actively involved in the birth and the adoption, it was almost therapeutic…Yeah, more like a pregnancy.

Like a pregnancy. But now the both of us were pregnant.

Conflated within the “do-it-yourself” activism across almost all participant accounts was vilification of adoption agencies’ placement roles—an agency’s role in matching X child with X family—and veneration of the U.S. process that hinged on birthparent selection of a family for their child. Anika Sanbi and Roelina Zanten explained:

She [her aunt] brought us into contact with this family and we learned that it was possible to meet the birth parents, at least the mother, and learn about the background of the child; and you were able to do it yourself. But it is not an agency saying, “This is your child,” but a birthmother who can decide if this will be your child or not. That for us was very important.

We like to do it on our own, not through agencies. Because when you call them they say, “Yes, someone is coming, but you’re maybe number 25, number 26.” And the main reason why we decided to adopt from the United States is the mother decides who’s going to be the parent of the child. And we found that was the main reason.

These perspectives cohere with Bruner’s (1990, as cited in Biesta, 2008) position that narratives are constructed “both at an individual and societal level – in order to justify the departure from established norms and patterns of belief” (p. 3). Further, working within this marginalized adoption clime, parents offered a view of a process that seemed almost clandestine. This was emphasized as they described a wholly unique but crucial element of the process: the existence of and reliance on a community of successful U.S.-Dutch adopters that served to initiate, educate, approve, mentor, and provide ongoing mutual support to newcomers in the
process. In describing how they came to adopt U.S. children, Dutch families presented strikingly similar accounts of connecting with someone who knew someone who had adopted from the U.S., contacting and being interviewed by the successful adopters, and only then being referred to the U.S. adoption provider(s) to move forward with the adoption. The following narratives from Wilma and Fred Flintstone, Ella DeVries, Arnold and Roelina Zanten, and Terra and Hans Hollander illuminate this practice:

Wilma F: I remember when we went to the family who we didn’t know but they said, “Just come and we’ll tell you about U.S. adoptions.” It was a group helping each other; you always have another family as your guiding family. We were [names family] guiding family. You just get a handout saying “First, write this letter to the ministry. Second, make a ‘Dear Birthmother’ letter; this is what should be in it. Number three: send that and a copy of your BT [required Dutch adoption form] and your complete guideline. If you want to book a flight, this is the agency which is cheap; here you can rent the car.”

Fred F: They would take you by the hand.

Wilma F: Yeah, “This is the address of the office, this is the address of the doctor, and this is the address of the hospital.” Everything was in it, just follow the book and you’ll be okay. We were driving back and I said to Fred, “I feel pregnant.”

Arnold Z: When we first connected here in the Netherlands with that network of parents.

Roelina Z: Yes, the other adoptive parents - They made a real book about it, like how you do it and everything.

Arnold Z: A kind of manual. Step by step what you had to do to adopt in the United States. It was every family had added a little bit extra in all those years, so even if you went over there you already knew where the shops were, where we had to go, what hotel. It was…almost everything.

Ella D: It was through a friend, it was actually a friend who said to us, “Do you know what? I know somebody. I know a couple. I know a woman who together with her husband adopted newborn twins from America.” And I just looked at her and went, “Excuse me?” I immediately went into, “Can I please call her? Can you ask her,” because we were in the middle of it and we’re like, if this is an opportunity then we’re just going to grab it. And just forget about what everybody had said beforehand. And so she said she was totally fine with that, so she rang the woman and said, “Look, I’ve got friends who are in a similar situation, can she call you?” And [her friend] said “Yes, she can call me.” And so I rang her and she said, “Yeah, no problem. Come round, come meet our children and I’ll refer you to the other couple who were in touch with [U.S. adoption agency].” [The U.S. adoption agency] chose to have families come … through like a referral
type of a network, a network of people… We had lovely people sort of helping us along. The other couple who were the sort of go-between for [USA adoption agency] at first, they said “Come to our house. We’ve got a list. Here’s your action plan. Don’t forget to bring the stroller!”

Below, the Hollanders note how they moved from pioneers of U.S. adoptions in the Netherlands, to experienced mentors guiding scores of prospective parents over the last decade:

Hans H: It ended up that we were the first and that after the guys, I won’t mention their names, after we’d adopted they asked us to help guide other couples. So we have I think 70 couples here.

Terra H: Over a period of ten years.

Hans H: Over a period of ten years. Because we have our experience and then we tell that experience and we told them about our experience and the do’s and don’ts and so on.

In the following chapter, I discuss this communal support more thoroughly and argue its representation as an indigenously produced community of practice (CoP), birthed in “do-it-yourself” activism and organically inclusive of the hallmarks Wenger’s (1998) adult learning model.

Unlike Canadian accounts, and ICA narratives in general, which often comment on informal communities among prospective adopters, Dutch experiences were explicitly tied to a specific sociocultural context and developed out of subordinated and maligned desires that were contrary to public Dutch adoption discourse and practice. For Canadian participants, hearing about a family that had adopted from the U.S may have ignited interest in the country as a sending nation but was not a necessary ingredient to forging ahead. Additional information could readily be obtained through Canadian agencies with a U.S. intercountry program or affiliation with U.S. adoption attorneys and providers. Dutch adopters faced a wholly different dilemma, and networking with successful adopters was a key element to becoming parents themselves.

Though Dutch participants used several U.S. adoption providers to facilitate their adoptions, the community that developed around one U.S. agency in particular was most often described as a supportive hub that encouraged prospective adopter mentorship, the development of an agency
newsletter for Dutch adopters, and annual picnics and gatherings for its Dutch families in the Netherlands.

**Intercountry Adoptions Inside the Delivery Room and Outside the Box**

Fieldwork for this study brought me to kitchen counters, dining room tables, bedroom closets, coffee houses, daycare classrooms, community health centers, local playgrounds, and restaurants as I drank teas and coffees, and ate pastas, salads, and *stroopwafels* with families across the Netherlands and parts of Canada. Entering into and then immersing in conversations that often flowed across hours and distances (picking up children at schools or going to family appointments), few of these experiences were as profoundly transporting as the times when I sat or stood side-by-side with parents as they opened up scrapbooks and life books, parent portfolios, and computer files that offered image after image of their progression from childless couple to parents of newborns, then toddlers, youths, and young adults. Many Canadian and Dutch parents punctuated their accounts with vivid descriptions and gestures of what they were doing when they “got the call” about a pregnant mother or waiting child. One mimed quieting a cell phone at a conference, another acted out turning off a cell phone under the belief that the adoption worker was a telemarketer, another acted out an interrupted rest from painting a room when her call came, and another recalled the ennui pierced by a call while waiting in an intractably long line.

Many parents were exceptional raconteurs (or perhaps it was the subject matter that made them so), and their voices proved media enough to relocate us to delivery rooms, neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) court rooms, family reunions, and other gatherings with birth families across the United States. Most of these last locations are ones not found in parental accounts of intercountry adoptions, and the co-presence of birth and adoptive relatives—mothers, fathers, grandparents and siblings—in many of them, signals how extraordinarily different these outgoing U.S. intercountry adoptions are. Though I am a seasoned social worker and education
researcher with substantive knowledge of intercountry adoption policy and practice, many times I felt as if I had a front row seat at some new, hybrid adoption entity. How else to explain an intercountry adoption where a birthmother, days after giving birth, travels to an airport to meet the Dutch couple she has chosen to parent her child and escorts them to the hospital, because she wanted to be the one to introduce them to him and him to them? How else to explain a prospective adoptive mother’s motivation to learn and then use La Maze training with her child’s birthmother in a sadly desolate delivery room? Or a prospective parent’s recalled surprise at the thickness and rubbery texture of her child’s umbilical cord as she cut it moments after her child’s birth? How else to frame family constructions when “Nana” for one White Canadian family is now indisputably an African American grandmother living in a midsize U.S. city, and of another family whose holidays and seminal celebrations are often border-crossing events organized and attended by birth and adoptive family members?

In this final section of this chapter, I present selected narratives that illuminate a seminal finding of this exploratory study: U.S. outgoing adoptions extend and complicate intercountry adoption practice, policy, and discourse in myriad ways, which, in aggregate, suggest a new paradigm of intercountry adoption practice—and one in need of study.

For example, in intercountry adoption practice, adoptive family profiles or family books are documents intended for agency use only and are required and evaluated by the prospective parents’ adoption agency and the sending nation’s organizations or agencies that match families to children in care. When used in domestic U.S. adoption practice, they have much broader circulation. Any quick Google search of U.S. adoption agencies or adoption providers can rapidly link to hundreds of individual, couple, and family profiles aimed at attracting domestic birth parents planning an adoption. To the chagrin of some participants in this study who had to negotiate the process with little guidance and cross cultural communication barriers, a substantial cottage industry of free or paid guidance on creating attractive profiles has developed in recent
years. Additionally, contentious discourse about the process (cf. adult adoptee and birth parent blogs and adoption agency websites) found expression in some participants’ comments as they noted some repugnance to marketing themselves, or as one Dutch participant noted, “bragging about who we are, how we live, and what we have,” while acknowledging that birthparents certainly needed information about them before considering contact, much less child placement.

Ruth Hall, mother of eight-year-old Sierra, framed the process and recalled her meeting with Sierra’s birthmother after she chose them as parents of her daughter:

There’s basically a birthmother letter that you fill out. I think it’s pretty much standard across the U.S. and Canada where you— It’s what they’re going to see of you. This is either they’re going to want to read on or they’re going to go, “Ah, not sure.” Once they read on they get your file and there they have pictures and a bit of your life story, where you lived, what your plans are for the child. Then when [my daughter] was born, it’s funny ‘cause [her birthmother] was saying, “Which one is the nurse?…[S]he’s going to have health!” And then she goes, “Who is the school official?” …Great, you’ll never let her get in trouble.” I said, “You’re not kidding.”

This brief narrative reveals several ways Ruth (and her partner, Carol) and Sierra’s birthmother engaged in an intercountry adoption process that differs markedly from the current, contemporary paradigm. First, Ruth is correct that the practice of writing a birthmother letter is standard practice; however, it is a standard in private, domestic adoption practice, and not in an international adoption process. Letters to birthmothers are not part of intercountry adoption practice because unborn children are not generally considered part of an intercountry adoption pool except in the United States. In intercountry adoption practice, prospective adoptive parents do create family profiles15, which describe themselves, their family, friends, community, interests, jobs and other background data. The distinction is important and indicates a significant shift in child-prospective adoptive parent matching processes. In the current intercountry adoption model, this review of family profiles is conducted by adoption professionals, not birth parents in

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15 Domestic private adoption applications may have both a “Dear Birth Mother” type document as well as a more complete family profile. Intercountry adoption applications have only the latter. In this study, most participants use the term “Dear Birth Mother” over “Dear Birth Parent,” I use them interchangeably when referencing this form of letter.
sending countries. It is a key stage in a process in which agencies match families to available children. A further distinction notable in Ruth’s account is the presence of adoptive parents with birth parents during the birthmother’s labor and delivery. This sometimes occurs in domestic private adoptions but here it signals another process well outside the scope of the contemporary international adoption paradigm.

The following excerpts are from my discussions with Ian Wilson, Terra Hollander, Anika and Dirk Sanbi, and Karen and Henry Vanderlinden. These accounts revealed birth-adoptive family relationships taking root in adoptive “Dear Birthmother” letters and family profiles and forming over time and distance (with some fits and starts and interventions on the part of agencies and counselors). Additionally, they bear witness to their complexities and capacity to deepen the adoption experience for all triad members. For example, in contemporary intercountry adoption practice, infant relinquishment typically occurs off-stage and out of sight of adoptive families. In many of these outgoing adoptions, however, it was center stage, strongly influencing adoptive family open communication patterns, sometimes facilitating consistent ongoing contact and—as my fieldwork confirmed—sometimes resulting in a near-visible presence of birth families in adoptive homes.

**Ian Wilson (Canada)**

*Creating a family book*

People are visual learners, so we get some photos; I wrote our profile—which usually the wife does—because her job necessitates she write in analytical style. I’m much more touchy-feely. So I just wrote, like, here’s who we are. If you asked our friends they’d say we’re the reliable couple—help you move…stuff like that. How do you distill—here’s our whole life, here’s all our cultural baggage, everything—here’s who we are?

*Being chosen by their daughter’s birthmother*

And what you realize is there’s no logic to it; it’s a visceral feeling; they pick it. Our birth mum tells us: “I saw you and there was this other couple that was in the running. All my friends liked this other couple but I picked you because I saw these photos of Ian
playing with the nephews and nieces.” And she just thought, “You know, this couple looks like they need a baby.” That’s literally what she said to us. We were like, “Wow.”

*Discussing birth and adoptive parents’ feelings and hopes*

It’s funny though, we’ve had a lot of contact with [older daughter]’s birthmother and a very involved adoption and when we were leaving, she came and stayed with us the night before at the hotel before we left and stayed a couple of days with us another time. The night before we left we’re all outside talking… We were just chatting about nothing and she got really quite emotional and she just said, “Just promise me that she knows I love her,” and we’re like, “Of course! You’ve made this incredible sacrifice; she’s going to know who you are.” And she said, “My life’s been such a struggle. I just want to know that she has a chance.” And I said, “Look, she’s going to have opportunity. We have no idea how she’s going to turn out. Our job is to give her all the skills to compete in life on her terms.” And she said, “Okay.” And that’s all she wanted to hear.

*Reprising – four years later…*

Now it’s complicated at times but fundamentally it’s funny- ‘cause last year [older daughter] said, “Well I want to stay with my birth mum.” And [older daughter]’s birthmother said, “Oh no you’re not! You’re going to go with your parents.”

Here, Ian reveals a strikingly intimate intercountry adoption process—one that begins with him trying to capture his family’s essence so that a birthmother in the U.S. may have some concept of the home he and his wife hope to provide for a child. Although he controls what he writes about his family (taking on a task he believes is usually undertaken by a wife), he describes a birthmother decision process that seemed more from the gut, rather than founded from a deep consideration of what his family text revealed. Switching voice in his narrative, Ian recalled his daughter’s birthmother’s reflections as she told Ian and his wife that it was when she saw the photos of Ian playing with his nephews and nieces that she decided “this couple” needed a baby.

Remarkable, at least from an intercountry adoption perspective, are the exchanges between the Wilson family and their daughter’s birthmother as she directly petitions the family to tell her daughter of her love and, years later, remonstrates her daughter for thinking she can simply stay with her when she’s annoyed at her parents. By this later point, birth and adoptive families are frequently in touch and have met again several times. The exchanges, the in-person and ongoing negotiation of family relationships and constructions of parenting (i.e., the
birthmother making the point clear to her birth daughter who her parents are) are lived experiences sometimes found in domestic adoption arrangements but not in transnational ones.

**Terra Hollander (The Netherlands)**

**Being chosen**

They really chose us because they connected with us. The birthmother of our oldest daughter, she is the middle of three sisters—I am too. We look alike. Her father [daughter’s birth father] looks very much like [daughter’s adoptive father]. And the things I wrote about—what my interests are and how we live—that’s how she would like to give to her child. She wants her child to grow up in that kind of surroundings. And that’s because that’s how she is as well, the things she likes as well. Like my youngest daughter, her [birth] family is very creative and very busy with music and making drawings, and my youngest daughter does that as well. She’s also very creative and she will go to an art school. So her [birth] mother didn’t choose me for nothing. She wanted her child to grow up in that kind of values, environment.

**Contact through the years and meeting**

And then when you meet each other after so many years and you can talk about this [one woman’s relinquishment of a child as the start of another woman’s motherhood] and you can all feel good about it. She feeling good about making a good decision, seeing and knowing she has done the right thing, feeling good about herself, because she has felt guilty all these years about making that decision. And you can never decide for another person whether they did a good thing or not. You make a decision in the circumstances of that period in your life and someone else can say, “Well, you also could have done this or could have done that or why did you do this?” It’s the decision of that moment and you have to live with that the rest of your life. And after so many years and having that contact through the years it helps seeing in one point of time we did a good thing—we all together did a good thing.

Earlier in their narrative, the Hollanders had shared how critical it was to them that in U.S. outgoing adoptions it is the birthmother who chooses a family for her child. In this excerpt, Terra recounts what her daughters’ birthmothers told her about why she and Hans were chosen.

This narrative, I believe, had at least two purposes: Terra was validating her family’s U.S. adoption choice with evidence of a discussion indicating birthmothers’ agency and also indicating awareness that adoption choices are context-driven and life-altering. They don’t occur only in a moment in time, but are considered and questioned throughout life. Contact between birth and
adoptive parents over years allowed the families to sometimes create meaning together of these experiences and the outcomes of their choices.

**Anika and Dirk Sanbi (The Netherlands)**

*Meeting their birthmother and child*

Anika S: We flew into [U.S. city] and the birthmother was already waiting for us at the airport.

DN: So the first time you meet her, she is waiting for you at the airport? Wow, I can’t even imagine what that must have been like.

Anika S: Emotional roller coaster.

Dirk S: And then we had to go to the hospital because she wanted to give us the child herself. She wanted to do it herself.

(Both visibly emotional recounting this)

Anika S: And so we had to go to the hospital and they brought us to a special room, a family room with the baby in the cradle.

Dirk S: We were sitting with the birthmother, and her grandmother and us and the social worker and then a nurse came in with the cradle and the baby. (Weeping)

DN: And so the mother went all the way to the airport to meet you first…

Dirk S: Three days after giving birth.

