

Final Project Pitch

This research project investigates how international adoption shapes attachment styles and relationship formation in adulthood. Building on course concepts, particularly attachment styles, ambiguous loss, and Relational Dialectics Theory, these frameworks collectively help explain the complex relationship patterns that emerge throughout an adoptee's life journey.

By examining the experiences of international adoptees born between 1985-2005, now navigating early adulthood, I explore the unique attachment challenges and strengths that emerge from early caregiving disruptions. This demographic is currently navigating to early adulthood, a critical period for forming intimate relationships and considering family formation. This project aims to serve both adult adoptees seeking self-understanding and professionals working with adoptive families (social workers, therapists, and adoptive parents).

As an adoptee with an anxious attachment style, this research represents both academic inquiry and personal healing. By examining how adoption experiences influence our approach to relationships, I hope to contribute meaningful insights to adoption research and practice while finding closure to questions I've carried throughout my life.

Relevant Project Definitions

1. Attachment Theory: Examines how early bonds with caregivers shape emotional development and future relationships. It identifies distinct attachment styles (secure, anxious-ambivalent, avoidant, and fearful) that develop based on early caregiving experiences and influence how individuals approach intimacy, express needs, and respond to perceived rejection in relationships throughout life (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978). When discussing these concepts with adoptees, there should be sensitivity to the potential for complex attachment histories involving multiple caregivers and transitions.

2. Ambiguous Loss: Describes situations where a loved one is physically absent but psychologically present (Type Two), or physically present but psychologically absent (Type One) (Boss, 1999). For adoptees, this concept helps explain the unique grief experienced when birth parents are physically absent but psychologically present in the adoptee's life and identity formation. When working with adoptees, acknowledging the legitimacy of this ambiguous loss is crucial, as it may not be recognized by others who haven't experienced adoption.

3. Relational Dialectics Theory: Looks at the tensions between opposing forces in relationships that require continuous negotiation rather than resolution. Key dialectical tensions include autonomy/connection, certainty/uncertainty, and openness/closedness (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). For adoptees, these tensions may be uniquely experienced due to the complex nature of adoption relationships. When having discussions with adoptees about their relationships, understanding these dialectical tensions provides a framework that validates the complexity rather than trying to find simple resolutions.

Audience Analysis

- **Who** is my audience?
 - My primary audience consists of international adult adoptees in their 20s and 30s who are seeking to understand how their adoption experiences have shaped their attachment styles and relationship patterns. This audience includes both those adopted as infants and those adopted at older ages.

- Might there also be a secondary audience? (such as parents or teachers)
 - Adoptive parents
 - Social Workers
 - Orphanages
 - Doctors/Therapists

- **What** does my audience likely already know about this topic?
 - Adult adoptees likely have lived experience with attachment challenges but may lack the theoretical framework to contextualize their experiences. Many might have noticed patterns in their relationships without understanding the connection to their adoption history.

- **How** am I hoping this audience will react to my message?
 - I want my audience to recognize that adoption is not just a happy ending, but a lifelong journey with real psychological implications. My goal is to shift the narrative from viewing adoption simply as a solution to understanding it as a complex experience that requires specialized support. For adult adoptees, I hope my research provides insight into their attachment patterns and validates their experiences. This understanding can be empowering and potentially lead to closure, healing, and more secure relationships in all aspects of their lives.

- **What** content do I need to convey?
 - My research needs to convey that while children may not consciously remember the initial separation, their bodies store this trauma physiologically, affecting stress response systems and emotional regulation capabilities throughout life.

- **What** is the format? (You might change this later.) for this writing?
 - I'll be creating a zine focused on attachment theory and the adoptee experience. This will combine academic insights with my own journey being an adoptee, using a mix of text, graphics, and data to make complex concepts accessible and engaging.

- How will the format influence the structure, organization, formality, or tone of the content?

- **Format:** The zine will be organized into multiple sections with clear headings and visual elements that guide readers through a progression from understanding attachment theory to applying healing strategies, creating a resource that is both intellectually stimulating and emotionally resonant for adult adoptees.
- **Organization:** The zine will be organized into clear sections with headings. The physical layout will use spacing, headings, and text formatting to guide readers through the content. Each section will be self-contained but contribute to a cohesive understanding of adoption and attachment.
- **Formality:** I want the zine to naturally balance academic content with a personal voice. The academic concepts I use will be presented clearly but conversationally, with citations integrated into the text in a way that maintains credibility without disrupting readability.
- **Tone:** The zine will use a thoughtful, authentic tone that balances personal vulnerability with informed analysis. The writing will be direct and honest when discussing the challenges adoptees face with attachment and compassionate when addressing the emotional aspects of adoption.

