

## Article

# The Child Tourist: Agency and Cultural Competence in VFR Travel

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**Abstract:** In this article, we meet a seven-year-old boy, Matti, who was adopted from his birth country in Africa by a family in Sweden. We meet him together with his family as they are planning a family adoption return trip to his birth country and again after their return. We argue that an adoption return trip is a form of family travel and/or visiting friends and relatives (VFR) travel. By methodologically using a so-called children's perspective we are primarily focusing on Matti and how he talks about the return trip. We explore some key concepts from child studies through Matti's relational encounters in the world. By presenting agency and cultural competence as something that is enacted in practice, we show how they are enacted through the dependencies between Matti, his mother and his sister. The analysis shows that cultural competence and agency are fluid in the sense that they can be changed by how topics of discussion are woven through one another. Staying with Matti's lived practices makes it possible to elaborate on and demonstrate different forms of competence and agency that are important for understanding children as tourists and children's roles in family travel.

**Keywords:** child; tourist; agency; cultural competence; adoption return trip; VFR



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## 1. Introduction

In this article, we follow Matti, a seven-year-old boy who was adopted from an African country by a family in Sweden. Through interviews with Matti, we focus on how he, his mother and his sister plan an *adoption return trip* and how they discuss the trip after it has been conducted. The idea is to explore the outcomes of approaching an adoption return trip by staying with and focusing on the child, Matti and his perspective [1]. Our aim, theoretically and methodologically, is to single out and discuss how a child, as a specific category within the family, can be studied as a tourist when making one type of VFR trip. To do this, we start out from the notion of children as social and cultural actors who produce and re-produce the world in which they live [2].

The fact that many Swedish adoptive parents (families in other countries, such as the United States of America, Great Britain and Norway, make similar return trips) are conducting so-called adoption return trips together with their young children today [3] makes this example particularly interesting, as it involves all kinds of complexities when it comes to transnational travelling. While there is no clear-cut definition of what constitutes a return trip, the different ways of naming them as roots trips, motherland tours or homeland tourism suggest that the adoptee's birth and origins in another country are a strong motivation for conducting such a trip. The link between travelling and origins is by no means unique to the context of transnational adoption. Millions of people who have emigrated from or fled their home countries travel each year with the hopes of seeking and experiencing their origins and to maintain their relationships with family members, friends, countries, cultures and places that are important to them [4]—trips that it has not been possible to make during the COVID-19 pandemic [5].

Adoption return trips are part of the tradition of travelling to visit friends and relatives. Many adoptive children were adopted from their birth countries as babies and have grown

up with parents whose ethnic origins differ from their own and with few memories, if any at all, of their birth country. Adoption return trips should therefore be seen as an activity that symbolises the political emphasis on the importance of adoptees being informed about their origins [6]. Today, many adoptive parents plan for and conduct adoption return trips, not only to comply with such political recommendations, but also to do what seems right for their child, both now and in the future [7]. The activities making up an adoption return trip vary and depend on the preferences of the adoptive family and on what it is possible to do in relation to the birth country. For example, there may or may not exist information about biological relatives, orphanages may have moved or closed down, foster parents may no longer be alive or they may be impossible to find. The usual idea is that an adoption return trip has the potential to create links between the present and the past, which is believed to help adoptive children gain an understanding of where they come from. However, it is not unusual for the trip to become an ordinary family holiday to the adopted child's birth country [8]. Today, it is believed to be best to make this trip as a family before adolescence [3]. This is why there are specialised commercial travel agencies that design and sell return-trip packages for families as a form of family tourism [9,10].

Previous research has shown that adoption return trips are in many ways adult and family projects [7,10,11]. As such, the trips are not conducted solely for the sake of the adoptee; rather, the travel is both fulfilling for the parents and enables them to live the idea of the family [7]. To a large extent, previous research on return trips has focused either on the family [10] or on adult adoptees travelling by themselves [12]. Added to this, there is a lack of any specific child focus within family holiday research [13]. That is why this article singles out and explores seven-year-old Matti's perspective on his own adoption return trip: How does Matti enact the trip, cultural differences, tourism, memories, travelling back, himself and his family? We also argue for understanding Matti's adoption return trip as a kind of VFR trip.