Anika S: (Crying) And then we spend one and a half days with her; she shows us everything…Unbelievable! Oh, whew, (deep sighing)! I don’t know where she got the power from, but it is unbelievable.

This account offers a powerful counter-narrative to the disembodied birthmother presence cited in intercountry adoption research (Dorow, 2006; Kendal, 2005; Volkman, 2005; chapter 3 of this dissertation) and adds to nascent research indicating attention to birthmother agency in intercountry adoption (Bos, 2007; Gibbons, Wilson, & Schnell, 2009; chapter 3 of this dissertation). Neither area of research scholarship, however, speaks to the Sanbis intercountry experience of being chosen, then being accompanied by a determined mother who maintained control and agency as she transferred her infant to their care. For the Sanbis, as with many of the families in this study, there is no ambiguity, no questioning of what a birthmother looks like, or
significantly, what happened at relinquishment. The placement of their son in their arms with his birth family present is no imagined event but a powerful, physical, and emotionally lived episode forever mediating the adoption experience and meaning for all members of the adoption triad.

Karen and Henry Vandelinden (Canada)

Birth meetings to birth narratives

Karen V: We actually met them a couple of times. The first visit went so well, we met with the social worker and we met a second time without the social worker.

Henry V: Yeah, we just went to a public park, and then we went out for dinner.

Karen V: And this was lovely.

Henry V: Yeah, but it was really tough, because they really are great people and they really wanted to make it work, but they just couldn’t at the time. They were just in a very difficult spot. Things were really slowing down—this was 2008 [the U.S. was in a recession during this time]. So she was trying to do some schooling and he was out of work.

Karen V: And they had another child to support, so it was really stressful for them.

Henry V: Yeah, just the thought of like buying diapers was a stressor for them. And we got the call about [our second son] after he was born as well, because they were kind of a late decision to adopt as well. And now we have pictures of the birth families in their room… each birth mom and birth father held the [their] child and we got pictures with them. And each birth mom fed their sons, so we got pictures of that… And we saw a lot of the benefits of open adoption at that time as well as a lot of the good language to use for those sorts of things. So from day one, before the kids could even really talk or understand everything we were saying, we’ve been praying for [sons’ birth parents] and telling them [sons] about them and how much they [birth parents] love them.

Karen V: [We tell them…] That they grew in [birthmothers’ tummies]. But they [birthmothers] couldn’t provide everything that they needed and they chose the mommy and daddy that could provide for them. So they know that we were chosen by them. And [older son] has indicated that he’d like to see [his birthmother] again…. We decided to keep their middle name as the name their birth mom and birth dad had chosen for them. We chose the first names, so they asked us what name we had chosen for him and she [birthmother] really loved the name [older son]. And she knew [its meaning] right away.
The Vanderlindens’ narrative moves from meeting their sons’ birth parents (they met each son’s birth father) to the adoption language they use in their family and what they share with their children about why they were placed for adoption (the “adoption or birth narrative,” in adoption terms). The narrative veers from the contemporary intercountry adoption paradigm again because of the physical presence of the birth parents, which forges tangible, physical and emotional links between the birth and adoptive families. The Vanderlindens (as did all adoptive parents that met birth families in this study) took care to document, through photographs, the meeting of birth and adoptive families and used this documentation to support their claim to their children that birth families chose adoptive parents.

The themes evident in these narratives—meeting birthmothers, negotiating relationships and kinship relations, creating history, co-creating an adopted child’s birth narrative and baby naming—are leitmotifs in domestic adoption literature and research, and recognized for their absence in intercountry adoption practice. All of the accounts offered at least some unique outlier experiences that confounded and extended intercountry adoption expectations. For example, Ella DeVries’s commitment to acknowledgement of birthparents (“You can’t pretend that that part of the triangle of the child, the parents and the adoptive parents, you can’t just leave one part out. That would just be robbing, you know?”) led her to accept her child’s birthmother’s invitation to connect through Facebook.

Not all reflections on birthparent choice and decision making tethered accounts to positive views of Canada or the Netherlands or some undefined connection to an adoptive family as presented in their family profiles. Concurring with findings from my pilot study with adoption providers engaged in outgoing adoptions, some birth parents appeared to choose families outside of the United States for the physical and emotional distance from one’s child this choice offered. Anne Atkinson speculated that this was the case with her child, born two months premature and weighing less than three pounds. Her daughter was born a twin, and her birthmother chose not to
see her or Anne throughout the time they shared the same hospital floor while the infant girls gained weight and stabilized. Although only three families in the study never met their child’s birth parents (the infants were placed in foster homes until adoptive parents could be confirmed or found), seven of the families did not have ongoing relationships with their child’s birth families. In several situations, contact was always mediated through either the U.S. or foreign adoption entities and stopped over time when birth parents could no longer be found. In other situations, despite the adoptive parents’ hope for ongoing contact (whether direct or via an agency), over time some birth parents reduced their engagement.

Thus, in many instances, emotion-laden accounts of meeting one’s child for the first time were inseparably cathected to the story of being involved in a birth parent’s relinquishment of his or her child. Participant narratives follow a projected chronology of events leading from completing adoption applications to a denouement of holding a new son or daughter in one’s arms. However, in many cases the accounts traversed paths and promontories that held full stories of their own. Meeting one’s child and being a contributory agent of another person’s transformation from parent to “birth parent” was one such narrative location, infused with Janus-faced themes of joy and anguish that defied disentanglement. One adoptive father, for example gave and acted out this account of the beginning of his parenthood of his child as marking the end the birthmother’s parenthood of the child. He and his wife had been asked by the birthmother to come to the United States about two weeks before the delivery of her child. They had spent the time together and the couple was present at the infant’s birth.

And I think it was the dawning of realization that this…We [birthmother and prospective adoptive parents] got along great; we had some fun; we had some laughs. You go into the lawyer’s office and this is the one thing nobody said a word about. (pointing) Okay you [prospective adoptive parents], go in that room. [Birthmother], you’re here. So the birthmother is with the child. And so we go into this room…and I am signing [adoption documents]…and you can hear the birth mum in the other room and to say it was primal, [it ]was howling…And so the lawyer came in and said, “[birthmother] wants to see you.” So we go over..., she’s holding this baby and I’ve never seen a sadder person. It was terrible.
Writing up this segment of the research that takes into account participants’ narratives of meeting their child for the first or nearly first time, I struggled with voice, and point of view. For example, in the first few drafts composing the paragraphs that would become this segment, I understood the adoptive parents as “bearing witness” to the pain of birth parents as they relinquished or placed a child with them. Only after going back and forth to the transcripts and my drafts did I realize another level of testimony. I too, was “bearing witness” as the participants emotionally recalled birthing and relinquishment scenes involving parent transformations, premature infants, sometimes harrowing drives across unfamiliar U.S. urban landscapes, and sometimes, the anguished cries or silences of birthmothers carried across delivery rooms and court rooms. This distinction is important and goes to the heart of an intercountry adoption process that is often critiqued for its capacity to remove emotional elements of loss, separation, and fracturing inherent in adoption practice.

**Conclusion**

Exploring these events narratively and the tensions they yielded, I was acutely aware, both in the moment and retrospectively, of being brought to the shores of some new horizons in intercountry adoption practice. Bruner (1990) accounts for this metacognition (being gripped by a narrative while simultaneously analyzing its function and content) by reminding us of narrative’s use of drama. Referencing Kenneth Burke’s discussion of “dramatism” (p. 50), he tells us, “Well-formed stories, are composed of a pentad of an Actor, an Action, a Goal, a Scene, and an Instrument – plus Trouble” (Bruner, 1990, p. 50). Trouble, he explains, “is an imbalance between any of the five elements of the pentad” (p. 50), and he gives the example of an Action toward a Goal that is inappropriate in a particular Scene, or when an Actor does not fit a Scene (sic, Bruner, p. 50). Although I might wish to refrain from using the descriptors “trouble” or “inappropriate” (e.g., I don’t really want to incarnate children, or birth/adoptive parents as either),
actions such as being present at the birth and cutting the umbilical cord of one’s adopted child or circulating Facebook pictures and postings of birth and adoptive family members reveal intercountry adoption narratives as unequivocally inscribed with the dramatic disjunctions and attributes Bruner described. I am also reminded of Mattingly’s (1998) “rather ordinary and restricted” sense of narrative as “discourse featuring human adventures and sufferings, one which connects motives, acts, and consequences in causal chains” (p. 275).

This chapter explored two of the questions girding the study: what personal experiences, knowledge, attitudes, or beliefs influence Canadian and Dutch citizens to adopt a U.S. child, and how do their narratives conform to or differ from contemporary intercountry adoption paradigms. Although similar psychosocial issues (infertility, aging, etc.) led to decisions to adopt, the process to do so, when adopting from the United States at least, was operationalized differently within Canada and the Netherlands. Canadian families followed a process similar to U.S. and Canadian domestic adoption practice; the socio-cultural context in the Netherlands drove a more independent and defensive practice requiring personal ingenuity and peer-community support. For both Canadian and Dutch adopters, birth parent agency in adoptive parent selection was a primary attraction in adopting from the United States. A major finding of this chapter suggests that this pivotal element and the outcomes it produces might reconfigure a view of intercountry adoption. In the following chapter, I present data that explore the second and fourth questions of this study: the educational and learning terrain of Canadian and Dutch parents undertaken pre- and post-adoption, their assessment of such efforts and their outcomes, and the impact of their child’s adoption on their lives.
Chapter 6

On Learning, Educating, and Changing

With almost no documented scholarship about the intercountry adoption experience of foreign adopters of U.S. children, this chapter picks up with an exploration of how Canadian and Dutch parents prepared when adopting a U.S. child—in effect, what did they learn, where did they learn it, and what did the learning mean to them or for their family? This chapter reveals an understanding of Canadian and Dutch adoptive parent learning as a bricolage, forged initially from the required training imposed by ICA requirements, and then significantly directed, adapted, and expanded upon by adoptive parents themselves.

Learning Through Adoption

When transitioning from one life status to another (e.g., being single to getting married, being childless to becoming a parent, being employed to entering retirement), adults frequently engage in some form of learning to help them achieve this life transition (Aslanian & Brickell, 1980; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Adult learning in this context is undertaken to gain the skills, knowledge and competencies to effectively move from one status to the other. As Livingstone (1999) pointed out, “Much of the most important learning adults do occurs in moments of transition” such as “births, deaths, marriage, divorce” (p. 5). Relatedly, specific events, such as having a child, moving to another city, getting a promotion or losing a job, can trigger decisions to learn at particular points in time (Aslanaian & Brickell, 1999; Merriam, 2005; Rager, 2003). Undoubtedly, becoming a parent by adoption is one such transition, and adoptive parents’ preparation and ongoing adoption-related learning reveals a dynamic context often begun
in agency-based training modules and expanded through additional informal learning activities and lived experiences.

According to Picca and Feagin (2007), “Sociocultural inheritances pass from one generation to the next and adults are major transmitters of collective understandings, interpretations, and memories” (p. 13). As such, they are charged with “socializing newcomers, the young, and others into collectively preferred racial understandings and dominant mainstream thoughts, memories, and ways of interpreting the world” (Smith, Juarez, & Jacobson, 2007, p. 1203). “Newcomers,” for the adoptive parents in this study, reflects the dual attributes of their adopted children: They were all very young infants as well as new immigrants in their adopted homelands, and transmission for these parents was necessarily operationalized in bicultural and racial socialization domains.

The 20 families in this study began their adoption preparation almost always under the aegis of a state-, province-, or nationally-authorized adoption service provider. These agency-based trainings were one of the first ports-of-call in terms of learning the language, issues, and perspectives circulating among adoption triad members, and developing an understanding of the skills needed for transracial and/or transnational adoption. Through the courses, parents became sensitized to — adoption language and terms (e.g., “make an adoption plan” versus “surrender a child”; open, closed, or mediated adoptions), understanding the effects of trauma or institutionalization on children, the importance of learning about a child’s birth culture and history—are standard for families pursuing transnational and transracial adoptions (Moosnick, 2004; S. Patton, 2000; Paulsen & Merighi, 2009; Smith, Juarez & Jacobson, 2011). Some topics, such as writing a “Dear Birthmother” letter (only some Canadian training offered this) were carry-overs from domestic adoption training agendas but fit U.S. procedures, and others, such as understanding the needs of older-child adoptions, simply did not relate to a U.S. process.

Regardless, these forums often served an important place in the transition process for adoptive
parents—socializing prospective parents to a larger domain of “adoptive parenting” and gaining new insights and perspectives through exposure to the circulation of positive and negative discourses that attend intercountry adoption in general and U.S. adoptions specifically.

Participants in this study noted that the process of adoptive parenting, moving from becoming to being, also required (and sometimes continues to require) extensive learning on their part—outside of and beyond the foundational agency-based efforts. Some of this learning took a form similar to Tough’s (1979) learning projects: for example, dedicating time to learn the immigration and adoption laws of the United States, Canada, or the Netherlands via the Internet, phone calls, or attorney visits or learning the appropriate adoption language and cultural wording to craft a “Dear Birthmother” letter or family profile. Some took more relational and participatory efforts: learning how to address an adopted daughter’s desire to see her birthmother by listening over time to other adoptive mothers in a support group.

This chapter explores these learning activities, needs, and processes. My goal is to provide a deeper understanding of the ICA experience of Canadian and Dutch parents of U.S. children through this learning lens. Finally, this chapter also looks at the evolution of adoptive parents from learners to educators of other adults and children in their communities and beyond, as they acted to interpolate beliefs about family, race, citizenship and other areas made newly relevant through their transnational and/or transracial adoption experience.

In the following sections, I present data found across three related areas: identification of knowledge sought or education undertaken pre-and post-adoption of U.S. children, methods or strategies used to obtain knowledge or education, and analysis of the contribution of these activities to becoming an adoptive family. The chapter reveals participants’ learning as they reflect on changes in knowledge, skills, behaviors, attitudes, and feelings over time. I use participant exemplars to illustrate this trajectory—from moving through the application process to
reflections from an adoptive mother on meeting her daughter’s birthmother more than 15 years after placement.

This chapter is structured with a comparative analysis in mind and, as with the previous chapter, begins first with a section pertaining to each country (in this case, agency-based learning) before moving to a more integrated analysis. Non-agency-based learning is qualified as culturally specific at times (e.g., Dutch families created resources for other Dutch families), but when similar experiences are noted that do not indicate a particular culturally informed response, participants from both countries are used to illustrate the issue, point, or saliency of topic. For instance, both prospective Canadian and Dutch parents gave examples of listening to successful U.S.-Canadian or U.S.-Dutch adoptive parents’ narratives and using information drawn from these accounts to influence their own decisions or actions.

Interview data related to adult learning and adoption-related education revealed several findings: (a) to equip themselves as adoptive parents of U.S. children, participants sought to adapt and expand their adoption-related learning beyond mandated or suggested adoption agency, organization, or state-based trainings; (b) the presence or possibility of a level of open adoption in an intercountry adoption process was a mediating agent in parent learning, experience, and outcomes; and (c) adoptive parents evolved from learners to educators as they transmitted adoption-related knowledge, sometimes to be used in service to, and by, their adopted children, and at other times to educate the community at large.

Narratives of learning are woven into each of the findings and are mapped against the adoption trajectory, beginning with the agency-based training that must be undertaken for all intercountry adoptions. I thematically group these into three supra-themes: (a) Narratives of Becoming, (b) Narratives of Parenting, and (c) Narratives of Educating. Each of these areas has subthemes that contextualize learning activities, strategies, and outcomes.
Narratives of Becoming

The first supra-theme incorporates both agency-based learning and self-directed efforts parents made toward becoming parents of a U.S. child. In response to my queries about how they prepared to adopt from the U.S., almost all parents began with a description of what they learned though their agency-based training. Because each country had discrete requirements and formats, the first segment of this theme is somewhat awkwardly bisected with these two contextualized descriptions. However, within each country narrative, I provide exemplars and analysis to illuminate a sampling of what was learned and to what effect. A second section of this theme reveals that extracurricular activities were needed beyond the scope of agency support to complete a U.S. adoption. Some of these efforts were enacted because of the marginal position of U.S. adoptions, which left participants in need of taking action on their own to achieve their goals. Within the section I include strategies parents used to acquire knowledge or information, including identifying narrative learning as one approach that several parents specifically tied to new perspectives or future actions. In this next section, I discuss learning begun in the context of agency-based offerings. Participants in both countries attended education programs or completed online requirements and most parents indicated that much of their training was significantly helpful to their understanding of the issues related to adoptive parenting. Canadian adoptive parent training was mediated by both the province participants lived in and the adoption agency they used. As stated earlier, intercountry adoptions are processed on a provincial level in Canada, and provinces and territories vary in terms of training requirements. Study participants resided in two of the 10 Canadian provinces. Requirements for and access to training varied. One province mandated training, the other didn’t; one province had a strong regional adoption education organization and several adoption agencies, the other had neither. In the sections below I identify themes found in narratives focusing on agency-based training pertaining to Canadians’ experiences, although many are also found in the Dutch experience.
Canadian Parent Preparation: Various Paths Across Provinces

Agency-based training content seemed to vary from venues that wanted prospective adoptive parents simply to get an overall perspective of the issues in intercountry adoption to more intense formats that interrogated participants’ motivations to adopt or educated them about taking a specific approach to adoptive parenting. Some agencies conflated intercountry and domestic parent adoption training, and from this experience prospective adopters would then decide which type of program to apply to. Katha and her husband lived in an area of Canada that did not have any local adoption agencies that could guide them through the process, and she offered two reflections on this.

