FROM INSTITUTIONAL CARE TO LIVING IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA: INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION

by

BEVERLY ANN SCARVELIS
BSW

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Social Work by Research Deakin University

December, 2012
I am the author of the thesis entitled

'From Institutional Care to Living in South Australia: Intercountry Adoption'

submitted for the degree of Master of Social Work

This thesis may be made available for consultation, loan and limited copying in accordance with the Copyright Act 1968.

'I certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided in the form is correct'

Full Name: Beverly Ann Scarvelis

Signed: [Signature Redacted by Library]

Date: 14 December 2012
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
CANDIDATE DECLARATION

I certify that the thesis entitled

‘From Institutional Care to Living in South Australia: Intercountry Adoption’

submitted for the degree of Masters of Social Work by Research

is the result of my own work and that where reference is made to the work of
others, due acknowledgement is given.

I also certify that any material in this thesis which has been accepted for a
degree or diploma by any university or institution is identified in the text.

‘I certify that I am the student named below and that the information provided
in the form is correct’

Full Name: BEVERLY ANN SCARVELIS

Signed: [Signature Redacted by Library]

Date: 14th December, 2012
Intercountry adoption from Thailand to Australia has been practiced for the past thirty years, but research of particular cohorts of Thai children is missing in the research literature. This thesis interrogates life histories to examine the lived experiences of children, aged between 4 and 9 years, leaving The Rangsit Children’s Home in Thailand and coming to South Australia during the late 1980s and early 1990s. Twelve adult adoptee participants were interviewed. These interviews provided qualitative data which were analysed using thematic analysis. This research investigated what the adoptees were confronted with and how they gave meaning to, in their lives in Australia despite the adversities they had experienced in Thailand. The findings reveal that intercountry adoption of older children is not without challenges for the adoptees or their families, but the adoptees were able to move beyond the orphanage experiences and embrace the lifestyle and opportunities afforded them in Australia. For some, Thailand remained in their memories as adults and returning and planning to return to Thailand came as a natural progression rather than an innate challenge to their identity. The adoptees possessed great resilience, which was demonstrated throughout their lives, and was displayed through strong attributes including self-determination, inner-strength, confidence, and self-worth. Researching adult intercountry adoptees enabled opportunities to voice personal experiences that may have otherwise been muted in the history of intercountry adoption in Australia. Implications for current intercountry adoption policy and practice are discussed.
Acknowledgements

This research study would not have been possible without the twelve individuals who participated in this study, and willingly shared their life histories. I am enormously grateful to ‘Biscuit’¹, ‘Cruso’, ‘Ducky’, ‘Dutchy’, ‘GN250’, ‘Jai’, ‘Kezza’, ‘Kia’, ‘Linz’, ‘Luma’, ‘Nike’, and ‘Surit’ for their display of great courage in articulating their triumphs and the many challenges with which they were confronted with. Their resilience, strength and self-determination were inspirational to the researcher. Their participation has contributed to the development of a firm knowledge base for future intercountry adoptions of older children.

I extend a special thank you to my supervisor Professor Beth Crisp and my associate supervisor Dr Sophie Goldingay for their encouragement and support. It is really appreciated. A thank you must also go to Dr Selma MacFarlane, Dr Jane Maidment and Dr Uschi Bay who assisted during the early stages of this project. I thank Kristy for her dedication to detail and Gay and Jenny for their assistance.

I am forever grateful to my husband, John and our children, Lisa, Stephen, Dale, Rika and Lu for their love, encouragement and support throughout this project and I sincerely thank them for this. Finally, I thank my friends and extended family for their interest and support shown throughout the duration of this project.

¹The names of study participants are pseudonyms, chosen by them.
For Our Children

Lisa Ann

Stephen John

Dale Ross

Sagarika Nimali Ann

Luang Keng John
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................2
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................................3
Table of Contents .........................................................................................................5
CHAPTER 1.................................................................................................................8
   Introduction ............................................................................................................8
   Research aims .......................................................................................................9
   Thesis overview ....................................................................................................11
CHAPTER 2...............................................................................................................14
   Literature Review ...............................................................................................14
      The Structural level: the Changing Nature of Adoption in Australia ..........14
      The Cultural Level: the Social Context of Adoption ......................................25
      The Personal Level: the Psychological Consequences of Adoption ............34
CHAPTER 3...............................................................................................................48
   Methodology ........................................................................................................48
      Critical Theory ..................................................................................................48
      Using a Qualitative Approach for Research ....................................................52
      Life History .......................................................................................................54
      Semi-Structured, In-depth Interviews ...............................................................55
      Ethical Issues ....................................................................................................59
      Recruitment of Participants .............................................................................64
      Data Interpretation and Analysis ...................................................................66
CHAPTER 4...............................................................................................................70
   Research Findings ...............................................................................................70
      Introduction to the Research Findings ............................................................70
      Transition from Thailand to Australia – reflection on their lives .................70
         Leaving the Orphanage ................................................................................71
         Arrival in Australia .......................................................................................73
         A New Family ...............................................................................................74
         Language .......................................................................................................77
         Primary School .............................................................................................79
         Racism ..........................................................................................................80
      Growing up in Australia – reflection on their adolescent years ....................81
         The Wider Community ...............................................................................81
         Socialising with Other Intercountry Adoptees .............................................82
CHAPTER 1

Introduction

During the late 1980s and early 1990s, thirty children from the Rangsit Children’s Home in Thailand were adopted to South Australian families. My son was one of these children, and while he was not one of the participants in this research project, his experiences and those of our family have undoubtedly influenced my knowledge of this group of intercountry adoptees and some of the issues they may have faced. Equally importantly, I was aware both of some unique characteristics of this group of intercountry adoptees and that no rigorous research has been undertaken on this group.

All of the children who were adopted into Australian families from Rangsit Children’s Home were aged between four years and ten years when they arrived in Australia. Many of the children were abandoned at birth in Thai hospitals and remained there for several months before moving firstly, to the Phayathai Children’s Home and then to the Rangsit Children’s Home, at similar ages. This cohort of children was subjected to the same care and endured the same abusive environment. Due to these circumstances, this particular group is quite a unique cohort of intercountry adoptees.

Approximately forty intercountry adoptions are conducted in South Australia each year but they are from various countries, and the social and political contexts of the sending countries have changed over the years. The children come from various orphanages, and vary in age from babies to older children. Their circumstances vary prior to adoption, from being cared for in foster homes, to being cared for by immediate and extended family
members, or in some circumstances, having lived on the streets. Each of these variants set the group of Thai children apart from other inter-country adoptions that have occurred prior to and since that time.

The health and well-being of this group is of a particular interest in this research as this group of children were categorised as ‘special needs’ children as they were over four years of age at the time of adoption. Many also would have been considered to be ‘special needs’ adoptions on the basis of having a medical condition, a physical or intellectual disability, or emotional and behavioural difficulties, associated with their life experiences prior to adoption (Post Adoption Support Services 2008). Many of them had obvious physical abnormalities requiring medical attention and special dispensation was granted by the Australian Immigration Department, to allow entry into Australia.

Research aims

The research question which this thesis explores is ‘How has the cohort of Thai adoptees who came to South Australia in the late 1980s and early 1990s experienced intercountry adoption in Australia?’

In undertaking this research, one aim in this study was to make a contribution to the Australian knowledge base regarding the experience of intercountry adoptions that occurred for children leaving Thailand and coming to Australia during the late 1980s and early 1990s. More particularly, this research aimed to examine how the cohort of Thai adoptees from the Rangsit Children’s Home experienced intercountry adoption in Australia. Gray (2007, p. 66) has referred to ‘cultural hybridity’ as being useful terminology ‘when mapping the
complexities of intercountry adoptees’ identities and the ways in which they manage difference’. Hence, the research has sought to understand the adoption experiences of Thai-born adults who came to Australia as children and what it means to be a ‘hybrid’ in a Euro-Western society.

As many of the findings in this thesis will have wider applicability, it is an expectation that this research will not only inform professionals who work in the field of intercountry adoptions, but also couples who are contemplating intercountry adoption and parents who have recently adopted.

A deeper understanding of how the adoptees transitioned from life in Thailand to the Australian way of life can be discussed using a framework that combines critical theory incorporating anti-discriminatory practice (Thompson, 2006). Critical theory addressing anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice advocates a commitment to use research procedures to empower groups, which is particularly important for this group of research participants who have potentially been discriminated against and have been marginalised. They may have experienced oppression at various times throughout their lives, due to the ‘negative and demeaning exercise of power’ and ‘unfair and unequal treatment … based on an actual or perceived difference’ (Thompson 2006, p. 40) brought about by their adoptive status, racial features, and language skills. They may have been subjected to social exclusion and a lack of social connectedness due to being single out and this may have impinged on their ability to have a voice within the context of social relations (Humphries & Truman, 1994).
**Thesis overview**

*Chapter 2, the ‘Literature Review’* investigates literature relevant to adoption, in particular intercountry adoption. The history of adoption in Australia is examined including the British child migrants, the ‘forced’ adoptions, and the ‘stolen generation’. Past and present trends and policy contexts of intercountry adoption is then examined including changes to Australia’s demography, children available for adoption, celebrity adoptions, the psychological consequences of intercountry adoption, cultural identity, racism, and resilience.

In *Chapter 3, the ‘Methodology’* section provides details of the qualitative approach in association with semi-structured interviews used for data collection which was effective for engaging the participant in order to gain detailed life histories. Recruitment of participants, data analysis and ethical issues are also discussed. My ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ status to the participants was addressed using critical theory to critically reflect on my experiences and location in relation to the participants’ data.

In *Chapter 4, the ‘Research Findings’* are organised into three main sections reflecting the chronological stages of the adoptees’ lives sourced from the interview material. The first stage covers the transition from Thailand to Australia, leaving the orphanage, and their adjustment in Australia and living in a family. The second stage discusses growing up in Australia when integration into their wider communities was experienced, attending school and the challenges to their identity. The final stage explores the transformation into adulthood which allowed mature perspectives to be forth
coming when reflecting on their lives. It also focuses on moving into the workforce, their thoughts on intercountry adoption practices, racism and cultural diversity in Australia, personal assessments of their lives and reconnecting with Thailand.

In *Chapter 5, the ‘Discussion’* looks at the fundamental elements to emerge from the research findings. These findings will be discussed in conjunctions with prominent themes from Chapter 2 and how social work theory allows for greater understandings to develop regarding the self-management of the adoptees’ lives in Australia. Social inclusion, exclusion and connectedness combined with anti-discriminative practices reveals the strengths gained and deficits faced from living a considerable time in the orphanage. The hybridity in adoption is then looked at where adaption to two cultures is experienced. The political presence is firstly examined within the realms of inclusion and exclusion, and it is then looked at on a broader scale incorporating intercountry adoption in the theme of caring for other peoples’ children in Australia. A comparison is then discussed between the British Child Migrants and the research participants noting similarities and differences. World views assess the continuation of intercountry adoption. Finally, I give a personal account as to the reason I undertook this study.

*Chapter 6, the ‘Conclusion’* summarises my findings in relation to the research outcomes. The current implications are considered with regard to the ongoing needs of the participants and how these will be met. Future implications consider how intercountry adoption can be improved through education, support, changes to policy and practices, cultural awareness
training for adoption social workers and prospective adoptive parents. The limitations placed on this study are then defined.
CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of this history of adoption in Australia and in particular, examines literature relevant to the experience of intercountry adoptees, and the complexities of adopting special needs children from overseas.

This structure of this literature review is informed by Thompson’s (2006) anti-oppressive practice framework that acknowledges that oppression occurs at three levels in society. At the *Structural* level, the focus is on the changing nature of adoption in Australia, including the emergence of intercountry adoption; the *Cultural* level which addresses the social context of intercountry adoptions; and the *Personal and Psychological* level which examines the impact of intercountry adoption on the lived experience of adoptees. The Thai adoptees in this research project are a potentially vulnerable group who may experience marginalisation through unequal power relations due to their racial features, their intercountry adoption status and their language skills.

*The Structural level: the Changing Nature of Adoption in Australia*

Children adopted from overseas countries since the 1970s were not the first children to come to live in Australia without their birth families. During the early decades of the twentieth century up to 10,000 British children were sent to Australia (Murray 2008). The motive of the policy was initially the preservation of the British identity of the Australian community enforced by the ‘white Australia’ policy and the Immigration Restriction Act 1901. The
need to populate the Empire with ‘white British stock’ (Lawrence 2011, p. 1) was seen as an imperative and ‘the encouragement of immigration was selective, driven by economic and political considerations, and based on a firmly established racial hierarchy’ (Coldrey 2012a).

In 1920s migration commenced with ‘boy labour’ (Coldrey 2012c) sought to replace the 6,000 soldiers who had been killed during the war. Youthful males were chosen because they ‘were inexpensive, exploitable’ (Coldrey 2012c) and their economic value was important because they had a longer life expectancy to that of adults and would more readily integrate into their communities at a younger age (Coldrey 2012b). Children, some as young as three, continued to arrive over the next forty years through three main schemes run by The Barnardo’s Homes in New South Wales, and the Fairbridge Society and the Christian Brothers in Western Australia. Several hundred children were also placed in other States of Australia including 47 girls who went to the ‘Goodwood Orphanage’ in South Australia (Kleanthi 2004).

After the bombing of Darwin during World War II, and with the fear of a Japanese invasion, the immigration policy was founded with the slogan ‘populate or perish’. The Archbishop of Perth advocated that an increase in white population was more desirable as it would ward-off ‘the teeming millions of our neighbouring Asiatic races’ (Lawrence 2011, p. 2). Mass migration was on the political agenda and Government policy planned to take 50,000 ‘war orphans’ during the three years following the end of the war, which became Government policy (Coldrey 2012c). The schemes left
thousands of people without a sense of personal identity or family history (Bessant & Hil 2005; Murray 2008; Rundle 2011). The children were shipped to Australia, often without their families’ knowledge or consent (Cliff 2012; Harrison 2011; Murray 2008; Rundle 2011). On arrival in Australia, some found themselves known by a number rather than by name (Murray 2008). Many were separated from any siblings, transported to remote areas of the country, and/or told that their parents were dead and the parents were told the children had been adopted (Harrison 2011; Lawrence 2011; Murray 2008). ‘Promised oranges and sunshine, many were faced with appalling conditions in large institutions thousands of miles from home, ill-treated, and, in many recorded instances, physical and sexual abuse’ (Lawrence 2011, p. 2). Stories were ‘of being denied opportunities and of adult lives filled with unsuccessful personal relationships, suicide attempts and insecurity’ (Lawrence 2011, p. 8). This enforced dislocation and not belonging has had a profound effect, not only on their lives but their families (Cliff 2012; Harrison 2011; Knight 1998; Murray 2008; Murray, Murphy, Branigan & Malone 2008). Having lived in Australia for many decades, Australian citizenship had not been granted, even though some had served in the Australian armed forces during the war (Lawrence 2011). Child migration

…had a long and chequered history surrounded with controversy and marred by scandal….it was a complex tangle of competing private schemes, government initiatives, charismatic personalities, muddled priorities and confused agendas. It was critically affected by the economic, political and social pressures of particular times. (Coldrey 2012b)
In addition to child migration, there is also a long history of the adoption of Australian-born children. For much of the twentieth century, single pregnant women had little choice but to marry the father of the unborn child in what was commonly referred to as a ‘shot gun wedding’ (Akerlof & Yellen 1996; De Vaus 2002; Hayes, Weston, Qu, & Gray 2010) as being married and giving birth were the ‘emerging ideologies of marriage’ (Gair 2009, p.77) within the traditional family context, or relinquish their babies for adoption. Many single women did not keep their infants because of social stigma and shame placed on the family (Gair 2009; Marshall & McDonald 2001). Moor (2005, p. 16) adds ‘in the event of an unplanned pregnancy it was the unwed woman who bore the brunt of social hostility, not the unwed man’. It is argued that some men were willing to marry and father the expected child but were placed in compromising positions due to the women’s family’s anger and outrage toward them because their daughter was no longer regarded as virtuous (Hayes, Weston, Qu, & Gray 2010; Matthews 1984). Others could not keep their babies because of the financial burden of adding another child to the family (Marshall & McDonald 2001), as social security payments for unmarried sole parents were not introduced until 1972 (Centrelink Data Request 2009). Against this, Marshall & McDonald (2001, p. 47) argue that ‘Contrary to current public perception of what happened to unmarried mothers during the decades of social conservatism and condemnation of ex-nuptial pregnancy that followed the introduction of legal abortion, it is clear that over this whole period a majority of these mothers kept their children’. In 1960 only 4.8% of babies were born out of wed-lock, with this steadily increasing to 8.3% in 1970, and 12.4% in 1980 (Hayes, Weston, Qu, & Gray
Sixty percent of babies born out of wedlock during the period of 1959-1976 were surrendered for adoption (Marshall & McDonald 2001).

Kelly (2000), reports that almost 10,000 local adoptions occurred in the financial year 1971-72 in Australia including the one third that were adopted by relatives and natural parents (Marshall & McDonald 2001). With this number steadily falling, by 1975-76 this number had halved to 4,990. In 1979-80 the number of local adoptions had dropped to 3,337, then to 3,072 in 1982-83, 2,294 in 1984-85, 1,294 in 1989-90, decreasing further to 668 in 1995-96 and then to 544 in 1998-99. Of the 104,000 local adoptions that occurred during the thirty years after 1968-69, approximately 73,000 of these took place before 1980 (Kelly 2000).

In addition to the children of single mothers, many Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families between 1900 and the 1970s in South Australia through the assimilation policy (Hall 1997) and placed for adoption, usually with Anglo-Celtic parents. Young ‘half-caste’ children and those with fairer skin were targeted in the hope that they would assimilate more readily into the non-Indigenous community and would grow up disbanding their Aboriginal heritage (Link-Up NSW and Wilson 1997). These transracial adoptions created complex and compounding experiences of individual and communal traumatisation for Aboriginal peoples across generations (Atkinson 2002). Many Australians today assess the policy as an extremely negative act upon the Aboriginal peoples especially those who were removed and their families (Human Rights & Equal Opportunity Commission 1997).
Furthermore, the assimilation policy influenced the ideology of Australians that ‘black’ or ‘dark-skinned’ people were inferior to that of ‘white’ people, which has potentially had an impact on how intercountry adoption is assessed by many Australians, and also the acceptance and inclusion of adoptees and their adoptive families into Australian society.

Widespread access to effective birth control and the legalisation of abortion resulted in fewer unplanned and unwanted pregnancies (Australian Bureau of Statistics, ABS 1998) and the availability of income support for single mothers and greater social acceptability of having children outside of marriage (Hayes, Weston, Qu & Gray 2010), all contributed to a dramatic reduction in the number of Australian-born babies available for adoption by the 1980s (Kelly 2000; Khan 2004; McGinnis 2007). In South Australia, there were just 6 Australian-born children placed for adoption in 1998-99, 3 in 1999-00, 5 in 2000-01, 3 in 2001-02, 3 in 2002-03, 6 in 2003-04, 2 in 2004-05, none in 2005-06, 1 in 2007-08, 1 in 2008-09, 2 in 2009-10, and 2 in 2010-11 (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare, AIHW 2009; 2010, 2010-11).

Hence, with fewer babies available for local adoption in South Australia, people began to look elsewhere in the world when considering adoption.

Intercountry adoption involves overseas countries where abandoned and orphaned children are available and placed for adoption. Intercountry adoption is the term used to describe

…adoptions of children from countries other than Australia who are legally available and placed for adoption, but who generally have had
no previous contact or relationship with the adoptive parents.

(Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2006, p. 2)

The current adoption literature (Dickens 2009; McCreery Bunkers, Groza & Lauer 2009; Selman 2006; Smith Rotabi & Footen Bromfield 2012; Young 2012) now contests this statement showing evidence that not all children that have been adopted have been legally available for adoption with the prominence of kidnapping and child trafficking having come to the fore.

Until the fall of Saigon ending the Vietnam War in 1975, adoption of children from overseas had not occurred in any orderly way in Australia. The airlift of 292 children to Australia, known as ‘Operation Babylift’ brought prominence to intercountry adoption in Australia (Armstrong 2001; Gray 2007; Taylor 1976). However, prior to this, in South Australia intercountry adoption commenced on a personal level with a group of interested people in November 1972. By December 1974 the adoption group was known as the Australian Society for Intercountry Aid Children SA Inc (ASIAC, SA). No State Government policies and procedures were in place during these years to accommodate intercountry adoption and prospective adoptive parents were assessed through existing policies relating to ‘local’ adoptions as were Court procedures. By 1982 State Regulations on intercountry adoption had been developed (Reynolds n.d.). Intercountry adoption continued in Australia with 66 children adopted in 1979-80 (Kelly 2000) with the mean annual adoptions from 1980 to 1989 of 356, this increased to 516 in 1988 then decreased to an average of 247 from 1993 to 1998. Results were unobtainable for the years of 1985-86 and 1986-87 (Selman 2001). In South Australia it is reported that
up until to August 1984, 320 children had been officially placed through the ASIAC (SA) Agency (Reynolds n.d.) and that between 30 and 50 children were reported arriving through the ASIAC (SA) Agency during the next ten years (Australians Aiding Children Inc Newsletters 1984–94).