## 2. Previous Research

Family travel, including VFR travel, is growing faster than any other form of travel today and constitutes a market of significant size [14,15]. It is also more resilient than other forms of travel since people will always continue to travel to reconnect with significant others [16,17]. Adoption return trips are complex mixtures of different ideas involving politics, identity, family values, cultural and personal heritage, consumption, ethnicity and education [9,10,18]. Children in particular tend to approach adoption return trips primarily as a family holiday [7]. This is why, we argue, family adoption return trips need to be understood as a special and mixed form of family tourism [8]: VFR travel with, in this text, a special focus on the child. While actual visits to friends and relatives are not necessarily a major component of family adoption return trips, visits to places of personal and historical significance related to the child are important to visit together in order to facilitate bonding within the family [9,10]. An adoption return trip can, just as with VFR travel, consist of different patterns of social networks and interactions when travelling to the birth countries [19].

The limited research on children's and families' holidays, as pointed out by Pau Obrador (2012) [20], is due to the way in which tourism and the tourist have been theorised within social science. Obrador and other researchers argue, for example, for the need to consider a diverse and heterogeneous view of the concept of family, as well as for a need to situate the family within tourism research [17,20,21]. This is especially important because family holidaying is considered an integral part of family life and how family life is conducted in practice [22]. Another critique is that family holiday research has, to a large extent, primarily highlighted the white nuclear family, while the ethnic diversity of families such as adoptive families and the complexities of family structures have been marginalised [20,23,24]. We would like to extend this reasoning, because the homogeneous figurations of the tourist, in the previous critique, certainly also exclude the travelling child.

Children have historically been a marginalised group within tourism research [13,25]. It is argued that the invisibility of children in tourism research is based both on assumptions about children as incompetent and vulnerable [26] and on the idea that research with children involves complex data collection techniques and difficult ethical procedures [21]. The research that does exist in this field has mainly focused on children's role in holiday decision-making processes [27].

Family holidaying should be viewed as a shared project between all family members, and children are perceived as having more influence on family decision-making processes than before [28]. Previous studies have shown that children have both direct and indirect impacts on family holidays [29–31]. The extent of children's influence over the decisions that families make is said to depend primarily on the risks that are or will be involved. Letting children participate in choosing where to eat during the trip is considered to be low risk, but they have less impact on deciding where the family should travel [30]. Another issue said to affect children's influence is their age: children's direct influence on larger decisions increases with age [32]. This research is important because it shows how children are involved in holiday-related decisions. More recent tourism research with children shows that today's children have extensive travel experience [33], and with this experience comes similar expectations about the quality of services and facilities during holidaymaking [34]. Children initiate, gather information, evaluate and make suggestions and actual decisions, making them actively involved in holiday consumption [8,31]. Children making adoption return trips, as we will show, are no different.

The outcome is that family holidays often depend on compromises between family members, whereby children and parents have to adapt to one another [35]. This highlights the complexity of family holidays and their various purposes and meanings, which come about through ongoing negotiation between family members [24]. Focusing on holiday decision-making processes as shared could therefore give more heterogeneous insights into family holidays [20]. In this article, we elaborate on the outcomes of approaching family travel through a child, the seven-year-old boy Matti, in order to achieve this heterogeneity.

To bring the child into tourism research, there are studies [21] that argue for the development of theories about the child traveller and tourism consumer from a psychological perspective. By combining tourism studies with child studies, we aim to contribute alternative insights into research with children and how the child tourist is brought into being when studying adoption return trips as a kind of VFR travelling.

### 3. Agency and Cultural Competence

A new theoretical approach to children and childhood as socially constructed was established with the emergence and set-up of the so-called 'new' sociology of childhood—today also labelled the Social Studies of Childhood, Childhood Sociology, Child Studies and Childhood Studies. We call the research area Child Studies. As pointed out by Anna Sparrman (2020) [36], child studies emphasize children rather than the structural notion of childhood.. The history of the field can be told in different ways. For example, it has a historical track [37,38] and a sociological track [2,39]. Here, we mainly focus on the sociological trajectory and the idea of children as social actors, and children and childhood as socially and culturally constructed. This approach was developed as a critique of mainstream sociology and especially family sociology. Children, argued Allison James and Alan Prout (1997) [2], disappeared in family structures. Children lacked individuality and agency. James and Prout's theory of children as social actors also questioned the dominant theories within developmental psychology, which focused on children's age-related maturation according to set mental and biological stages. The new take was that children's actions were outcomes of situations and processes whereby they produced, re-produced and were produced by the societies in which they lived.