We applied to the intercountry program [through the province]… and they have it set up so it’s very independent. So they don’t give a lot of advice, they kind of leave you on your own. But they did give about ten different websites to go to. It wasn’t U.S.-specific, but it was international adoptions. So there was attachment, there was FAS [fetal alcohol syndrome]. They were generic, [and it was] general intercountry stuff. Then we had a really lengthy application with the province and they wanted to ensure that you’ve done your research as applicants. And so there were questions on what books have you read about the country, what resources have you accessed about immigration, like all those kinds of questions…. So maybe it’s their hope that through the application process you do all your homework first off. So that was kind of the formal stuff.

When an agency is giving you information, well they’re a stakeholder in their agency, so they’ll have an agency slant. We didn’t have that so we had to get all of our information and put it all together. So in some ways it was good—there was no slanted information, but in other ways it was just difficult to find the information and then to know what information to trust. And then I needed to find more information to make sure that the information that I was finding was true.

In Katha’s first account above, she was held accountable to complete the required Hague training by accessing resources identified by the province, and the overall program seemed designed to give a broad overview of intercountry adoption issues. Families were accountable for the material via a later check by the agency during the application process, and they also had to investigate immigration rules and roles on their own. Although resourceful and able to secure information as needed, Katha noted later in her interview that she had tried to locate in-person conferences or workshops in her area that would give her more in-depth training.
Critical appraisal of adoption information, the focus of Katha’s second comment, was taken up by several participants and connected to discourses of adoption as “big business” or (worse) an unregulated business where children were commodities and adoptive parents are moneyed consumers, fears about being misinformed about the health of available children (or their birth parents), or being misled about length of time from application to child referral. Ian Wilson recalled hearing some early views about the U.S. at general adoption meetings: “You’re kind of looking around, you’re chatting over coffee [and] there is a definite consensus, though, that the U.S. is a bit of the Wild West… You can be successful, but you have to really try and take care with it.” Rachel, another mother, noted the need to take this approach: “We were lucky because we had immense support, but I am a researcher. We did an awful lot of research. I don’t think you should take what people say at face value.”

Nell’s training was different from Katha’s; it was mostly conducted through a series of on-line training modules, but participants worked directly with an agency. Families studied progressively more in-depth content over a series of weeks:

And our agency has it all online. It’s things like attachment issues, discipline issues, race issues, because if your child is not going to look like you, how do you field questions? …And it was very, very helpful. We did a whole big thing on how to take care of African American hair and skin. Well, because you know, we’re White people; we don’t know.

Nell’s agency moved them through an online program emphasizing issues related to racial socialization processes aimed to prepare them for racialized encounters and to prepare their children to respond to them (Hughes & Chen, 1999), as well as teaching parents how to care for their transracially adopted child’s skin and hair. Nell’s account preceded a more detailed discussion of her current practice in caring for her son’s hair and skin. Henry and his wife Karen experienced another level of training.

Henry: We learned a lot from our local adoption agency, going through the five days of seminars before we adopted. And we saw a lot of the benefits of open adoption at that time as well as a lot of the good language to use for
those sorts of things. So from day one, before the kids could even really talk or understand everything we were saying, we’ve been praying for [each child’s birth parents], and telling them about them and how much they love them.

Karen: It was about five months of education, home studies, having references checked and medical checks, actually probably more than that.

During our interview, Henry showed me the three-inch thick binder and other materials he had saved from this training. The binder was sectioned by topic area ranging from how to write a “Dear Birth Parent” letter to articles by noted adoption experts (including some referenced in this thesis) on attachment, grief, loss, open adoption and open communication, and other adoption topics. Highlighting, check marks, and circled text signaled important points, and I had the sense this had been a well-used resource. These examples and others from families in the study indicated that in general, the pre-adoption training sponsored by this Canadian agency emphasized content related to developing awareness of and skills in racial and cultural socialization practices, training that is understood as particularly critical to transracial adoptions (Baden & Steward, 2007; Hughes & Chen, 1999; Simon & Roorda, 2000). Henry’s comment also segues into how the couple applied what they learned at the seminars to their lived experiences as adoptive parents—in this case their commitment to open communication about adoption in their family. For example, they maintained efforts for ongoing contact with their sons’ birth families; they created family books (scrapbooks) that included pictures of their sons’ birth families; the children had pictures of both their adoptive and birth families in their bedrooms; and family prayers were said for birth and adoptive family members. Notably, these activities suggest a new level of open adoption communication in the context of intercountry practice. Karen confirmed that learning content was threaded throughout other adoption related activities such as undergoing a home study—the assessment of a family by a social worker that is needed to proceed with an adoption.
Learning Adoption Through the Lived Experience of Others

Significantly, narrative, first-person accounts delivered by adoption-triad members powerfully influenced the beliefs and actions of participants. For example, Ian Wilson, a father of two young African American daughters, recounted hearing a Canadian-African American adoptee offer her perspective on Whites touching Black children’s hair:

And she gets up in front of us. She’s just lovely, confident, and she said, “If I’m going to give you any advice, don’t let anyone play with her hair.” And we [Ian and his wife] were like, “Oh?” And she said, “Look, you don’t go up to blonde-haired, blue-eyed babies and rub their head. People will think you’re weird. They’ll think you’re a pedophile.” We’re like, “Oh!” She said, “My hair’s a novelty because yes, I can wear beads in it and that, but it’s my hair and it’s my space, so don’t let people…” So we’ve told the kids – and it was tough at first ‘cause people just come up and would like want to run their hands through [daughter’s] hair and at that time it was quite a project to even get beads in [her] hair, but it’s interesting. But [daughter], she’ll let people touch it but we always say, “Well, it’s your hair so you decide.” And she’ll say, “Okay, that’s enough. Please don’t touch my hair.” So it’s very interesting to see. But most people are like, “What’s the big deal?”

In this narrative the adoptee-speaker is offering a powerful race lesson, its authenticity and value amplified by her perspective as a young Black woman in Canada. The content is about touching hair but also works on multiple levels: Ian notes his and his wife’s initial ignorance of Whites touching Black children’s hair, (“…and we were like, Oh!”), their understanding deepening through listening to the adoptee, followed by their transmitting the knowledge to their daughters and teaching them it is okay to rebuff people (e.g., race lessons). Confirmation of his changed perspective can be heard in his comment about other people’s ongoing ignorance—“But most people are like, ‘What’s the big deal?’” An interesting counterpoint to Ian’s experience is that of Ruth, the mother of another African American adoptee. Ruth and her partner Carol were also informed about people touching Black girls’ hair but their lesson came from a social worker during their home study meeting.

Like the social worker had said, “How are you going to feel when some person comes over and feels your child’s head?” I said, “They won’t do that.” She goes, “Oh, yeah, they do.” [Ruth as if talking to the social worker] “No.” [Ruth, to DMN with emphasis] They [strangers] do! It’s incredible! The first time we were in public with her. I reacted
totally not what I told the social worker I’d do. I said, “Get your hands off my child.” Carol [partner] was like, “That was rude.” I said, “No, they were rude.” [Ruth to DMN] You just don’t understand what that is until you have a child. You say you’re going to do it, but the mother bear or the tiger instinct comes out. Up until [daughter] was about two or three [years old] people would touch her hair. We’d say, “Don’t touch her hair.” Eventually when she would get touched on the head we’d say, “Honey, if you don’t want to be touched tell the lady, ‘Please don’t touch my hair,’” so she could advocate for herself.

As noted in the previous chapter, Richard Baker was moved to consider and value an open adoption model after hearing first-person accounts by birthmothers presented at an adoption agency panel. Hearing an adult African American adoptee talk about the need for open communication in adoptive families (communication about race, feelings about birth parents and adoptive parents, and other topics) committed Karen Vanderlinden to use this approach in her family:

Someone asked, “What part of your parents’ style or parenting helped you most work through your adoption issues and stuff?” And I just remember her saying how open dialogue and being able to speak your mind, whether that might be hurtful to me, having my child say to me something that I could potentially see as hurtful. I don’t see it that way anymore. I see it more as I want my child to be able to vent and be open. So I think in that way it’s probably made me more open minded as how to I’m going to parent.

In these four accounts (inclusive of the reference to Richard Baker), participants shifted their point of view to reveal their positions as audience members or, more specifically, learners about adoption. Reissman (2008) noted that narratives are used to “argue, justify, persuade, engage, entertain, even mislead…[they] do political work” (p. 8). In these selections, the narrators with real-life experience as adoption triad members are two young adult African American adoptees, and a panel of birthmothers and their stories serve as testimonies or exemplars (Zillmann, 1999) to the adoption experience. The effects of narratives to influence behaviors, attitudes, or understanding rests on several interrelated variables: “engagement, identification, trust, affect, counter-arguing, talking to others, and recall” (McQueen, Kreuter, Kalesan & Alcaraz, 2011, p. 3). For example, engagement or identification with a narrative may
forestall or even block counter-arguments. Richard Baker offered one example of this as he spoke of his shift (after listening to birthmothers’ accounts) from wishing for a closed adoption with little or no birthmother contact, toward an understanding that open adoption and contact was more ethical and healing for birth parents and adoptees. Ruth’s narrative is helpful to observe the contrast of learning from others’ lived experiences and testimonials, and being informed by a professional. Although learning occurred through a variety of processes, notable in this study was the power of messages carried by others with lived experience—adoptees, birth parents, successful adopters. Not surprisingly, adoption agencies or adoption-related organizations often call upon adult adoptees, successful adopters, or birth parents to speak about adoption.

Families also critiqued their preparation, noting that it was not extensive enough —“They didn’t really give you anything about talking to your child at all; it was only about eight hours.” — or that materials were not useful or tailored to their needs. One family offered this critique:

Like there’s stuff about adopting kids that are 11 and 12 and if that’s your situation, then that’s great…. I think it should be, yes, you should do some of that general stuff beforehand, but then when you’ve been picked, I think there should be another piece before that that’s specific to the type of child you’re bringing to your family or the make-up that your family is going to be, whether it’s racial or whatever.

This was a sentiment echoed by several other Canadian participants, with some noting too much emphasis on infertility-inspired adoption choices and others noting, as the Dutch also did, the lack of content related to infant adoptions or anything about creating or negotiating relationships with birth families.

**Dutch Parent Preparation: One National Course**

All Dutch families wishing to adopt must first register for and then complete a required adoptive parent training. The training is conducted by the *Stichting Adoptievoorzieningen*, (Foundation Adoption Services [FAS]) and is held for several hours a day over a period of weeks. The course costs approximately 1200 Euros and has a required textbook. The training followed a
prescribed curriculum; used lecture, role plays, adoptive parent presentations, discussions, and films; and had a mandated textbook that covered various adoption related topics. Although all agency based training was conducted pre-adoption, the training reviewed resources and referral sources for post-adoption issues.

Several participants noted that the training provided a forum for themselves and their spouses to deeply consider the various perspectives of the adoption triad, becoming a multiracial family, understanding the effects of adoption on children, and grief and loss issues of birth parents. All the participants I interviewed spoke positively about the course. Below, two mothers share similar thoughts:

Basically they’re preparing you for adopting a child from another country that’s most likely not to be your color. And they really did a good job actually of having you as a parent, look at this through the child’s eyes. What would it be like if you are, for example, Black and everybody around you is Black and then you go to the country and there’s these two White people that pick you up from the airport that bear no resemblance to your surroundings whatsoever? But they did a really good job at trying to get you to see things from the child’s point of view. (Ella D)

So we went there and weren’t very optimistic, but we really loved it and the people teaching were very nice and they adopted [children] themselves so they know what to talk about and it was okay. It was not that bad at all. Specific information from countries, you didn’t get it, only the general information. “Yeah, you can adopt from China, these are the demands you should meet and this is South Africa and this is the demands you should meet.” And also giving information on which books you can read and which sites you can visit. The adoption triangle was very important; the child, the birth family and the adoptive family. So you get an insight to seeing adoption through the child’s eyes. [Mother speaks from point of view of child to make the following point] You’re sitting there and in one moment you see a man and woman you don’t know and they’re touching you, they smell different, they look different, they speak a different language and they’re taking you with them into a hotel and that gave me the creeps. [Mother shifts back to first person] I thought ‘Oh my God, what are we doing?’ But it’s just to get the awareness that you’re getting a child from another culture, from another land, from another country, so it was a good thing. (Eva J)

One family intending to adopt more than one child entered the training thinking they would adopt across several countries, only to be disabused of the idea by their trainer who made them consider the situation from an adoptees’ perspective. This mother of two African American children noted:
I remember during the course we said, “We don’t want to choose for race.” According to us, we could adopt one from China, one from Ethiopia, one from Columbia and she [the trainer] said “Oh you want a rainbow family.” And we’re like “Yeah that sounds great to us.” She said, “What will that do for the children? Won’t it be nice for the children if they have somebody who is just like them?” We’re like “Okay, didn’t think of that, good point.”

As noted in the previous chapter, almost all Dutch adoptions are international, and the training is geared toward this, as one father emphasized: “Yeah, the classes we take are intercountry adoption because adoption from the Netherlands are around 10 a year or something like that so the classes are basically intercountry adoption, intercultural adoption in general.” Some participants remarked that hearing the perspectives of other couples helped them confirm their own beliefs; others noted that the sessions helped them better understand what level of special needs they felt they could or could not manage. Because the training was held during weekdays, one father poignantly commented on the sharp contrast of being in an environment with strangers discussing extraordinarily intimate topics and then emerging out into the workaday world.

**Learning in context.** Adoption preparation courses are an anticipatory learning process. Rooms are filled with prospective parents and training frequently occurs months or years before a child is ever placed with a family. Forms confirming parent education and preparation are signed well before an adoption dossier even makes it to county, national or international levels of consideration. Dutch and Canadian training could and did foster critical reflection and provided substantive content that deepened parents’ understanding across a wide swath of topics. However, all parents in this study substantially augmented this foundation with extensive learning agendas of their own. Depending upon where they were in the adoption process (applicant, waiting parent, new parent, or experienced adopter) and what they felt they needed to know, both Canadian and Dutch participants identified and attempted to rectify deficits in knowledge. For many, this began with simply finding out more about adopting from the U.S., since the process
was not well known in the Netherlands or Canada, or learning how to write to a birth parent, but it also extended to needing social support.

**Researching laws and writing to birthmothers.** Families in both countries needed to become knowledgeable in adoption and immigration laws of both sending and receiving countries and subsequently targeted learning they needed to take on themselves. Eva, a Dutch mother, did this twice.

But you know, we didn’t know anything about U.S. adoptions. I had to go through the Internet for domestic adoption. So I took my information from there. So the Dutch laws I understood but the American laws I didn’t understand. So then I taught myself…all the things from websites adopting.org or something like that, adoption.org. I wanted to adopt from [U.S. state] again because I knew the laws and I found a great site with a great explanation of [state] adoption laws from the [state] bar so it’s great information. I read it all and I recommend it now to people I know of. So I knew that side, I knew much of the information, which was impeccable for us, so that was great.…. I think you have to do research yourself when you want to adopt. You have a responsibility of your own.

Learning how to write sensitively and appropriately to a pregnant woman or recent parent in a foreign country was a daunting task for Dutch participants. For Canadian participants, the content was difficult but in the process was a similar one to their domestic adoption process. For the Dutch there was no corresponding model. The Sanbis recalled it as an emotional and cultural challenge but they did get some guidance for translation issues: “Yes, this is not writing for an afternoon, this takes days. It is very personal, we have language difficulties, and so it is so difficult to write what you mean.”

**Needing other families to become a family.** Not surprisingly, the role of social support in the form of meeting other families that had adopted either from the U.S. or transracially was of great importance for the majority of families in the study. Pre-adoption social support functioned to inform participants of U.S. adoption possibilities; it helped participants imagine and prepare for adopting transracially; and it was used as a conduit to exchange knowledge and resources on a range of topics from immigration laws, to U.S. hotels or health care coverage. Anne, a Dutch mother recalled:
We [prospective parents] called them [Dutch family that adopted U.S. children]. They live at the other part of the Netherlands. We visited them. We met their children. We heard about their story and we thought, ‘Well, if it’s possible that we could adopt a child through that way that would be wonderful!’

As Karen, a Canadian mother became more deeply aware of how transracial adoption would significantly alter her how she engaged with her community, she sought out information from experienced friends to learn how to cope with racist or inappropriate comments:

I remember before we adopted [son], we were waiting. Our friends that had adopted from [U.S. state]—I was on the phone with her for hours at a time, coming up with all these hypotheticals, like ‘What if someone says this or this?’ And I remember her just saying to me, ‘You just take it as it comes. You can’t foresee everything that will come about and you can’t live on edge like that. You have to just take it as it comes and deal with it when it comes.’

In the Netherlands, a very strong informal network formed around the needs of adoptive parents. The Hollanders, like Karen’s friend above, took on a mentoring role:

Hans H: Because we have in our experience and then we tell that experience and we told them [new prospective parents] the do’s and don’ts and so on.