During the past six years Australia has seen changes regarding intercountry adoption on a national level due to *The Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Intercountry Adoption*’ (Intercountry Adoption Strategic Plan, IASP 2008). *The Hague Convention* focus is on the ‘best interest of the child’ and states intercountry adoption can only occur, when all other options have been explored in the child’s birth country (IASP 2008). Protection for children and their families in the sending countries is assessed against ‘risks of illegal, irregular, premature or ill-prepared adoptions abroad to prevent the abduction, sale, or trafficking of children’ (IASP 2008, p. 3) also (Dickens 2009; McCreery Bunkers, Groza & Lauer 2009; Rollings 2008; Saclier 2000; Selman 2006; Smith Rotabi & Footen Bromfield 2012).

Policies and procedures continue to change to meet current demands both from the Australian people but also from the recommendations set down by *The Hague Convention and The House of Representatives Stranding Committee on Family and Human Services 2005 Report*, referred to as the *Overseas Adoption in Australia Report*. From this Report 27 recommendations were set down with the purpose of improving the system of intercountry adoption in Australia. The fundamental recommendation was for the Commonwealth to ‘take the lead role in the overall development and
management of intercountry adoption programs’ (IASP 2008, p. 4). The Report recommended that a national peak group be formed with State representation from non-Government agencies with the primary aim of focussing on presenting problems regarding intercountry adoption programs in Australia. The assessing and approving of adoption applications would be delegated to the States and Territories who will come together at a bi-yearly meeting chaired by the Commonwealth Authorities (IASP 2008). Emphasis was placed on the importance of adoption programs meeting The Hague standards in several areas. Programs were to be administered with consistency, confidence and trust, and developed and in a manner that people could depend on which would provide an avenue for children who were in need of families to become part of appropriate Australian families wishing to adopt (IASP 2008).

Currently, the Australian Government controls those who enter Australia with strict Immigration policies under the Immigration (Guardianship of Children) Act 1946. When the intercountry adoptions of the Thai children who are the subject of this thesis occurred, the Australian Immigration Department relaxed the entry protocol into Australia, allowing Thai children with obvious physical abnormalities requiring medical attention to enter Australia, when in normal intercountry adoption processes, they would have been refused because of the predicted impact on medical resources in Australia (Department of Immigration & Citizenship 2008). The adoptive parents of the Thai children were also supported by the Australian Government, at this particular time, for all medical costs incurred by the Thai adoptees for any corrective surgery requirements.
While the sources of children available for adoption has changed over time, so too have adoption practices and procedures. Adoption in Australia during the 1950s and 1960s took place using State policies and procedures. The relinquished babies’ identities were legally changed to that of the adoptive parents. The children were chosen to resemble their adoptive parents through matching of such things as height, eye, skin and hair colouring, and socio-economic status of the child’s birth parents in an endeavour to assume a biological connection between the adoptive child and the adoptive parents (Marshall & McDonald 2001; Volkman 2003a). The official documents of these transactions were sealed thus concealing the children’s birth identities forever (Marshall & McDonald 2001; Volkman 2003a).

Pressure on the Australian Government by those persons who had been affected by the ‘hidden’ local adoptions changed the policies and procedures relating to local adoptions to that of ‘open’ adoptions where all parties are known to each other and contact is maintained throughout the child’s life (Post Adoption Support Service 2008).

Intercountry adoption during the 1970s and 1980s were enacted under early assimilation ideals where adopted children were integrated into the Australian families with little recognition of the child’s birth country and culture (Gray 2007). Adoption practices changed from humanitarian notions to that of childless couples wanting to adopt (Young 2012). The child’s birth country and culture is now promoted and returning to the country of birth is encouraged (Gray 2007; Volkman 2003a). In a matter of thirty years adoption in Australia has moved from ‘closed’ adoptions and physical
matching of the adopted child with the adoptive parents (Marshall & McDonald 2001), to that of local ‘open’ adoptions and very racially different intercountry adoptions.

Early intercountry adoption policies and procedures developed at state and territory levels which brought about many inconsistencies in the approval processes (Gehrmann 2005). The adoption non-Government agencies varied in numbers within individual states, and in some states the State Welfare Department was the sole agency for intercountry adoption programs (Overseas Adoption in Australia Report 2005). The criteria for prospective adoptive parents addressing such things as the maximum and minimum ages of prospective parents, number of children in the family, de facto relationships, single parent applicants, same sex applicants, use of contraception after a child is placed, infertility treatment and citizenship also differed. Each of these criteria differed in varying degrees from State to State as did the adoption fee structures (Gehrmann 2005; Overseas Adoption in Australia Report 2005; Young 2012).

From the Inquiry into adoption of children from overseas 2005, change has occurred with the fundamental recommendation for the Commonwealth to ‘take the lead role in the overall development and management of intercountry adoption programs’ (IASP 2008, p. 3) which now control all of the adoption policies and procedures, and work closely with the overseas ‘sending countries’ (Selman 2001; 2006) where previously this was addressed by the State and Territory Governments (IASP, 2008).
A considerable number of widespread phenomena influence the way intercountry adoption is seen elsewhere in the world including Australia. In recent years the world has witnessed high profile celebrities in the United States adopt children, both nationally and intercountry. When wanting to adopt in Australia in 2000, film stars Deborra-Lee Furness and Hugh Jackman were confronted with an Australian system of adoption thwarted with difficulty and very long wait periods. They returned to the United States to adopt through a system that was quicker and easier (Jackman 2008). Furness continued her endeavour in Australia with her ‘change to adoption’ campaign via the media and lobbying politicians. Her lobbying resulted in an announcement by the Federal Government in 2007 that it would create a new organisation to cut waiting lists and to streamline the process of intercountry adoption (Connolly 2007b). Through her action of intercountry adoption promotion, Furness was appointed as a member of the inaugural national peak group formed by the Australian Government to address intercountry adoption issues at a national level (Intercountry Adoption Strategic Plan 2008).

The Cultural Level: the Social Context of Adoption

Australia’s demography has changed remarkably since World War 2, with the arrival of migrants from all over the world. During the 1970s Australia saw the abolition of the ‘White Australia’ and Assimilation Policies, and the political view changed to one of promoting multiculturalism in Australia with a Multicultural Policy activated in 1972 (Healey 2005). In the past, the policy known as the ‘White Australia’ Policy (Department of Immigration & Citizenship 2007) and the Assimilation Policy 1951 (Hall 1997) strongly
influenced Australia’s early negative political and social stances regarding the acceptance of racial differences and ethnicities. Gray expands on this point by stating

…the policy of assimilation with its emphasis on preserving a homogenous culture and the promotion of a particular Australian ‘way of life’ can be seen as a major barrier to those who are situated on the periphery. The policy failed … our first intercountry adoptees…. because its suppression of difference, which lingered long after the policy had been discarded, allowed adoptees little opportunity to explore other ways of understanding themselves beyond the bounded confines of whiteness.(Gray 2007, p. 169)

Migration to Australia continues and intercountry adoption adds to Australia’s cultural diversity (Esposito & Biafora 2007) but there have been fluctuations. For example, the mean number of intercountry adoptions into Australia between 1980 and 1989 was 356, reaching a high of 516 intercountry adoptions in 1988 declining to 245 in 1998 (Kelly 2000; Overseas Adoption Report 2005; Selman 2001; 2006; 2008; 2009). Data for South Australia also reveals annual variations. For example 43 were recorded in 1990-01 and 44 in 2000-01, increasing to 74 in 2004-05 but decreasing to 34 in 2008-09. These children come from a range of countries which have intercountry adoption programs into South Australia including Bolivia, Chile, China, Columbia, Ethiopia, Fiji, Hong Kong, India, Lithuania, Philippines, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan and Thailand (Adoptions Australia 2008-09).
Issues which have emerged with local adoptions including the desire of many adoptees to learn about their families of origin have also become issues for intercountry adoptees (Volkman 2003a). Many intercountry adoptees are returning to their birth country to find their birth parents and experience their country of birth. As a consequence offering a different perspective, it has been noted that

The social pendulum has swung from the virtual denial of adoption and the biological beginnings of the adopted child to an insistent ideology that without embrace of those beginnings there will forever be a gaping hole, a primal wound, an incomplete self. (Volkman 2003a, p. 43)

The intercountry adoption process is supported by The Hague Intercountry Adoption Convention 1993, which promulgates that every child has a right to a family which provide food, clothing, shelter, protection, medical care, education and love (IASP 2008). There are many reasons why children are not able to be cared for in their family of birth, such as unplanned pregnancies, wars, poverty, natural disasters, and HIV/AIDS (Selman 2001). Many children end up living on the streets and are vulnerable to exploitation, and abuse, while others ‘join the illiterate masses who live only from day to day’ Wardle (2004, p. 2). In 1997, the United Nations Children’s Fund listed the estimated numbers of street children in several countries as 8 million in Brazil, 250,000 in Mexico, 20,000 in Argentina, 10,000 in El Salvador, and 10,000 in Haiti (Inciardi & Surrrett 1997). Intercountry adoption is seen as a way of solving the problem of having to care for these often orphaned and
abandoned children (Bartholet 1993; Khan 2004), many of whom, remain in institutions for long periods. The plight of the orphaned children came to the attention of the world in 1990 when the Romanian state-run institutions were discovered with children living in overcrowded, unhygienic conditions. The Romanian Government estimated that in 1990 there were 170,000 children living in orphanages and other institutions within its borders (Morrison 2004; Roby & Ife 2009; Thurnham 1993). World attention on Romania’s children resulted in up to 10,000 children being adopted overseas from March 1990 to June 1991 (Selman 2000). In 1991 the adoptions were suspended as the Romanian government recognised that ‘more controls were needed to stop the flow of children out of the country’ (Young 2012, p. 72), which coincided with the influence of Romania’s entry into the European Union, and the European Union ‘urging Romania to overhaul its child welfare system’ (Roby & Ife 2009, p. 663). Following this Romania banned all adoptions in 2004 except those adoptions to biological grandparents (Roby & Ife 2009).

The experiences and expectations of intercountry adoptive parents and families have also changed such that typically now they would expect to participate in culturally related activities ‘as well as participating in seminars and workshops on adoption and race’ (Gray 2007, p. 8). The shift in attitudes now impels ‘intercountry adoptive parents and adoptees to seek connections with the country or the culture of origin...that would have been unimaginable in an earlier era’ (Volkman 2003b, p. 4).

Although intercountry adoption has provided families for thousands of orphaned and abandoned children from the poorest countries of the world,
there have been many critics, raising a range of reasons as to why they consider intercountry adoptions to be problematic. For example, when pop-star entertainer Madonna adopted a child from Malawi in 2006 the reaction was not one of universal admiration and she has been widely criticised for her actions (Gulland 2008; Young 2009). As the child had a biological father who visited the child regularly, questions could be raised as to whether the needs of the child were properly considered.

Kevin Browne, professor in forensic and child psychology at Liverpool University, spoke out about the adoption referring to Madonna’s motivation as “the do-gooder hypothesis” and that the committed intercountry adopters believe that providing a better life overseas reduces the number of children in institutionalised care (Gulland 2008). However, a study by Chou and Browne (2008) exploring the link between institutional care and intercountry adoption found that ‘rather than reduce the number of children in institutions, international adoption may contribute to the continuation’ of it (Chou & Browne 2008, p. 40) due the continuance of mothers relinquishing their children into institutional care in the hope that the children are adopted to overseas countries where they may receive a better level of care than the mothers can provide (Chou & Browne 2008).

The current intercountry adoption discourses are controversial and are heavily debated especially since the ‘Inquiry into the Adoption of Children from Overseas’ was conducted in 2005 here in Australia. Murphy, Pinto and Cuthbert (2010) analysed the findings from the inquiry and noted that
Contemporary discourses surrounding intercountry adoption share continuities with earlier discourses on adoption in Australia and beyond, reflecting a historical pattern which, at best, sees children serving the interests of adults and, at worst, has resulted in the systematic abuse of both children and birth families – who invariably hold far less power than either adoptive families or the state – and unleashed legacies of trauma and disconnection for significant numbers of people around the world. (Murphy, Pinto & Cuthbert 2010, p. 143)

Robinson (2010) states that apologies recently made in Australia to the Forgotten Australians and the Stolen Generation indicates that the practices of separation of families in the last century ‘are not considered to be acceptable today’ (p1). She argues that if local adoptions are ‘no longer considered to be in the best interest of Australian children, there is no justification for policies and practices which treat children adopted in other countries with any less care and concern’ (p. 2).

Other points of view add to the debate on intercountry adoption. According to research conducted by adoptive parent Gehrmann (2005) an anti-adoption culture has developed in Australia in which adoption social workers, through their personal racial biases, have made adoption processes difficult in order to deter prospective adoptive parents from adopting children from overseas countries, thus attempting to exclude young children from living in a family in Australia (Gehrmann 2005). He adds that it appears that prospective intercountry adoptive parents are being punished for the anguish of past
white relinquishing mothers and adoptees when mothers were forced to give up their babies for adoption (Gehrmann 2005). He continues, and states that ‘despite the fact that children relinquished in the intercountry adoption program are clearly not “stolen”, connections between the Stolen Generation and intercountry adoption programs continue to be made, with racist world views that focus on a child’s pigmentation being the only possible link’ (p. 16). Young (2009) gives a different perspective and points out that each set of players, that is, the adoptive parents and the Government adoption professionals’ agendas operate with differing focuses. She states ‘Prospective adoptive parents and adoptive parents are motivated by the individual needs for children, which gives them a personal and emotional orientation towards the process’ which ‘ignores the social, political and economic context in which intercountry adoption policy operates’ (Young 2009, p. 237). Against this, the adoption professionals adhere to the assessment criteria and take a ‘practical and pragmatic orientation towards this task as they operate according to the rules and regulations set out in various adoption acts around the country’ (Young 2009, p. 237).

Chou and Browne (2008) argue from an ethical perspective regarding the demand for children involved in intercountry adoption.

In the past two decades, intercountry adoption has progressively changed. From its initial purpose of providing a family environment for children, it has become more demand driven. Increasingly in industrial countries, intercountry adoption is viewed as an option for childless couples. (Chou & Browne 2008, p. 42)
Kim (2003) acknowledges market forces relating to Korean intercountry adoptions which have been occurring for fifty years. She discusses some of the reasons why intercountry adoptions have continued, and adds ‘reportedly bringing in $15 to 20 million per year, adoption in South Korea has become a business and a cost-effective way of dealing with social welfare problems’ (Kim 2003, pp. 63).

The demand for children in impoverished countries incites many unethical practices including child-trafficking, abduction of children, pressure on mothers to relinquish their children, and children conceived for adoption to name a few (Chou & Browne 2008; Lucker-Babel 1991; McCreery Bunkers, Groza, & Lauer 2009; Pilotti 1993; Roby & Ife 2009). Countries such as Guatemala where malnutrition in children is the second highest in the world, so too is the trafficking of children to the United States for adoption by childless couples (McCreery Bunkers, Groza & Lauer 2009). People live on a US$1 per day, so receiving $1500 (which equates to four years’ salary) in exchange for a child that they cannot afford to care for, is an attractive option for the poor women of Guatemala (McCreery Bunkers, Groza & Lauer 2009). Corruption is rife as O’Keefe (2007) writes ‘a process that was largely philanthropic has become one that is sometimes treated as a for-profit venture, resulting in corrupt practices, black market, trades and child trafficking’ (O’Keefe 2007, 1618). Although the Hague Convention has been ratified in Guatemala, those profiting from adoption are the private lawyers, with little money going back into the welfare system for the children who remain in the country (McCreery Bunkers, Groza & Lauer 2009). They add, the Guatemalan Government have taken a passive role in child welfare
insighting intercountry adoption as ‘the main alternative care option available’ (McCreery Bunkers, Groza & Lauer 2009, p. 656).

This is not so for the Thai cohort I am researching. Many of them were abandoned at birth and lived in orphanages for up to ten years. Their adoptions to South Australia were conducted through what was regarded to be an effective, credible and reliable adoption agency, namely, Australian Society for Intercountry Aid Children SA Adoption Agency Inc (Reynolds n.d, pp. 3, 31).

Money market forces play an important role in intercountry adoption; contrasting United States adoption processes with those of Australia illustrate this point. Intercountry adoption processes in Australia differ dramatically to that of the United States (Bartholet 1993; Khan 2004). In the United States money gives greater choice of children available for intercountry adoption, and it influences the process and eliminates much of the screening process. The adoption process in the United States is likened to that of purchasing of a commodity (Bartholet 1993; Khan 2004) whereas in South Australia policies, and regulations which control all adoption procedures place more emphasis on assessing the suitability of potential adoptive parents. The assessment of potential adoptive parents is a lengthy process and includes obtaining extensive personal information both from prospective parents and persons who know them. The prospective adoptive parents must also meet specific criteria in relation to age, health, finances, family structure, and cultural awareness (Adoptions SA 2009). In other words, on its own, the
desire to adopt a child is only one of the many factors considered by adoption authorities in Australia.

**The Personal Level: the Psychological Consequences of Adoption**

In Australia intercountry adoptees live in the dominant white culture with their adopted families. The adoptee’s unique physical characteristics inform others that they are of a minority group and this may pose challenges personally, culturally and politically as they navigate their lives in a Euro-Western society. Studies suggest that race and cultural identity are at the forefront of the intercountry adoption debate and ‘the socialization of a minority child is complex because the child must learn to navigate their existence in the major community’ (Triseliotis 1993, p. 133). Indepth knowledge and understanding of racial and cultural identity is essential for adoptive parents when caring for intercountry adoptees in order to rebuff any negative racial encounters that they may experience (Tresiliotis 1993).

Williams (2003), a Vietnamese adoptee, whose research targeted Vietnamese war orphaned adoptees from all over the world, identified racism as an issue and found adoptees benefited by connecting with other adoptees. Some of her participants were comfortable living in a Euro-Western cultural society and one participant reported that ‘the boundaries between language, race, ethnicity and nationality are not always mutually exclusive and don’t always have to be’ (Williams 2003, p. 62). Another participant identified himself as a ‘Global Citizen’ acknowledging his status as being culturally diverse (Williams 2003, p. 62). Many of her participants experienced ridicule, exclusion, and negative cultural stereotypes by white
peers at school during the latter half of the 1970s and early 1980s, so being Asian became a negative part of their identity. Those who were most distressed by challenges to their identity had not been provided with positive knowledge and support relating to racial diversity from their adoptive parents (Williams 2003). Williams Willing (2004) adds

…further investigation into the adoptees’ stories of rags to riches revealed that a complex process of racial and cultural alienation accompanied their journey from poverty to middle-class privilege.

(Williams Willing 2004, p. 652)

Gray’s (2007) research compared a culturally diverse older group of intercountry adoptees whose locations were scattered throughout the world, and a younger group of Korean adoptees and found that racism was common, though it ‘differed in severity and management dependant on the socio-political and historical context and resources available, e.g. peer group support, living in a culturally diverse area, family understanding and involvement, access to birth culture etc’ (Gray 2004, p. 2).

The Colour of Difference was borne out the demand for relevant information to give to adoptees who sought counselling and support through the Post Adoption Resource Centre in Sydney. That book was a collection of life histories, of personal accounts from a variety of 18 overseas and 9 local adoptees whose ages ranged from 17-50 years at the time of contributing to the project. They too had lived in Australia for more than twenty years and gave their personal histories from an adult perspective as did the participants in this study.
Many of the 18 intercountry adoptees who participated in the Colour of Difference experienced racism of varying degrees. Those adoptees who had been raised in country locations ‘where the population was predominantly white had experienced the most vicious racism’ (Armstrong 2001, p. 16). It was noted that the most important factor in assisting intercountry adoptees to develop a positive sense of who they are, was the adoptive family’s attitude and commitment to embrace the birth culture of the child. The continuous effort made by the family to instil a sense of pride in the child of their race and their appearance aided a positive racial identity for the child (Armstrong 2001).

Amara, who was born and adopted in 1980, was a participant in the Colour of Difference and she states that her parents’ openness assisted her to develop a sense of who she is and discusses this at length.

My life is not shrouded in mystery, with parts hidden, deemed untouchable...I have a good sense of who I am. In terms of culture and identity, I am Australian. My identity includes being Sri Lankan....I don’t see myself in individual parts. There is no friction or confusion but rather a sense of wholeness. When I look in the mirror, I see Amara – not colour, appearance, culture or questions. (Amara’s Story 2001, p. 26)

Buffy, who was adopted from Vietnam as a baby, also participated in the Colour of Difference but her story is different. Her story identifies that race and culture are important to adoptees when faced with challenges to identity, culture and race, and that lack of affirmation and support from ones adoptive
family has devastating effects on the well-being of the adoptee (Buffy’s Story 2001). She concludes her story by adding that her adoption hasn’t been totally negative as it has helped shape who she is today. As an adult, she has moved beyond the devastation of rejection by her family and has carved a life for herself by drawing on her inner-strengths and by reflecting on her achievements against earlier adversity, and she adds ‘I am proud of what I have achieved; I am not at the end, I am at the beginning’ (Buffy’s Story 2001, p. 62). These stories demonstrate that supportive parents are integral in nurturing adoptees to gain confidence to deal with racism when confronted with it while growing up.

In the future, the concept of race may change with the advent of genetic fingerprinting technology. This technology may initiate the acceptance that ‘everyone is mixed race, even those for whom it does not show on their faces’ (Perkins 2007, p. 13). Racial inequality will not suddenly vanish as one would hope, ‘the grounds on which inequality is justified will simply change’ (Perkins 2007, p. 27) as in many respects DNA determines the outcome of life’s chances when it comes to individual racial appearances (Perkins 2007). Recognition of difference in appearance is a learned process which is continually used by the brain to identify racial differences, as Perkins (2007) reiterates ‘When it is unseen, it goes without comment. It is only when the difference is visible that it becomes a topic of conversation’ (p. 19). Ang (2001), who is ethnic Chinese, born in Indonesia, educated in Holland and now resides in Australia, is often asked ‘where are you from’? When she replies that she is from Holland, racial confusion and disbelief is experienced by the questioner, who then asks ‘No, where are you really from’ (Ang 2001,
Many Australians believe they have a right to such personal information. Perkins (2007) elaborates ‘people who conceptualise themselves as belonging to the “mainstream” do not usually imagine that they themselves have a colour or a race. They are interested in someone who does’ (Perkins 2007, p. 20). The adoptees may have experienced being questioned by strangers about their Thai appearance while growing up.