The ideas that children are to be recognised as agentive and as social and cultural constructions are just two aspects of the theoretical programme developed by James and Prout (1997) [2,38]. However, these ideas have had great impact on research about and with

children during the last 30 years. Over this 30-year period, the concepts of the social actor and agency have been defined and redefined. Therefore, we would like to reflect upon how we approach Matti as a social and cultural actor and what agency might mean in the context of being a child tourist.

The concepts of the social actor and agency are difficult to disentangle. James and Prout (1997) [2] never really defined or explained what it means for a child to be a social actor [40], except that children produce, re-produce and are produced by the worlds in which they live. Both the social actor and agency have been, and still are, used in multiple ways and often interchangeably [40]. These concepts are associated with other terms, such as giving children a voice, children's rights, participatory research methods, competence, independence and rationality, and the concepts commonly have positive connotations (Huijsmans 2011: 1308, cited in Gallagher 2019: 189) [41]. How these concepts are used also differs according to whether the discussion is purely theoretical or whether the concepts are attributed to individual children [41].

From now on, we will use agency and social actor interchangeably. Our question is not whether Matti 'has' agency as a tourist. We want to challenge this attribution, 'having agency', as meaning that agency is an intrinsic, essential property of the child [40–43]. This essentialist and also individualist take on agency within child studies was criticised by Nick Lee as early as 1998 through the notion of 'immature sociology' [44].

Lee's (1998) [44] critique was founded on the idea that child studies simply fitted children's agency into the already existing grand standard sociological theory without any adaptations or special considerations, simply approaching them as independent and mature. Through the emphasis on immaturity, agency becomes less rational and, as Lee describes it, distributed between material and non-material entities, accentuating incompleteness as the standard. This distributed approach establishes agency as a property of networks in which patterns of dependency are enacted through relations between the material and non-material. This is Lee's (1998) [44] way of challenging the idea of 'having' agency. It might look as though agency is then flattened out [41]. A more complex way of describing it is that it situates agency within, and shows how it is dependent upon, the situation in which it is being exerted. This opens the way to seeing how agency can fluctuate within one and the same situation and means that different versions of agency can be at stake at the same time, depending on how the dependency is enacted through the relations between material and non-material entities [41–45]. Agency is thus an outcome of collaboration and relations between multiple actants [42,43].

We favour this take on agency in this text. Our focus is on how Matti performs agency through dependence. This should not be confused with the concept of the dependent child criticised by James and Prout (1997) [2]. They argued that the child lost his/her individuality and autonomy through his/her dependence on the family. We argue that dependence through networks is different, because it involves both children's and adults' independence coming about through dependence on the relations between the material and non-material world they live in [41–43,45,46]. In Matti's case, the network of dependence that he enacts within in this text takes place through the relations between the 'I', others (mother, sister, and people they met on the return trip), being adopted, his birth country, travelling, Sweden, money, tourist experiences, places, souvenirs and cultural competences, to mention just some of the aspects [41–44].

The last aspect mentioned, cultural competence, is not an analogy for agency, social actor, 'having' agency or being a competent child [47]. Competence, and in this case cultural competence, just as with agency, refers to tasks that are *done* [48]. Theoretically, we are interested in the performativity of both cultural and social competence and how they intertwine [42,43,45]. For example, through the processes of the joint enactment of human sociality and tangible and intangible culture, it becomes possible to investigate cultural competence as: "... legitimacy in doing, being in, expressing, understanding and/or interpreting culture—both one's own culture and that of others" [48] (p. 22). We

approach Matti as being/doing a tourist through his relational encounters when he talks about travelling back to his birth country.

#### 4. Children's Perspectives as Methodology

This article stems from a study in which Matti and his family, together with other families, were interviewed about planning and making adoption return trips [7]. For this article, we use pseudonyms for the family members and we do not mention the birth country by name [49]. The interviews conducted for the study were carried out during the period 2015–2018 and followed a so-called multi-family-member interview method [50]. This method invites all family members to be interviewed together as a family, in different family constellations or individually one by one. The choice is made by the family. The idea behind this method is to gain a nuanced and dynamic sense of, for example, the planning of an adoption return trip [50]. In Matti's case, only family interviews were conducted, in which Matti, his mother and his sister participated. Two interviews were conducted, one before the adoption return trip and one after. The first interview was conducted in Matti's family home and the second via Skype. Each interview lasted about one hour.