Terra H: Yeah, we have a newsletter once a year. Then we share information as well. So as parents, amongst each other we have support and we exchange all these experiences. It’s all voluntary of course. It’s not by an organization; we do it ourselves amongst each other. But I would like to see more in the proper organization in helping areas…It’s all about getting information…So that’s why we need each other as parents, to share this information and to decide whether this is good for your child or not…

The Hollanders’ remarks capture the sense I had from Dutch adopters that a primary route of information sharing was among families themselves. With U.S. adoptions viewed as a marginal practice (see Chapter Two), the process began and was sustained through an informal social network. As a group they were active and resourceful, but at times there also was a sense of isolation or even loneliness that characterized the process. As one father noted, “In the end, it is all through an informal network…I was hoping to find someone; I had my antenna up, looking for someone who was adopting and get an overhead, a helicopter view.”
Wilma was one of the Dutch parents caught in a knowledge gap created by the absence of a coordinated program between the United States and the Netherlands. According to her, and other Dutch families, the U.S. agencies were not wholly responsible for walking Dutch families through Dutch laws or issues about adopting from the U.S., and Dutch entities (government or adoption agencies) knew little about adopting from the United States. Over the years, the community of adopters created various resources of their own. Wilma had received handouts to help her adopt (see Chapter Five) and then, based on her own experience, added to the materials as new needs surfaced:

So I wrote the handout. I said [to the U.S. adoption agency], ‘Is it okay if I make handout for you?’ and the [adoption worker] said, ‘Sure.’ And at that time, they didn’t see the importance of that I think. But now that they got it, it’s like [wow]! They’re just thinking how it works in America, it’s completely different here. You arrange a leave of absence from your work, and if you adopt a baby it’s not immediately insured, so if something happens to the baby which insurance going to cover it? So you have to check it out…

And families such as the Zantens relied on them.

Roelina Z: Yeah, but it (help) was also from the other adoptive parents. They made a real book about it, like how you get through it and everything.

Arnold Z: A kind of manual. Step by step what you had to do to adopt in the United States….Every family had added a little bit extra in all those years, so even if you went over there you already knew where the shops were, where we had to go, what hotel. It was easy with getting us walking distance from almost everything.

**Dutch-U.S. adoption networking as a community of practice.** For adoptive families, social support is a vital ingredient that can minimize stress related to adoption, buffer effects from adverse community interactions, enhance parent-child interactions, and promote better family functioning (Erich, Leung, & Kindle, 2008; Vashchenko, D’Aleo & Pinderhughes, 2012; Viana & Welsh, 2010). A finding in this study indicated that the socio-cultural context of adopting U.S. children in the Netherlands moved the level of informal networking and social support that circulated among prospective and successful adoptive families to a learning system akin to the concept of a community of practice (CoP; see Chapter Three).
The double attributes of being adopters of infants and of children from a Western nation led Dutch participants to claim a shared identity as a marginalized group within the larger context of intercountry adopters in the Netherlands. Community was built around these shared characteristics as well as through the collective use of the limited group of U.S. adoption service providers and resources through which their adoptions were processed. Moreover, the process as described by parents began with an invitation to meet with a Dutch family that had already successfully adopted from the United States. This meeting was described as almost a vetting process whereby the experienced adoptive family shared information with the newcomers about the U.S. adoption process, assessed their level of interest and commitment (to adopting), and subsequently referred them to U.S. adoption resources. The informal but connected group of veteran U.S–Dutch adoptive families took on this role of responding to the interests, and learning needs of prospective families. Prospective adopters moved through subsequent levels of involvement and contributed to the community as they themselves evolved from prospective parents to adoptive parents—a learning process that coheres with Lave and Wenger’s (1991) description of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). Participants in this study discussed documents they produced to help new parents, documents created for prospective parents, and a quarterly newsletter produced by core members for distribution to other members of the community. The understanding of their status as zelfdoeners of U.S. adoptions led to an interrelationship of learning, participation, knowledge building and sharing, coherent with a community of practice model of learning.

**Narratives of Parenting**

The second supra-theme explores the work of parenting as expressed though strategies taken to create and foster family and adoptee identity to navigating birth-adoptive family relationships. These narratives revealed ways in which much of the learning undertaken in
preparation for parenting was applied over time. I begin with accounts that revealed parents’ motivation to learn—to expose themselves to new experiences in the service of meeting their child’s needs or even the needs of their child’s birth family. This was a substantive theme across families—seeking out information when confronted with new issues arising from adopting or simply being motivated to learn more about a child’s birth culture, family history and so on. The tone of the discussions around these self-directed learning activities ranged from remembered joy at achieving pleasure or competence from an activity to recalling feelings of frustration when few or no resources were found to address an issue (e.g., advice regarding how to tell a child a birthmother has had subsequent children that she has not placed for adoption). Other themes discussed in this section center on discrete topics such as, in the case of transracial adoption, experiences of caring for a child’s hair, skin, health, or mental health needs. Narratives of parenting also included activities meant to foster racial and ethnic socialization through adoptive parents’ own research to secure knowledge of their child’s birth culture, to activities they engaged in as parents or families in support of their family’s needs.

**Motivation and Learning for Others**

In addition to offering evidence of the learning needs of foreign adoptive parents of U.S. children, content analysis of participant accounts of adoption-related learning revealed efforts marked by a powerful motivation to learn, willingness to challenge themselves in seeking new resources and means to obtain knowledge, and engagement in critical reflection of the information obtained. The following excerpts illustrate these three patterns.

Ruth: Before we left [for the United States to meet with birthmother] I knew she [birthmother] would probably have nobody with her because of her circumstances. So I came home one night when we were still in Canada and I told Carol [partner], “I got this great movie we need to watch.” It was a Lamaze video to help her out. You see it on TV and I said, “I want to at least [watch it].”
Ruth and her partner Carol were one of four couples who were invited by their child’s birthmother when she delivered her child. They had been in contact with her through weeks of her pregnancy, and she had asked them to be present at her child’s birth. Realizing that she would not have any friends or relatives with her, Ruth was motivated to learn tangible ways to support her during the delivery. Her account continued, “I went in there and it’s like, ‘Okay, give me your hand;’ ‘Carol, go get us ice;’ ‘Go do this, and go do that.’” The Lamaze training afforded an immediate and useful role as helpers not just a mothers-in-waiting and set a tone of cooperation and caring between the birthmother, Ruth, and Carol. Their recall of their daughter’s birth was an amalgam of scenes: helping an exhausted woman during labor through deep breathing exercises, advocating for needed medications or attention, cutting and feeling the texture of the umbilical cord, spending a night holding a newborn in hospital nursery, and returning to Canada as new parents.

For Canadian and Dutch parents learning to foster their child’s racial, ethnic, and adoptee identity—from culturally appropriate hair care to learning about U.S. racial history—meant identifying resources that would help them accomplish these goals. Agency-based seminars and workshops apprised families of the need to attend to the children’s needs but the learning, activities, and opportunities were largely situated and community bound.

Karen (below) described numerous activities and strategies she engaged in as the parent of two African American boys. These include attending a transracial family support group and “culture” camp, reading, researching, socializing with Black and transracial families, and seeking mentoring from Black friends.

Yeah, I asked questions… I have a friend who’s from Africa and she came to go to school here. And she was laughing one time because she said, “Yeah, us Black families, we do kind of talk about families like you.” [Karen continued] And I don’t ever want to make her feel like she can’t tell me this stuff, because I want to know this stuff, like what’s important? And you know, it takes a bit of vulnerability on your part, because you don’t want to seem like you don’t know what you’re doing. But for the sake of your kids you want to know what you’re doing. So then she said, she was talking about
another family at the school, she said, “Their hair is terrible.” In black culture girls’ hair is real important, not boys. So I choose to keep it [sons’ hair] really short.

Karen’s account, in this case focused on hair care, is similar to several other parents who asked for guidance from Black friends. For example, Julia Bryant, in the previous chapter, looked to her African American friend, who was himself an adoptee raised in a small White-dominant community, for guidance on racial socialization. Not all efforts were well received: participants also gave examples of when their queries were met with silence or rebuffed, although in each of these accounts, participants had no previous relationship with the person from whom they had requested advice. As one mother explained, “I was trying for a few months to try and get somebody to teach me with the African Heritage Society, but the lady was always putting me off, so I went on the Internet and found a website that was called, ‘Keep Me Curly.’” Eva, a Dutch mother, felt a deep commitment to learn more about her children’s birth culture so that she would be able to pass it on to her children; this is the work of cultural socialization, that is, the work of the adoptive parent (Hughes, Rodriquez, Smith, Johnson, Stevenson, & Spicer, 2006; Picca & Feagin, 2007).

I think also because we are more interested in background and how things work, healthcare, the school system, I want to stay updated on what happens there and what’s happened in the past. I have looked over African American, we did know about the slavery and the cotton fields and Uncle Tom’s story and stuff like that, but now you look through it with other eyes. You see it differently. I looked in the library for history but it’s very rare to find something here. On the Internet, it’s better to find. Everything you wanted to know, any question you could ask about backgrounds, about cultural; most of the cultural things were African American, values, that’s the most thing that I looked on the Internet because I looked here in the libraries for books and it’s very difficult to find something.

Joan was one of two parents I interviewed who had adopted White children, both daughters. Her daughter’s birth family was of a different ethnic and religious affiliation and the family decided to raise her in in both cultures. This meant attending a religious school and celebrating both sets of holidays. Joan contended that her daughter would want to be able appreciate her birth family’s culture, and she thought it quite likely that she would visit the
United States as she got older. Indeed, the family now keeps in contact with the birth family on a bi-monthly basis, and both families have spent holidays together.

These narratives offer multiple interpretations but are placed here as evidence of the motivation found in many parents accounts to inform and prepare themselves to capably parent their children. The strategies used, the efforts made, and the content covered are not unique to outgoing adoptions, but for adoptive parents in the Netherlands, the challenge could be access to information.

**Seeking Knowledge and Help for Post-Adoption Issues**

More difficult, or at least more complicated, were situations where families searched for help in supporting their children as they aged, when these children had more conflicted feelings about being a Black or biracial child in a White family or community or had questions about being adopted or placed for adoption when other birth siblings were not. Three families reported strikingly similar accounts of their toddlers’ awareness of race—touching another Black child’s hair or skin, and then touching their own. For example, Anne Atkinson described a time when her 18-month old daughter saw a Black child in a stroller at a park with his two White parents. She recalled:

And she looked at him and she looked at her shirt and she looked at his arms and she held up her arms to his and she touched his hair, you know what I mean? I just knew at that second it all was clicking for her, that it had just sunk in to her. She couldn’t express any part of it. It was all sinking in for her that she doesn’t look like us. She looks like this other little boy and they’re the same and she, like, rubbed his face. Yup, this is what she looks like. And it’s not the same as us. You could see her put it all together.

Many parents reported comments and queries their children presented as they got older and were able to articulate feelings about being Black or biracial in White dominated communities. Julia Bryant recalled comments made by her daughter when she was about five years old. The excerpt below includes that recollection along with a more recent experience (her
daughter was 14 years old at the time of the interview) of responding to being a visibly-adopted family and Julia’s perceptions of the layered issues that are part of being so:

I remember her looking in the mirror and saying, “Mommy, I just wish I looked like you.” And it’s not because I was prettier; it was because I think there was a sense that everyone knew visually that she was different; there was something different about how she became a part of our family and it was very exposed…In the last couple years [she] has been very clued in to that fact when little girls will literally stare at her in the washroom. She’s very aware of that because she’s old enough to be aware of it.

The desire of minority children to be White, if their adoptive parents are, has been noted in adoption literature (Juffer, 2006), especially among younger children. Julia believed that in her daughter’s case, the experience of being racially different was mitigated by living in a racially diverse neighborhood, having a strong social group comprised of Black and White friends, and racially diverse family friends and classrooms. These influencing factors were in alignment with adoption-based research that argues for the importance of racially diverse environments and same-race relationships for transracial adoptees (Andujo, 1988; Huh & Reid, 2000; Mohanty & Newhill, 2006; Vonk, 2001). They were known to Julia through her personal research and professional experience as a social worker. Other families in both Canada and the Netherlands were aware of research that recognizes the need for contact with racially diverse populations and other minority role models and groups. However, in many cases there was a problem with access in that these families lived in White-majority towns and villages with little to no diversity. For example, this Dutch family noted:

But for the children it is different. Especially for [our first son]; he is so aware that he is different from the rest of the children, from his friends. It’s always…the exception, swimming, sports. There is one guy who is also colored 16 but he is the darkest of all the children. Always, ten White children and [our son], he always feels like he’s different…It’s less an issue when you are living in a big city like Amsterdam because the variety is wider than when you are living in a mostly White village.

16 Families in the Netherlands sometimes used the term “coloured” to describe Blacks. I asked some participants and other non-participants I met during my field work if there were racial overtones or opposition to usage and was told there was not. One family did say that their U.S. adoption agency advised them not to use it.
Coping with the effects of racial isolation and transracial adoption was one area where some Dutch and Canadian families sought additional help from adoption support and education organizations. Other areas included attachment and bonding issues, how to deal with special needs related to drug or alcohol exposure, mental health issues, and learning disabilities. Inculcated by their national course to seek help if they encountered adoption-related difficulties, Dutch parents seemed aware and open to agency-based post-adoption support. One parent considered such options:

And a lot of people ask, like... if we think that we might need help with one of the boys in the future, we’re going to call them. Why not? And they in the adoption class they train you that it’s not, you’re not a bad parent if you ask for help, you’re just doing yourself and your child a big favor. Everyone wants to help you. If you have the flu, you go to the doctor so... you have the professional help.

Open Intercountry Adoptions Require Expanding Domains of Adoptive Parent Education

Unique to these U.S. outgoing adoptions (which are intercountry adoptions), were family requests for help negotiating relationships with birth families. Specifically, several families spoke of their hesitancy with and need for advice regarding how to introduce discussions about birth siblings to their adopted children. This issue could come up quite early post adoption and appeared never to be considered in the intercountry adoption training families had received. One mother remembered:

And when she was about 2½, just when she was forming words about the tummy, ‘Did I come from your tummy,’ and when we explained to her she had three brothers, she said, ‘Are they still with [birthmother]?’ [I answered] ‘Yes.’ And she looked at us and she goes, ‘Why me and not them?’ She was 2½ perhaps and in her language, ‘Why me, not them?’

One Canadian mother knew that her family’s open adoption with her daughter’s birth family meant that this issue would come up. She recalled a time when she attended a talk by an adoption expert in hopes of learning how to respond when these issues came up:

And I went and it was one of the questions I asked him, “How do I tell her when her story’s this; she has a sister; and [birthmother] has always said, ‘I’m not going to have
anymore.’’ He [expert] said, “Well you never know where your life’s at; don’t shut the door on that. You just tell her what you… what would you tell her?” I said, “I’d tell her that she has a younger sister. At the time she was born her mum was not in a position. She already had an 18-month-old; she wasn’t in a position financially to look after another baby and she didn’t have family support.” And with her sister, she was in a relationship and chose to… felt that she was in a position to keep the baby. He said, “She’ll take that away and she’ll come back and ask you more questions but you can’t change the reality; you just have to tell her.” I’m like, “Okay.” I guess I was looking for a Band-Aid or something.

Her husband picked up from here, sharing the couple’s fears:

It’s the inadvertent damage you do because you don’t know. You in good faith try to be honest with them but maybe it’s something… is there a way to frame it that would resonate with her where it’s not hurtful, right, ‘cause I just see this as one big wicked scar that we’re going to pull open at some point and I think the worst part is… We could stick our heads in the sand absolutely, but the Internet is a game changer.

Although the question can arise in any ICA, actual early-stage contact in the contemporary intercountry paradigm is highly unlikely and the situations of any birth relatives may remain unknown until some formal search or roots trip is undertaken. In U.S. adoptions the relinquishment context is usually known, and other birth siblings and other kin may even be present when the adoptee is placed. The issue of contact is highly complex but is found in domestic adoption literature (Berry, 1993; Logan & Smith, 1999; Wrobel, Grotevant, Berge, Mendenhall, & McRoy, 2003). Adoption providers did guide families through mediated contact, but participants recognized the need for a more comprehensive level of guidance that would attend to the more complex U.S. context. Families in both countries often felt a loss with how to handle these situations. Terra Hollander recounted her experience with her daughter:

[…]and she asked] ‘Why did my birthmother give me away and she didn’t give the other ones away?’ And, ‘Why couldn’t she take care of me?’ I told you [DN] that there are adoption agencies that arrange the adoptions from China and I know that the support you get afterwards is an ongoing process. That wasn’t in our case. We had to find out ourselves.
Four of the 20 families interviewed for this study were with their child’s birthmother when she gave birth, and all but two others\textsuperscript{17} met the birthmother shortly after her child was born. Official relinquishment usually followed days later, but the child’s birth story is created from a narrative that weds these birth and adoptive families. When an adoption narrative is founded on a component stating that a birthmother could not care for, support, or otherwise parent her child as a condition for the adoption, it is powerfully confounding for an adopted child to learn that subsequently born children did stay with her.

These families described other complex situations where they sought advice. One family with two adopted children encountered a situation in which only one birth family wished for contact. Another had to address comments from birth siblings and relatives who noted the advantages offered by the adopted family to the adopted child, advantages such as material belongings and opportunities that they themselves lack.