Audience Characteristics and Behavioral Factors

DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTIC	PSYCHOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTIC	RELEVANT EXPERIENCE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · SEX: ALL GENDERS · AGE: 20-39 YEARS · FAMILY MAKE UP: ADOPTIVE FAMILIES, SOME MAY HAVE CHILDREN OF THEIR OWN · GEOGRAPHY/REGION: VARIED, BUT PRIMARILY FOCUSING ON THOSE WITH ACCESS TO ADOPTION RESOURCES · EDUCATION LEVEL: VARIED · RACE/ETHNICITY: BOTH THOSE WHO SHARE RACE WITH ADOPTIVE FAMILIES AND TRANSRACIAL ADOPTEES · ECONOMIC STATUS: VARIED, CONSIDERING ADOPTION OFTEN INVOLVES SOCIOECONOMIC FACTORS · ADOPTION AGE: BOTH INFANT ADOPTEES AND THOSE ADOPTED AT OLDER AGES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · NEEDS/CONCERNS: UNDERSTANDING RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS, PROCESSING IDENTITY QUESTIONS, ADDRESSING ATTACHMENT CHALLENGES · HOPES/ASPIRATIONS: FORMING HEALTHIER RELATIONSHIPS, FINDING COMMUNITY AMONG OTHER ADOPTEES, RECONCILING DUAL IDENTITIES · VALUES: AUTHENTICITY, BELONGING, CONNECTION, SELF-UNDERSTANDING · INTERESTS: PERSONAL GROWTH, PSYCHOLOGY, RELATIONSHIP DEVELOPMENT · ACTIVITIES: THERAPY/COUNSELING, SUPPORT GROUPS, ONLINE FORUMS · RELEVANT ATTITUDES/OPINIONS: MAY FEEL THEIR ADOPTION EXPERIENCE IS MISUNDERSTOOD BY NON-ADOPTEES, MAY HAVE COMPLEX FEELINGS ABOUT BOTH BIRTH AND ADOPTIVE FAMILIES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · LIVED EXPERIENCE WITH ATTACHMENT CHALLENGES · NAVIGATION OF RELATIONSHIPS WITH ANXIOUS, AVOIDANT, OR FEARFUL ATTACHMENT STYLES · POSSIBLE EXPERIENCE WITH AMBIGUOUS LOSS REGARDING BIRTH FAMILIES · EXPERIENCE MANAGING DIALECTICAL TENSIONS IN RELATIONSHIPS
CURRENT/EXISTING BEHAVIORS	CURRENT RELEVANT KNOWLEDGE	OPPORTUNITIES TO SEE YOUR MESSAGE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · SEEKING INFORMATION ABOUT THEIR ADOPTION EXPERIENCES ONLINE · SOME MAY BE IN THERAPY ADDRESSING ATTACHMENT ISSUES · MAY PARTICIPATE IN ADOPTEE FORUMS OR SUPPORT GROUPS · POSSIBLY EXPLORING REUNION WITH BIRTH FAMILIES · MAY BE WORKING THROUGH RELATIONSHIP CHALLENGES STEMMING FROM ATTACHMENT STYLES 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · PERSONAL AWARENESS OF RELATIONSHIP PATTERNS · SOME UNDERSTANDING OF HOW ADOPTION HAS SHAPED IDENTITY · MAY LACK THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK TO CONTEXTUALIZE EXPERIENCES · VARIED KNOWLEDGE OF ATTACHMENT THEORY CONCEPTS · LIMITED UNDERSTANDING OF NEUROBIOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF EARLY SEPARATION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> · MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES AND THERAPISTS SPECIALIZING IN ADOPTION · ADOPTION CONFERENCES AND WORKSHOPS · ONLINE FORUMS & SOCIAL MEDIA GROUPS FOR ADOPTEES · ACADEMIC SETTINGS IF STUDYING RELATED FIELDS · ZINES DISTRIBUTED AT RELEVANT COMMUNITY CENTERS OR EVENTS

Annotated Bibliography

Feeney, J. A., Passmore, N. L., & Peterson, C. C. (2007). Adoption, attachment, and relationship concerns: A study of adult adoptees. *Personal Relationships*, *14*(1), 129–147.