While family understanding and involvement have been highlighted as positive factors in identity construction, challenges to the genealogical family model have been made. It is questionable as to whether intercountry adoption is obligated to replicate the biological family and that new family formations can be made without biological connections through intercountry adoption (Volkman 2005). Volkman (2005) who has an adopted daughter from China, adds ‘Sometimes the sense of kinship extends in the other direction, to a sort of bonding with “China”, a China that is imagined yet somehow palpable, embodied in the child, archived in photographs and other tangible souvenirs’ (Volkman 2005, p. 32).

Identities are formed within and beyond the adoptive family, and according to Ang (2001) they

Take shape through multiple interrelationships with myriad, differently positioned others. These interrelationships, whether economic, political, professional, cultural or personal, are never power free, but they cannot be avoided, they have to be continually negotiated and engaged with somehow. More, these interrelationships are by definition constitutive of contemporary social life. This, of course, is
what togetherness-in-difference-is all about. It is about co-existence in a single world. (Ang 2001, p. 200)

Further to this, Matthews (2004) an intercountry adoptee who presented a personal perspective on intercountry adoption at the 8th Australian Adoption Conference, identifies several benefits that the adoptive family can initiate for the ongoing support and development of the adoptee. She suggests that socialising on a regular basis with other adoptees and their families through adoption support networks will assist with confidence building. The adoptees birth culture should be promoted to instil a sense of pride for the adoptee, and differences to physical appearances should be openly discussed to assist with identity and racial issues to prepare the adoptee for any racial taunts if and when they occur. Lastly, parents need to demonstrate sensitivity toward the adoptee when explaining their reasons for adopting an overseas child (Matthews 2004).

Researchers with a psychological focus have suggested that attachment and bonding are important to brain development and human relationships and for institutionalised children this may have particular relevance. Children living in institutions have been detached from their birth parents often at a young age. They are thought to live a life lacking in love, affection, predictability, trust, attachment and bonding. Much of the child’s later development may be dependent on these very factors (Bowlby 2005; Garbarino 1999; Kobak & Sceery 1988; Perry 2001). The cohort of Thai children spent their early years in orphanages and may have experienced delay with forming meaningful relationships at an early age.
A child’s brain develops to ninety percent of an adult brain during the first three years of life and the emotional parts related to caring, sharing, empathy, control of aggression, bonding and attachment all develop during this short time (Perry 2001). This suggests how critical these early years are in the development of a child. Many people who were institutionalised report that they never had the opportunity to experience the outside world and learn what it was like to live in a loving, caring family situation (Atkinson, 2002; Edwards & Read, 1989; Knight, 1998; NISATSIC 1997; O’Beirne, 2005; Szablicki, 2007). Lack of attachment and loss of identity was also experienced by many who had been institutionalised and Joanna Penglase, a care leaver activist and author, poses several questions regarding this.

Who are you if your parents do not claim you? Where do you belong? ....How does a person construct their identity when all the usual determined "normal" shaping influences of childhood – like parents! – are missing? (Penglase cited in Murray et al. 2009, p. 52)

The adoption of the Thai participants has enabled them to discard the institutional environment, and moving to Australia and living in a family may have provided opportunities for any psychological damage to heal and for the individual to develop. On this basis, the Thai cohort who are the focus of this thesis may have benefited from being adopted into families rather than remaining in the orphanage.

Institutionalised children who are deprived of parental and family stimulation early in life may have difficulty in achieving developmental milestones. Other than language barriers, they are faced with under developed sensory
integration issues and limited everyday learning experiences (Burns & Burns 2007). Within a family environment ‘Children start learning words around their first birthday. By the time they start school they know around 13,000 words’ (Rich Harris1998, p.165). However the Thai children who came to South Australia from Rangsit Children’s Home had very limited language skills while in the orphanage, which has potentially resulted in limitations to their learning and later to their employment opportunities.

A child spends a large portion of their life in the school environment, and many of the Thai children went to preschool or primary school soon after their arrival in South Australia. There have been negative accounts given by earlier adoptees about their school experience. Analee, a Vietnamese war orphan was adopted to Australia in the mid 1970s and her story is included in the Colour of Difference. She attended a country primary school during the late 1970s and early 1980s and as the only Asian pupil suffered from negative comments relating to her Asianess. These experiences led her to believe that ‘being Asian was bad. Being Asian meant being a lesser person’ (Annalee’s Story 2001, p.18). It is unclear however whether the Thai cohort from Rangsit Children’s Home would have had similar experiences as they attended school 15-20 years later than Analee.

A review of current literature suggests that child abuse and neglect are prevalent in the institutional care environment. Following both the NISATSIC Report (1997) and the Mullighan Report (2008) ‘disturbing revelations of child sexual and other forms of abuse have emerged’ (Bessant & Hil 2005, p. 108). Many other accounts are from people who were institutionalised in the latter
half of the twentieth century who endured and survived abuse and neglect (Atkinson, 2002; Edwards & Read, 1989; Knight, 1998; O’Beirne, 2005; Szablicki, 2007).

Children who experience a lack of attachment and are subjected to abuse may develop problems such as self-harming behaviours, posttraumatic stress disorder and child sexual abuse accommodation syndrome (Miller 1998; Perry et al. 1995; Perry 2000). They may also have difficulties in other areas such as relating to others, developing a conscience, demonstrate manipulative behaviour, and may be unable to show true affection (Fahlberg 1988). It is further suggested that these children may be aggressive and cruel due to not having opportunities within a family setting to learn ways to control aggression; they may lack empathy and show no remorse when questioned about their actions (Garbarino 1999; Green 1993).

Trauma causes physiological and psychological responses and findings indicate ‘the effects of early and severe trauma are widespread, devastating, and difficult to treat’ (Cozolino 2005, p. 22). Many children who were institutionalised in Australia and were subjected to trauma developed strong resilience when enduring the infliction and Szablicki (2007, p. 137), when recalling his childhood memories states ‘I was determined not to cry, I admired mental toughness; it was all I had’. Many stated that it gave them an inner strength and this strength and determination assisted their survival (Coldrey 1993; Knight 1998; Murray et al. 2009; Szablicki 2007; van den Berg 1994).
As adults, those who have been institutionalised may reach a point where they are able to reflect on life events and see earlier negative events in a new light, and understand their circumstances. Through the process of self-reflection and self-assessment they are able to reframe their story and consciously rise above the adversity as opposed to becoming a victim of it (Katz 1997). Wolin & Wolin (1993 cited in Katz 1997) point this out

While you cannot change the past, you can change the way you understand it…You can frame your story around the themes of your resilience or themes of your damage. You can find reason to be proud in some of your worst memories, or you can let yourself be overwhelmed by the harm of it all. Katz 1997, p. 87

Children who overcome adversity and ‘beat the odds’ possess certain qualities and skills. Resilience is a major factor in aiding this process. Katz talks about resilience as ‘strength under adversity, the capacity to withstand the affects of exposure to known risk factors and adverse conditions, to beat the odds, so to speak’ (Katz 1997, p. 27). From a critical perspective it is recognised that social structures enhance and inhibit resilience of individuals (Henderson Grotberg 2003; Thompson 2006). Coleman and Hagel (2007) claim children who are sociable, those who had hobbies, and those who displayed talent developed self-worth. Having a supportive family and participating in such things as sports and other areas of interest assisted children to build up their self-confidence. Self-confidence is developed out of reliable inner-strengths that have been self-tested in the past, and ‘is your reputation with yourself’ (Daicoss 2007, p.1). Coleman and Hagel (2007)
advocate that ‘a supportive neighbourhood and good peer relationships’ (p. 31) may assist in the process of increasing resilience and promote healing in children from earlier trauma. Self-esteem is built on inner-strengths and positive inner feelings of one’s self which also contributes to resilience (Daicoss 2007; Henderson Grotberg 2003). Katz (1997) adds those ‘who learn to feel good about themselves, who can recognise their strengths and talents may be neutralizing the otherwise harmful, long-term effects of the painful life experiences they endured’ while living in the institutionalised environment (Katz 1997, p. 146). He suggests that ‘turning point experiences’ and ‘second-chance opportunities’ that happen throughout their lifetime should be emphasised as to contributing to their success (Katz 1997, p. 31). Coleman and Hagel (2007) agree with Katz and stress that the emphasis should be placed on the child’s strengths and capabilities rather than the lack of confidence, self-esteem and resilience.

The extent to which the Thai adoptees in this study have also been oppressed and discriminated against by their social environments due to racism, their Asian accent and their intercountry adoptee status, also needs to be considered. Much input is needed by the caregiver to change behaviours that have formed during the abusive or neglected periods (Coleman and Hagel 2007; Perry 2001). A great deal of understanding around the institutional environment and its impact on the child’s development is required to encourage bonding and attachment. Children copy behaviour as they learn. Parents who model appropriate behaviour and encourage participation in daily activities with their children, are more likely to change their children’s behaviour related to emotional responses and social
interaction (Perry 2001). Children need to feel safe and secure before traumatic events are addressed and this should happen ‘without judgement or prejudice’ (Atkinson 2002, p. 193). The Thai adoptees had language barriers that may have prolonged the period before intervention could commence for their personal healing.

Adoptive parents need to be educated and have access to resources to aid coping mechanisms if and when challenging behaviour is displayed by the adoptee (Fahlberg 1988). The adoptive parents of the Thai children were not given any formal education relating to the challenges of adopting a child from Thailand. Many of them may have gained knowledge regarding intercountry adoption through their previous intercountry adoption experiences, the support networks and by listening to other adoptive parents’ accounts of their intercountry adoption experiences. If the adoptive parents did not belong to a support network at that particular time, then their knowledge of the intercountry adoption experience may have limited their expected adoption outcomes in dealing with challenging behaviour. Perry (2001) states that progress with changed behaviours in abused children is slow, especially with older children, as were the Thai children, and Perry (2001) acknowledges this

The slow progress can be frustrating and many adoptive parents will feel inadequate because all of the love, time and effort they spend with their child may not seem to be having an effect….children are most malleable early in life and as they get older change is more difficult. (Perry 2001, p. 11)
Social workers and psychologists are often involved with adoption processes and have highlighted a range of observations and difficulties. Alessia and Roufeil (2008) researched twenty eight South Australian intercountry adoptive parents. Some of the parents reported that ‘you have to be seen to be coping’ (Alessia 2008, p. 1). The research also emphasised the often lack of understanding and empathy shown towards the adoptive family by the professionals who worked within the field of intercountry adoption. Those parents who did seek support were disappointed about the outcome and found that ‘professionals were ill informed ... and parents felt scrutinised and judged’ (Alessia & Roufeil 2008, p. 1). Personal racist and nuclear family ideologies of professionals working within the realms of intercountry adoption may still persist (Gehrmann 2005). Further to this, Rosenwald and Carroll (2004) add ‘there has been an active campaign to create an erroneous public perception that adoption is harmful to all parties involved and to discredit the proven advantages of adoption for both children and birth families’ (Rosenwald & Carroll 2004, p. 4).

For adoptees, a sensitive and culturally appropriate adoption process by itself may be insufficient in meeting the needs of children, such as the cohort of Thai adoptees who participated in this research project, who came from a background that included some years of institutionalisation.

My thesis will incorporate a critical theory approach to social work covering anti-oppressive approaches through empowerment of oppressed groups, which is conducive to the participants in this study who may have experienced racism and ridicule during their lives.
This chapter has reviewed literature and research relevant to intercountry adoption and has examined the changing nature of adoption in Australia, covering British child migration, the ‘stolen generation’ and the ‘forced’ adoptions in Australia, many of whom experienced living in institutions. While few studies have researched intercountry adoptees (Gray 2007; Williams 2003) there is little evidence supporting research on Thai adoptees from the Rangsit Children’s Home who came as a group of thirty to South Australian families in the late 1980s and early 1990s. My thesis explores the life histories of these adult adoptees with the intent to contribute to the gaps in the literature by providing opportunities for the adoptees to reflect on their lives and tell their personal stories, previously unheard and unexamined.
CHAPTER 3

Methodology

Full life histories and experiences of adopted Thai individuals were qualitatively investigated, using personal data provided by twelve participants, in an endeavour to gain an understanding of how the Thai adoptees adjusted to life in Australia and how their lives were shaped using three time frames. This gave opportunity for data to reveal life experiences from their orphanage days in Thailand through to their adulthood in Australia.

Critical Theory

Critical theory which incorporates a critical approach to social work is relevant to my research because the focus of the research project is on anti-oppressive approaches to social work practice which address social injustice and oppression through empowerment. Critical theory and anti-oppressive practice advocates a commitment to use research procedures to empower oppressed groups. Critical theory identifies individual problems are related to oppressive social structures and links them directly with political issues (Baines 2007; Thompson 2006). The challenge is attempting to change the more oppressive aspects of life that silence and marginalise some and privilege others (Adams, Dominelli & Payne 2005).

It has been proposed that ‘one of the basic aims of research is to bring to public notice realities that were previously hidden and new perspectives on worlds that have been taken for granted’ (Humphries 2005, p. 281).
Humphries, when describing critical social research, draws on Harvey who stated

At the heart of critical social research is the idea that knowledge is structured by existing sets of social relations. The aim of critical methodology is to provide knowledge which engages the prevailing social structures. These social structures are seen by critical researchers, in one way or another, as oppressive structures. (Harvey 1990 in Humphries 2005, p. 282)

Thompson (2006) proposed oppression occurs at three levels –

- (S) the structural level,
- (C) the cultural level
- (P) the personal and psychological level

Figure 1.

Thompson’s framework can be applied to the experiences of the Thai cohort as they are a part of a minority group in South Australia who have potentially
experienced oppression or discrimination. Critical theory locates social problems in dominant-subordinate relationships and is informed by critical analysis and self-reflective practice and is propelled by a goal of emancipation from oppression (Mullaly 2002).

Psychological theories such as those explaining attachment, trauma and child development also have some relevance, and can help flesh out Thompson’s third level of experience: the personal psychological level, in understanding the experience of the Thai children/now adults.

Critical theorists focus on the political and ideological values in interpreting their findings. The critical questions the researcher needs to consider in the initial stages of question preparation and data analysis are ‘To what extent will the research focus on the aim of changing or improving policy/practice? Will it inform practice as it proceeds on an ongoing basis? How will this be achieved and what might be the barriers?’ (Banks & Barnes 2005, p. 240).

As adults, those who have been institutionalised may reach a point where they are able to reflect on life events and see earlier negative events in a new light and understand their circumstances. Baines (2007) advocates from a critical anti-oppressive stance that, individuals ‘can and need to be active in their own liberation’ (p. 21). Providing the adoptees with the opportunity to reflect on their lives may allow them to understand that their personal experiences are shaped by political policies and cultural beliefs. De-guilting them of decisions that were made beyond their control, and allowing them to recognise that the ‘personal is political’, may be an enabling factor in their present lives (Baines 2007, p. 20).
The interviews may initiate self-reflection and self-assessment responses heightening the adoptees awareness of personal achievements rather than focussing on institutional experiences (Katz 1997). According to Baines (2007), providing an opportunity for people to tell their life stories is ‘a key starting point in the development of new theory and knowledge’ as well as contributing to ‘political strategies and resistance’ (Baines 2007, p. 192).

Critical self-reflection is also part of a critical approach to practice and research. Critical theory incorporates reflexiveness in the way of critical thinking. This means that the researcher needs to critically self-reflect to acknowledge where their own experience and actions are located, and then to question themselves when confronted with new ideas, ‘the latter being the critical element’ (Adams et al. 2005, p. 11). Mullaly (2002, p. 207) adds that critical self-reflection is a type of ‘internal criticism, a never-ending questioning of our social, economic, political, and cultural beliefs, assumptions and actions’ and where these are located in relation to the participant. This may be particularly important due to my ‘insider’ status, which is discussed later in this chapter.

While conducting the interviews, analysing the data and writing the thesis I am compelled to critically reflect and question my social location within the research context compared to that of the participants’ social location. My reflective stance is necessary for me to critically stand back and review my research process, being open to change if required in how I ask my questions or when analysing new information introduced by the participants. It is suggested that
A researcher must become deeply involved with his [sic] material and allow it to absorb him [sic] while remaining emotionally vital enough to step back and perceive the contours of the data. It is a rigorous, affective exercise demanding emotional reserves and critical perceptiveness. (Glazer 1980 cited in Ely et al. 1991, p.113).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2003) qualitative research now includes ‘a method of inquiry that moves through successive stages of self-reflection’ (Denzin & Lincoln 2003, p. 27). By adopting a critical reflective stance I acknowledge the importance of minimising my influence on responses. I also need to analyse my power as a researcher and as an insider.

**Using a Qualitative Approach for Research**

A qualitative approach is chosen for this research project, as it enables a deep exploration of the lived experience of the Thai adoptee group from their own perspective. The perspectives of the mature Thai adoptees and how they managed difference in Australia have not been examined in-depth in the literature.

Qualitative research methods involve procedures that result in rich, descriptive, contextually situated data….Within this context, it is nowadays generally acknowledged that an understanding of the experiences not only of our participants but also of ourselves as researchers constitutes a fundamental part of the research process. (Richardson 1996, p. 175)
Rubin and Babbie (2005) add that qualitative research methods focus on the study of individuals and the meanings given to particular experiences with the intent to create richer in-depth data that cannot be reduced to numbers, as in quantitative research. The qualitative data enlisted a rich description of the participants’ lives and this allows me to explore the sensitive issues and concepts raised by the participants regarding their lives in Australia as an intercountry adoptee.

More specifically, qualitative interviewing focuses on the ‘continually changing world, and recognizes that what we hear depends on when we ask the question and to whom’ (Rubin & Rubin 1995, p. 38). In this light, I was mindful, when interviewing that I adhered to the interview questions but also follow leads that were appropriate to the participants’ data. Rubin and Rubin (1995) also recognised that ‘qualitative research is not looking for principles that are true all the time and in all conditions .... rather, the goal is understanding of specific circumstances, how and why things actually happen in a complex world’ (Rubin & Rubin 1995, pp. 38-39). They add that qualitative interviews distinguish commonalities and the unique factors of each interviewee.

In this research, the Thai adoptees were asked able to speak about their upbringing from outside the parameters of their adoptive families. As adults, they were asked to critically reflect upon the impact their adoption by South Australian families had ‘on their overall sense of who they are both within and beyond the influence of their adoptive parents’ (Williams 2003, p. 44).
Exploring the life history of research participants was one way of gathering qualitative material, and was considered relevant to exploring the lives of the Thai adoptees. Hatch and Wisniewski (1995) explain that life history research attempts to recapture the subtle differences, the people, meanings, events and even ideas of the past that have influenced and shaped the present. Similarly, Watson (1976) has suggested that the purpose of life history ‘is a commentary of the individual’s very personal view of his [sic] own experience as he [sic] understands it’ (Watson 1976, p. 97). Retelling and remembering life events can have therapeutic benefits and can pass on personal wisdom to the next generation (Berg 2001).

The key tasks in life history research are the collection of information and the interpretation or analysis of the data. Berg (2001) discusses oral histories and explains several points. The data analysis must be kept in context to time and place. First-person accounts, such as ‘oral histories are necessary to understand the subjectivity of a social group that has not been heard in official records’ (Berg 2001, p. 221). Life histories allowed the researcher to investigate ordinary people and give voice to those who have been ‘muted, excised from history, invisible in the official records of their culture’ (Long 1987, p. 5); this fits with a critical approach, which aims to make visible the experiences of those in marginalised groups. The cohort of Thai adoptees remain invisible in the official adoption records in South Australia and this research project has given opportunity to have their experiences expressed through the research findings.
Semi-Structured, In-depth Interviews

Life history interviews provided the researcher with an in-depth look at someone else’s life. Neuman and Kreuger (2003, p. 385) add that ‘this is often an enriching experience that creates a close personal relationship and encourages self-reflection in ways that enhance personal integrity’. Neuman and Kreuger (2003) claim that a research interview differs to that of a friendly conversation as there is a specific purpose to the interview in accessing information. There were several steps in the interview process that incorporate the researcher redefining her research skills. The interview ‘Has an explicit purpose – to learn about the informant and setting’ (Neuman & Kreuger 2003, p. 384).

Open-ended questions were asked to ‘capture how the person understands his or her past’ and ‘exact accuracy in the story is less critical than the story itself’ (Neuman & Kreuger 2003, p. 384). The past was retold with present interpretations in a way that the participant understands it, as ‘The main purpose is to tell it how the respondent sees or remembers the past, not just some kind of objective truth’ (Neuman & Kreuger 2003, p. 384).

The interview questions explored the participants’ lives in Australia in three chronological periods [See Appendix 2]. The first stage of the interview was focussed on when the adoptee first arrived in Australia when interactions were confined to adapting to a new way of life, living in a family, learning a new language, attending primary school and the introduction of social events. The second stage was directed to the adolescent period when secondary school was attended, peer interaction became important and activities took
place outside of the home. What assisted them during this stage and what had negatively impacted on them was also covered. The final stage addressed adulthood, which included the participants’ current situation living with or away from their families, encompassed by their experiences and challenges along the way.