Canadian and Dutch parents adopt infants from the United States with the understanding that their children’s birth families may request ongoing post-adoption contact. Though not legally binding, all parents in this study seemed eager to maintain contact, and all predicated this desire on understanding it as in the best interests of their child and the birth family. An unexpected consequence, particularly in cases where contact was in person, was the extent to which adoptive parents and birth families were affected by the perceived beliefs each group had about the other. For example, Annette Wilson, a Canadian mother in an open adoption with her daughter’s birth family, was highly motivated to learn how to care for her daughter’s Black-textured hair. Tethering her belief in the importance of hair in Black culture to her responsibility as a White parent of a Black child to learn how to care for her daughter’s hair, Annette shared:

\textsuperscript{17} One U.S. birth mother did not want to meet the adoptive family she chose and another family was referred a child who was already placed with a foster family. In this case the families did not meet, although in several other situations, children were placed temporarily with foster parents, yet the birth and adoptive parents met.
And the hair, I think it is important: As an adoptive parent you have the obligation and I feel really strongly about that. You are obligated to learn about it and either do it yourself or get somebody else to help you with it. I think it’s a bit of a copout when you don’t do that, but that’s just me.

However, she also believed that this competency, from her daughter’s birthmother’s perspective, was a measure of her parenting skills. Annette resumed:

When we’re going to the States, I do her hair the day before so it is just right. I do feel a lot of pressure. I don’t want to be judged on my quality as a parent based on the hair that I do, but I know I will be, especially because I’m a different race.

Dutch parents Anika and Dirk also met their son’s birthmother, as noted in the previous chapter, and described their account of her greeting them at the airport and accompanying them to the hospital in order to physically place her son in Anika’s arms. Meeting her, spending time over several days with her, and returning home with pictures and videos of her with their son forged an immutable bond and a responsibility toward her. They shared:

Anika: In the beginning I was very insecure about it. I thought, ‘Someone gave me her child to take of, and I have to do it.
Dirk: And you do your best.
Anika: And maybe we try to do more than our best than natural parents.
Dirk: You try harder because it is not your own child, and so there is all this pressure to do well.

Although the narratives also foreground several transracial and intercountry adoption discourses (e.g., White adopters’ competency to parent Black children, notions of family membership and kinship), they are used here to acknowledge the mediating effects of present or future contact with birth relatives to adoptive parent learning.

Narratives of Educating

This supra-theme considers the shift by many parents from focusing on their own learning needs to taking on opportunities to educate others. There are multiple reasons for such engagements, including managing racially-charged comments, anticipating and attempting to foreclose school or classroom issues, challenging discourses about adoption, and so on. Often in
these narratives, participants’ efforts and their accounts attested to the ways adopting had changed them. Emails and communication during the participant recruitment process revealed an understanding of research participation as an act of educating.

Teaching about Intercountry Adoption against a Context of Open Adoption

The data relating to this category generally reflected efforts to explain adoption and a child’s adoption narrative (how they came to live with the family), and bicultural and racial socialization efforts with their children. The data presented an opportunity to understand how parents taught their children about adoption in general, and their child’s adoption story in particular. Specifically, the findings, introduced in part in the previous section, revealed that adopting from the U.S. requires Dutch and Canadian parents to diverge from prototypical intercountry adoption preparation as they relate to communicating about adoption or constructing adoption narratives for children.

The contemporary ICA paradigm holds numerous assumptions. These include: that children emigrate from impoverished countries to prosperous ones, that adoption entities (organizations, governmental departments, or agencies) not birth parents choose adoptive parents for children, that identifying birth families will be a difficult and usually impossible endeavor, and that ICAs are closed adoption processes with no options for ongoing contact between adoptive and birth families. Embedded within these assumptions are perceived consequences for adoption triad members such as lifelong psychological tensions around not finding one’s birth family, unresolved loss of birth parents who have no knowledge of the outcome of their adoption (child’s) placement, and ongoing threats to adoptive parents’ sense of security as the adopted child’s need to find missing birth families affects family bonding and loyalties. Furthermore, in this ICA paradigm, the U.S. is positioned as a receiving nation with prosperity and resources
enough to care for its own children and the adoptable children of other nations (Naughton, 2012). The experiences of adoptive families in outgoing U.S. adoptions contradict these assumptions.

There were several themes found in the data uniquely tied to the experience of outgoing adoptions. In constructing adoption narratives and notions of family composition with their children, birth parents were often visibly present through photos, videos, mail and email contact. Adoptive parents often referenced birth families as (current or potential) available sources of family knowledge. Children’s names were sometimes chosen through joint decision-making between birth and adoptive families. Children, although culturally developing and identifying as Dutch or Canadian citizens, were very much considered dual nationals, likely to take advantage of one or the other country’s opportunities to their future advantage.

With the proliferation of U.S. adoptions from China and Russia in the mid-2000s, adoption scholarship took an interest in the “culture-keeping” strategies of U.S. parents when adopting from these countries (see Chapter 4, Jacobson, 2008). Culture or heritage camps and “roots trips” to birth lands, are also focuses in this literature. Findings in this study, however, suggest alternate routes and strategies are employed when an intercountry adoption is also, in varying degrees, an open adoption. Adoptive families privileged kinship over culture and birth families over birth nation. The cornerstone in many of the adoption narratives tethered children not to a U.S. nation-state, geography, or culture, but to particular families. In addition, narratives of both Canadian and Dutch families seem to suggest that the ubiquity of U.S. culture in world media rendered it as not in need of study or conceptualized as a culture needing “to be learned.” As one Dutch father explained, “America is such a big country, it falls over you and you enter it.” The following narratives illuminate the alternate foci of U.S. adoptions.
Teaching New Versions of “Creation Narratives”

In family and communication studies scholarship and parlance, how a child enters a family is often conceived as a “creation narrative,” what Galvin (2003) described as an entrance story that “defines who the child is, narrates the process by which he or she was born into the family and contributes to the family” (p. 241). Intercountry adoption creation stories are necessarily more complicated; they are marked by loss and separation, and coherence can be rent by missing histories, actors, documents, or other entities. In this study, parents took great effort to document a child’s “family entrance,” which, in many cases was a near simultaneous exit from another family.

It started from birth. We had the pictures and he and I would show the pictures every night and look at them. Yeah, they know those pictures. I would point out to them who [birthmother and father] were and always say that is your tummy mommy. We prayed with the boys every night and we always prayed for [birth parents]. So they know the word adopted and how that’s special… (Canadian family)

I guess at least for our oldest son it is very important because we now have pictures, we can show him and we have a short movie that [his birthmother] is taking care of him. I filmed it when she was taking care of him. And a few weeks ago we have been watching the movie, and so he knows that she loved him very, very much and we had a connection with her. We hear that from other families; that this is the most important thing that you have, somewhere to go back to and need to know where you come from. (Dutch family)

We have hundreds and hundreds of pictures around his birth, pictures with his birthmother and her family, pictures in the delivery room, pictures in the U.S., and pictures of the journey home. We were with the birthmother in the delivery room. And so the story is all there, right from the time of his birth, with both families. (Canadian family)

In each of these narratives, adoptive parents have made a commitment to open communication about their child’s adoption and have set off on a birth narrative that is exceptionally transparent for an ICA process. In contemporary ICAs, birthmothers may be prayed to and prayed for, but their images, the corporeal sense of who they are, what they look like, is absent. Families in both countries adopted this broad model of communicative openness (Brodzinsky, 2006), with the only notable exception being in cases where the adoptive parents did
not meet the birth family. Some families indicated that they had “learned openness” from the adoption trainings; others said personal experience with closed adoptions fomented beliefs in openness; many indicated that their understanding was that U.S. adoptions pivoted on birth parent choice and thus likely had some openness. Most families, however, unequivocally believed it was their child’s right to know his or her full birth history. I sat with several families who showed me containers or computer files that documented in great description a child’s journey from a U.S. pregnancy or birth to life in Canada or the Netherlands. Families did not keep culture much in terms of U.S. identified cultural artifacts (e.g., decorations or clothing), but they often were meticulous in documenting each part of the journey.

Teaching about Birth Families

Another way the experiences of the families in this study differed from those that are more consistent with the “grand” narrative of ICA was in the telling about birth families. For example, in the traditional paradigm, birth families are static. That is, they are preserved in time and location to a country outside of the child’s present and adoptive homeland. For some of the adoptive families in this study, the boundaries were far more fluid, and kin were not a part of a preserved past, but more likely part of a not too far away (temporally and spatially) future. The experiences of the three families below capture variations of this difference.

And she will ask often, “Who’s my dad?” I [adoptive mother] said, “Well, you know, honey, that is going to be something that you’re going to have to talk to [birthmother] about when the time comes”…And I said, “If she tells you something and it doesn’t make sense to you, you can challenge her. It’s okay to ask her the question because it’s your life. You need to know.” (Canadian family)

In this example, there is an almost extended notion of kinship between the adoptive and birth families. The parent does not evade the child’s question at all, but considers it appropriate and possible for the child to ask her birthmother. There is the presumption that birth and adoptive families will have contact and that the child has the right to know this information. There was
another similar narrative, although in that case the child did ask and the birth and adoptive mothers both discussed the birth father:

She’s very clued in on who is who, how it all fits in et cetera. Like if [birth father] were to die tomorrow she would know that she was loved by him. That is really the best gift we can give to her and security. [It was the] same with her [U.S.] grandma and her papa. If they were to die tomorrow she would have some of that. If you don’t do that and something happens, that opportunity is gone. You can never go back. And if [birth father] were to die and she found out later that there were the pieces in her life story that she didn’t get, I think that’s when it becomes difficult. I think the big thing is to keep that open with the honesty and to support relationships in certain degrees and areas.

(Canadian family)

Although only a few families came close to this level of openness, this perspective—that a child should know that he or she was loved by a birth parent—moves to a different level with some outgoing adoptions. For example, another father offered this observation about his family’s choice to be in contact with birth families: “My brother said, ‘Oh, you should have adopted kids from Russia because then they can’t run away anywhere when they’re older.’ And I’m like, ‘Well at least if they run away we know where they are and we know that they love them, too, so it could be worse.’”

A more typical response for many families about how they teach their child about their birth families and culture followed the lines of this Dutch family:

And now we’re glad because we now see the advantages of the adopting from the U.S. because [son] has so much questions about where am I from, what does my mom look like, how does my dad look like. We have pictures of when he was just born with his birth mom, with his birth dad, so it’s very precious to have all that information. (Dutch family)

**Teaching about Birth Culture**

Although I have argued that families in this study have not engaged in some forms of culture keeping, this is not to say that they have not taken seriously encouragement of bi-culturalism—“the significant efforts parents make to relate to their children’s birth culture” (Freidlander, Larney, Skau, Hotaling, Cutting, & Schwam, 2000, p. 192). For Dutch families, annual events at Father’s Day or July 4th picnics were important socialization events, and some
Canadian families attended culture camps (targeted for transracial, Black, mixed race families, not specifically U.S. or African American groups) with their children, while some parents in both countries attended or had attended adoption-themed support groups. A general sentiment was vocalized by this Dutch family: “We don’t have American things all over the place. I mean upstairs in [son] room there’s a few things that are sort of American-ish, but you know, we’ve not really made a big sort of massive deal out of it.”

An alternative way to consider birth culture is to consider dimensions of citizenship and nationality. If U.S. culture was somewhat ambiguous for adoptive families, the conferred dual citizenship was not. Several families commented on their child’s awareness of their nationality and/or dual citizenship:

[She] is absolutely, absolutely very aware of it, very aware. And she has dual citizenship. She always keeps that. She’s very aware. She’ll say “I was born in [US city].’ She’s adamant about that. She says “I celebrate [U.S. holidays].” She says “My [birth] family lives in [U.S. city] and my [adoptive] family is up here.” (Canadian family)

And, if he ever wants to go back because they start here with as early here with the English it’s no problem for him and we have his American passport so they don’t have to get a green card or whatever. They can go and study there, live there, experience the country. So I think, yeah, it has a lot of advantages that I didn’t see at first. (Dutch family)

But it’s actually kind of cool because [adopted daughter] has a U.S. passport. So she can work in the States. She can go to university in the states. She has options that [son] doesn’t have. (Canadian family)

In the quote below, a Canadian mother describes the challenge she faced with locating U.S. culture for her child.

You know, like she crossed the border, she’s Canadian and that’s exactly how it works. Yeah, there is no real emphasis or I don’t find that anybody really thinks it’s important for her to keep an American culture at all. Whereas I think if we had adopted from the Ukraine it would be like, “Oh, Ukrainian Christmas,” or if we’d adopted from China, Chinese New Year. There would be those emphasis, whereas July 4th went by and nobody said, “Oh, it’s the American holiday for [daughter]; wish her happy American Day,” you know, that didn’t happen. So that’s just something that I just went “Hmnn,” that’s just interesting that there’s almost an expectation that there is no American culture for her to learn.
Taking on New Roles: Educating Others

Parents in both countries shared strikingly similar accounts of educating children about adoption, especially when opportunities arose in playgrounds, during play dates, and other situations. Wilma Flintstone commented, “And also children [asking], “How is it that you are White and he is Black?” And then you have to explain of course….But from children I can understand.” Diane Baker’s account was very similar to narratives shared by other parents:

Ellis was sitting next to me and the little boy upstairs said, “Is that your son?” And I said, “Yeah.” And he said, “Oh, why doesn’t he look like you?” And I said, “Well, that’s because he’s adopted. Do you know what that means?” And the little guy goes, “No.”… So I said to him, I just said, “Well, that means he grew in another lady’s tummy, and he came to live with us.” And he goes, “Okay” and goes back to playing. But it was a non-issue…. If I can do my part, as far as educating kids on what this is all about…I hope other parents have done at least their part, too.

Several families spoke of educating their children’s school staff on the nuances of discrimination and racism as well as how to talk about adoption and birth and adoptive families in the classroom. Karen Vandelinden explained: “If I can help educate the moms in [son’s] classroom, then yes, I do that for his sake because that’s going to come back to their houses and they’re going to talk to their kids about it and hopefully—”.

The arc of parents’ narratives revealed an evolution from tentative adoption applicant to a more assertive and confident adoptive parent. These journeys correlated to a related learning trajectory as knowledge sought (via seminars, advice from other parents or resource seeking) became knowledge gained, applied, and passed on to others. An example of this trek is revealed in excerpts from Henry and Karen Vanderlinden’s narrative, sections of which were mentioned earlier. Those excerpts revealed the variety of strategies this couple employed to gain adoption and parenting knowledge: agency-based training, attending heritage camps for transracial families, seeking mentoring from experienced transracial/intercountry adoptive families, seeking guidance from Black friends, and self-directed research on various topics. Their narrative corpus illuminated the couple’s development from nascent to experienced adoptive parents and their
roles as educators of their own children and the community-at-large. The former role was intentional as parents helped their children grow, develop, and negotiate adoptive and birth identities. The latter role was unpremeditated but seemingly inevitable, and is reflected in the comment by fellow Canadian, Ian Wilson:

Even if someone isn’t evangelical about adoption, you’re forever talking about it. You feel compelled to. Most people have such a skewed version of how it works or what it is, that you kind of feel like, “Well, I’m going to solve all the misconceptions.” And there are days you’re just like, “I can’t even do it. I just can’t invest emotionally. Sure, if that’s what you’re going to think, so be it.” It’s really strange. I didn’t know that going into this – that’s for sure. I thought [adoption worker] kind of overstated it, but in fact, no. I think everyone asks me, “Oh wow. You’ve got African-American kids,” and then every question begets two more.

The combination of being visibly-adopted families, families that had adopted internationally, and more specifically, families that adopted from the U.S. compelled many families to take on roles of educating others about their children’s needs, ICA, and the U.S. adoption process itself. For example, several Dutch parents educated their medical practitioners about conditions affecting minority children that were not prevalent in the Netherlands, and both Canadian and Dutch parents became so well informed about immigration and social service requirements (needing to register children with programs) they sometimes had to educate agency staff about laws, regulations, and procedures. Parents also coached family members and other adults (their own parents, other relatives, and strangers in public settings) on adoption and race language, corrected misinformation about adoption and challenged public discourse, or as seasoned adoptive parents, took on roles of peer experts. The following narratives illustrate the educative positioning of adoptive parents and evidence of this thematic content.

Teaching Prospective Adoptive Families about U.S. Adoptions

In the excerpt below, Diane and Richard Baker spoke of their commitment to be a resource to new prospective families. It is telling perhaps that they are on an adoption triad panel, offering testimony of the U.S. adoption experience. It was Richard’s account earlier in this
chapter that identified the power of narrative learning, the transmission effects of being a credible source, a “lived experience:”

We often do some educational things through [Canadian adoption agency]…Last month, we spoke on a panel that provides for future adoptive families, so we were on this panel with other adoptive parents, telling our story to this room full of people who were waiting. It’s a really neat little process…It’s a big circle, and we love it. We love being a resource.

Teaching Community and Strangers Adoption-Appropriate Language and Queries

Throughout this chapter, Karen and Henry Vandelinden’s accounts revealed an arc of learning that moved them from anxious parents, trying to anticipate strangers’ inappropriate comments, to more assertive and experienced parents. They spoke of the need to educate through informal community responses and how they try to manage these replies, especially in the presence of their two sons.