<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6811.2006.00145.x>

This study examined how adoptive status and family experiences impact adult attachment security and how attachment predicts relationship outcomes. Researchers compared adults adopted as infants (N = 144) with nonadoptees (N = 131) using measures of attachment security at recruitment and 6 months later, along with assessments of parental bonding, adoptees' reunion experiences, and relationship variables. Results showed higher insecurity among adoptees and those reporting negative childhood relationships with parents. For adoptees specifically, recent relationship difficulties also predicted insecurity. The study found attachment dimensions were more important than adoptive status in predicting relationship variables and mediated the effects of adoptive status. This research is directly relevant to my zine project on attachment theory and adoptee experiences, as it confirms that adoption can lead to higher attachment insecurity while also highlighting that relationship quality is influenced more by attachment styles than adoptive status itself. These findings support my interest in examining how early caregiving disruptions shape relationship patterns throughout an adoptee's life, particularly for those adopted as infants.

Pace, C. S., & Zavattini, G. C. (2011). “Adoption and attachment theory” the attachment models of adoptive mothers and the revision of attachment patterns of their late-adopted children.

Child: Care, Health & Development, *37*(1), 82–88. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2214.2010.01135.x>

This study investigated attachment patterns in late-adopted children (aged 4-7) and their adoptive mothers during the first 7-8 months after adoption, evaluating how adoptive mothers' attachment security affected the revision of their children's attachment patterns. The researchers assessed attachment patterns in 20 adoptive dyads and 12 genetically related dyads at two different times: within 2 months of adoption and 6 months later. Children's attachment patterns were measured using the Separation-Reunion Procedure and the Manchester Child Attachment Story Task, while mothers' attachment models were classified using the Adult Attachment Interview. Results showed significant enhancement of late-adopted children's attachment security over time, with all children who changed from insecurity to security having adoptive mothers with secure attachment models. This research is essential to my project comparing infant adoptees with those adopted at older ages, as it provides evidence that attachment patterns can be revised even after early caregiving disruptions. The finding that adoptive mothers' attachment security influences children's attachment development supports my argument that specialized support strategies are needed for adoptive families, particularly those adopting older children who may have already developed insecure attachment patterns.

Powell, K. A., & Afifi, T. D. (2005). Uncertainty management and adoptees' ambiguous loss of their birth parents. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships*, 22(1), 129–151.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407505049325>

This study extends the literature on uncertainty management and ambiguous loss by examining how these concepts inform one another in the adoption context. The researchers studied 54 adult adoptees, investigating the multiple ways adoptees experience uncertainty and loss and how these experiences and management responses are shaped by familial, perceptual, and situational factors. While much research has focused on attachment and adjustment issues adoptees experience, this study uniquely addresses the loss felt by adoptees as they reach adulthood. This research directly connects to my project's exploration of ambiguous loss as a key concept for understanding adoptee experiences. It provides evidence for how uncertainty about birth families shapes adult adoptees' relationships and will inform the section of my zine that addresses the unique grief experienced when birth parents are physically absent but psychologically present in an adoptee's life and identity formation. The findings support my argument that adoption is not just a "happy ending" but a complex experience with lifelong psychological implications.

Steele, M., Hodges, J., Kaniuk, J., & Steele, H. (2009). Mental Representation and Change:

Developing Attachment Relationships in an Adoption Context. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*,

30(1), 25–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07351690903200135>

This article presents findings from a longitudinal and intergenerational study of attachment relationships in previously maltreated children who were adopted during latency. Using an attachment perspective, the researchers explored how previous attachment objects influenced new relationships, for both adoptive parents and recently placed children. The methodology involved assessing mental representations as indexes of change in the adoption context. This research contributes to knowledge about assessing mental representations in both children and adults and provides empirical evidence for intergenerational links and changes in representations over time in relation to a new environment. This study is significant to my zine project as it demonstrates how early caregiving experiences continue to influence new relationships through mental representations, supporting my argument that adoption is a lifelong journey with psychological implications rather than a one-time event. The findings about intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns align with my interest in exploring how adoptive parents' attachment styles influence their children's development, which is crucial information for adoptive families seeking specialized support strategies.

Toland, A. M. (2024). Down the Rabbit Hole: The Mental Health Implications of Adoption

Trauma on People Adopted at Birth. *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping*,

30(2), 88–103.