The initial question was designed to be non-challenging and the participants were invited to talk about their lives when they first arrived in South Australia. The focus was placed on the adoptive family dynamics such as family members, number of children, other intercountry adoptive siblings and personal questions relating to age at adoption. This process enabled the participants to feel at ease as they drew on easily recalled facts relating to their family environments and adoption history, thus setting the participants’ memory in the early chronological period (Williams 2003).

The three time-defined categories identified that experiences for the twelve participants differed significantly in some respects as they moved from the initial settling into the family and school, to socialising during adolescence and the high school environment, to life beyond school moving into adulthood, employment, choosing life partners and returning to Thailand. The time frame of each interview was approximately one hour duration, although this was not an intended set period. Each participant was interviewed once. The participants were encouraged to discuss their lives for as long as they thought was necessary to complete their answers.

Using open-ended questions gave the participants choices as to how they answered the questions. Although more difficult for the researcher to code
and categorize, the advantages of open-ended questions were that ‘the interviewer may gain a greater range of responses, many of which may not have been anticipated’ (Gochros 2005, p. 257). Furthermore, the use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews was conducive to life-history interviews. The semi-structured approach allowed the researcher to ask additional questions in order to clarify meaning and to gain data of the participant’s past and their interpretation of it (Neuman & Kreuger 2003). As ‘Data collection in the interview is interactive; you can check out your understanding and interpretation of your participants’ responses as you go along’ (Grinnell & Unrae 2005, p. 81).

Grinnell and Unrae (2005) claim given that the researcher has formulated the research question, ‘the data collection process is particularly vulnerable to biases of the data collection’ (p. 81). In an attempt to avoid biases, the researcher needed to be aware of her own biases through past knowledge of intercountry experiences and consciously attempted to ask the questions as consistently as possible during each interview allowing each participant to answer each question in their own words, thus encouraging them to divulge whatever information they chose to do so, without suggesting known facts when obvious difficulties presented. During the interview the participants told their stories to the researcher and, the researcher indicated that she had interpreted and understood the story, thus, focus was on the participant’s point of view. The researcher was also open to new leads from participants and these were followed and expanded upon (Grinnell & Unrae 2005). They add
The ultimate goal is to interpret data in such a way that the true expressions of research participants are revealed. You want to explain meaning according to the beliefs and experiences of those who provided the data. (Grinnell & Unrae 2005, p. 81)

In-depth interviews have distinct features to that of a normal conversation according to Rubin and Rubin (1995). They claim that in interviews, the researcher asks specific questions, leads the discussion through stages and inspires confidence in the participant to answer in greater detail. Interviews are recorded either by a hand-written record, a tape recorder or videotaping depending on the circumstances of the interview location (Rubin & Rubin 1995) and the consent of the participant. In this project all interviews were audio-taped with the consent of participants.

Face-to-face interviews were be conducted for this study. Face-to-face interviews were preferred for several reasons. Firstly, the interviewer was able to meet the participant and establish a rapport. Secondly, an atmosphere of trust was developed with the intent to enhance the comfort level of the participants when discussing their lives. Thirdly, this enabled the researcher to gain answers to all the questions and to reword any of the questions when they were not clearly understood (Grinnell & Unrae 2005).

One possibility which was considered but the researcher eventually decided against involved conducting interviews via email and telephone. These options were deemed not suitable for this project after having brief conversations with some of the participants. According to Selwyn and Robson (1998) communication through e-mail interaction is not comparable
to verbal interaction. Face-to-face interviews were the most appropriate method of interviewing the Thai participants. Although their conversational skills were at times difficult, these possibly outweighed their comprehension and writing skills due to the lack of early language opportunities.

Self-evaluation was useful for the researcher to assess how well the interviews were going. When participants suggested extending the interview process by discussing extra topics, which a few of the participants did, it was a sign that the participants trusted the researcher and that things were going well as Rubin and Rubin reiterate ‘It is great when your conversational partners so want to get it right that they point out subtleties that you would otherwise miss’ (Rubin & Rubin 1995, p. 167).

Ethical Issues

The research project was approved by the Deakin University, Geelong Human Ethics Committee before any interviews were conducted. Other information was emailed to the participants which included the Plain Language Statement which outlined the research project [See Appendix 3], the consent form [See Appendix 4], the withdrawal of consent form [See Appendix 5], the Research Ethics Officer contact details who were able to answer any enquiries relating to the ethics of the project [See Appendix 3, p. 4], my supervisors’ names and contact details [See Appendix 3, p. 4], and that the research project was conducted through Deakin University. A face-to-face interview was then arranged with each participant.

The principle of seeking informed consent of research participants was a standard requirement in the Australian Association of Social Workers (2010
p. 36) (AASW) ‘code of ethics’ (5.5.2. 2, (a), (b), (c), (d). ‘Consent must be given voluntarily without coercion’ and ‘Participants should be informed that they may withdraw from a programme at any time’ (AASW 2010, 5.5.2.2. (f), p. 37). This showed respect to the participants especially if they did not wish to participate and it provided the researcher with some protection from later complaints and litigation (Banks & Barnes 2005). Maintaining privacy was another ethical issue and this pertained to confidentiality and anonymity. Banks and Barnes (2005, p. 249) clarified this by adding ‘Obviously the main reason for interviewing people is to find out information that can be used in the research and reported in any findings. So to make a blanket promise of confidentiality would be counterproductive’. Anonymity of the participants was assured by the researcher and pseudonyms were be chosen by the participants to protect their privacy and ensure confidentiality (AASW 2010; Gray 2007; Williams 2003). Ultimately, the participants had a choice as to what name they would use in this research project and the benefits of protecting their personal and confidential information by selecting an alternative name was discussed with them.

Initially it was planned that quotes would be attributed to individual participants known by pseudonyms. Choosing a de-gendered pseudonym was encouraged to hide the identification and gender of the participant. Some were of a de-gendered origin, others were not. I discussed this problem with my supervisors, and then contacted the gender-identified participants and requested a de-gendered pseudonym. The data was collated using thematic analysis to de-identify participants, rather than the individual’s full life history information. Eventually, given the small population
of adoptees who came from the Rangsit Children’s Home, it was decided not to attribute quotes or ideas to individuals to preserve the anonymity of individual participants.

My subjective position as an adoptive parent is similar to that of Gray (2007) who states that ‘a personal interest and knowledge about the intercountry adoption process places me as both an insider and an outsider (as a non-adoptee researcher) to the adoptees in this study’ (Gray 2007, p. 35). As an adoptive parent researcher, in many respects, I have had a vantage position to many aspects of intercountry adoption. Blumer (1969) claims being an ‘insider’ has an advantage as it adds to the self-reflection and awareness, and it can assist the interview by ‘suggesting leads, enabling insight, and in helping him [sic] to frame more fruitful questions’ (Blumer 1969, p. 125). This has enabled the researcher to enrich the research area from their knowledge base (Weber 1949).

Of the twelve participants who were interviewed, the researcher had had previous contact with four of them through adoption circles. My assessment of this situation was positive in that a rapport with the adoptee was easily established at the beginning of the interview and that the adoptee felt comfortable with divulging personal information to me. One of the four participants made a personal request at the end of the interview to discuss their life in Thailand, which had not been the focus of the interview questions. My assessment of this request gave me two answers; firstly, although I was known to the participant, they felt comfortable about divulging to me the abuses and injustices that had been experienced in the orphanage; and
secondly, this interview may have been the first opportunity that the participant had had, as an adult, in telling their story to someone who was listening to them. Another one of the four participants requested the recorder be turned off prior to giving sensitive information, for self-reassurance that the interview was completely confidential, which I assured them that it was, and they proceeded to speak freely about their life experiences, of both the positive and negative experiences. My critical reflection on how these four interviews had progressed suggested to me that the participants had been open and honest about personal information that reflected both positive and negative accounts of their lives, and that knowing me prior to the interviews had not deterred them from withholding this information.

Methodological dilemmas associated with adoptive parents researching intercountry adoption is recognised by Volkman (2003b) when she states

> We live daily with these ambivalences and ambiguities and have struggled with how to position our research and writing: how to cast an eye that is both critical and sympathetic, attuned to our own profoundly personal connections to these questions and to an analysis of the cultural and political contexts within which adoption must be situated.

(Volkman 2003b, p. 4)

Against this, it may have posed problems in that one’s own biases, and preconceptions may have influenced what the participant was trying to say (Maykut & Moorehouse 1994). Because of this, the ‘methods of social inquiry need to be rigorous and comprehensive to validate the research findings’ (Gray 2007, p. 37). As an insider Kanuha (2000) ‘questioned the
objectivity, reflexivity and authenticity of a research project’ because of the researcher’s in-depth prior knowledge of the project (Kanuha 2000, p. 444). However, insider research has the advantage of being more readily accepted by the participants in order to gain a greater depth of data (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle 2009). The interview questions were directed to their individual life situations, encompassing what was helpful, what was difficult and there overall personal reflections of their lives. As some of the adoptees are known to each other, analysing the themes which emerged from the interviews but not attributing these to particular individuals, enabled the confidentiality of individuals to be kept when analysing their life history data.

My insider knowledge of this targeted group of intercountry adoptees dates back to the late 1980s when families were sought for the thirty children living in Rangsit Children’s Home in Thailand. This cohort of children, all of whom were legally available for adoption, had remained in Thailand as ‘forgotten children’ until their adoptions took place with families in South Australia. This presented a unique situation within intercountry adoption procedures in Australia. My insider knowledge informed me that orphanage life had placed limitations on the children’s lives and that coming to Australia presented greater opportunities, but also initiated more challenges for the adoptees and their families. My biases developed from my personal knowledge of parenting one of these children, the personal challenges that were confronted and the rewards derived from experiencing and witnessing life changing events of a young child and how my son had been able to discard the negative effects of orphanage life.
Many of my biases on adoption outcomes and how the adult participants may have been affected by past traumas were influenced by literature focussed on children who had been institutionalised. The literature informed me that these environments had devastating and long lasting effects on the well-being of the resident children, leaving legacies of damaged adults marked by anger, violence and alcohol misuse (Murray et al. 2009). Other psychological disorders such as depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder (Cozolino 2005) also impacted on how they managed their lives beyond the orphanage. Comprehensive research conducted by Perry (2000; 2001) and Fahlberg (1988) provided a plethora of data related to early brain development and also to what extent abuse and trauma impacts on brain development. Having this knowledge swayed my thinking that the participants may be suffering from many of the disorders and lifetime legacies that had been presented, considering they too had endured abuse and trauma while institutionalised.

**Recruitment of Participants**

My project was focused on intercountry adoptees from the Rangsit Children’s Home, Thailand, now residing in Australia. The objective of the project was to interview as many as possible of the thirty adult adoptees who had resided in the Rangsit Children’s Home, Thailand. Twelve individuals responded to a request for research participants and all were subsequently interviewed.

Their ages varied from 4 years to 9 years at the time of arrival to Australia. Six of the participants were in the 4 – 6 years age bracket and six participants were in the 7 – 9 years age bracket on arrival to Australia during the late
1980s and early 1990s. All were adopted by South Australian families. The gender mix of the Thai cohort was nine male and three female participants, and the majority, but not all, lived in South Australia. The dynamics of their adoptive families varied. Some were adopted into families where they were not the first intercountry adoptee, some into families in which all other children were biological offspring of the parents, and others were adopted by childless couples.

Participants were recruited through World Families Australia organisation via on-line announcements of the research project and via an informational flyer that was distributed at a World Families Australia support group that meets regularly and that has supported intercountry adoptive parents for the past forty years.

World Families Australia is an organisation that aims to support overseas children within their birth families or with a family in their birth country through aid and sponsorship programs. They provide international aid through relief and development projects in nine countries in Asia and Africa supporting 1200 children with food, medical and educational needs and housing. Although previously known as ASIAC (SA) and Australians Aiding Children, World Families Australia has been operating with similar ideals for the past forty years. It has representation on the National Intercountry Adoption Advisory Group established by the Australian Government Attorney General. It holds several social functions throughout the year for adoptive children and their families and holds monthly support group meetings for adoptive parents.
The flyer invited the Thai adoptees, from this particular cohort, to participate in the research project [See Appendix 1]. My telephone and email details were supplied which enabled them to make contact with me. When a Thai adoptee accepted the invitation to participate I explained to them what was involved, that the interview would take approximately one hour, what I hoped to gain from the research project, that confidentiality would be adhered to, and that they may withdraw from the project at any time without explanation.

*Data Interpretation and Analysis*

The data interpretation and analysis brought together the meanings, not only of the participants’ lives but also called for a reassessment of the researcher’s own knowledge. Through this the researcher became an active participant, rather than presenting as the highly trained expert or the disinterested observer, (Gray 2007) to encompass an accurate reflection on how the data is interpreted. The purpose of the analysis was to organise large amounts of data in such a way that the themes and interpretations that emerged from the process addressed the original research question. A systematic plan was essential in this process (Boyatzis 1998; Grinnell & Unrae 2005).

As a researcher I developed ways of coding that assisted in the process of getting at the meaning of the data more easily. Each time I found a statement of prominence in the data I wrote the meaning in my own words as a short phrase in a log book and numbered it, for example, ‘felt comfortable in Australian family’ or ‘recognised lack of early language development’. I also placed the same number in the participants’ data. As I examined each
of the participant’s data, I coded the data with a number and if it matched a previous statement I added the participant’s initials to the phrase in the log book. This showed me how many of the participants experienced similar things and the importance of that particular piece of data. ‘Each approach involves techniques for finding and marking the underlying ideas in the data, group similar information together, and relating different ideas and themes to one another’ (Rubin & Rubin 1995, p. 229). Descriptive themes were created from various interviews having brought together the related information pertaining to a situation and these were grouped accordingly.

When analysing the data I broke down the life stories into thematic categories, rather than presenting each story as a whole to protect the confidentiality of each participant.

As each interview was analysed, the researcher marked each passage with a particular code then added a brief summary of what the participant was talking about in the interview. This process identified various themes. In this research project the themes identified were many and varied which included ‘experiencing racism’, ‘school experiences’ and ‘relationships’. Once a theme had been suggested by the coding, the interviews were re-examined to find more examples that validated or did not validate the new theme (Boyatzis 1998; Rubin & Rubin 1995).

Rubin and Rubin (1995, p. 237) state that ‘Both compatible and contradictory concepts can help build themes’. The data analysis revealed both compatible and contradictory concepts which have been discussed later in the document. Once a set of themes were identified, the data was re-
examined ‘to ensure that the linkages are grounded in the data’ (Rubin & Rubin 1995, p. 238).

Rubin and Rubin (1995) explain the process of coding as ‘the process of grouping interviewees’ responses into categories that bring together the similar codes, concepts, of themes you have discovered, or steps or stages in a process’ (p. 238). Everything was coded that helped analyse the data, such as, names, evidence, time sequences, pauses, and emotional signs. An initial list of coding categories were made, and then expanded upon as more interviews were examined. The earlier interviews were then recoded using the new codes. In some instances, there were several codes within the one paragraph or sentence (Rubin & Rubin 1995).

The data was further examined for overarching themes. This was a two stage process. In the first stage, an examination and a comparison was made within the data. In the second stage the data was compared across the categories (Rubin & Rubin 1995). In the final stages of analysis, the data was organised in themes that connect them to the research question when the ‘material is then interpreted in terms of the literature and theories in the researcher’s field’ (Rubin & Rubin 1995, p. 251). Once the overarching themes had been found and they had been incorporated within broader theory, the data analysis was finished (Rubin & Rubin 1995).

Surprisingly, as the interviews of this project progressed, I found that the adoptees had adjusted to life in Australia and they all reported that they had taken advantage of the opportunities this had offered them.
The research findings are presented in the next chapter and are organised into three main sections which reflect on the chronological stages of the adoptee’s lives. The first stage ‘Transition from Thailand to Australia’ reveals new understanding into how the Thai adoptees experienced their world when leaving the orphanage and adjusting to life in Australia. The second section ‘Growing up in Australia’, shows how the adoptees negotiated and managed integration into the wider community; and the final section ‘Adulthood’ reports on the way the adoptees, as adults, managed their lives in Australia as well as reconnecting with Thailand.
CHAPTER 4

Research Findings

Introduction to the Research Findings

The overarching themes of the research findings presented in this chapter have emerged from an analysis of how the participants’ experienced intercountry adoption in Australia. The participants had lived for many years in the Rangsit Children’s Home, Thailand. The first section of this chapter will give a greater understanding of how the participants managed the transition from Thailand to Australia, of leaving the orphanage and coming to Australia, adjusting to family life, learning a new language, and attending primary school. The second section focuses on the period of ‘integration into their communities’ when faced with the complexities of difference, highlighting challenges that confronted the Thais including adolescence, health issues, socialising with other intercountry adoptees, high school and racism. The final section I will explore the role ‘resilience’ played in influencing participants’ attitudes to life including self-reflection and self-assessment of their lives from adult perspectives.

Transition from Thailand to Australia – reflection on their lives

This section examines the different levels of understanding the adoptees had about what was happening in their lives the moment they left the orphanage, their arrival in Australia, adjusting to the new family, learning a new language, and attending primary school.
While some had an understanding as to what was happening, for others, this was a time of confusion. As all the adoptees had spent most or all of their lives institutionalised, it was a huge step for them to leave the orphanage, come to South Australia and live in a family environment. While living in Thailand, none had ventured beyond the orphanage gates. They were attuned to the Thai culture; the food, the language, the people, the smells, the sounds. They were also accustomed to orphanage culture of predictability, routines, and of collective solidarity formed by the children with whom they shared their lives. There were approximately two hundred children living in the Rangsit Children’s Home, during that particular period, and thirty to forty children shared a dormitory. Participants recalled the orphanage as providing limited food at meal times, ‘we used to be hungry all of the time because we didn’t get a lot of food’, very basic schooling ‘ABC but in the Thai language with lots of activities like colouring and we wouldn’t stay in school for very long’, and controlled the children’s behaviour with physical punishment, fear and intimidation as one participant explained.

There was a lot of physical abuse because if we were naughty we would get hit, get spanked. That’s how they controlled us, through fear and intimidation. If we didn’t go to sleep at night they used to scare us to sleep using a ghost. We didn’t quite understand what a ghost was but we understood that there was somebody outside, somebody scary. We didn’t know what that thing looked like; we just knew it was out there. It used to go around knocking on windows and scaring the hell out of us, and if we were talking and that, boom,
boom, heaps of noise outside and then everyone was silent. That is how they made us go to sleep.

Apart from that, the orphanage was the adoptees’ home and they were accustomed to orphanage life and their surroundings.

Leaving the orphanage with strangers, whom the adoptees could not understand, ‘they started talking this strange language…I was screaming and crying in the hotel and you know, I didn’t understand what they were saying…then they took me away’, provoked mixed feelings of confusion, excitement, nervousness ‘when I saw this new family, it was strange but I didn’t know what was happening’ and fear for many of the adoptees. Common feelings were

I was nervous and excited, but I think I was more terrified because it was something out of my comfort zone. Being stuck in orphanage for over seven years, I would say I was nervous and scared. I had always been used to waking up to the same environment every day and then I was taken out of that environment, I was so scared.

The poor care, and the physical and emotional abuse that had been experienced in the orphanage was frequently discussed and typical comments were ‘I didn’t like it’, ‘it was just horrid’, ‘sort of torture’ ‘they don’t treat you well’, ‘all dodgy’ and nightmares were still being experienced by a few.

Others were pleased and excited to leave and stated that ‘I was actually happy to leave the orphanage’ and ‘it felt good, it felt really good’ and had
some understanding that they were coming to Australia to a new life, with a new family. An intense sense of freedom was experienced on leaving the orphanage by a few of the older adoptees.

**Arrival in Australia**

The experience of arriving in Australia varied considerably. For several of the older children this was a time of feeling scared and confused, and difficulties in adapting to their new life were experienced. A number of participants commented on what they perceived to be similarities between orphanage life and prison life when referring to the lack of life skills and experiences which resulted from living in a confined and controlled environment for many years and they remembered.

I am aware of the outside world but I don’t have a big picture of what the outside world is like. So I am stuck in a very controlled environment. It's like being in jail. When you have been there for two or three years it might not affect you until you go out. It is the same with an orphanage but you're a kid, and you know that's when you're moulded.

Some stated that they felt weird, whereas others had feelings of being alone and this was frequently expressed ‘it was quite different being alone’, ‘I really felt by myself’, ‘when I first come to Australia I was very alone, I didn’t have any one to relate to’. Several thought of the orphanage as their home and ‘being brought up and hanging around with the Thais in the orphanage I pretty much thought they were my family’ was a common belief amongst the adoptees. Hence many experienced grief and loss after they had left. They
missed the company of the other children with whom they had shared their lives and the feeling of being alone was often stated. They were used to living in the orphanage environment and they grieved for what they knew and understood of their lives in Thailand. They were confronted with a new world with new experiences, a new language, and different food, as well as a change in climate, new sights and new sounds. A few described the move as a cultural shock. For example

Things were very different, the weather was cold at the time and I had never experienced cold before and I didn’t know what to do really. I didn’t know the toaster and all that stuff. It was weird, it was just weird, and at the same time I didn’t know what was going on. It was big cultural shock if that’s the word.

A limited number had no memory of their lives in Thailand, especially those who arrived at a younger age. As one adoptee commented ‘I don’t actually remember my childhood’.