But certain questions, too, I think I just try to explain to people what’s incorrect about their question. For example, when they say, “Who are their real parents?” or “Did you know anything about their real parents?” I’ll say, “Yeah, [my wife] and I are really their parents and they have a birth family as well; that it’s their story to tell. And that’s our thing, right?” So it’s just basically made it clear to them that what they’ve stated is actually incorrect or inappropriate, but in a loving kind way I try to steer the language towards them, so they kind of know how to address it the next time.

Teaching About and Reframing Adoption Discourse

Families in Canada and the Netherlands were keenly aware of the contested discourse of international adoption and spoke of their new roles, not specifically as advocates for intercountry adoption but rather as adoptive parents frustrated with uniformed public debate. Both the notions of child rescue and baby buying were discussed by these two Canadian families. Interestingly, in the socio-legal sphere, Canada has not been as vocal as the Netherlands has been in terms of the appropriateness of the U.S. as a sending country:

And a lot of it again is rescue mentality and I’m like, “You can’t think that way. You have to think of someone.” You can’t think of it that way about rescuing a child because then you always think that this is a thing that you kind of possess rather than you want
someone to join your family. But don’t ever think about rescuing anybody; that’s just…. Their circumstance is their circumstance. How they got into it is their story. They have parents but their parents can’t take care of them – that’s why they’re in an orphanage. It’s not up to you to put your Western ideals on what’s going on in their country.

There are a lot of negative things like baby buying. We sort of said, people don’t understand. First thing [that people say] is, “How much does it cost?” There’s like a money thing attached. Whereas in some ways I try to explain to people that it’s good that there is money because that’s to pay the lawyers to make sure it’s all done properly and it’s not baby buying as such. You look at this and with the birth family; those are real people with real feelings. It’s not that sort of situation. I think there’s still a lot of negative around the whole idea of adoption, which is really too bad.

Views of the U.S. as a Sending Nation and Changed Lives

Two final content areas of the data considered how Canadian and Dutch adopters viewed the U.S. as a sending country; in other words, what is the discourse about this phenomenon from those in the midst of it, and in what ways did adopting from the U.S. change participants? With regard to the former, the data confirmed that the U.S. is seen as a country of adopters that looks to adopt foreign children over its own. However, parents’ narratives also complicated views of the U.S. as a wholly wealthy nation capable of caring for all its children. Families returning to Canada or the Netherlands after spending time in some socioeconomically depressed urban centers were circumspect about wealth distribution, resources, and opportunities across all economic strata. Relatedly, some families were also affected by what they saw as the entrenchment of poverty, a pervasiveness that led one adoptive father to admit that his daughter’s birthmother’s situation was “absolutely soul-crushing.” Although many families in Canada and the Netherlands acknowledged difficulty with accepting the paradox of available infants from the U.S., many also noted how this policy had allowed them to benefit by affording them the opportunity to be parents of infants.
Participants’ Observations of the U.S. As a Sending Country

Each of the three excerpts below offer a representation of the parents’ conflicted perspectives regarding understanding the United States as a sending country. Some parents wove reasons given by birth parents for placing their child outside of the country into their own comments. But overall, responses fell along these three themes of adoption preference for White children as a factor that results in fewer homes for minority children, a questioning of U.S. adopters’ response to look abroad rather than within for adoptable children (and given the countries mentioned—Russia and Poland—the racialized element to these choices), and a realization of the socioeconomic disparities in the United States:

Back in 2007 it seemed like there was a fairly strong need for adoptive parents in the [region] States. And that proved fairly true, or so it seems with [son’s] adoption. From the time we started with the first seminars here in [Canadian city] until he came home was about nine months.

We also met some people that were adopting from Russia and Poland and so from Europe in fact. And so they said, “That’s strange. We as Americans are adopting from Europe and you Europeans are adopting from the United States.” Strange world.

Should we adopt from the U.S., a rich country? Then we learned about the [region of U.S.] and we saw fundraising for poor people who had no Thanksgiving dinner, who lived on the streets and I thought “Oh my God, this is America, too. This is the other side.” The boats and the cars and the big houses and… I think in the Netherlands there are poor people, too, but there’s a system that houses them, there are food banks, clothing banks, places to get food for a week for nothing, and when we have clothes we give them to [Dutch word]. I think that’s important.

In describing how adopting their child changed them, families thematically anchored their responses to several areas of change. They were changed because they were now parents, and that in itself was an individual and familial transformation. Many described an experience of deepened sensitivity to racism, and almost all shared substantial concerns about their child’s ongoing adaptation to their predominantly White societies. The two in-racial adoptive families were, curiously, two of only three participant families that identified themselves as initially vehemently opposed to open adoption. Mothers from both families narrated adoption stories that
described their personal evolution as they moved from not wanting contact with birth families to
their evolution as advocates for open adoption and life-long contact between birth and adoptive
families. Several parents struggled to describe personal discoveries of the depth of love they
found they could experience through parenting, and one father tied this to the shift of planning for
a biological child to being made a father through adoption:

The only way I can really explain to people how much you really love your kids, when
you say that they are adopted, I’m so glad that they are adopted, I’m so glad that we
couldn’t get pregnant.

Five families noted changes in their family members’ views, some tethering these to
changes in perceptions and beliefs about adoption, and others to transracial adoption. One mother
described her parents’ change:

I think their opinion of adoption has changed, not because he’s adopted from the U.S.,
but adoption overall. I know that our parents, before we got [our son], they had
questions. They already had grandchildren and they were wondering, will an adopted
grandson feel the same as a grandson, a normal one, another grandson? I think they had
doubts about it and there isn’t. It doesn’t feel different, and that changed their mind of
adoption.

Although no family described themselves as Dutch-American or Canadian-American because of
their adoptions, many described a new sense of kinship, of belonging and connection with the
U.S. One Dutch father explained:

Because when you watch telly, [U.S. city] comes up and you say, “We’ve been there.”
And it feels, well it is a little bit home, because your child comes from the U.S. And you
have other connections with the country than when you go through France, or Spain, or
Italy. You’re part of life there; not a tourist.

Conclusion

Two Dutch mothers in the study, Eva and Terra, made interesting analogies regarding
their experience of adopting children from the United States. In the context of talking about what
they needed to know and how they sought that knowledge, each reflected:
Eva: I think that we’re pioneers. I know somebody who adopted when we adopted [son], it was very important that you knew somebody who adopted from the U.S.; otherwise you haven’t the information.

Terra: Maybe there are not that many adopted children? Because it’s like you have a disease—when there are only a few people who have that disease you don’t get the money for the research and for the lobby to be more active and go finding sponsors or whatever. We are too few.

In each response is recognition of being outliers, adoptive families relying on each other for knowledge and support and falling outside of the reach of adoption-focused research. Eva is on target in seeing their adoption process as pioneering. With little to no direction or guidance, foreign adopters of U.S. children are figuring out not just how to adopt from the U.S. but what the lived experience entails and what knowledge is needed to best accomplish it. Terra’s feelings of marginalization, and perhaps weariness, are notable, especially when considering her role as a long time mentor to families over the last decades. Although she wonders if there are too few families to warrant research into best practices, Dutch and U.S. legislation has changed to accommodate even more outgoing adoptions.

This chapter explored the experiences of Dutch and Canadian parents as adult learners undertaking and mapping their own adoption related learning needs when navigating a newly developing adoption paradigm – adoptions that are sometimes simultaneously intercountry and open adoptions, or intercountry adoptions hallmarked by patterns of open communication. In the following chapter I discuss aggregate findings as they relate to contemporary intercountry adoption practice, policy and discourse, adult education and adult learning, and consider their contribution to both areas of practice.
Chapter 7

Discussion, Limitations and Concluding Thoughts

In this concluding chapter, I discuss four major topics drawn from the findings of the two previous chapters. At first glance, intercountry child adoption—the practice of creating families across international borders—seems hardly a candidate for a thesis topic in adult education. However, as the previous chapters revealed, the 30 well-educated parents in this cross-national sample offered an illuminating case study of self-directed and informal adult learning efforts located in the crosshairs of lifelong learning and globalization—and well outside of the typical adult education landscapes such as higher education and workplace learning. Implications of study findings may contribute to adult learning and social work research (policy, theory, or practice). For example, Canadian parents’ accounts of learning from the narratives of Black adopted teens and Dutch parents’ recollections of inspiration and instruction drawn from listening to successful Dutch-U.S. adopters are two examples of narrative learning relevant to studies in adult education and practice in social work.

The purpose of this cross-national narrative inquiry was to explore the ICA experience of Canadian and Dutch families that have adopted U.S. children. Conclusions drawn from this study follow the research questions and thus address four areas: (a) the sociocultural context of Canadian and Dutch ICA practice and policy as it intersects with U.S. outgoing adoption practice and policy; (b) adoptive parents’ pre-and post-adoption learning (agency-based and self-directed) experiences, needs, and outcomes; (c) new outcomes and concerns emerging from a new intercountry paradigm; and (d) how adopting from the U.S. affects meanings of self, family, citizenship, or worldview for foreign adopters of U.S. children. Following this discussion, I close with brief remarks about the study’s limitations and some concluding thoughts.
Sociocultural and Socio-Political Influences on U.S. Outgoing Adoptions to Canada and The Netherlands

Narratives from this study indicated that the socio-cultural context of Canada and the Netherlands affected adoptive parents’ decision making about choosing intercountry adoption, but was not a significant factor in families’ choice to adopt from the United States. Nine of the 12 families in Canada had considered private domestic adoptions before turning to ICA and then to the United States. Two of these families had already adopted children through domestic private adoptions. Five of the eight Dutch families considered adoptions from other countries before moving forward with a U.S. adoption. Canadian and Dutch participants noted that few healthy infants were available in their countries because of changed attitudes toward abortion, birth control, and single motherhood, as well as the provision of health and social service benefits that aid families. Dutch families noted that because of these factors almost all Dutch adoptions are intercountry adoptions. Concerns about children’s health, mental health, alcohol, and trauma histories discouraged almost all Canadian families from considering adoption from the Canadian public care systems. Long wait times for a child referral discouraged adopting from private domestic systems for both Canadian and Dutch participants. These findings align with the Canadian and Dutch studies on intercountry adoption (Dave Thomas Foundation for Adoption Canada, 2013; Hoksbergen & ter Laak, 2005; van Hooff, 2010).

Two Canadian families adopted White U.S. children; the other ten Canadian families adopted African American or U.S. minority children with mixed-race heritages. U.S. – Canadian adoptions followed a process very similar to Canadian private adoptions. Although U.S. outgoing adoptions are almost always understood as cases involving U.S. minority children (Avitan, 2007, Brown, 2013; Davenport, 2004; Glaser, 2004; O’Neill, 2005), the Canadian sample in this study contradicts this assumption and complicates discourse regarding U.S. outgoing adoption policy, which frames the practice as extending placement possibilities for hard-to-place minority
children. As did almost all adoptive parents in this study, the parents of White U.S. adoptees cited U.S. birthmother preferences and agency as key to their becoming parents of U.S. children. For these families, White U.S. birthmothers chose them over any U.S. applicants. Moreover, both adoptees were infant girls, who would have been at the top of the preferred child adoption hierarchy and considered highly adoptable in the United States (Baccara, Collard-Wexler, Felli, & Yariv, 2010). One of these Canadian mothers, who had already adopted a White child through the Canadian private adoption system, thus noted that for her, the U.S. did not so much represent a larger pool of adoptable children, but rather a larger pool of possible birthmothers. Although this was a minority view, the similarities between Canadian private adoptions and the U.S. outgoing adoption process supported the possibility of this view.

Dutch parents understood outgoing U.S. adoptions as an intervention for finding homes for difficult-to-place U.S. children. This understanding was not framed to suggest humanitarian or altruistic motivations to adopt on parents’ part, but rather as a basis to understand the U.S. as a sending country of children. In the Netherlands, almost all intercountry adoptions are transracial adoptions and U.S. adoptions fit this pattern and expectation (although there have been some in-race adoptions from Romania, Eastern Europe, and other countries; Hoksbergen, 1991; Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005). Somewhat ironically, Dutch colonial history was cited by some families as a cultural factor that contributes to the wide acceptance of transracial adoption in the Netherlands. They attested that a national contemporary history of approval for miscegenation and personal experiences of transracial marriages among extended family members or friends facilitated acceptance of their Black and bi-racial children in families and communities. Further, some Dutch participants connected membership in a Dutch family as facilitating child acceptance; that is, being the (adopted) child of a (White) Dutch citizen conferred membership in the society regardless of the race of a child. This sense aligns with Holston and Appadurai (1996), who argued that it is identity through citizenship “which subordinates and coordinates all
other identities—of religion, estate, family, gender, ethnicity, region, and the like…” (p. 187) and which also confers nation-state opportunities. Finally, although no Dutch same-sex couples were part of this study, the U.S. is reportedly a desired sending country because the U.S. “is probably the only country that will allow a gay couple to adopt a child” (Goldstein, cited in Brown, 2013, para 12). Two Dutch families mentioned and questioned the availability of White U.S. children for foreign adoption by noting that these infants were not likely hard-to-place (e.g., White infants are highly desired by White prospective adoptive parents) and therefore these adoptions were against the spirit of Dutch and U.S. adoption policy and the Hague Convention.

As did Canadian families, all Dutch families placed significant emphasis on U.S. birthmothers’ rights in choosing an adoptive family for her child, identifying this as a key attraction to adopting from the United States. Except for the two Canadian families that adopted White children, all other families in this study privileged children’s age (infancy) and likely good health (minor physical special needs) over race, findings that correspond to public media accounts of outgoing adoptions (Brown, 2013; O’Neill, 2005; Stahl, 2005). The U.S., for Canadian as well as Dutch adoptive families, is a sending country with healthy infants—indeed, newborns—available for adoption. Families in both countries assume ICAs will likely be transracial adoptions; thus, the U.S. with its availability of newborns, birthmother agency, and possibility of some level of post-adoption contact makes it a highly desirable sending country. Although it was thought that implementation of the Hague Convention would deter, if not end, outgoing U.S. adoptions (van Hooff, 2010), it has done neither, but it has changed these adoptions in various ways. For example, several Dutch agencies are now working with authorized U.S. adoption providers to facilitate U.S. adoptions, and prospective parents interested in U.S. adoptions must use them for the process—thus more-or-less ending the zelfdoeners approach described in this study.
Implications of this study with regard to the sociocultural and socio-political sending and receiving forces for the three countries (U.S., Canada, and the Netherlands) connects U.S. outgoing adoptions to current intercountry debates concerned with the competing interests of adoptive parents and birth families, and the child welfare policies of sending nations. Specifically, no Dutch or Canadian parents in the study framed their desire to adopt internationally as overt acts of humanitarianism or rescue (Balcom, 2011) prior to their adoptions of U.S. children. In the cases of transracial adoption in this study, the space for this possibility opened during or after adoption, and was affiliated with the preferences and agency of birth parents, not adoptive parents.

U.S. states are not required to track numbers of private infant adoptions and there is no national entity responsible for tracking U.S. domestic adoption statistics. But from 1972 to 1995 the infant relinquishment rate of unmarried White mothers dropped from 19.2 percent to 1.7 percent, and has fallen and remained at 1 percent ever since (Joyce, 2013). The rate of infants relinquished for adoption among never-married Black women “has been statistically zero for decades” (p. 111). About 18,000 infants are estimated to be adopted annually (Adoptive Families, 2013, para. 1), and clearly only a small portion of these infants find homes outside of the United States. But, given these numbers, it is hard not to look for reasons why parents who do relinquish children choose families outside of the U.S. as the best option for a child. Although some adoptive parents indicated that birth parents had visceral connections to their family photographs or profile, subsequent discussions between birth and adoptive families often indicated additional considerations. Canadian and Dutch parents were told they were chosen as adoptive parents by birth parents for reasons including beliefs that Canada or the Netherlands offered more racially tolerant societies and that the adoptive family could provide economic security, health, vocational, educational, and lifestyle opportunities beyond what would likely exist for their child in the United States. One parent noted that his son’s birthmother related that
a Canadian placement meant that her child would always have health care. Although they did not identify with the rescue and humanitarian motivations typically found in intercountry adoptions from global south sending nations (Briggs, 2003, Malm & Welti, 2010), Canadian and Dutch parents did understand that they could represent this discourse for U.S. birth parents. One Dutch mother explained: “You want to be equal; you don’t want to be the rich family from the west….”

Implicit in the twin themes of outgoing adoptions as a solution for hard-to-place children and birth parents’ perception of less racism in other countries, is reinforcement of the notion that U.S. outgoing adoption policy and practice is a race-based solution to finding homes for less-desired Black and minority U.S. children, and the U.S. as a country unequally supporting all its citizenry. In this sense, U.S. birthmothers appear aligned with birthmothers of the global south; as Bhabha (2004) noted, “Poor parents see foreign adoption as one of the few ways to give their children a decent life” (p. 182). This conclusion expands and complicates rescue discourse and debates found in adoption critiques of Balcom (2011), Briggs (2012), Davies (2011), and others by moving the desire for rescue to birth parents, and the conditions that predicate the perceived need for it onto institutional and systemic racism in a wealthy, Western, resource-rich nation. This latter consideration seems to support Dorow’s (2007) argument that White U.S. prospective parents engage in race-based hierarchies of adoptive child preference leading to ICAs, but also suggests a birth parent response to these practices. Although these observations are derived through the narratives of adoptive families and are not first-person accounts by birth parents, they nonetheless seem to concur with Solinger’s (2001) observation that intercountry adoption is about “the vulnerable status of women in the country of the birthmother” (p. 63).