This article explores the relationship between adoption, trauma, and mental health from the author's perspective as a clinical social worker experiencing reunion with their birth family. Challenging the perception that adoption is singularly and only positive, Toland proposes a framework called the "Adoption Trauma Spectrum" to help mental health professionals and adoptees better understand adoption trauma. This framework suggests that adoption trauma may occur across the spectrum of human development, potentially affecting bonding, individuation, and relationship and attachment styles. The author emphasizes the need for more research on the impact of adoption trauma on people adopted at birth and identifies implications for future research on adoption-related issues. This 2024 study is directly relevant to my zine project as it validates my argument that adoption is not just a "happy ending" but a complex experience with potential trauma implications. As an adoptee myself with anxious attachment, Toland's "Adoption Trauma Spectrum" framework provides a valuable model for explaining how adoption experiences can affect relationship patterns throughout life. This recent research also supports my call for specialized mental health support for adoptees and reinforces the importance of understanding the neurobiological impacts of early separation, which I plan to address in my zine.

Tolmacz, R., Lev-Ari, L., Bachner-Melman, R., & Timor, M. (2024). Adoptees' basic need satisfaction within romantic relationships: The role of attachment orientations and relational attitudes. *Children & Youth Services Review, 161*, N.PAG.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chilyouth.2024.107640>

This study examined the association between adoption and three relational attitudes in romantic relationships (authenticity, pathological concern, and sense of entitlement), exploring the potential role of attachment style. The researchers surveyed 268 participants aged 18–60 (18.8% males, 59.3% adopted) using online questionnaires measuring attachment dimensions and several variables in the context of romantic relationships. Results revealed that adoptees reported higher levels of attachment avoidance, relational entitlement, pathological concern, and lower authenticity and need satisfaction within romantic relationships compared to non-adoptees. The association between adoption status and basic need satisfaction was partially explained by avoidant attachment, relational entitlement, and authenticity in relationships. This recent 2024 research is particularly valuable for my project focusing on adult adoptees in their 20s and 30s as it provides current evidence of how early adoption experiences manifest in adult romantic relationships. The finding that adoptees show higher levels of attachment avoidance supports my personal experience with anxious attachment and will help illustrate how early caregiving disruptions can lead to specific relationship challenges for adoptees. This study also reinforces my argument that understanding attachment theory can help prevent lifelong mental health challenges by identifying how separation affects emotional regulation and relationship development.

Watson, K. W. (1997). Bonding and attachment in adoption: towards better understanding and useful definitions. *Marriage & Family Review*, 25(3–4), 159–173.

https://doi.org/10.1300/J002v25n03_03

This study examines the meanings of "bonding" and "attachment" as terms related to human connections from a historical perspective, focusing on their importance in adoption contexts. Through clinical observations, the researcher proposes distinct definitions that underscore qualitative differences between these often-confused concepts. This terminological clarification is presented as a practical tool for improving adoption practices, including placement decisions, custody case resolution, reducing tensions between families connected to an adopted child, and supporting children's attachment development. This research is crucial to my zine project as it provides clear definitions of attachment and bonding that will help my audience understand the foundational concepts I'm discussing. Watson's emphasis on the importance of precise terminology in adoption contexts supports my argument that generic approaches often fail to address the unique circumstances of adoptees. This work will inform the section of my zine that explains how early caregiving disruptions specifically affect attachment formation, helping adoptees and adoptive families better understand their experiences within an evidence-based framework.

Wimmer, J. S., Vonk, M. E., & Bordnick, P. (2009). A Preliminary Investigation of the Effectiveness of Attachment Therapy for Adopted Children with Reactive Attachment Disorder. *Child & Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 26(4), 351–360.

<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-009-0179-8>

This preliminary investigation examined the effectiveness of attachment therapy for adopted children with Reactive Attachment Disorder using a pretest-posttest design with 24 children who received therapy through a Georgia Office of Adoptions program. Results showed statistically significant improvement in both RAD symptoms and functional assessment scores. This research is valuable to my zine project as it provides evidence that specialized attachment interventions can be effective for adoptees, supporting my argument that adoptive families need specialized support rather than generic parenting approaches. The study supports my argument that adoptive families need specialized support strategies rather than generic parenting approaches and contributes to the section of my zine discussing potential resources for healing attachment wounds. While the study has methodological limitations, it adds to the limited knowledge about effective attachment-focused treatments specifically designed for adoptees, which is relevant to my goal of reforming adoption practices through attachment-informed care.