For this article, we have chosen to analyse excerpts from the second interview in particular. Matti is very verbal and expresses both concerns and thoughts about the trip the family has made. The idea behind using the example of one single child is to conduct an in-depth qualitative analysis of Matti's tourist experiences and how his stories are situated as part of the family story of the adoption return trip [51]. Using this approach, we can show empirically how young children can be appreciated as tourists while also creating new lines of thought about children's agency and cultural competence within tourism studies.

This article is based on one of the main methodological principles within child studies, which suggests that a 'children's perspective' is important for understanding the world, as far as possible, from the point of view of the child [1,2]. Methodologically, a 'children's perspective' in this case means approaching the adoption return trip through Matti's way of seeing, how he relates to the trip and how during the qualitative interview he re-tells his tourist encounters. Sceptics may argue that we cannot trust children's narratives or take them at face value, because children are not necessarily truthful. The idea of using a children's perspective is not to uncover the Truth with a capital 'T'; the goal is rather to determine how children, from the position in which they are situated (an interview in Matti's case) enact [52] tourism events; in this case together with the interviewer, his mother and his sister. To emphasise the point that we are taking Matti's perspective during the interviews, we have chosen to name him, while his other family members are referred to as 'mother' and 'sister'. The name Matti is a pseudonym.

To analyse the empirical material, we first explored the transcripts from the two family interviews inductively by singling out Matti. This was done in order to identify his role and actions within the family discussions. The categories identified through the inductive approach were: Matti as expert, as arguer and as traveller. Matti as expert includes situations where he communicates and offers knowledge and facts about himself, the family, the trip, his birth country and Sweden. He is often the first to answer questions posed by the interviewer. Matti as arguer includes situations where he is questioning, resisting and offering answers to the interview questions that oppose those given by his mother and sister. He is strong-willed and maintains his arguments, even at times when challenged. This is achieved by asking follow-up questions and getting clarifications and answers from the mother, sister and interviewer. The category of Matti as traveller includes awareness of his travel experiences, what he prefers to do (and not do) when travelling and the trips he has liked the most so far in his life.

Following on from this inductive methodological approach to the child's perspective, and taking the three categories of expert, arguer and traveller, we started to elaborate on them theoretically in relation to the notions of agency and cultural competence. The analysis in this article is thus based on both inductive and deductive approaches [53]. To analyse the categories, we mainly used extracts from the second interview. Even though



the context of the examples is unique, our empirical exploration is balanced by a more general theoretical discussion, in order to contribute to an understanding of children as tourists [53].

## 5. Talking to Matti about His Family's Adoption Return Trip

By exploring the examples from the interviews using theories of both agency and cultural competence, the analyses show how Matti has experienced this special type of VFR travel, the visit to his birth country, meeting people and visiting places, dealing with language issues, differences between countries, new friends and wishes for the future. We then move on to analysing Matti's views on being/doing a tourist and his involvement in the family's travel decisions.

### 5.1. Visiting One's Birthplace—Situated Differences

The aim of adoption return trips is to provide the adopted child with cultural competence relating to their birth country [7]. Matti was six months old when he was adopted by his family in Sweden. This was his first trip back to his birth country. Making an adoption return trip as a child often means having a family vacation, going sightseeing, visiting famous cultural landmarks and doing some shopping, while also visiting the orphanage, the birth town and, if possible, foster parents [8,10,18]. In this sense, the trip back is a trip back to places rather than to visit friends and relatives [54]. Places become, to some degree, equivalent to making family connections, because visits to specific places were designed to strengthen Matti's biography. As part of returning, Matti, his mother and his sister visited the hospital where Matti was born. The interviewer asks about this visit:

Excerpt 1

- Interviewer: What was it like, do you think, to go to the city where you were born? What was it like to see it?
- Matti: Fun, but really . . . one thing I thought about was that it was really disgusting
- Mother: You mean the hospital then, should I say that?
- Matti: Yeah, then I'll put my hands over my ears
- Mother: Yes, put your hands over your ears then. When we found . . .
- Matti: A little quieter
- Mother: . . . we found the hospital, and we were allowed to go in but it's a little difficult when you, like, don't understand each other, and then a person says "Come in", and then we ended up, like, right by a little newborn baby who was lying there with a little poo and stuff
- Interviewer: Yes, ok
- Matti: Are you finished now?
- Mother: Yes, that was what you thought was a little disgusting
- Matti: Why did you have to say that, that was really unnecessary
- Mother: Yes
- Matti: Why should she force me to go close to a baby that has pooped itself, and then the poo is black
- Interviewer: Maybe she didn't think about that
- Mother: Yes, she probably was thinking differently, and that. And that is how it, sometimes when you don't always speak the same language, it gets a bit mixed up like that
- Matti: All you have to do is say "no", and I did, but she didn't listen.
- Mother: So, you thought that was a bit like that
- Matti: It smelled really disgusting
- Interviewer: Yes
- Mother: But now you know a little, how it is with newborn babies