However, the study also revealed a double-bind in U.S. policy as it relates to ICA. If intercountry adoption is intended as a last resort to find homes for hard-to-place children, why are White infants—the children perceived to belong to the most sought after group of children—also being placed outside the United States? The families in this study that adopted White children
did so before U.S. implementation of the Hague Convention, and it is possible that there could be barriers to the process in the current climate as the Hague Convention has made more clear the principle of subsidiarity. This principle, as noted earlier, holds that children are best served by intercountry adoption only after domestic placement possibilities have been exhausted. In other words, there is a placement hierarchy of community, culture, and country. However, U.S. outgoing cases are conceptually framed in three arguments: opportunities for hard-to-place children, birth parent choice in adoptive parent placement, and state court determinations of best interests of the child (Avitan, 2007). The decisions of the White birth parents in the adoptive families in this study may not have been founded in hopes for homelands more tolerant of racial diversity, but reportedly were founded on other shared desires such as an understanding of the type of home and opportunities each family could provide for the adopted child. If, as Dutch and Canadian families believed, White, Black, and minority birth parents can currently look abroad for adoptive parents, the policy has created an interesting anomaly in international adoption practice by offering an international pool of prospective parents for U.S. birth parents.

**Intercountry Adoptive Parent Education and Learning**

**in the Nexus of Lifelong Learning and Globalization**

This study’s contribution to adult education, comparative and international education, and adult learning relate to the intercountry adoption experiences of foreign parents adopting from the U.S., but I suspect that some aspects are applicable to parent education efforts undertaken for any Hague Convention intercountry adoption process and many domestic adoption programs. Of interest to me in this study was that the sample—highly educated, mostly mid-career professionals—offered a unique view into adult learning activities falling outside of the workplace or higher education, the primary domains in many adult learning studies.
This study contributes to learning in adulthood studies that have linked adult learning and life transitions. There are some similarities of discourse in terms of suggesting intentional efforts adults take to broaden their knowledge or understanding in service of their children’s needs. For example, Merriam and Heuer (1996) describe efforts parents may take, such as attending support groups, getting professional guidance, or learning more about the community, when they learn their child is gay. Merriam has written extensively on learning through life transitions (c.f. Merriam, 2005; Merriam & Clark, 1991, 1992; Merriam, Mott, & Lee, 1996; Roberson & Merriam, 2005) with a particular focus on meaning-making from life events or transitions, and the impact of life events on changing individuals’ worldviews.

Findings from this study, which revealed the efforts and outcomes of Dutch and Canadian parents as they transitioned from childlessness to parenthood and from mono-cultured families to transracial, transnationally created families, contribute to this line of research and extend it to consider ethnic, racial, and socio-cultural complexities. Henry, a Dutch parent, offered an example of this: “With something like this [transracial parenting], we don’t know what we’re doing completely, no parents do…But we’re fully committed to raising our boys as Black boys in our family.” For Henry and his wife this effort has meant attending workshops and trainings, reading and researching, and engaging in racial, ethnic, and cultural socialization practices (among other activities) intended to contribute to their own knowledge, support their efforts to transmit cultural/racial knowledge to their children, and support their children’s racial and adopted identities. Their activities and goals are similar in motivation and purpose to those found by other adoption researchers (Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater-Deckard, & Petrill, 2007; Paulsen & Merighi, 2009, Pertman, 2011).

The study also links activities of learning for a life transition (to parenthood through international adoption) to discourses of lifelong learning and globalization. Parents in this study, for example, would likely not have explored U.S. racial history or immigration laws or learned to
braid Black hair and care for Black skin without the joint stimuli of transitioning to parenting and doing it through an internationalized process. Eva, a Dutch parent, sounded almost wistful as she described a hoped-for outcome for her two African American children: “I hope that we can teach them…living in both worlds and that’s why I’m reading all of the books—being different and being the same and that kind of stuff—so I can teach them to cope with that.”

This study contributes to comparative and international education and social work scholarship by offering a descriptive comparison of adoptive parent training for intercountry adoption. Arguably, this facet of the study may have a select audience, especially with the dramatic decrease in intercountry adoption over the last six years (Selman, 2012). However, recent cases of abuse and neglect of intercountry adoptees in the U.S. have drawn attention to deficits in parent training, particularly in the areas of children with special needs (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2008; Pertman, 2011). The small sample size in this study and the lack of focus on evaluation of trainings forecloses any in-depth assertions. However, as an exploratory study covering a swath of experiences, participants’ narratives in each country did suggest some key differences in agency-based training, learning styles, methods, and access to information.

The Dutch system offered one national course that required in-person attendance, had a required textbook, and in general seemed well-regarded by participants. However, it was undertaken months, and even in some cases nearly two years before an actual adoption. Between the time of taking the course and becoming parents, Dutch parents focused their learning on identifying successful Dutch-U.S. adopters and learning the immigration and adoption laws of the U.S. and Netherlands relevant to moving forward with a zelfdoeners adoption process. Pre- and post-adoption, there was a heavy reliance on this community of peer-family experts—in part because of the negative national attitudes toward infant adoptions and U.S. infant adoptions.
specifically. This marginalization, for a time, facilitated these U.S. adoption communities of practice, and led to national parent activist groups in support of U.S. adoptions.

The Canadian experience of preparing for U.S. adoptions was different. There was no national course, and training (which could be in-person or online) also depended on the adoption agencies used and the province in which the family lived. Narratives from Canadian participants revealed use of multiple methods to access learning opportunities for further knowledge about U.S. adoptions, transracial adoptions, or other areas of interest or identified need. These included provincial workshops and access to adoption-themed conferences, talks, workshops, publications, and support or resource groups. In sum, Canadian parents had multiple access points to adoption learning opportunities and experts; Dutch parents relied more on the informal network of experienced adopters.

Self-directed and intentional informal learning efforts varied across families, although as Chapters Five and Six indicate, some similar themes emerged. As prospective adoptive parents, participants in both countries recalled augmenting agency-sponsored training with significant research on their own, much of it characterized as pragmatic or logistical information needed to process an international application. These efforts ranged from understanding the nuances of writing a “Dear Birth Parent” letter to learning adoption laws. This need was seen by participants as a consequence of adopting children from the U.S.—a country not well-known or well-advertised as a sending nation and with adoptions processed almost on a case-by-case basis. Prior to and after becoming a family through adoption, some families sought out racially diverse friendships or more explicitly asked for guidance from Black or minority friends about raising children in a White majority culture. Participants in both Canada and the Netherlands spoke about seeking additional information about transracial adoption and family and adoptee development (in-race or transracial) beyond what was provided in their courses. Despite efforts directed toward racial socialization, many families of Black and biracial children confirmed that
outside of some friendships or annual events with other transracial or U.S. adoptive families, local communities were racially isolating. Alternatively however, a minority of families (n=5) lived in racially diverse areas or their children attended racially diverse schools. As new adopters gained experience in parenting, they mentored prospective parents and contributed to the adoption community in other ways. In both the Canadian and Dutch sample, many adoptive parents moved away from the adoption network the further out they were from adopting and sought more therapeutic and professional advice when their children experienced physical or mental health issues that may or may not have been related to their adoption.

In *The Mind At Work: Valuing The Intelligence Of The American Worker*, educator Mike Rose (2005) argued for a reconceptualization of working-class and physical labor as a complex set of cognitive behaviors (which he noted involves mental processes of memory, attention, knowing, judging and perception; p. xxii) involving exceptional intelligence. The form of intelligence required, usually perceived as “the neck down” rather than the “neck up” (p. xix), is undervalued if not disparaged in contemporary American society. Using a case study approach that allowed him to focus on the intricacies of cognitive behaviors and levels of physical and mental skills needed to gain competency as a waitress, hair stylist, and plumber, among other vocations, Rose argued for a deepening understanding and respect for the forms of intelligence and skills acquired for these everyday vocations and, significantly, calls for a reevaluation of the place of work in people’s lives, particularly as an identity-forming activity. Focusing on this latter aspect, Rose called for a more democratic view towards work in society, one that values the intelligence and skills of the manual laborer as much as it does the “neck up” one.

I reference this book because as I listened to the narratives of the 30 participants who represented 20 families across two countries, I realized that what was being described was the learning activities of the “work” of parenting and parenthood: first the intentional, skill-building efforts aimed to gain some competencies—the “becoming” work, followed by the trial-and-error,
reflected upon, researched, and expanded upon, efforts that became the collection of skills and beliefs expressed through parenting. For example, participants watched videos, asked Black co-workers for help and advice, and moved forward with efforts to learn how to dress and arrange Black hair, not for a wage, but to build a family. Rose wrote:

In chapters I, “The Working Life of a Waitress,” and 2, “Styling Hair,” I examine two types of service, two traditional occupational pathways for working-class and immigrant women. These two kinds of work are typically defined in light of the social and emotional needs they fulfill rather than in terms of the thinking involved in their execution. When we examine the work carefully, however, easy distinctions begin to blur. (p. xxx)

I argue that in much the same way that Rose understands that intelligence and learning in working-class settings are undervalued and understudied (i.e., the math skills of the carpenter, the spatial intelligence of a waitress, the aesthetics and values of the hairstylist), adult learning that takes place within the home and in the service of establishing and supporting family relationships is largely ignored and under-investigated. To be sure, studies have offered linkages between learning and home-life but many are themselves critiques of this lack of examination (c.f., Eichler, 2008; Gouin, 2009; Gonthro, 2005; Stehlik, 2003). Gonthro (2005), for example, used a critical feminist analysis to critique the lack of scholarship linking this area to discourses in lifelong learning. She argued that lifelong learning discourse positions work in the home within a “masculine and competitive framework of values, reflective of the impact of the global marketplace” (p. 5). By limiting the focus of learning that takes place in the home to comparative frameworks of learning in the workplace, Gonthro understood that other, powerful perspectives are lost—including the identity-forming and relationship building functions that home-work provides (Rose makes a similar argument for working-class labor). Family construction through international adoption is a fecund learning site. For parents in this study, lifelong learning was both a coping strategy and the road that lies ahead.
Interestingly, adult learning in the context of adoption is explicitly found in adoption discourse; note for example, the quote by Brodzinsky (2007) shared in Chapter Four, in which he argued the need for mandatory prospective parent education to be “guided by adult learning theory, which emphasizes the efficacy of an active, multi-source, multi-method strategy of instruction” (p. 3). It is in the area of transracial adoption, however, where more contentious responses erupt. For example, Briggs (2013) noted the National Association of Black Social Worker’s (NABSW) critique from the 1970s phase of transracial adoptions in which the organization was disturbed by “the ways black children became a project in white families” and “white parents had to seek assistance to figure out how to deal with black children’s hair, to learn black culture” (p. 47). This discourse was framed in a larger critique of Whites adopting Blacks, a child welfare option that Black social workers thought undermined and fragmented Black communities, and privileged finding children for White adopters over efforts to aggressively find Black homes for Black children (S. Patton, 2000; Quiroz, 2007). Hollingsworth (2003) offered another perspective and saw a social justice issue in social workers’ responsibility to inform prospective adoptive parents about evidence-based research and ethical practice, and numerous other scholars from social work, anthropology, women’s studies, psychology, and other disciplines, as well as writings by adult adoptees and adoptive parents, offer directives for adoptive parent training and competencies.

Parents in this study were highly assertive and self-directed in their search for ways to best help their adopted children. Canadian and Dutch parents did undertake “learning projects” that taught them to braid and bead hair, moisturize skin, learn diet and nutrition needs specific to their children, and become more adept at handling negative race-based encounters and preparing their children to do so. However, parents of White adoptees also pursued new areas of knowledge on behalf of their child’s needs. One adoptee’s birth family was Jewish and the adoptive family committed to raising their daughter Jewish, requiring them to become familiar
with cultural and religious practices, traditions, and holidays. Another family’s daughter had significant learning needs and the family researched extensively best options for her and methods they needed to know to support her. I believe these efforts were not wholly acts of “culture keeping,” as Jacobson (2008) suggested, but were embedded in deep personal beliefs about the nature and commitment to the work of parenting.

Although parents founded or pursued many of their practices on information secured from adoption experts and professionals in their courses, workshops, or agencies, their efforts were compromised when access to experts or content was not available. For example, Dutch participants spoke of the need to rely on peer families over adoption professionals because of the aforementioned attitude toward infant and U.S. adoptions. Parents in both countries identified a disconnect between adoption training focused on the needs of older, often institutionalized children coping with histories of neglect or civil and societal traumas such as AIDs, and their own experiences of adopting newborns. Perhaps the most richly discussed issue, the main content of the next topic, was the lack of preparation or support in negotiating an intercountry adoption when the journey is shared at various points and with varying levels of involvement with the birth parents of an adopted child.

**New Outcomes and Concerns Emerging from a New Intercountry Paradigm**

In Chapter Five, I offered evidence of the unique and complicated role among birth and adoptive families in U.S. outgoing adoptions. As indicated in Table 2-1, many of the adoptive families had, or still have, some form of ongoing contact with their child’s birth family. Findings in Chapter 5 revealed that parents’ contact with birth families before a child’s birth gave birth families valuable information about their placement choices and frequently led to a nascent birth-adoptive family relation. This is new terrain in ICA, and the unexamined process has many positive and some negative drawbacks. This discussion begins with the former.
Being present at a child’s birth or in physical or phone contact with birth parents during pregnancy and/or post-birth, was paradoxically seen as opening and closing the adoption circle. Adoptive families hoped their child would draw comfort and support knowing that birth and adoptive families had co-constructed the adoption plan (once the birth parent chose the family), families had been in contact, and based on “the conditions at the time,” the adoption plan had been made with the best interests of the child in mind. The concept of “the conditions at the time” was brought up by several families who discussed how birth parents’ situations change; a birthmother may have relinquished one child for adoption, but another child born earlier or later, or from another relationship, might stay with the birth family. Unlike contemporary ICA practice in which birth parents and families are almost imaginary or fictive kin through much of a child’s early life, in the U.S. adoptions in this study, many of the children knew they had siblings in the U.S., along with parents, grandparents, and other relatives. Several participant families had visited birth families in the U.S., and in one situation, members of the U.S. birth family had visited the adoptive family. Several families maintained intermittent contact via phone or email, and some adoptees had siblings in-country adopted by other foreign families. This insertion of birth family relationship into the present experience (for both adoptees and adoptive families) offers a remarkable contrast to the experiences of Korean adoptees Kim (2003) and Borshay-Liem (cited in Eng, 2003; Chapter Three). In some instances, this level of communication and relationship among birth and adoptive families created challenges as the significant gap in socioeconomic resources and opportunities between the families became more evident. This finding coheres with scholarship relevant to domestic adoption birth-adoptive parent relations (Grotevant, Grant-Marsney, French, Musante, & Dolan, 2012).

In all instances where adoptive parents were with birth families at time of relinquishment, their narratives reflected how profoundly affected they were by the process and how it has shaped the adoption narrative they share with their child. Accordingly, the experience forged a far more
indelible awareness of the adoptive family-birth family connection than is found in the contemporary intercountry adoption paradigm. Adoptive families were also disabused of any notions they might have had about adoption not being related to socioeconomic status, race, or other social issues; for example, adoptive parents spoke of birth parents under severe economic stress or of White birthmothers placing children for adoption because as bi-racial children they would not be accepted into their families or communities.

A key finding of this study was that all families have some level of open adoption communication: their children are often well apprised of their adoption status and may know a significant part of their adoption history and specific information about their birth parents/family. Across almost all families, communication about birth families was normative and part of the family ethos. Some children had pictures of their birth families in their rooms, and many families had family books or files with extensive pictures of their birth family and adoptive families meeting (including adoptive parents being at the births of children, or years later, at birth family events such as birthdays, family reunions). Some information was for view only for the child/family (i.e., respect for the child’s adoption story); at other times it was quite open. As children aged and various issues arose, families considered which of their children’s issues might have genetic origins and, remarkably (for intercountry adoption) some families were able to get information by asking birth family members directly. Alternatively, when some children had questions about their birth families, some adoptive parents relied on birthmothers for explanations. This approach to an intercountry adoption process is radically different from the “clean break” model that characterizes most intercountry adoptions.

In aggregate, many of these issues are present in domestic U.S. adoption processes, and recommendations and evidence-based practices are found in lay and academic, domestic and transracial, adoption literature (Melina 2010; Steinberg & Hall, 2000). However because many of these issues are specific to domestic adoption processes, foreign families receive little or no
ongoing support on how best to handle them. Professional advice and guidance regarding what to expect and how to negotiate birth and adoptive family relationships, whether early on or over time, have been insufficient, leaving families to figure this out for themselves. Dutch parents spoke about asking other Dutch parents about birth-adoptive family relationships, and some Canadian parents spoke of attending seminars or workshops led by adoption experts in their pursuit of learning how to manage the vicissitudes of the relationships. Although adoption agencies and adoption professionals are facilitating these adoptions, the longer view toward ongoing post-adoption support specific to this new U.S. paradigm is not being met.