**A New Family**

Living in a family was a big change for children who had spent their lives in an orphanage. Some of the older adoptees had a sense of feeling comfortable with their new families having had a few days together in Thailand and looking back to first meeting their new family one participant remembered thinking ‘these people are fine and I think I will be settling in well’. Souvenirs of life in Thailand were important such as listening to Thai music brought comments such as ‘I had a favourite music tape that my Mum bought for me and I listened to it’.
For both adoptees and their new families, there were many challenges in making the adjustment to family life in a new culture. As one said, 'It was hard to get along because you are getting used to each other and a different culture and family'. Others were more specific with comments such as 'I lived my life with a room full of kids and then they take you to Australia and you have your own bedroom and that’s a bit scary, it was a bit hard for the first few nights'. There was a noticeable change for the adoptees at mealtime, eating with a family after eating with a lot of children in the orphanage and ‘I remember feeling a bit weird and scared to do anything’ was commented on by a few. Inner-strength and self-determination had been developed as coping mechanisms for orphanage life, so was often applied when adapting to family life and ‘the adjustment was pretty hard, it took a while to get used to the new environment, but you learn to cope’, ‘I taught myself’, and ‘you always struggle with something’ were common statements made by the participants.

Having other intercountry adoptees in the family assisted many of the Thai adoptees to integrate into their already culturally diverse families. ‘I felt comfortable actually, they probably knew what I was going through’, and’ I guess they were trying to make me feel welcome’, typified the overall views. It was strange at first for some who didn’t understand the concept of siblings and they explain

In a way it’s just like friends from another family or another country and at the time I thought that they are my friends, but as the years go by I think they are my brothers and I feel more connected.
Having adoptive parents and extended families who were culturally diverse Australians ‘made a lot of difference’ and assisted with integration according to a few. Indeed, many of the families had had previous experience with multiple intercountry adoptions of older children so they had some idea of what to expect when adopting an older Thai child. ‘I had really great support from my family’, ‘my parents always made sure I had fun and I was never bored because there were always things to do’ were various comments made. For others, it was their new parent’s first intercountry adoption and in some cases their first child.

Adoption also resulted in challenges for the new families, some of whom seemed more able to understand and respond to their needs. There were different experiences for those who were the only adoptee compared to families where there were multiple adoptees and a few stated that ‘when I first come to Australia I was very alone, didn’t really have anybody to relate too’. The transition into Australian family life was generally easier for the families who had previously adopted from overseas countries as they were experienced and informed about many aspects of intercountry adoption of older children ‘the family had experience with kids’ and ‘they already knew what was going to happen from the previous adoptions so the transition was quite easy for me’. Although having several adopted siblings was regarded as an advantage by some, a few of the participants found that the age of arrival to Australia made a difference and that integration into families was easier at a younger age.

Adoption is a difficult process and it did not always go to plan. Varying levels of integration into the family were experienced. A small number of
adoptees talked about “their real” siblings and parents when referring to the biological connection within the family, as if they were a different class. In a worst case scenario, integration into a new family does not occur and for two participants, issues in the initial placement with an Australian family resulted in the children being placed with another family. Having been relinquished by their Thai parents, these adoptees experienced repeated rejection causing additional consequences for the individuals.

Language

None of the adoptees spoke English when they arrived and the families had little or no Thai language. Most of the adoptees had difficulty communicating with their families and the struggle continued for a couple of years. A typical comment was

At first it was real hard for me to speak my language, like English to them, to communicate. But, then again, we got by, they kind of understood me but I couldn't understand them.

Some of the adoptees did not speak Thai either. As one commented, ‘all I remember is that I probably never spoke because I don’t actually remember speaking Thai’ so language development in their early years had been compromised and their language was far below the developmental level. Even though they were of school age, they had a lack of language. Missing out on early English language development gained from parental interaction from an early age was recognised by a few.
The language barrier obviously from the start is a difficulty. Being six years old, obviously you miss out on your parents’ pronunciation, your basic English really.

Those who arrived at pre-school age had the advantage of learning English at a younger age, and also prior to attending school. Many had difficulties learning English and for some, English continues to be a struggle as ‘English is not really an easy language, it’s hard as well’.

Consequences of poor language skills resulted in poor communication with the family, and difficulty making friends. Several stated that they did not have any close friends for a considerable time until their English improved and they were then able to communicate.

However, while none of the adoptive parents were Thai-speaking; a few families had taken steps to maintain some Thai language skills. Socialising at Thai festivals not only provided an opportunity to observe Thai traditions but also allowed the adoptees to converse in Thai. As one commented:

I remember during Thai festivals, during song time, families with adopted children from Thailand would always get together and interact. Actually some of them didn’t know Thai they only spoke English, but I knew, I still knew my Thai so spoke some Thai to my friends, the ones that actually understood Thai.

A more common experience was that Thai language skills had been allowed to lapse. Several of the older adoptees had deep regrets about the loss of their Thai language as they had been fluent in Thai and could read Thai prior
to their arrival in Australia, and disappointment was expressed that now they could only remember basic Thai.

Language, I got Thai language, but bloody hell I forgot. I know number one, I keep saying count up to number ten. I know mango like mamiwng that’s all I know.

Some wished there had been opportunities that would have allowed them to maintain their Thai language. A few reiterated the same sentiment. ‘I could still have my language. Now I can’t and that’s one of the most important things to keep with you, to be able to still speak Thai when you come to Australia. But to lose that, it is a big thing’. As adults, they continued to grieve over their loss of the Thai language.

Primary School

Depending on their age on arrival to Australia, children were enrolled at school. Attending school was a positive experience for some due to the school structure being similar to the orphanage structure, routine and predictable and being surrounded by many children. It was an environment they were used to and gave a sense of continuity for people.

I think I was used to having many kids and I think it reminded me of the orphanage. Just that environment of so many kids, you’d sit in a classroom like we would do in the orphanage. I actually quite liked it and I was very welcomed.

Attending special ‘English as a Second Language’ (ESL) programs at a language school was available to those who lived in the vicinity of Adelaide.
Others had ESL support arranged for them at the schools they attended, and private tutors were arranged at private schools. A few added comments such as ‘I actually had private tutors to update me or fast track me a little quicker’. Arriving at an older age often meant the adoptees were placed in age-appropriate classes with no knowledge of the English language, which was recognised as a difficulty for individuals, ‘I was in year three or four at the start, even though I didn’t know English. It was just like kindy; you start from scratch, which was hard’. Even though extra tuition was provided many had difficulties learning the language. Hearing loss was experienced by a few ‘my ears were completely blocked’ which contributed to further learning difficulties within the class room settings.

Specialist support was less likely for children in rural South Australia. School was a positive experience for those attending culturally diverse schools, as it provided a connection to children with similar backgrounds. ‘I felt really comfortable because there were different countries like myself. So I felt like I wasn’t the only person that was here’. A positive experience was also gained where schools were able to meet the child’s needs and this was recognised. ‘The school was pretty much set up for me and I made friends pretty much straight away. They had programs especially for people like me’. Others were very sociable and made friends quickly.

Racism

Racial ‘difference’ was insignificant to most individuals during the primary school years although it was experienced by a few. It was less likely in culturally diverse schools. Living in a rural location with a culturally diverse
population was an advantage. Racial taunts were experienced where the community lacked cultural diversity and participants were vulnerable at the beginning. Regular comments were ‘Kids used to look at me weird, teasing me, like nerd, just pointing and things like that’, and ‘when young kids are that age they don’t think and they just tease you, until you grow up a little older when in high school and you start to realise ok this is a little bit different’.

**Growing up in Australia – reflection on their adolescent years**

The second section focuses on ‘Growing up in Australia’ and investigates how the adoptees adapted to life in Australia. The findings relate to wider community acceptance, socialising with other intercountry adoptees, health, what it meant to be a Thai adoptee adolescent, attending high school and racism.

**The Wider Community**

For the adoptee, acceptance into the wider community depended on location and demographics. There was a greater acceptance in culturally diverse communities or those with a significant Asian population.

I think it is a massive advantage to be in the country, in a small town, because you tend to know everybody and when you are adopted, you sort of stand out a bit more as well. I mean in our town it was multicultural, especially Italians, Greeks, there was a small Asian community as well.
There was a strong connection between sporting ability and community acceptance for those who were sporty. The sporting arena provided a positive forum as many of the children enjoyed sport and discovered that they were good at sport, and this became an integral component for community acceptance. Generalised statements were typically in the form of ‘the best way to actually communicate or get along with people is actually do sport. Lucky for me I had really good sporting abilities, so therefore I was ranked pretty highly within the community’, and ‘I loved any sport, I fitted in’. Other recreational activities and clubs were enjoyed by a few and participation in these promoted acceptance into the community.

**Socialising with Other Intercountry Adoptees**

The majority of participants identified that socialising with other intercountry adoptees and their families while growing up was very beneficial as friendships were formed and maintained. Many attended picnics and camps on a yearly basis for all intercountry adoptees no matter what country they had come from. These were organised by the intercountry adoption parent support groups and provided ongoing contact for the adoptees, especially for those who lived in regional locations. It also allowed a few adoptees from the orphanage to have on-going contact and become ‘real close friends from a long time ago’ with continued friendships into adulthood. Mixing with other adoptees provided a sense of security knowing that other people lived in similar families ‘I got to hang out with some of the other kids, just like me, so that was pretty good’. Confidence levels were boosted when interacting with other adoptees. ‘It definitely helps and it made you feel more confident’. The following comments typified how many of the participants felt
I think this was important because all the kids when I was young we all had fun, we mixed with each other. We probably don’t see each other now, now we are all adults. But I think it was a good idea to keep everyone in touch with all the families and the kids, which we did in the past.

A few did not have the opportunity to mix with other adoptees, and several participants were disappointed that friendships had not been maintained with other Thai adoptees from the orphanage.

Health Issues

On arrival to Australia, several of the adoptees had obvious physical issues with missing or damaged body parts, and hearing loss was experienced by a few. While some were able to ameliorate these, a few were teased about their abnormalities, especially in the school settings. Further discussion and identifying the actual health problems would enable those particular participants to be identified within adoption circles.

Adolescence

For many, adolescence was a time to enjoy friends and activities. Several found socialising easy ‘when I was young until now I was always a very sociable person’ and quite a few recalled that it was the best time of their lives and reiterated ‘the best thing about my adolescent years was my friends’ and ‘friendship is really important for me’.

Support received from loyal friends assisted with choosing appropriate activities during the adolescent years ‘if I didn’t have friends I think I would have been off the rails’. Others struggled with their identity, and lack of social
skills made it difficult to choose appropriate friends. Associating with the wrong crowd fuelled rebellious behaviour and petty criminal activity, and ‘in trouble with the law’ was mentioned on several occasions. Difficulty forming true friendships was experienced by those who lacked social skills due to earlier life experiences of leaving the orphanage and experiencing unresolved grief and loss issues in Australia, and this pattern of behaviour continued into adulthood as one commented on friends.

They were important but I didn’t really have too many, because as I didn’t like to be attached to people. I don’t like to attach myself to people. That is just the way I am, I like to sort of keep a distance, and I don’t like to get too close.

The most important things that assisted the adoptee

Love, support, guidance, encouragement, and understanding from parents and siblings and having ‘people around me that understand’ were identified as being the most important things that assisted the majority of the adoptees during their lives especially during the adolescent years and one added.

The most important thing when you’re growing up, I believe, is that family support is a big deal in how you’re going to feel. Just to have that support it makes it easy for you to go through what you’re going through.

Individual comments varied when referring to the love and support received from families. One participant summed it up by stating ‘you can’t put a value on that’. Others compared earlier days of living without a family to living in a
family and added ‘family is a big thing, a massive thing’. Receiving guidance and support through difficult times was recognised by several and typical comments were ‘they guided me through, out of trouble’, ‘actually what helped me most was the support from my mum and dad, that’s very important to me. Otherwise I would me no-where, I’d be a crazy little kid’. Respectful behaviour was encouraged by some parents and ‘to grow up to be a good person’ was reiterated. Others found they could depend on their parents’ advice and stated ‘they always give me advice’, while other parents encouraged them to be aware of what they are doing when making important decisions and the advice received was to ‘think wisely when you make a decision’.

Love, acceptance and support shown by extended families were also important and appreciated by many and as one participant stated.

It’s not just immediate family; its extended family as well that’s really important. I just feel that from day one I felt really accepted. They made me feel loved, and they didn’t look at me as a different person or make me feel alienated, they made me feel like I was a member of their family.

Visiting grandparents and other relatives occurred on a regular basis for most, with the celebration of Christmas, Easter and birthdays being special times.

A few encountered difficulties and the adolescent years brought challenges for the adoptees and their families. For some it was a period of family conflict and rebellious behaviour. Many experiences were typical of teenage
behaviour when clashes occurred between parents and adoptees, despite them talking about identity issues. In some cases, family relationships were strained to a point where adoptees rebelled against their parents’ guidance and advice, which resulted in the adoptees leaving home and being presented with unexpected and further challenging experiences for the individuals, as one reiterates ‘I currently blame myself because I did rebel, I wasn’t kicked out it was more like I pushed them away’.

High School

High school brought about a change of schools and this meant integrating into to a new school community and making new friends. Being good at a particular subject at school assisted the adoptees with confidence building, it helped with socialisation, and it promoted a greater acceptance within the school community. Many demonstrated a natural ability in art and sport, including athletics, so found they were readily accepted into their school communities.

High school was another big step for me again, and I found it much easier because I’d picked up my language. My English was getting better, my communication was getting better and I was getting along with more friends because of my speech, and I wasn’t left out of the group. I loved playing sport of course; I played most sports in high school that involved, football which is Aussie rules, soccer, basketball, and then tennis. It helped me mix.

Although few participants managed academic subjects, most struggled with these due to earlier language development and lack of schooling. Their
physical disabilities and hearing loss, at times, impacted on their learning. Difficulties were encountered by a few with socialisation and forming new friendships, which resulted in not having true friends and becoming a loner. School counsellors supported a few and assisted them and ‘made sure we kept on the right track’. Due to lack of schooling and poor nutrition in earlier years, some of the participants were older than their peers, but smaller for their age and ‘that was my downfall every year, I was older than every kid, even though I looked younger than some of those kids’.

These drawbacks gave the adoptees a significant disadvantage especially on school sports days when competing events were organised in age level and not year level. A few found themselves in year eight competing against years eleven and twelve and admitted ‘I didn’t know the sports very well and I got laughed at, but I didn’t mind that so much’. Despite these challenges several stated that high school was the best years of their lives.

I would say high school was the best years of my life because I have so many memories of friends, and activities that I have done. We always had fun and there was always things happening.

High school provided a career pathway for several of the participants but brought challenges for others. Not many managed to study academic subjects, complete high school and attend university. Many struggled to attain education requirements and left in year eleven without completing their South Australian Certificate of Education (SACE). TAFE SA provided vocational training for several who chose a career in hospitality. Senior colleges for mature age people provided an age appropriate venue for a few
of the older adoptees who continued their education and subsequently
completed their SACE.

Racism

Lack of respect of racial features became more apparent during adolescence
and exclusion slogans of ‘go back to where you came from’, ‘don’t come here
we don’t want you’ and ‘the Asian invasion’ were often bantered in their
direction. Racism was experienced by all adoptees during their adolescent
years. The adoptees’ physical disabilities often incited more torment and
they were teased about these. Some were confronted with racist remarks
more than others and found demographics and location made a difference.

There was less racial jeering in culturally diverse communities. Several had
travelled to other countries while still at high school which gave them a
broader view and acceptance of racial diversity, but found many Australians
still displayed racist attitudes towards Asians during the mid 1990s.

At high school, racism was experienced by most and they were teased
and bullied about being Asian. A few secretly wished they could be similar to
the main stream school population and were envious of them. Others were
confused by the names they were called when referring to the Thai features,
which were not understood and confidence levels dropped. While some
learnt to ignore racial bullying, others found that learning to have self-
confidence assisted in preventing racial attacks. As one participant
commented:

You always get hassled by other students. It's all about someone
being better than you. There is still racism out there, always will be.
It depends on who you hang around with. It's all about the group.
You will get some people who still have a bad attitude towards other races. It's all about confidence I reckon; if you are confident with them they will leave you alone. That's what I see, that's what I think. If you’re not confident the guys will stir you up and that is when it gets messy.

**Adulthood – a reflection on their lives**

The final section, ‘Adulthood’, explores the participants’ experiences regarding such things as employment, racism, identity, returning to Thailand, intercountry adoption and how they assessed their own lives. The findings show that as adults they were able to discuss their current lives in Australia which, for some, included returning to Thailand, and visiting the orphanage. It was also a time for reflection on life events and opportunities.

**Employment**

The majority had been in regular employment since leaving school, and very few had had problems securing meaningful employment despite their earlier life experiences and lack of education. All adoptees had each worked in a variety of positions including factory work, labouring jobs, supermarkets, fast-food outlets, restaurants and as shop assistants. Many were now employed in the hospitality field, sporting clubs, a few worked in the health arena, some in the mining industry, in warehouses and other areas. Although, very few had studied at university and held professional positions, many had studied vocational courses at TAFE SA and were pleased with their achievements and were gainfully employed through this.
Racism

In adulthood, the adoptees’ Thai appearance was a challenge at times and different reactions were experienced. Some stated ‘Because I physically look Asian they assume that I have all the Asian features. Until I open my mouth, and everyone is like ‘oh my God you are a bloody Aussie’. Often people thought the adoptees were unable to speak English and were surprised when they discovered they could. ‘When the people meet me they are actually quite surprised at the English I do speak’.

Most of the participants experienced racism as adults, including the workplace and mixing socially. At times they were made to feel inferior in the workplace and were looked down upon and called names as one claimed ‘you still get racism at work, you still get that. They don’t have to be calling me a dust bag or think of me as nothing’.

Racial stereotypes could be both positive and negative. Some had experienced work where Asians were respected ‘because they know Asian people work better than Aussie people’. On the other hand, some participants have been subjected to offensive comments and innuendos regarding the Thai sex industry.

Several of the participants had lived overseas and experienced a greater acceptance of cultural diversity. Many showed insight into current racial attitudes in Australia. Adelaide was considered to be less accepting of cultural difference, as one participant added ‘they really don’t know the world yet and they tend to stick to their own clan, because of over the years apparently Asians in Adelaide had a bad reputation’. Racial boundaries of
inclusion and exclusion were less defined in cities like Sydney and London.

As one participant stated:

I think less people are being, less racist now and they more welcoming of other countries over here because we are very multicultural. Everyone you see is from another country, and you don’t know who is adopted. Like in Sydney I couldn’t believe how many Asians are there, and how many ethnics, it’s like London.

Others expressed a shift in acceptance of cultural difference in Australia during their life time but recognised it was not demonstrated by all Australians. People continued to be racist, according to some, even though Australia is more culturally diverse. The fear of job loss and negative attitudes that some Australians still hold about racial difference was identified as being a problem. ‘With all these people coming in, they are afraid they might lose their jobs. They do it very slightly and subtly, but it’s racism’.

Others felt that there was a greater acceptance of Asians now than had been experienced in the past, with location and demographics making a difference to the acceptance ‘I think the Asians are looked at as quite equal now’.

Australia’s proximity to Asia and the move away from the Euro-Western Its only recently actually one of the family members in Port Pirie were struggling for up to eight years for adoption lists, influence was discussed by one of the participants.

I guess Australia has been growing every year. There have been lots of immigrants coming each year, lots of international students coming from Asia, especially China, Korea, Japan and other places. Australia
has to accept that, because Australia is closest to Asia more than Europe or any other places so, it's good to have that diversity. When I'm walking down the street anywhere I see mixed cultures, it's good to have that culture.

**Identity**

The majority of the participants were old enough at the time of arrival to Australia to have some memories of their lives in the orphanage. Although raised in the Australian culture most had an understanding of who they were, and where they had come from. The desire to investigate their Thai background was important to many and some had already returned to Thailand.

All twelve participants had been asked at different times in their lives “where are you from?” After giving personal responses, most received very positive feedback about Thailand from those who had inquired. While many thought it significantly important to be asked, were pleased to be asked and were proud of their heritage, others disliked being asked and felt humiliated, displeased and referred to it as interrogation. Some felt uncomfortable about being asked by people whom they did not know, and felt it was rude and intrusive to be asked, as they would not ask it of others and stated

You get sick of retelling your story the whole time. People I meet for the first time I feel a bit uncomfortable, it's a bit rude, I don’t go out and ask someone where they are from. Why does it make any difference?
Many felt comfortable and were happy to tell people about living in the orphanage and their adoption to Australia, acknowledging that Thailand is part of their past. Some teased the inquirer by giving an Australian location just to confuse them. They found that the inquiry continued until the birth country was disclosed. It was suggested that ‘they could ask what’s your nationality instead of where you from, as it does get bit confusing’. It was seen by some as ‘an icebreaker’ when conversing with strangers when the inquirer displayed a genuine interest in the personal Thai history and it was common to be asked.

All the time, I really don’t mind at all, I mean I get asked nearly every day. I feel like I need a tape recorder to answer ‘where you from?’ I started a few years ago saying I’m Aussie, then they say ‘oh I know you’re an Aussie but where are you actual from?’ It’s like oh [town identified] and they’re like ‘no, no, no, where are you from?’ Oh so it’s my heritage you’re after. It’s like an ice breaker really and people are fascinated by your back ground.

A few adoptees were asked to explain their adoption history during employment interviews which they felt was irrelevant but obliged in order to get employed.

Feeling proud and gaining a boost in confidence were outcomes experienced by quite a few when people spoke positively about Thailand and often the personal stories got longer and longer once people heard about their adoption. Many were appreciative of life opportunities and were more than happy to explain their history to others. Many felt good about themselves.
when asked where they were from and wanted to impart their personal life experiences to people and added 'I feel good in the way I've been brought up, I want to tell people, because I'm lucky, I'm very lucky and I feel good'.