Rationale Statement

My project examines attachment theory and its impact on adoptees, particularly how early caregiving disruptions shape relationship patterns throughout life. For adoptees, these attachment processes are uniquely complex due to disruptions in early relationships. With approximately seven million adoptees living in the United States and around 140,000 adoptions occurring each year, this represents a significant part of the population whose experiences deserve acknowledgment (Very Well Mind; <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-are-the-mental-health-effects-of-being-adopted-5217799>). Research shows adoptees report higher levels of attachment avoidance, greater pathological concern, an imbalanced sense of relational entitlement, and lower authenticity in romantic relationships compared to non-adoptees (Tolmacz et al., 2024). This highlights a critical communication challenge: adoptees often struggle to contextualize their relationship experiences and lack the language to express their ambiguous loss. Many adoptees with anxious or avoidant attachment styles find generic relationship advice doesn't address their specific needs, and adoptive families frequently struggle with communication around these sensitive issues.

This project furthers our understanding of close relationships by showing how early caregiving disruptions affect attachment formation and show up in adult relationships. By examining attachment through the lens of adoption, we gain insight into how separation from birth parents can physiologically affect brain development and emotional regulation throughout life. Studies have found that adopted children who changed from insecurity to security had adoptive mothers with secure attachment models (Pace & Zavattini, 2011), showing the intergenerational transmission of attachment patterns. This demonstrates the powerful role of consistent, attuned caregiving in revising attachment patterns, even after early disruptions. The complex navigation of relationships with both birth and adoptive families creates unique mental representations that adoptees carry into their adult connections. By examining how adoptees reconcile these complex identities, we gain insight into relationship dynamics that extend far beyond the adoption community, showing how humans forge meaningful connections despite challenging beginnings.

Understanding the connection between adoption and attachment theory allows for the development of more ethical and effective adoption practices. Recognizing adoption as a lifelong journey with psychological implications rather than a one-time event can lead to policies that minimize trauma during transitions and prioritize attachment-informed care. When adoptive families and professionals understand attachment theory, they can implement specialized support strategies addressing the unique needs of adoptees, potentially preventing lifelong mental health challenges associated with insecure attachment. Most importantly, this research validates adoptees' experiences, helping them understand how their early history may shape their relationships.

Final Problem Statement & Proposed Solution

1. International adoptees face unique attachment challenges due to early caregiving disruptions that significantly impact their ability to form and maintain close relationships throughout adulthood. While approximately seven million adoptees live in the United States with 140,000 adoptions occurring annually, many struggle to understand how their adoption experiences have shaped their attachment styles and relationship patterns.
2. Addressing this issue is crucial because research consistently shows adoptees report higher levels of attachment insecurity, particularly avoidance, which manifests in romantic relationships, imbalanced relational entitlement, and lower authenticity. Without proper frameworks to understand these patterns, adoptees often internalize relationship difficulties as personal failures rather than recognizing them as common adoption-related challenges. This lack of understanding can lead to continued relationship struggles, isolation, and mental health issues that affect overall quality of life.
3. My project will educate adoptees and parents about the impact of early caregiving disruptions on attachment styles while validating adoptees' emotions.

Project Description & Organization

1. I am creating a research-based educational zine that combines attachment theory frameworks with personal narratives to help international adoptees contextualize their relationship experiences, validate their ambiguous loss, and develop healthier attachment patterns. By blending academic insights with my lived experience, this resource will provide adoptees with both the language to understand their unique challenges and practical strategies for healing.

2. I plan on including the following in my zine:
 - Personal narratives about my adoption journey that illustrate how early caregiving disruptions shaped my attachment style, helping other adoptees recognize similar patterns in their own relationships
 - Clear explanations of attachment theory concepts that contextualize common relationship challenges unique to the adoptee experience
 - Discussion of ambiguous loss and relational dialectic tensions that depicts the complex emotional landscape adoptees navigate with both birth and adoptive families
 - Discussion of relational dialectic tensions that depicts the complex push-pull dynamics adoptees navigate in various relationships
 - Statistical context showing that with approximately seven million adoptees in the United States and around 140,000 adoptions occurring annually, this population's unique experiences and challenges deserve greater recognition and specialized support

3. To Do List

- Draft personal narrative sections highlighting key experiences that shaped my attachment style (by April 20)
- Create simplified explanations of attachment theory concepts for a non-academic audience (by April 22)
- Design layout with appropriate spacing, headings, and visual elements (by April 26)
- Compile resource list of adoption-competent support options (by April 28)
- Prepare both digital PDF and print versions (by April 30)
- Final review and submission (by May 1, 11:59 pm)