Adoptive Parents’ Meanings of Self, Family, Citizenship, and Worldview

Canadian and Dutch parents identified several ways in which adopting a U.S child affected them. All of the families in the study were acutely aware of contemporary U.S. culture, politics, and media. Fieldwork for this study was conducted during the 2012 presidential election, and all participants were knowledgeable about these events and the specific politicians, their primary causes, and political views. They almost all alleged that this knowledge was not a consequence of adopting a U.S. child but rather that U.S. media and culture were so ubiquitously present in their societies that current U.S. news was common knowledge. This point was frequently validated by my fieldwork observations and conversations with a host of Canadian and Dutch non-participants. What changed for them as adoptive parents was the way that they saw the U.S. as now part of their culture and community in the forms of their sons and daughters. Unlike the families in studies by Jacobson (2008), Moosnick (2004), and others, neither the Canadian nor Dutch families put much effort into culture-keeping, the term Jacobson uses to describe adoptive mothers’ efforts of incorporating aspects of their foreign-born children’s cultures of origin into their families’ lives. They explained this “deficit” on the prevalence of U.S. culture within and across their media, their familiarity with the U.S. through personal or
business travel, having friends and relatives who lived in the U.S., and several other similar reasons to indicate that the U.S. was simply all around them. An exception or variation to the culture-keeping practice was that adoptive parents in both countries stated that it was very difficult to purchase Black dolls for their daughters. One family recounted buying out a store’s supply when they visited the U.S., and another mother spoke of online searches.

Although families did not “keep culture” in the manner suggested in other ICA research, they were committed to helping their children navigate their dual nationalities and feel connected to their birth culture. This, too, followed a different path than is found in contemporary models of intercountry adoption in that adoptive parents in both countries assumed their children would, in time, meet their birth families (if this had not already occurred). Quite unlike other notions of birth-adoptive country relationships, families in these outgoing adoptions did not see a severance of birth culture and birth land ties, but seemed to view the U.S. as a dynamic and latent presence in their child’s life. They wanted their children to know English because they assumed they would meet their birth families and would need to speak it; they thought it quite possible that their children might attend universities in the U.S. or pursue working or living there. Moreover, U.S. citizenship is conferred to U.S. outgoing adoptees regardless of their adoption abroad, and they can move between countries as dual nationals. This, too, offers a contrast to, for example, South Korea, where new advocacy efforts on the part of Korean adoptees have only recently allowed return under new visas (see Chapter Three).

Several families commented on how their views of the U.S. changed as they became more aware of the forces that led their child’s birthmother or birth parents to make adoption plans. Families commented on seeing sides of the U.S. they were unaware of—from profoundly socioeconomically depressed inner cities to witnessing acts of discrimination encountered by birth families. Many participants were aware of the uniqueness of the U.S. as a sending country. Several were aware of the principle of subsidiarity, and some questioned U.S. allegiance to this
principle. Families in the Netherlands were more keenly aware of this since their country closed
U.S. adoptions for a while because of Dutch government views that the U.S. should be able to
find homes for healthy infants. The government subsequently reopened adoptions following
pressure from the U.S. and Dutch adoptive and prospective adoptive parents.

Overall, outgoing adoptions seemed to be viewed as a complicated phenomenon that
proceed differently in the U.S. than they do in other countries. Some of this was considered
admirable: notably birth parent decision making and the possibility of openness even in an
intercountry adoption. Some aspects were quite challenging: Parents did not know how such
levels of birth-adoptive family communication would affect their child’s adjustment to adoption
over time. Two couples with older adoptees spoke poignantly of their child’s need to physically
connect with birth families, even if their presence (for an intercountry adoption) had been
palpable throughout their life. In other words, communication across borders lays the
groundwork for possible future meetings; it does replace them.

Limitations and Concluding Thoughts

I hoped in this exploratory study with Canadian and Dutch adoptive parents of children
from the United States to present a view of their intercountry adoption experiences, with a goal to
understand how they differ or align with current intercountry adoption practice. Through
participants’ descriptions and archival data, the U.S. outgoing adoption experience differed in
process, policy, and procedures from other forms of intercountry adoption. In using a narrative
inquiry approach, I aimed, to the extent possible, for the voices, the close-to-the-bone narrations,
that a study with a sample size of 30 individuals, representing 20 families from two countries,
would allow. Not surprisingly, this resulted in some limitations.

I entered the study aware of the contentious discourse around ICA in general, and U.S.
outgoing adoptions specifically, but did not want to make these primary subjects of the study.
Families certainly shared on topics explicitly related to the contentious side of discourse. Most participants discussed understandings of which U.S. children are available for adoption and why and offered perceptions of the U.S. as a sending country. However, this study was conducted neither as an endorsement nor critique of U.S. outgoing practice; rather, it was intended to offer a view of the lived experience. This may be a disappointment to readers in search of a more explicitly political or social policy-oriented analysis.

As I moved forward with my interviews, I realized ways in which my lens as a researcher in adult education directed the course of my research and moved me away from areas that might have been investigated from my position as a social worker. This is, of course, evident in my theoretical framework and in my argument for valuation of the learning that goes into the work of family building and parenting, as well as my view that intercountry adoption presents a particularly fertile landscape to join discourses of adult and lifelong learning, in conjunction with globalization. However, it meant I limited my inquiry in other ways. For example, I chose to foreground the broader canvas of informal and self-directed learning activities participants engaged in, over perhaps a focused look at racial socialization, adoptee and parent attachment issues, or other areas that could have been prioritized in a study on this topic. An alternate view, and a legitimate rationale, I believe, is that this was always intended as an exploratory study; I always assumed there would be more work to be done, and unequivocally, more voices to be heard. This brings me to the most obvious limitation of the study. Adoptees, birthmothers and birth fathers, need to be represented if any robust understanding of this process, its effects, and its outcomes is to be achieved.

Aside from arguments about whether or not the U.S. should even be a sending country of children, the intercountry adoption process as practiced in U.S. outgoing cases has some exemplary characteristics. Promotion of U.S. adoption programs in the Netherlands and Canada makes clear that birth parents can and may select adoptive parents and may wish for post-
adoption contact. This is right there with the information that also states that children are likely to be Black or minority infant or newborns, and that children may even leave the hospital with the adoptive parents. If, as multiple media reports indicate and this study also confirmed, foreign parents anchor their adoption choices in age (infants) over race, then clearly the U.S.—as perhaps the only country with newborns available for adoption—is likely to remain popular. If Black and minority children, including infants, are truly an at-risk population for permanent homes, even in the context of the U.S. private adoption system, then perhaps such alternatives as outgoing adoptions may need to be considered. However, double binds ensue when arguments against “exporting” (Smolove, 2004) only Black or minority children for adoptions mean that White infants should also be considered for foreign adoptions, an outcome likely resulting in fewer placements for minority children and a contradiction of the principle of subsidiarity.

The families in this study took seriously the hopes of birth parents to remain in contact and deferred to the wishes of birth families when that was not their desire. Families, particularly in some almost exclusively White areas in the Netherlands and the less racially diverse areas in Canada, were concerned about the racial isolation of their children, even when this was mediated by acceptance into their families or communities.

Somehow, in this long work, I have yet to add one quote that I thought would find a home somewhere in these multiple chapters. It was this: “Additionally, concern in sending countries about how the exportation of children from their lands reflected negatively on perceptions of their country in the global community curbed rates of adopting from a number of sending countries” (Grotevant, Grant-Marsney, French, Musante, & Dolan, 2012, p. 209). It is not my intent to advocate or protest this as an outcome of this or other studies on U.S. outgoing adoptions. But I did observe the questioning, the perplexed reflections by some Canadian and Dutch parents on how it has come to pass that the U.S. is a sending country of infants. Is it a question of birth parents of any race (and should that even be in the equation?) having agency to
choose families from across the globe for their child? Is it a solution to find homes for infants whose placements might be delayed because of their race? For the present study, I was inspired and enriched by my meetings with Canadian and Dutch adopters of U.S. children. I believe that they are moving forward in a new paradigm of intercountry adoption and doing so with little professional guidance to help them negotiate new roles with birth families in intercountry adoption or new questions put forth by adoptees whose birth land is usually a receiving country. I hope to have offered a detailed, rich picture of the complexity and nuances of their adoption experiences.


OED: Oxford English Dictionary, Online


Steinberg, G., & Hall, B. (2000). *Inside transracial adoption: Strength-based, culture-sensitizing parenting strategies for inter-country or domestic adoptive families that don’t “match.”* Indianapolis, IN: Perspective.


Appendix A

Learning through Adoption Pre-Interview Questionnaire

LEARNING THROUGH ADOPTION

Thank you for completing this form. To keep your information confidential, please use the pseudonym (fake name) you created.

Your Study/fake Name: _______________________________

1. Are you ___ male ___female?
2. What is your relationship status? (For example, single, married, divorced living with a partner, etc.) __________________________________________________________
3. What was your status (of the above) when you adopted your child? __________
4. How old were you when you adopted your child? ______
5. What is your highest level of education? __high school ___university ____other____?
6. What is your occupation?
7. With what nationality do you identify? ___________________________________
   a. If different, what nationality does your partner identify with?________
8. How many children do you have? ______
   a. How many adopted children do you have? ______________
9. If appropriate, what countries besides the U.S. are your adopted children from? ________
10. What date (year) did you adopt your U.S. child(ren)?____________
11. How old was your U.S. adopted child(ren) when adopted?____________
   a. How old is your U.S. child now? ____________________________
12. What is the ethic/racial group of your U.S. adopted child(ren)?
13. How did you first learn about adopting from the United States? For example
   a. Knew someone who adopted
   b. Agency told you about U.S. adoptions
   c. Heard about U.S. adoptions from reading/researching about adoptions
   d. Other
14. How did you prepare to adopt from the United States? For example –
   a. Did you speak to your adoption agency staff?
   b. Did you meet other families that adopted from the U.S.?
   c. Were you given resources – training, readings, counseling to help you understand what adopting from the U.S. would entail?
   d. Other
15. Which U.S. state is your child from?_______________________________________
16. Did you meet your U.S. child’s birth family?______________________________
17. Are you still in contact with them? ______________________________________
18. When were you last in contact with them?
19. Have you taken your U.S. child to the United States? If so, when?
20. How does your child describe him/herself in terms of citizenship/nationality?
   For example: Canadian__ U.S. Canadian__ Dutch___ U.S.- Dutch___ Other ___ Doesn’t describe as such _____
Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Topic 1: Background

- Can you tell me about how the child you adopted from the U.S. came to be a part of your family?
- Any life experiences (e.g. international travel, work, values, fertility, etc.) influence your decision to choose international adoption? USA in particular?

Learning about USA Adoptions

- How did you first learn about U.S. adoptions?
- What were you told about the children who were adoptable?
- What most attracted you to adopt from the U.S.?
- What most concerned you about adopting from the U.S.?
- How have others (your family, community) responded to your adopting from the U.S?

Topic 2: Informal and Non-formal preparation

- Can you walk me through the Netherlands/USA process – what was required, how long did it take, etc.?
- What did you do to prepare to become a parent to your child?
  - Did you take any steps to learn about parenting a child from another race? Culture? Required for NL/Hague?
  - What did you most need to understand transracial parenting?
  - Where and how have you learned this?
  - What has helped you along the way/What most helpful? Can you give me some examples?
  - What has been difficult? Can you give me some examples?
- What do you wish you had done/known to prepare for adopting a child (of another race) from the U.S.? What is your advice for other families?
- What are you currently doing /what new things do you learn or need to learn as your child gets older (young, hair care, coping with comments, etc.)
**Topic 3: Approaches to teaching/sharing about child’s birth culture /kin/country.**

- Can you describe any approaches you’ve used (or intend to) regarding teaching your child about his/her birth culture/country/family?
- How do you explain to your child how/why adopted (adoption story you tell your child)
- What led to this way/style?
- Do you do things to emphasize USA in general, or African-American? (e.g., USA holidays, history, heroes, famous figures, etc.) *How do you learn this?*
- How does your child respond to efforts? Any change over time?
- What role (if any) does contact with your child’s birth family have with this?
- How do you think your experience is similar or different from parents who adopt children from countries such as Ethiopia, China, Guatemala, or other developing countries? (probe for similarities & differences and specific examples, e.g., do you need to explain U.S. adoption to people- Do you do this, ignore it, etc?)

**Topic 4: Parents of internationally adopted children often describe a host of reasons why they adopted internationally, what went into their choice about which country to adopt from, and how they, their children and their family have evolved over time.**

With this in mind, can you tell me:

- Has adopting your child has changed you as a person?
- Does your child’s U.S. and African-American background affect this in any way?
- What have you learned about yourself, your family, or your community through your child’s adoption? (E.g., racial acceptance, conflict, attitudes about USA? What it means to be Dutch, or Dutch American)
- How have others (your family, community) responded to your adopting from the U.S?
- How do you describe your family to others?

**Topic 5: What do you think others need to know re OA?**

- Dutch and USA adoption workers
- Prospective parents
- Law / policy makers
Appendix C

Example of a Fieldnote

Amsterdam 11.3.12

[at the café near my hotel in Amsterdam]. It is a sweet place, friendly with good sandwiches, tea and coffee. As the crowd thinned I asked the owner about the diversity of Amsterdam. In his opinion, it is a very diverse and racially tolerant city with people from all over represented. He mentioned that more recently there has been a stop to immigration, that the borders had been porous (my word, not his) for a long time with many immigrants tolerated. Dutch services for immigrants he says are generous and some immigrants after getting stable will send home for more family to come live with them. He said only the Moroccans really posed a problem, and described them as deliberately isolative, wanting benefits and not wanting (not making any attempt) to assimilate. He felt they harbor low opinions of the Dutch while taking their support and in particular see Dutch women as loose/low while segregating their own women from Dutch society. He said most immigrants live in South Amsterdam. Looking out from the window I see a White man walking his Black child and I wondered if this was an outgoing adoption situation. Still later, I was even more surprised when I saw a White woman with her Black (AA) child walking down the street. I could not think of any polite or appropriate way to ask them if this were so. I am left wondering if more transracial families live in Amsterdam, if TRA (U.S. OAs?) are surprisingly common here, and do Moroccans and No. Africans get the brunt of Dutch enmity but White Dutch families with Black children are given a pass.
Appendix D

Example of a “Dear Birth Parent” Letter

Dear Birthmother,

We are very thankful and grateful that you have decided to make an adoption plan for your child. We can’t imagine what kind of emotions you are feeling right now and what you have been going through so we won’t even try.

We have been trying to have a child of our own for awhile but due to various physical reasons we are biologically unable to do so; therefore we are turning to adoption to welcome a child into our lives and share in the love we have for each other. We are very excited to become parents and can’t wait to take him or her for long walks around our neighbourhood, play in our yard, read stories at bedtime and yes, even changing diapers and getting up for late night feedings.

In order for a child to understand how their background makes them a part of who they are, it is important to us that the birth mother is part of his or her life. We embrace open adoption and want to work with you so everyone is comfortable with the level of openness whether that be constant updates with photos or no contact at all. Please know that we will always be open and honest with you and you can always be honest with us about your needs.

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter and looking at our profile. It can be difficult to express our feelings about adoption on paper and for you to get a true understanding of our intentions from our letter and profile. We would certainly love the opportunity to discuss your feelings about adoption through your Social Worker or in person.

With Much Affection and Respect,
Appendix E

Acronyms Used in this Dissertation

AP       Adoptive parents
ASP      Adoption service provider
CA       Central Authority
HAC      Hague Adoption Convention ("the Convention")
HCCH     Hague Conference on Private International Law
IAA      Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000 – Public Law 106-279
ICA      Intercountry adoption, or international adoption (terms used interchangeably)
PAP      Prospective adoptive parent
TNA      Transnational adoption
TRA      Transracial adoption
U.S. DOS United States Department of State (DOS)

*See also, Intercountry Adoption, Bureau of Consular Affairs, U.S. Department of State glossary available at http://adoption.state.gov/adoption_process/glossary.php
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GRADUATE AND PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

Research Assistant. Pennsylvania State University, Faculty Use of Personal Digital Archiving, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Conducted qualitative data analysis on ethnographic study of university faculty use of digital technology and produced data reports on findings. 2012 – 2013

Research Assistant. Pennsylvania State University/Hershey Medical Center, Conducted qualitative interviews in nurse and physician led medical practices, collected, coded and analyzed data, wrote articles, reports and paper presentations of findings for peer-reviewed journals and conferences. 2010 – 2012

Graduate Assistant and Teaching Assistant. Pennsylvania State University, Adult Education Program. Assistant teaching responsibilities for Adult Education classes ADTED 460, ADTED 502.

Graduate Assistant, Adult Learner Program of Penn State. Recruited new students, conducted weekly coffee hours and organized social events for adult learners at PSU. 2008 – 2010

Clinical Social Worker Supervisor. Rebecca and John Moores Cancer Center, University of California-San Diego, LaJolla, CA. Provided individuals and families counseling throughout disease 2005-2008

Training Coordinator and Therapist, Wendt Center for Loss and Healing, Washington, DC Coordinated and conducted national and local training requests. Provided individual counseling for trauma, and bereavement counseling at city morgue. 2003-2005

Assistant Director, Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, International Social Service – USA Branch, (Subsidiary) Baltimore, Maryland. Supervised staff and cases for international agency involved in reuniting families across international borders, and international social work assistance. 1999 – 2003

Co-Director Post Graduate Clinical Training Program, Sidney Kimmel Cancer Center, Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, Baltimore, Maryland Developed professional education courses in clinical care for nurses, social workers, physicians and other health professionals. 1993-1998


PUBLICATIONS

Book Chapters

Peer-reviewed Articles