There were mixed responses when questioned about what meaning Thailand and the Thai culture had on the adult adoptees. Many had a desire to learn about the country, the culture, and the food. As one participant added:

'It's just my interest since I born was there, I wouldn't mind understanding my background. I'm more Aussie than Thai anyway, but I wouldn't mind understanding the history a bit and most likely the food and the environment and all of that.'

Several participants had a longing to reconnect with their past, and find any biological connections to a Thai family ‘I always thought that I sort of know who I am, but I never knew who I was, I still don’t. It's always been part of me that I don't know’. Others stated it was important ‘because it's my past, and sometimes you can’t really run away from your past so it’s very important to know the culture’.

All participants had now lived in the Australian for more than twenty years. Knowledge of Thailand and the Thai culture was not a priority for a few participants who stated that they had no interest in discovering their heritage at this particular time of their lives and one participant reiterates:

'I have never ever had any intention what so ever to learn, I know it sounds bad. I'll tell you the reason why. It is because I’m really happy. I’m really happy with my life, I’m really grateful for what I've
got and why spoil that. I think I’ve really embraced the Australian
culture, and the way of living.

Returning to Thailand

Several of the adoptees had returned to Thailand. Some who had been
several times, had chosen not to visit the orphanage and made statements
such as ‘I was having a good time, enjoying what I had, and not thinking
about the orphanage’. However, a few had journeyed back to the orphanage
to revisit the place they had left many years ago while others were planning
to return. Some participants had scant memories of the orphanage and felt
that revisiting it was something they had to do to reconnect with their past
and see where they had lived. Maturity assisted some to confront the past
and discover their roots as one adoptee stated:

This year I visited my orphanage to find my roots and information, and
to see what my orphanage looks like now and how it has changed,
which it had changed a lot since I had been there. I found that they
treat the kids over there a lot different than how they treated us back
then. I was a bit nervous at first but this year I’m old enough and I
wanted to do it. I wanted to see it, to see how things are going and I
was fine. I was just like wow, this is where I stayed’.

Those who had returned were welcomed and remembered by orphanage
staff, some of whom showed affection, although the adoptees had no
recollection of them.
Others expressed that they felt nervous and emotional while at the orphanage. For some it brought back good memories and for others it reignited unpleasant memories as one participant explained:

It was really wow, memories, emotional, very, very emotional going back to my orphanage. Definitely lots of bad parts, but good parts were definitely in there as well. But the good parts I guess were when my mum and dad came and picked me up. I’m glad I went back to see where my life was when I started at the orphanage. They were pretty happy that I came back to say hello.

Some surprised themselves by remembering where everything was at the orphanage. While there, they were able to access their orphanage records which informed them of their lives in Thailand. Many were told of being abandoned in a hospital where they continued to live for a few months. A few were placed in foster care for a short time, or alternatively moved directly to the baby orphanage, Phayathai Babies Home. Later they moved to the Rangsit Children’s Home which cared for children from four to eight years of age. The older adoptees then moved to Mahami Children’s Home. Those who had returned found the orphanage buildings to be modern and new compared to when they lived there, providing better care and conditions for the children currently living there. The children now had toys to play with, which was a noticeable improvement, as the participants explained that they did not have toys except on Christmas day when they were given one, and then the next day the toys were taken away and stored for the following year. A few made similar comments:
I looked in the orphanage and I still remembered a lot. These days they have done up the whole complex really good, it’s modern now, it’s all new. Back then when I was there we had to share everything, but now every kid has their own little bed, their own toys, cleaner water now.

They discovered that the current children attend school away from the orphanage whereas the adoptees did not leave the confines of the orphanage. ‘They go outside the orphanage to school and they have a lot of options, they can do pretty much whatever they want’. They observed that the current level of care is greatly improved to what was provided when the participants lived there. This gave a huge sense of relief to those who had had ongoing concerns and fears for the children currently living there, and they were able to discuss their relief regarding previous fears and worries they had had. Returning to the orphanage recalled the memories that had faded or had been lost over time.

For those who had not yet been, planning to visit Thailand and to return to the orphanage was on the agenda for many of the adoptees to gain knowledge about their earlier lives. Several of the participants made similar comments:

I actually want to go back to where I came from and see where I grew up. I think I would probably head back to where I was placed, the orphanage, and see where I grew up and maybe I could see my hometown. I’ve always had a craving to go back to my homeland to see what it is actually like living there.
A longing to return to explore different aspect of personal history was expressed and a few wondered if they had any biological family in Thailand with whom they could connect. Several of the participants now had partners or were married and a few had children. Discovering family history and family traits became a priority for those who now had children of their own and a few participants expressed their desires to find family:

I don’t know my real parents, so having kids I think you reflect on what your parents have and what your children have. I would love it if they had a grandma. That’s the only thing that I wish that I knew.

Having a family of their own was recognised by a few as the ‘biggest milestone’ in their lives so far. Those with children and those planning to have children wanted them to know about the Thai culture as ‘I’m sure they would ask’. They would visit Thailand with their children so the children would have a greater understanding of where their Thai parent came from and the history associated with that and the consensus was ‘I think it is important for them to know’. A few were brimming with excitement and enthusiasm at the prospect of returning to Thailand and the orphanage with children in the future. ‘I can’t wait to have children. I would tell them everything about my past, and I’d take them to Thailand and visit my orphanage’.

Intercountry Adoption

The current adoption criteria and ‘the best interest of the child’ (Intercountry Adoption Strategic Plan 2008) were not understood by very many. The majority were not aware of the current intercountry adoption practices and
were not aware of any new adoptions taking place. Delving into prospective adoptive parent’s backgrounds and obtaining indepth information was understood to be important and necessary when choosing appropriate parents for adoptees. Currently,

I think the law makes it so hard. I mean it’s important that they look into their background, their information, but it’s got to a point where it’s full on in depth. It’s taking eight years for adoption papers to get approval. It’s sad but that is just how the world is now days, because you never know who’s out there and obviously it is in the best interest of the individual adoptee, but to what extent.

The difference between adoptions in the late 1980s and early 1990s to that of current adoptions was understood by a few who were able to discuss the lengthy process and huge monetary input needed with current intercountry adoptions. ‘People who can’t have kids want to adopt but because of the adoption process, and let’s face it, the money factor of adoption these days is just horrendous. You know it puts them off’. The participants recognised that these factors either turned people off the idea or precluded them from adopting a child resulting in fewer children being adopted. Current processes were seen as long and complicated compared to the participants’ adoption era, when less paper work and less money were required, and most of the money involved was donated to the orphanage. Presently,

It’s a lot harder to adopt people, the government is making it so hard, like the criteria is a lot harder now and it just costs so much more
these days, it’s very expensive. You could say I was very cheap.

Now it’s a turn off for a lot of parents.

The general community were seen as more accepting of intercountry adoption now as a way of forming a family for childless couples or adding to families, than when the participants were adopted and that both the families and the children benefit from adoption.

I think they are more accepting now than when I was younger. I think now days it’s like, if you can’t have kids you adopt. It’s giving that child a better quality of life, than if they were back in their own country where they may not have a life.

It was recognised that the cultural shift of acceptance of difference in Australia would assist current Asian adoptees as it was felt they would be more readily accepted in the community and ‘would fit in a lot easier’ than when the participants were adopted.

The media and movie-star adoptive parenting influencing community attitudes toward current intercountry adoption were recognised by some participants who brought mixed reactions. A few thought that past ‘local’ adoption practices had tainted current attitudes towards intercountry adoption. Past practises of ‘local’ adoptions and lobbying by relinquishing mothers’ has heightened adoption awareness which portrays adoption in general, as less acceptable. The media was blamed for portraying adoption as a negative process due to past adoption practices when mothers were forced to relinquish their babies, then years later the child and mother are reunited and the reunification is televised as one participant explains:
The adoption rate has declined just because of the backlash, like the bad image, the stigma. You hear people talking about people who have been adopted and having such a terrible life, and then they go find their biological parents. So once again it’s obviously, it’s the increase of adoption awareness that has had an effect of decreasing adoption itself. I blame the media for betraying adoption this way.

The experience of most the adoptees had been quite positive and the opposite of the experiences that were being televised on ‘Find my family’.

Others held the opposite view, and believed that the media through television, women’s magazines and the newspapers has assisted with the acceptance of adoption due to the publicity of movie stars and other famous people adopting, making adoption more acceptable than it was twenty years ago. As is discussed by one participant:

I think the media and the information out there, like the radio is telling you everything. I think the media, the TV; the papers have really changed it. Like the Americans, the famous people adopting kids now. It's accepted now. I wished I could have had it in my day.

**Assessment of their Own Lives**

The participants were now at an age where they were able to reflect on their lives and make an assessment of what they, as individuals, gained strengths from. Being older in age at the time of adoption had allowed them to experience contrasting environments at an early age, from orphanage life to one in Australia.
When assessing their own lives, many saw themselves as lucky to be adopted and recognised the many opportunities in life that they had been given. Lucky, in a sense, that they were the ones who were adopted to Australia as opposed to the children who remained in the orphanage. Some thought of their lives as being very fortunate and were pleased to be accepted into a family because ‘it’s not easy to find a good family’. Another summed up the situation of luck for all of the Rangsit adoptees by stating:

I’m guessing that all of us that came from Thailand from this orphanage, we are pretty lucky and we should pretty much just be grateful and thankful for our mums and dads for adopting us. Because there are more kids out there that want to be adopted and we’re lucky ones and so far we’re doing well.

Several indicated that they would like to adopt a child from overseas to give someone the same opportunity they had been given, so that personal life experiences could be repeated and enjoyed by someone else. ‘I know when get older I want to adopt kids because it gives them a better quality of life. I want to help kids to come here to Australia. I want to do the same’.

Resilience in the face of adversity was learned at a young age in the orphanage due to the lack of trust and enduring an abusive environment in which they had lived each day. Due to this, inner strength had developed which assisted when confronting challenges later in life.

When you live in an orphanage for most of your life, you get this ability to cope with whatever it is you’re good at. Then you come to
Australia. Even though it's different you still have that ability to cope when no matter what life brings, you just keep going.

Escaping to another world using vivid imagination was a learned survival technique as one explains 'I coped with Thailand because I have a very big imagination, so I escaped to that world and that’s what I did most of the time'. Self-determination and self-reliance were strong attributes for all adoptees, both of which had been developed during the orphanage days and one recalls ‘I remember what my life used to be like, when I used to have nothing. I always tell myself to be successful, be who you want … and you have to do it yourself because no-one else is going to do it for you’.

Believing in oneself, adopting a positive attitude and self-determination developed at a young age are characteristics identified for personal accomplishments to be achieved by many of the participants who comment: ‘It doesn’t matter what happens in life, you can always come out because it’s the way you think. I believe that is what made me’; ‘I try to have my own positive goals and I never let anyone push me around’. Others had similar attitudes and reiterated ‘It's all about believing in yourself’; ‘I actually taught myself as I grew up. I always had that in me’; ‘I always act positive all the time and never give up with what I am are doing’.

A few developed a strong feeling of empathy toward underprivileged people and were sensitive to those who did not have anything. They acknowledged that their life had been fortunate and they felt the need to give to improve someone else's life and empathy was forthcoming from one participant:
When I went overseas and I saw all of these poor people I would give them some money. Just giving to someone who doesn’t have what we have is important to me because I’m very fortunate I guess, I think that’s the word.

As adults, some were able to recognise how institutional care impacted on their lives. The stories of abuse in the orphanage sometimes came up within the course of the interview. Interview questions were focussed on life in Australia so when recalling life events the focus was not directed to the orphanage days. However, a few found it necessary to talk about life in the orphanage. They needed to tell someone of the lived experiences of orphanage life, and by request, gave very detailed accounts of what it had been like living in the orphanage. Although very few participants chose to discuss this topic, the trauma had been experienced by all adoptees.

Self-assessment of, and visualising past traumatic events made a few very aware of how the abuse in the orphanage had impacted on brain development and behaviour when they were children and recollections were made. ‘Picture me when I was a young orphanage kid back then, sort of torture, all dodgy. When you are little you pick things up in your head, you pick up everything, so that would take ages’ [to forget] and that the residue from past trauma remained for many years after leaving the orphanage, and continued to be experienced through nightmares, as adults.

A few spoke of the importance of prospective adoptive parents being prepared for adopting an older child:
The most important thing for parents is to be prepared for the situation of coming to Australia as it was pretty hard for me, because they did not know the possibility of the outcome. They didn’t understand how the kid is going to react in the new country, or the side effects of coming to a new country and to an environment that was unfamiliar to them.

**Conclusion**

The findings from this chapter show that coming to Australia was huge shock for the participants when confronted with a world with a new culture, new language and a new environment, and it took time for them to make the adjustments. They had experienced the Thai culture for some years and were accustomed to the Thai culture and orphanage life. Confusion, excitement, nervousness and fear, along with grief and loss were all experienced after leaving the orphanage. Loneliness was felt by many who missed the company of the other children with whom they had shared their lives, especially those who did not having siblings. The Thai language was a recognised personal attribute possessed by the older participants on arrival to Australia and as adults many continued to grieve over the loss of the Thai language.

Integration into family life was assisted by the family understanding and meeting the needs of adoptees. Having other intercountry adoptees in the family assisted many to integrate into their already culturally diverse families. There were recognised benefits of having culturally diverse parents and extended family. Experiences were different for those who were the only
adoptee in the family and the transition was generally easier for those who had intercountry adoptee siblings. Socialising with other intercountry adoptees and their families while growing up was very beneficial as long-lasting friendships were formed and it also provided a sense of security knowing that other people lived in similar families. A few were disappointed that they had missed out on this opportunity.

Many adoptees had difficulties learning English and for some, English continues to be a struggle. Most were linked to ESL programs in schools but it was less likely for children in rural South Australia. School was a positive experience for those attending culturally diverse schools. Many struggled to complete high school, but had continued gaining skills through vocational courses provided by TAFE SA. Despite the lack of language and limited schooling, most adoptees managed to secure meaningful employment during late teens and into adulthood, experiencing many types of employment.

Consequences of poor language skills resulted in poor communication with family, and difficulty making friends at school. The adoptees found that being good at sport or other activities promoted acceptance into the wider community environments and high school communities. Participating in age-level sport day activities was seen as a disadvantage. The obvious lack of age maturity and experience for the sports events brought negative attention to the adoptee which incited ridicule and teasing causing a decrease in self-esteem. Having experienced inclusion within their classroom, they felt excluded from their regular class mates through this ‘age event’ selection process.
Love, support, guidance, encouragement, and understanding from parents, siblings and extended families were identified as being the most important things that assisted the majority of the adoptees during their lives especially during the adolescent years. Support received from friends was also very important especially during adolescence. A few struggled with social skills which impinged on the ability to choose appropriate friends, resulting in associating with the wrong crowd which fuelled rebellious behaviour and petty criminal activity. In some cases, family relationship breakdown resulted in the adoptee leaving home and being presented with further unexpected challenges.

Racial difference was less prominent during primary school as many attended culturally diverse schools and they found that living in culturally diverse areas was an advantage. All participants experienced racism at high school but developed skills to defend themselves against racial taunts. It was more prevalent during adolescence when exclusion slogans were directed at the participants. A few were teased about their physical abnormalities, especially in the school settings. For some racism continued into the workplace where degrading comments were made, and some participants were indirectly blamed for the threat to job losses due to refugees coming to Australia. Others experienced respect of racial difference within their work environments. As adults, racial stereotyping and sexism was experienced by a few. It was recognised that a cultural shift of acceptance of difference in Australia had occurred during their life time.
Identity was not a major issue for the adoptees even though their lived experience was one of straddling cultures. Most had been asked ‘where are you from’ and were pleased to be asked and were proud of their heritage, although a few thought of it as interrogation. Many were happy to tell people their life history as they were happy with their lives. Several had a longing to connect with Thailand and to find a biological connection to find out who they were. Others wanted to learn about the country, the culture and the food. A few had no interest in their heritage at this particular time of their lives.

A few had returned to Thailand while growing up and several had returned as adults and had visited the orphanage and found improvements had been made to the orphanage and to the level of care. This brought a huge sense of relief to the adoptees as they had been worrying about the current children living there. Most experienced fear and nervousness while visiting but were glad they had returned to discover their roots. The orphanage staff remembered the participants but they could not remember them. Those who had not yet been to Thailand, and had plans to return in the near future, recognised it was part of their history and it was important to visit Thailand. Those with children or those planning to have children intended to take their children to Thailand to show them where they had lived.

The current adoption criteria and ‘the best interest of the child’ were understood by very few. Most were unaware of current adoption practices and did not know of any new adoptions occurring. Complicated adoption practices, long waiting times and huge expenses were seen as preventing or precluding people from adopting children from overseas. People were seen
as more accepting of intercountry adoption now and that the adoptee would more readily integrate into the community compared to when the participants arrived. The media were blamed for portraying adoption in a negative light by telecasting reunification between relinquishing mothers and their children.

When assessing their own lives they all thought of themselves as being lucky to be adopted compared to the children who remained in the orphanage. Some regarded themselves as fortunate to be accepted into a family. Several indicated that they would like to adopt a child from overseas to give someone the same opportunity they had been given. As adults, some were able to recognise how institutional care impacted on their lives. A few found it necessary to talk about life in the orphanage and the abuse that had been inflicted on the children’s lives. They needed to tell someone of their lived experiences. Although very few participants chose to discuss the topic, the trauma had been experienced by all adoptees. Others recognised the importance of preparing the adoptive parents prior to adopting and older child.

Many professed that believing in one-self, having inner-strength, always acting in a positive manner and never giving up assisted personal achievements. Goal setting was high on the personal agendas of many of them. Some recognised how institutional care had impacted on their lives and that nightmares continued to be experienced as adults. The following chapter involves a more in-depth discussion of the research findings.
CHAPTER 5

Discussion

By focussing on the lived experiences and perspectives of adult intercountry adoptees from Thailand, now living in Australia, this study brings to the fore ideas that challenge the conventional thinking that older institutionalised children suffer lifetime legacies from earlier privations.

*Strengths Gained from Institutional Life*

This study has illustrated that intercountry adoptions is multifaceted and encompasses a whole range of contributing factors. Elements of orphanage life have been found in this study that to date have only been acknowledged sparingly in previous literature. It has been demonstrated that many of the adoptees experienced grief after leaving the orphanage, initiated through the losses of their familiar surroundings, the companionship of other children with whom they had shared their lives, of the daily routines, and the predictability that orphanage life provides. Although their early lives had been limited to the confines of the orphanage and to the unpleasant aspects of that, the adoptees had unknowingly connected to it. Only when they arrived in Australia and were confronted with a world that was unfamiliar to them, did they realise their losses (Crisp 2010). Through this, the majority experienced anxiety, fear, confusion and loneliness, especially by those who did not have intercountry adoptive siblings in the family and lacked the comfort which this provided.
Critiques of twentieth century orphanages in Australia and those operating in poorer countries have often focussed on cultures of abuse, neglect and deprivation (Atkinson 2002; Coldrey 1993; Edwards & Read 1989; Knight 1998; Mullighan Inquiry 2008; Murray 2008; NISATSIC 1997; O’Beirne 2005; Szablicki 2007; Taylor 1976; van den Berg 1994). Similar criticisms could be applied to the Rangsit Children’s Home during the period study participants were resident there. Several of the participants had lived up to nine years in this environment and it was during this period that resilience, including self-confidence and self-determination were developed to assist their survival. They recalled how orphanage life had been abusive and a struggle, and that they had taught themselves to cope. Many saw personal achievement as a goal that was always striven for when they remembered what life used to be like in the orphanage, ‘when I had nothing’. Many spoke of goal-setting for personal success and ‘never giving up’ which demonstrated self-confidence, self-reliance, personal strength and self-determination which all attributed to the success of their lives in Australia. Frequently self-determination developed an essence of maturity far beyond their years. As such, coming to Australia was seen as ‘a second chance’ and from the onset of their arrival they were determined to make the most of that opportunity as one stated ‘all I wanted was a family to be loved, and that is all I wanted in the world, so for me to be adopted, it’s like this a great second opportunity and when it came I took it by the throat’. For many of them the negative effects of orphanage life had been discarded and they moved to a life of opportunity (Katz 1997; MacLean 2003; Rutter 2012).
It has been found that resilience is a response to adversity; this response causes a strengthening effect or ‘steeling’ effect on the mind which develops from periods of exposure to stress (Rutter 2012). Each time adversity is confronted, an increase in resistance is formed, or a greater ‘steeling’ effect occurs and through this the mental attitude strengthens (Rutter 2012). Self-determination, self-reflection, and self-efficacy are all responses to resilience (Rutter 2012). ‘Turning points effects’ also contribute to the individual’s resilience (Rutter 2012) demonstrated by the benefits gained by leaving a bad situation and going to a new one, as did the adoptees when they left Thailand and came to Australia. From a critical perspective it is the social structures that contribute to improving resilience of individuals. In Australia, the families, extended families, communities and friendships all contributed to the adoptees’ resilience and reversing the effects of trauma (Katz 1997; Rutter 2012). As several participants had similar responses:

Each individual member of my family plays their own unique part towards my life...the second thing had been my friends and I really had a great bunch of friends. Also, we used to go every year where all the adopted kids from our region were, and would go there to be amongst other adopted kids.

Spending lengthy periods in institutional care has a powerful impact on every fundamental aspect of children’s development (MacLean 2003). While noting that initial impressions can be incorrect, there was no manifest evidence of participants presenting with significant psychological problems during the research interviews. This may reflect a high degree of resilience among the
research interviewees. Resilience is recognised as being the main contributing factor when adoptees make great recovery from adverse effects of institutionalisation (van IJzendoorn & Juffer 2005). This is not surprising given that personal strengths, resilience and turning points were the major themes to emerge from many of the twenty-seven adoptees interviewed in *The Colour of Difference* (Armstrong & Slaytor 2001).

**Factors that Assisted Inclusion**

The adoptees identified that the most important things that assisted them was the love, care, support, encouragement and understanding provided by the adoptive families and their extended families. The families played a major part in influencing the success of the adoptees’ life-courses. Studies have suggested that adoptive parents tend to have a greater commitment to parenting, have higher expectations of parenting outcomes and are more likely to seek support to deal with identified problems than those who parent biological children (Alessia & Roufeil 2008; Fick & McMahon 2009; Gunnar, van Dulmen & the International Adoption Project Team 2007).

Having other intercountry adoptees in the families provided several benefits to the participants. Many of the participants’ adoptive parents had a greater understanding of intercountry adoptions through previous adoption experiences, and were found to be better prepared to meet the needs of the older adoptee ‘I believe that family support is a big deal in how you are going to feel, just to have that support it makes it easy for you to go through what you are going through’ and ‘family is a big thing, a massive thing’, ‘They already previously knew what was going to happen from my siblings’
adoptions. So the transition was quite easy for me’. Having diversity within
the families enabled the experience of immediate inclusion ‘they had other
kids like me, they had experience with kids and I didn’t feel alone anymore’.
Socialising with other intercountry adoptive families on a regular basis and
the support that this provided was seen as being beneficial to most adoptees
which were not dissimilar in context to that of Fick & McMahon (2009).
These were identified by the adoptees as major contributors to their
inclusion, comfort levels, feelings of acceptance, self-efficacy and success in
adjusting to life in Australia. What became clear is that the success of the
adoptions is somewhat dependent on the post-institutional environment
which is similar to previous findings by MacLean (2003).

**The Impact of Institutional Life**

Living in an institutional setting for many years meant that the adoptees had
missed out on stimulating home environments. Lack of language
development and lack of schooling in early years are common factors of
institutionalised children, and many experience lower academic outcomes,
struggle with cognitive functioning and present with challenging behaviour
(Burns & Burns 2007). These may be attributed to the amount of time spent
in the orphanage, having to learn another language, or both of these factors
(Meese 2005). Having very limited conversations or meaningful contact with
adults or older children whose language skills are more developed contribute
to poor language development in the institutional setting (MacLean 2003;
Meese 2005; van IJzendoorn & Juffer 2005). It is highly likely that such
conditions were prevalent at the Rangsit Children’s Home, as many of the
participants could not recall ever speaking Thai ‘I don’t actually remember it, I
probably never spoke, because I actually don't remember speaking Thai'.
Not having grasped the use of the first language makes it harder to learn a
second language (Meese 2005). This was probably so for many of the
adoptees.

Other studies show that institutionalised children who were adopted at an
older age had lower IQ scores compared to those who were adopted at a
younger age and had not been institutionalised (van IJzendoorn & Juffer
2005). For the Thai adoptees, schooling in Thailand had been very limited
and cognitive stimulation had been lacking. The older participants stated that
they only spent a couple of hours a day in school and much of that time was
spent colouring pictures. Many had difficulties learning English and most
continued to have limited English language proficiency as adults. Studies
have suggested that when the child moves to another country the first
language dissipates from the memory, enabling the second language to
begin (Meese 2005). The Thai language had been important to several of
the older adoptees who claimed that they had been fluent in the Thai
language and could read Thai prior to their arrival in Australia, but over the
years the Thai language skills had lapsed. As adults, they all wished that
their language had been retained, as it had been important to them.

Comprehending the English language becomes more difficult as the adoptee
advances from one grade to the next (Meese 2005). Many of the participants
struggled at high school and many did not complete the final year of
secondary schooling. Although lack of early language development, and
schooling had impinged on the adoptees' language fluency and
comprehension, the majority of participants had overcome many of their earlier adversity and developmental delays and had been in regular employment since leaving school. Several had attended vocational courses at TAFE South Australia colleges, were pleased with their achievements and were gainfully employed through this.

**Experience of Racism, Exclusion and Inclusion**

Racism is experienced through derogative uses of language and actions against a person with the aim of precluding or excluding those belonging to a minority group. It is done through the exertion of power over the minority by the mainstream majority, whose ideology espouses approval of dominance over inferior culturally diverse minorities (Bhabha 2001; Thompson 2006). Thus, the adoptees' inclusion and exclusion positioning were set at various levels within individual and community thinking. Where communities lacked cultural diversity, racism was experienced. As Fredrickson (1999) posits ‘A racist society functions like a private club, in which membership conceives itself in a certain way and excludes those who do not fit in’ (Fredrickson 1999, p. 335).

The adoptees were very aware of racial difference on their arrival to Australia. As Hall (1992) had found previously, their obvious Thai features distinguished them as a minority group living within multi-cultural Australia. Many experienced immediate inclusion and connectedness within their families especially those with other intercountry adoptees already living in the family or where families were culturally diverse, and an immediate comfort
level was experienced which assisted with integration into their families which was almost the same as Armstrong's (2001) findings.

Mixing with children with similar cultural diversity assists with inclusion, belonging and connectedness within communities (Crisp 2010). Inclusion into the primary school community was felt by those who attended the culturally diverse language school in Adelaide, which was designed for new overseas arrivals and intercountry adoptees, as there were children who were similar to them and this gave them a sense of inclusion and belonging. Lack of respect of their Thai features increased for all adoptees once they spent more time socialising beyond their family home, especially during their adolescence, when they became more interactive in their communities. During their adolescence their rights to citizenship were challenged when several disenfranchising slogans ‘go back to where you come from’ and we don’t want you’, and ‘the Asian invasion’ were directed at them which were also experienced by the participants in the Colour of Difference (Armstrong and Slaytor 2001). Displaying self-confidence assisted in deflecting racial teasing.

As adults, racism was experienced in the workplace and while socialising and were made to feel inferior through the derogative language directed at them, thus confirming that inequalities and racist attitudes still continue today which is supported by Crisp (2010), Gray (2007) and Williams (2003).

Racism continued to be experienced throughout their lives and oscillated from subtle forms of exposure to extreme racist taunts, such as ‘this kid was saying something about, you’re a nip. I said what’s a nip? Then they do the
eye thing’, dependant on situations, locations and demographics. As noted by (Crisp 2010) those residing in areas with a higher population of Asians experienced a greater sense of inclusion. Overall, participants felt that there was a greater acceptance of Asians now than had been experienced in the past, with the change to Australia’s demographics making a difference.

Asia was unknown to most Australians until after World War Two, and Asians were regarded as inferior (Rizvi 1996). Orientalism was defined by the West as a derogatory form of racism attached to Asians, and there was a direct association between the Orient and sex which inferred that the East was in servitude to the West for sexual exploitations (Said 1991). Cultural prejudice in the form of racial stereotyping and sexism regarding the Thai sex industry was directed at a few of the adoptees, which they were deeply offended by.

**Hybridity of Identity**

As previously mentioned the participants were adopted as older children and knew where they had come from. For most, their memories served them well and they could recall much of their pasts. The adoptees knew they were Thai unlike the Vietnamese adoptees researched by Williams (2003) who were faced with identity crises due to being adopted at a younger age, when the assimilation ideology dominated, and disconnections from Vietnam had occurred due to the factions of war (Williams 2003). Other studies espouse that the only way that adoptees can find out their true identity is to connect with their birth mothers. This claim is notably with females, but this is not universal thinking amongst all adoptees (Armstrong 2001; Juffer & Tieman 2009; Patton 2000). The view to finding any biological connections,
especially mothers, in Thailand presented as important to a few of the participants to claim past unknown identities, especially for those who now have children. The tendency to search for birth parents is prompted when disconnection occurs between adoptees and their families and comes with the expectation that the birth parents will fill the emotional void experienced by the adoptees (Tieman, van der Ende & Verhulst 2008).

Research on identity found those who had been adopted at an earlier time thought it was unimportant to connect with their countries and many adoptees had no desire to return to their countries of birth (Gray 2007; Williams 2003).

The importance of knowing Thailand brought mixed responses, some accepted that Thailand was part of their past which could not be dismissed or forgotten, while others were less interested and happy in Australia and felt that they had embraced the Australian culture. Several of the adoptees had returned to Thailand as adults and had journeyed back to the orphanage to connect with their pasts and discover their roots.

Other studies showed that many other intercountry adoptees who were adopted at a younger age were confronted with identity issues when growing up, and did not want to look different to that of their adoptive parents and received negative comments regarding their racial appearance (Harter 1999; Juffer & Tieman 2009). A few adoptees wished they could look similar to their peers at high schools that lacked cultural diversity. Ang (2001) discusses the value of choice in self-identification; she manages her obvious Chinese features by choosing to identify as Chinese or not, depending on her
social endeavours at the time, and she explains ‘if I am inescapably Chinese by descent, I am only sometimes Chinese by consent’ Ang (2001, p. 36) [italics in original text]. The participants’ Asian features were at times a personal challenge. Because they physically looked Asian people assumed that they lived in an Asian family, and were quite surprised how well they spoke English.

With the change to Australia’s demographics and to the politics of the ‘Asianisation’ of Australia, it is envisaged that the economic and political stance of Australia should be directed towards Asia, being closer in proximity, than other countries (Ang 2000). A few of the participants discussed the changing of the once imperialistic ideals to a new ideological formation that includes Asians in Australia’s way of life.

The Politics of Intercountry Adoption

All of the adoptees in this study were pro adoption. The media was blamed for portraying adoption in a negative context via the television program ‘Find my family’ (Find My Family 2008; Cuthbert & Spark 2009a) when their personal experiences of adoption have been positive. Against this, a few participants felt that intercountry adoption had been normalised and legitimated through the movie stars in the United States adopting children from overseas. Many of the participants viewed the current adoption approval system as being over-thorough in waiting time and paperwork, and fees were too high. Several of the participants had a very clear understanding of the child welfare theory and ‘the best interest of the child’
but claimed the process was more complicated than was required, compared to their own adoptions.

The outcomes of the State inquiries previously mentioned, have contributed to a negative ideology being developed that works against intercountry adoption (Gehrmann 2005; Rosenwald & Carroll 2004). There are claims that all children from overseas countries become available for adoption under similar circumstances to that of forced adoptions practices (Gehrmann 2005; Cuthbert & Spark 2009a; 2009b), choosing to ignore such circumstances as HIV/AIDS, poverty, wars and droughts which cause children to become parentless. In Ethiopia alone, orphans through HIV/AIDS were expected to increase to 1.8 million during 2010 (Peterson 2011).

*Caring for Other People’s Children in Australia*

Caring for other people’s children has become a contentious and highly debated topic during the past twenty years in Australia (Cuthbert & Quartly 2012; Fronek & Tilse 2010; Murphy, Pinto & Cuthbert 2010; Quartly 2012; Robinson 2010; Rosenwald & Carroll 2004; Wardle 2004).

Voices have been heard from the ‘stolen generation’ of Aboriginals removed from their families without consent during most of the twentieth century up until the 1970s, from British child migrants who were sent to Australia from the 1930s up until the 1960s also without parental consent, and from those affected by ‘forced adoptions’ in Australia from the 1950s – 1970s, many of whom did not give legal consent to the adoption of their children. Each of these groups entered the political platform which initiated Governmental inquiries into the lives of those who were affected by Government policies
and societal beliefs of the times, namely *The National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families (NISATIC) - The Bringing Them Home Report 1997*; and the *Mullighan Inquiry, Children in State Care Commission of Inquiry 2008* which included child migrants, with several other inquiries taking place in other States. These reports found that many people who lived in institutions during the twentieth century in Australia suffered abuse and privation, leaving thousands of lives lacking in love, affection, trust, attachment and bonding (Atkinson 2002; Edwards & Read 1989; Knight 1998; NISATSIC 1997; O'Beirne 2005; Szablicki 2007).

Many personal reports given to the Government inquiries are similar to Szablicki (2007) who was institutionalised in Australia. He considered that he had no normality to his development as a child and from the abuse he received. Like many others, he developed resilience and inner-strength which assisted with his survival. It was discovered that institutional care and abuse of children were common threads woven through the hundreds of submissions given to the many inquiries of children who were institutionalised during the 20th century in Australia (Mullighan Inquiry 2008; National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Children 1997).

*British Child Migrants, a Comparison*

The deprivation and suffering endured by the British child migrants has also heightened society’s awareness of the children who left Britain to live thousands of kilometres from their birth parents and their birth country. These past detrimental practices have placed those who care for non-
biological children, with intercountry adoptive parents being the most obvious, in a position of public scrutiny and suspicion regarding caring for other people’s children. The only commonality in this scenario is the distance to birth parents, if alive, and birth countries (Gehrmann 2005).

Katz (1997) claims that removing the child from the adverse conditions will promote normal development in the child. The Thai participants in this study left the orphanage at a younger age than those British child migrants who lived in Australian institutions, and this enabled them to experience a different life beyond the orphanage in supportive, family environments with opportunities to develop their personalities, develop friendships, enjoy life, receive education, and further their skills. Adoption to Australia has been a positive experience for the majority of the Thai adoptees, unlike the child migrants who were promised oranges and sunshine and had expectations of coming to a better place only to live a life in which they were enslaved in appalling conditions for the rest of their childhoods (Lawrence 2011).

Certainly some issues that the Thai adoptees encountered were not dissimilar to the child migrants. Both groups consisted of older children who spent some of their lives in institutions and identity was a problem for both. The adoptees had Thai names and their records sent to Australia prior to their adoptions, confirming the names of their birth parents but they had had no connection with them in Thailand; and they were confronted with two cultures.

Many of the child migrants felt that they had lost their identity when they were issued numbers on arrival to Australia and were known by these until they left
the institution. Others had their names changed and in many cases were told that their parents were dead. Sibling groups were often separated. Unfortunately, many of the records of the child migrants were destroyed or incomplete. This left them without any identification, and in many cases, a record of their existence (Murray 2008). They were disenfranchised, as Australian citizenship was not automatically granted even though they had come to Australia as children and this was part of their identity denied them. Many had served in the armed forces for Australia but when it came to claiming social security benefits, lack of immigration documentation challenged their legal entry to Australia (Murray 2008).

Unlike Australia’s institutional record keeping of child migrants, the Thai Government has official documentation on each participant who informs them of their Thai name, their birth parents, where they were born, and their life journey within the Thai Child Welfare system. For the adoptee, access to personal files is available on return to Thailand and visiting the orphanage is supported by the Friends For All Children Adoption Agency in Bangkok. Australian citizenship was automatically decreed after their adoption Court proceedings, and they are able to access their Australian adoption information from the Adoption and Family Information Service in Adelaide.

Both the Thai adoptees and the child migrants came from institutional care in their respective countries, but the Thais were adopted into families where they experienced inclusion and connectedness, and it was suggested to me that they were given opportunities to develop further, enabling them to disconnect from the orphanage environment. Unfortunately, many of the
child migrants continued living in institutions most of which were very harsh environments and were lacking in love, care and education.

Following public scrutiny and discussions of past care of children entrusted to the State, Restoration Funds were set-up for all who had lived in Australian institutions to enable those affected to reconnect with their families, and for health and educational expenses (Murray et al. 2009; Senate Committee Report 2004). Similarly, reparation from the Thai Government may be appropriate for the participants due to the poor care and lack of education in the orphanage, which has left an ongoing legacy of low educational standards and of poor language proficiency. This has inhibited the participants’ employment potentials and earning capacities. Access to higher education would have provided the adoptees with opportunities of greater advancement in the employment sector enabling better life outcomes for themselves and their children.

*The Continuation of Intercountry Adoption*

Intercountry adoptions have been a better option for children who have suffered deprivations and abuses, and have been known to regain normality and prosper once placed in family environments (Rosenwald & Carroll 2004; Wardle 2004). This study has demonstrated that intercountry adoption has been beneficial, and the participants in this study believed it was a better option than remaining in a Thai orphanage. Adoption had enabled them many opportunities which would not been available to them had they remained in Thailand (Gehrmann 2005; MacLean 2003). Although a few had continued to struggle with life, they all had presented with confidence during
the interviews, and they had articulated their lives with an inner sense of
worth and an outer sense of achievement. Their resilience and self-
determination, combined with family support had enabled them to make the
most of many opportunities presented to them.

Intercountry adoption continues throughout the world with numbers
fluctuating depending on the sending and receiving countries at any
particular time (Selman 2009; Selman 2008; Selman 2001). Intercountry
adoption will come to an end when children throughout the world receive
adequate care and have their basic needs met in the form of food, clothing,
shelter, education and stimulation, and when it is possible for them to remain
with their birth parents in their birth countries and enjoy good health
(Rosenwald & Carroll 2004; Triseliotis 1993).

The numbers of children adopted internationally in 2007 still exceeded the
numbers adopted in 1998 (Selman 2009), indicating that intercountry
adoption is a choice people continue to make in family formation into the
twenty first century (Young 2009). For thousands of families, intercountry
adoption has been a long and rewarding experience for all involved including
extended families and their friends (Rosenwald & Carroll 2004).

Intercountry adoptions continue to be debated worldwide, especially
regarding countries that have reformed adoption policies recently such as
Russia, China and Guatemala which now limit the numbers of intercountry
adoptions occurring. Russia has had several intercountry adoption scandals,
and children with ‘special needs’ are the only ones available for intercountry
adoption in China. China has prevented single parents and those in same
sex relationships from adopting (Smith Rotabi & Footen Bromfield 2012). In
Guatemala a moratorium has been placed on intercountry adoption due to
the corruptive practices associated to adoptions, including the sale of
children and payments going to the birth mothers (McCreery Bunkers, Groza
& Lauer 2009).

When discussing the changes in adoption practice in Australia, Cuthbert and
Spark (2009a) put forward the idea of reintroducing local adoption as an
acceptable way to forming families, by reframing the context of ‘special
needs’ adoptions to meet the needs of local children who are in the State
care system and live with foster parents. As intercountry adoption declines
due to the limited numbers of children available from overseas, it is
anticipated that people will adopt local children. This may benefit many
Australia children who would otherwise remain in foster care. This change to
adoption practices is recognised by Cuthbert and Spark (2009b) who aptly
suggest that ‘society moves to make their own solutions’ within adoption and
parenting theories (Cuthbert & Spark 2009b, pp. 55-72).

Unfortunately, many Australian children who may become available for
adoption, but presently live with foster carers, may miss out on living with a
family as couples ‘make their own solutions’ to overcome childlessness
through global surrogacy. More people are now turning to global surrogacy
using in vitro fertilisation (IVF). Although nine countries in the world have
banned surrogacy including Australia, surrogacy has become a booming
business in India. It started in India in 2003 and by 2010 it had become a
$450 million business. The cost of treatment in India is approximately
$12,000 compared to surrogacy in the United States which is set around $80,000. After many attempts of unsuccessful personal IVF treatments, some couples are now opting for this form of reproduction as a guarantee of securing a new born child (Ross-Sheriff 2012; Smith Rotabi & Footen Bromfield 2012). In the future both local adoptions and global surrogacy may sit alongside of intercountry adoption and all be regarded as acceptable forms of family formation in Australia.

**Personal Reflections**

Earlier in this thesis I discussed my personal position as an adoptive parent of a boy from the Rangsit Children’s Home. For me, the adoption journey of parenting other people’s children during the past 28 years has been an interesting and rewarding one. Participating in adoption related social activities such as cultural dinners, picnics, camps, and informal gatherings not only provided support for adoptees and their families, but it promoted belonging, inclusion and connectedness within the realms of intercountry adoption where many lasting friendships were forged. Participating in these social activities also provided a forum at which a myriad of topics were discussed on parenting intercountry adoptees.

How my son presents today has only been partially influenced by me and my family, the rest has been influenced by his friends and the many and varied experiences encountered within the Australian culture; and his connection with Thailand. Playing Australian Rules football, along with traditions including the occasional barbeque are synonymous to the Australian culture in which he chooses to participate. The connection with Thailand is the other
‘part’ of him which beckons him, and he has returned to Thailand and to the
Rangsit Children’s Home on several occasions. He too, has utilised his
attributes of resilience, inner-strength and determination throughout his life
which assisted him to become a pleasant natured, sociable, independent,
employable adult. My initial desire to find out how the other twenty nine
adoptees from the Rangsit Children’s Home had managed their adoptions in
Australia inspired me to embark on this research project.

This study has illustrated that the notions of intercountry adoption extend
beyond my personal experiences and knowledge, and those of other
adoptive parents. They are intricately linked to the adoptees who have lived
the adoption experience and are able to speak independently about their
lives, thus providing invaluable personal accounts on adoption, unobtainable
from any other source. The adoptees’ personal life histories have
enlightened me to the fact that their resilience, strengths and determination
cannot be underestimated. Researching this cohort of Thai adoptees has
extended my understanding and knowledge base to incorporate ‘another
side’ of adoption rarely found in adoption literature.
CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

This study is the first Australian study to investigate the experiences of older children from the Rangsit Children’s Home in Thailand who were adopted by families in South Australia.

The study revealed that on-going support and understanding of older children adoptions are needed when faced with the many challenges that are associated with adopting older children, both for the adoptee and their families. Their personal narratives of their experiences have illustrated the difficulties that they were confronted with when transitioning to a new world. Their remarkable use of self-efficacy, from orphanage days through to adulthood enabled a pathway to be paved from overcoming deprivation and abuse and leading a better life in Australia.

The participants’ adoptions were instigated under the banner of humanitarian notions where families were found for the children. The quality of the post-institutional care was directly related to the adoption outcomes. A high level of support and understanding in all spheres of their lives was important, especially from their families, and this contributed to their sense of inclusion and belonging.

Limitations of this Study

There are a number of limitations which may have impacted on the research findings revealed in this thesis. First, while reflecting on their life histories as adopted Thai adults, participants’ memories were possibly slightly skewed by
their present agendas. However, ‘while any agenda or aspiration might alter
the retelling of situations or events this does not necessarily negate the value
of the data’ (Williams 2003). Distortion of memory was still valid according to
Said who argues ‘those hazy or magnified accounts still had an imaginative
or figurative value we can name and feel’ (Said 1991, p. 56).

Secondly, while minor difficulties were experienced with the level of
correspondence skills with a few of the participants during the interviews, overall,
participants answered each question and, at times, were forthcoming with
extra personal information. Although many of participants had positive
relationships with their adoptive families, others discussed how their
relationships with their adoptive families were somewhat strained. While
there seemed to be a degree of openness regarding these relationships,
participants may have placed limitations on the amount of data they divulged
to the researcher.

Thirdly, the results may be skewed due to the respondents who chose to
participate in this research project as opposed to those who chose not to
participate or did not know the research was being conducted. The research
flyer announcing the research project may not have reached all of the
adoptees, so the lack of information prohibited a response to participating.

Fourthly, as the researcher was known to several of the participants, they
may have stated what they thought I wanted to hear in an endeavour to
please me. Against this, knowing the researcher may have produced an
environment in which they felt comfortable, thus enabling the researcher to
elicit a greater amount of data. The researcher was also aware that some
were participating for their own personal reasons, as this was stated. A few of the participants were encouraged by their parents to participate, thus the data may have been distorted through the pressure placed on them by the parents and the obligation for the data to meet the parents’ expectations.

Fifthly, as this research project engaged a very small sample of participants, it also gained a limited amount of data to draw conclusions from. A much larger sample may have given a more comprehensive picture incorporating the management of adoptees' lives in Australia.

Lastly, the researcher was well connected to the intercountry adoption network. Working with a population that was very familiar to the researcher placed personal biases and limitations on the project, instigated through personal adoption experiences as ‘an insider researcher’ (Corbin Dwyer & Buckle 2009), on how the research project was presented, what questions that were asked, and how the data was interpreted, analysed and discussed.

**Recommendations for supporting Thai intercountry adoptees**

Notwithstanding the above limitations, there are a number of recommendations for supporting Thai intercountry adoptees in Australia. For a start, support services need to be provided to intercountry adoptees and their families not just in childhood, but continuing into adulthood. Many of the participants have identified on-going problems and some have pronounced needs. Access to support, specific to their individual needs, to be available, including access to appropriate counselling which would assist with addressing underlying problems from childhood abuses and address any
ongoing concerns they are now confronted with or may be confronted with in the future.

Reparation from the Thai Government may be appropriate for the participants due to the poor care and lack of education in the orphanage. Access to higher education would have provided the adoptees with opportunities of greater advancement in the employment sector enabling better life outcomes for themselves and their children. Acknowledgement of past wrongs by the Thai Government would restore their sense of worth and dignity.

‘Native Land Visits’ are organised by the Thai Government every three years involving a week’s celebration of official events, social events and visiting some of the orphanages. It brings together the Thai adoptees from all over the world. As this event is costly to attend, most of the research participants are likely to be precluded from attending. With reduced attendance fees and concessional flights to Thailand, a group visit could be arranged for all Rangsit adoptees to attend the next Native Land Visit.

Several of the participants stated that they would like to adopt a child from overseas to give a child an opportunity similar to what they had been given. As the cost of adoption is beyond most of the participants earning capacity, concessional grants should be made available, or the waiving of fees should be considered to this particular group of adoptees, provided they otherwise meet the criteria for being adoptive parents.
Recommendations for supporting intercountry adoption generally

In addition to the previous recommendations specifically for the Thai adoptees, there are several recommendations for supporting intercountry adoption generally. Fore-mostly, current intercountry adoption policies and procedures result in lengthy waiting times for Australian parents to adopt a child from overseas. The focus of the ‘best interest of the child’ has generated a complicated system demanding that many documents be completed, several compulsory educational sessions to be attended, and huge amounts of money to be paid. These policies and practices need to be addressed to make the process of adoption more streamlined (Intercountry Adoption Strategic Plan 2008). The adoption practices implemented for the adoption of the participants were less complicated, involved less money and were conducted in a shorter time frame, demonstrating that the intensity of current adoption practices not necessarily guarantees better adoption outcomes.

Immeasurable pleasure and support was gained by the adoptees in this study from having ongoing contact with other intercountry adoptees while growing up (Gray 2007; Matthews 2004; Williams 2003). Attending intercountry adoption social activities and forming friendships with other adoptive parents should be strongly advocated within adoption practices in the early stages of the adoption process, at the time adoption approval is sought (Matthews 2004). Adoptees need to be prepared for any racial taunts that they may be confronted with (Matthews 2004). This will enable the prospective adoptive parents to be exposed to the experiences of others living with difference during the waiting period. This will heighten their
awareness through observation and participation of the benefits that this experience provides to the child and to them when living ‘together-in-difference’ (Ang 2001, p. 200) eventually occurs.

Preparing the adoptee in the birth country in relation to their adoption to Australia would benefit the child with regard to their future of what it may be like living in a family situation and also what living in Australia is like as many of the participants in this study experienced mixed feelings of confusion, excitement, nervousness and fear on arrival to Australia. Returning to the birth country should be encouraged for the child to experience and develop a connection with their culture (Gray 2007). Open adoption practices would create personal connections between the adoptee, the adoptive family and the birth parents adding to the adoptees identity and sense of self (Katz 1997). The adoptees need opportunities to expand their sociability and to display talents to develop self-worth, and need a supportive neighbourhood and good peer relationships (Coleman and Hagel 2007). They need to feel good about themselves (Katz 1997). Attending cultural related festivals and events should also be encouraged both in Australia and in the birth country to promote positive cultural identity and education, not only for the adoptee, but for the adoptive family members as well (Gray 2007).

Finally, the availability of children for intercountry adoption is declining worldwide (Dickens 2009; Roby & Ife 2009; Selman 2009) which may have broader implications for children and prospective adoptive parents. Adults who desperately want to parent through the intercountry adoptive programs will be waiting longer for children from overseas due to fewer children being available. Their options will then be limited to adopting older children due to
their age increase during the waiting period, and subsequently in meeting the adult/child age difference of 40 years between the child and the older applicant which is set by the intercountry adoption principles (National Principles in Adoption 2010). Adoption of older children will then become more accepted within intercountry adoption practice. This study will contribute to the prospective adoptive parent’s knowledge base when contemplating adopting an older child.

Recommendations for future research

For intercountry adoption to remain a viable option and to keep abreast with ongoing trends and outcomes within the context of family formation in Australia, further on-going research is needed. Several areas of future research are proposed. Research involving other Thai adoptees would enable comparisons to be made regarding their adoption experiences in relation to the participants in this study. As these participants had particular needs and had many challenges to overcome, others may present with similar or different situations which would allow a noting of these to be made within the realms of Thai adoptions to Australia.

Interviewing parents of the participants would provide a more comprehensive account of what was needed to parent this particular group of older adoptees (Alessia 2008; Alessia & Roufeil 2008). What assisted the parents to manage the adoption could be elicited using a framework that incorporates similar chronological periods to those used in this project. Data gained from parents, would provide a broader scope of assessment to be made as to the
skills and abilities required to cope with the challenges presented when parenting an older institutionalised child.

Ultimately, researching these participants again when parenting their own children would add, not only to the life history dimension of this project, but would allow assessments to be made of their parenting skills and abilities considering that all of them were denied the experience of early nurturing by caring parents incorporating love, attachment and bonding. Research suggests that the experience of early privations may be trans-generational in some circumstances as Murray et al. (2009) found

\[\text{…each new generation, lacking a sense of security and parental role models, is unable to provide these vitally necessary foundations for the next generation. (Murray et al. 2009, p. 79)}\]

Missing out on parental modelling practices in the participants early years may have impacted on their ability to parent children appropriately. Against this, further research may find that adoption into families assisted in preventing the ‘cyclical’ pattern of poor parenting (Murray et al. 2009).
References


Coldrey, BM 1993, The scheme: the Christian Brothers and childcare in Western Australia, Argyle Pacific, O’Connor.

Coleman, J & Hagel, A (eds) 2007, Adolescence, risk and resilience, against the odds, John Wiley & Sons, Chichester.


Cuthbert, D & Quartly, M 2012, ”Forced adoption” in the Australian story of national regret and apology’, Australian Journal of Politics and History, School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, School of Political Science and International Studies, The University of Queensland and Blackwell Publishing Asia, pp. 82 – 96.

Cuthbert, D & Spark, C 2009a, ‘Other people’s children: informing debate on adoption in Australia’ in C Spark & D Cuthbert (eds), Other people’s


Edwards, C & Read, P (eds) 1989, The lost children, thirteen Australians taken from their Aboriginal families tell the struggle to find their natural parents, Doublebay, Moorebank.


Fahlberg, V 1988, Fitting the pieces together, British Agencies for Adoption & Fostering, London, UK.


Find My Family 2008, television program, Chanel 7, Hindmarsh.


Garbarino, J 1999, Personality and environmental correlates of attachment styles in children with ADHD and/or conduct disorder, Texas A & M University, UMI Dissertation Services, Bell & Howell Company, Michigan.


Gray, KM 2004, Diversity and difference in intercountry adoptee experiences in Australia – A PhD work in progress, presentation at Monash University, Melbourne.


Hall, A 1997, ‘A brief history of the laws, policies and practices in South Australia which led to the removal of many Aboriginal children’, We Took the Children: A Contribution to Reconciliation, Family and Community Services, South Australian Government.


Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1997, Bringing Them Home, A guide to the findings and recommendations of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies.

Humphries, B 2005, ‘From margin to centre: shifting the emphasis of social work research’ in R Adams, L Dominelli & M Payne (eds), Social work futures; crossing boundaries, transforming practice, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, pp. 279-292.

Humphries, B & Truman, C (eds) 1994, Rethinking social research: anti-discriminatory approaches in research methodology, Aldershot, Avebury, pp. 185-204.


Matthews, A 2004, *Inter-country adoption and me*, presentation at the 8th Australian Adoption Conference, 19-21 April, Adelaide.


Murphy, K, Pinto, S, & Cuthbert, D 2010, "‘These infants are future Australians”: making the nation through intercountry adoption’, *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 34, no. 2, June, pp. 141-161.


Post Adoption Support Services (PASS) 2008, What is adoption, Relationships Australia, Hindmarsh.


Richardson, T 1996, Handbook of qualitative research methods for psychology and the social sciences, BPS Books, Leicester.


Robinson, E 2010, ‘Are we creating another stolen generation’, presentation at the Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Intercountry Adoption in


Wardle, LD 2004, ‘The forest and the trees: issues in domestic and international adoption’, in Inter-country Adoption, presentation at the 8th Australian Adoption Conference, Adelaide, April.


Williams, I. 2003, *Not quite/just the same/different: the construction of identity in Vietnamese war orphans adopted by white parents*, Master of Arts by Thesis, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Technology, Sydney.


Young, A 2012, ‘Developments in intercountry adoption: From humanitarian aid to market-driven policy and beyond’, *Adoption & Fostering*, vol.36, no. 67, pp. 70-78.
THAI ADOPTEE RESEARCH PROJECT

Were you adopted from Thailand during the late 1980s and early 1990s to South Australian families?

Are you an Intercountry Adoptee who lived for some of your life in the Rangsit Children’s Home in Thailand?

If you answer yes to both of these questions, you are invited to participate in a research project called

‘From Institutional Care to Living in South Australia: Intercountry Adoption’

being conducted through Deakin University, Melbourne Campus, Burwood, Victoria.

Your participation will involve being interviewed about your experiences as an adoptee in Australia.

If you would like to participate in the research project please contact Bev Scarvelis, the research student, by

Ph: (08) 8535 6960, mob: 0417 819 392

or Email: beverly.scarvelis@health.sa.gov.au
APPENDIX 2

Interview Questions

1. Life in South Australia would have been different for you when you were first adopted; can you tell me what it was like living in a family and attending school?

2. Many families have adopted children from overseas countries; can you discuss your interaction with other adoptees and adoptive families whilst you were growing up?

3. During your adolescent years you would have attended high school; what activities did you enjoy during these years and what contributed to this, and what things had a negative impact on you during your adolescent years?

4. Australia is a country with many diverse ethnic and racial groups; in your experience, do you think your Thai background influenced people’s attitudes towards you?

5. When meeting people who you do not know, are you ever asked ‘where are you from’; how do you respond and how do you feel about being asked this?

6. Looking back on your life; can you describe the most important things that assisted you during your life as a Thai intercountry adoptee?

7. Do you feel that intercountry adoptees experiences would have changed from when you arrived in South Australia to that of current intercountry adoptees? In what way would the experiences differ and why?

8. Now that you have lived most of your life in Australia; did you ever want to learn more about your Thai culture at any stage in your life, why was this important to you? If not, why not?

9. Now that you are an adult; can you explain where your life has taken you since leaving school?
Plain Language Statement

Date: October 18, 2010

Full Project Title: From Institutional Care to Living in South Australia: Intercountry Adoption

Principal Researchers: Assoc Professor Beth Crisp, Dr Sophie Goldingay

Student Researcher: Beverly Scarvelis

This Plain Language Statement and Consent Form are 6 pages long. Please make sure you have all the pages

1) Your consent:

You are invited to take part in this research project. This Plain Language Statement contains detailed information about the research project. Its purpose is to explain to you as openly and clearly as possible all the procedures involved in this project so that you can make a fully informed decision whether you are going to participate.

Please read this Plain Language Statement carefully. Feel free to ask questions about any information in the document. You may also wish to discuss the project with a relative or friend or your local health worker. Feel free to do this.

Once you understand what the project is about and if you agree to take part in it, you will be asked to sign the Consent Form. By signing the Consent Form, you indicate that you understand the information and that you give your consent to participate in the research project.

You will be given a copy of the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to keep as a record.

2) Purpose and Background:

The purpose of this project is to examine how a cohort of Thai adoptees has managed their lives as intercountry adoptees that arrived in Australia during the late 1980s and early 1990s.
Approximately fifty intercountry adoptions are conducted in South Australia each year but they are from various countries; the children come from various orphanages, and vary in age from babies to older children. Their circumstances vary prior to adoption from being cared for in foster homes, being cared for by immediate and extended family members or in some circumstances having lived on the streets. Approximately thirty Thai children were adopted into South Australian families during the late 1980s and early 1990s. They were aged three years or older and each had lived in the Piathai Children’s Home before being moved to the Rangsit Children’s Home, at similar ages. Each adoptee’s life experience in Australia is different. It is hoped to reflect how these particular Thai adoptees have managed their lives as an intercountry adoptee in Australia during the 1990s and into the 21st Century.

You are invited to participate in this research project because you were part of a group of Thai intercountry adoptees who were adopted into South Australian families during the period of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and you lived some of your life in Rangsit Children’s Home, in Thailand. This research project is directly related to these facts and is targeting you being a Thai adoptee. It is hoped that the information obtained about your experiences as an intercountry adoptee will assist in providing recommendations to policy makers and others involved in intercountry adoption, through greater understanding of adoptees’ experiences.

This research is a student project and is being conducted for the purpose of obtaining a Master of Social Work by Research Degree.

This research is partially funded by Country Health SA, South Australian Government and Deakin University.

3) Procedures:

Participation in this project will involve being interviewed for approximately one hour. With your permission, the interview will be audio tape-recorded. You will be provided with a transcript of your interview to confirm the accuracy and completeness. Changes can be made at this point to any of the recorded data for accuracy.

A total of 15-20 people will participate in this project.

The questions that will be asked by the researcher are about your early childhood experiences in Australia, what your school years were like and your social experiences. The kind of questions will include asking you to discuss your adolescent years and your adult life experiences including those things that assisted you in life, and the things that were not helpful.

The research will be monitored through regular supervision sessions with my supervisors.

4) Possible benefits:

Participating in this project may give you the opportunity to reflect on your life. As an adult you may further understand your experience. By sharing your experiences, you may provide valuable insight into the understanding of intercountry adoption at the political level, where changes can be advocated
in the best interest of future intercountry adoptive children and families; at the cultural level where society norms and beliefs are shared and challenged; and also at the personal and psychological level where day to day interactions take place. Intercountry adoption continues in South Australia with approximately fifty adoptions occurring each year from various countries, including Thailand.

5) Possible risks or discomforts:

Possible discomforts that you may experience include recalling unhappy memories which may have a negative psychological impact on you. If you experience adverse reactions, counselling is offered to you by a qualified psychologist who can be contacted at Relationships Australia (SA) Inc, Post Adoption Support Services, 192 Port Rd, Hindmarsh, phone 8340 2022. If during the interview you find participation is distressing you may suspend or end your participation in the project.

6) Privacy, confidentiality and disclosure of information:

The researchers will store the data in locked filing cabinet at Deakin University for a period of 6 years from the date of publication, after which time the data will be destroyed. The data will be de-identifiable and will only be accessible to the researchers at Deakin University.

Any information obtained in connection with this project and that can identify you will remain confidential. It will only be disclosed with your permission, subject to legal requirements. If you give us your permission by signing the Consent Form, we plan to discuss the data with the principal, associate and student researchers. The results will be published at a future date.

In any publication, information will be provided in such a way that you cannot be identified. What can be offered is the use of pseudonyms to limit the identification of each participant. Ultimately, you will have a choice as to what name you use in this research project, the benefits of protecting your personal and confidential information by selecting an alternative name will be discussed with you.

Choosing a de-gendered pseudonym will hide the identification and gender of yourself, as you may be known to other participants. The data will be collated using thematic analysis to de-identify your personal data, and to prevent your individual full life history from being divulged.

7) Results of project:

You will be sent a letter outlining the research findings, at the completion of the project. You will also be informed of any publications of the research project.

8) Participation is voluntary:

Participation in any research project is voluntary. If you do not wish to take part you are not obliged to. If you decide to take part and later change your mind, you are free to withdraw from the project at any stage. If you withdraw from the project prior to the commencement of data analysis, your
participation in the research study will immediately cease and any information obtained from you will not be used.

Your decision whether to take part or not to take part, or to take part and then withdraw, will not affect your relationship with Deakin University. Before you make your decision, a member of the research team will be available to answer any questions you have about the research project. You can ask for any information you want. Sign the Consent Form only after you have had a chance to ask your questions and have received satisfactory answers.

If you decide to withdraw from this project, please notify a member of the research team or complete and return the Revocation of Consent Form attached. This notice will allow the research team to inform you if there are any health risks or special requirements linked to withdrawing.

9) **Ethical guidelines:**

This project will be carried out according to the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)* produced by the National Health and Medical Research Council of Australia. This statement has been developed to protect the interests of people who agree to participate in human research studies.

The ethics aspects of this research project have been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of Deakin University.

10) **Complaints:**

If you have any complaints about any aspect of the research, the way it is being conducted or any questions about your rights as a participant then you may contact **Secretary HEAG-H, Dean’s Office,**

**Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing and Behavioural Sciences, 221 Burwood Highway, Burwood Vic 3125,** Telephone: (03) 9251 7174, Email hmnbs-research@deakin.edu.au.

Please quote project number HEAG-H 02/2011.

11) **Further information, queries, or problems:**

If you require further information, wish to withdraw your participation or if you have any problems concerning this project (for example, any side effects), you can contact the principal researcher or the associate researchers.

The researchers responsible for this project are:

**Associate Professor, Beth Crisp, and Dr Sophie Goldingay**

**School of Health & Social Development,**

**Faculty of Health, Medicine, Nursing & Behavioural Sciences**

**Deakin University, Waterfront Campus, Geelong, Victoria, 3220**

**Contact phone numbers:** Beth (03) 5227 8430, Sophie (03) 5227 8461
DEAKIN UNIVERSITY
CONSENT FORM
TO: Participant

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Consent Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Project Title:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From Institutional Care to Living in South Australia: Intercountry Adoption

I have read, and I understand the attached Plain Language Statement.
I freely agree to participate in this project according to the conditions in the Plain Language Statement.
I have been given a copy of the Plain Language Statement and Consent Form to keep.
The researcher has agreed not to reveal my identity and personal details, including where information about this project is published, or presented in any public form.

Participant’s Name (printed)
........................................................................................................................................

Signature ..........................................................Date......

This consent form is to be returned to:

Mrs Beverly Scarvelis, Murray Bridge Soldiers Memorial Hospital,
PO Box 346, Murray Bridge SA 5352
Revocation of Consent Form

(To be used for participants who wish to withdraw from the project)

Date;

Full Project Title:

From Institutional Care to Living in South Australia: Intercountry Adoption

I hereby wish to WITHDRAW my consent to participate in the above research project and understand that such withdrawal WILL NOT jeopardise my relationship with Deakin University

Participant’s Name (printed) ………………………………………………………………

Signature ………………………………………………Date ……………………

Please mail or fax this form to:
Associate Professor Beth Crisp,
School of Health and Social Development
Deakin University, Waterfront Campus, Geelong, Victoria, 3220

Ph: (03) 5227 8430
Fax: (03) 5227 8371