Visiting places of biographical significance might make such trips different from ordinary VFR travel. In one sense, it can mean going a bit more native than usual as you travel beyond friends and relatives and the tourist areas to places where, for example, language might become an even larger issue. The complicated situation that occurred at

the hospital when Matti and his family were introduced to a newborn baby is described as a possible language issue by the mother, whereby the hospital lady and the family did not understand one another. It seems as though English was not sufficient to bridge the gap between the local language and Swedish.

A lot of different aspects clashed during the hospital visit due to cultural diversity, competence, incompetence and difference. In a Swedish context, for example, outsiders would never be invited to look at newborn babies. Swedish children like Matti are informed from pre-school onwards about their democratic and co-determination rights as children. They are used to being listened to. Matti explains in the interview that he said “no” when they got closer to the newborn baby but that the lady did not pay attention to him.

The idea that the situation depends on cultural differences [48] is also suggested by the interviewer’s and the mother’s answers to Matti as to why the lady did not listen: either she did not think or, as the mother suggests, she thought differently. This does not make Matti change his understanding of what happened.

The most problematic entity to Matti, which he describes as “disgusting” or even “really disgusting”, is the baby’s poo and its black colour. It is so disgusting that Matti cannot even retell the story of the visit. After just a couple of words he hesitates. His mother offers to take over, which is accepted by Matti who decides to cover his ears and asks his mother to speak more quietly. From Matti’s reaction at the end of the story, we can see that his mother has pushed the narrative a bit too far, however, as she also explains exactly what Matti found so disgusting (the poo). This, Matti argues, was “really unnecessary”, which is confirmed by his mother.

This example shows how agency moves back and forth between Matti, his mother and the interviewer. For Matti, the situation is not about being considerate and adapting to, or understanding, the cross-cultural differences [47]. Matti is doing cultural competence as a Swedish child when he says “no” and questions why he was not listened to. He also challenges his mother’s explanations and tells her off by remarking that she could also have said no, just as he did, when she realised where things were heading. We are not saying here that he is not aware of the cultural difference or that he lacks cultural competence. We are just saying that Matti ignores the cross-cultural differences by stating what is to him a more important cross-cultural difference, of him as a child expecting to be heard.

For Matti, the visit to his birthplace thus becomes more about right, wrong and respect than about building strong biographical connections.

## 5.2. Visiting Ethnic Likeness

When discussing the family’s visit to Matti’s birth town, the interviewer asks Matti if the town looked as he had imagined. Matti’s only answer to the question is “erm”, prompting his mother to pitch in, asking if he did have something in mind before visiting the town. Matti then says that he does not know. His mother then initiates a discussion about whether Matti found it okay with all the people asking him if he was from the country.

### Excerpt 2

Mother:	Did you think it was OK, all the people asking if you were [from that country]?
Matti:	What do you mean?
Mother:	Yes, well, some [people] came and asked you in English and so
Matti:	Yes, they probably actually know that I am
Mother:	Yes, you think that they knew that you’re [from that country]
Matti:	Uh-huh
Mother:	And then they just wanted to make sure of that, was that why they asked?
Matti:	Yes
Interviewer:	Were there many who asked?
Matti:	I don’t know
Mother:	Yes, there were some. And I think there were some who asked [your sister] too
Interviewer:	Could you speak a little English there with the people you met, or how did you communicate with them?

- Sister: When we were going to fly to [city name], and you went to the loo and then I sat talking with another person who was going to, like, [city name], I think
- Mother: Yes, and then you spoke English
- Sister: Yes
- Mother: Matti tested a little English too
- Matti: Yes, what do you mean, tested?
- Mother: Tried yes
- Matti: Yes, I just said that
- Mother: Yes, you spoke a little
- Matti: [inaudible]
- Mother: Yes, okay, but you tested speaking, I mean
- Matti: Yes, what else should I have done? Not spoken? Sign language?
- Mother: Sign language, yes, sometimes you need to use that

In this example, rather than saying that he was bothered by the question of whether he 'is' from the country the family is visiting or not, Matti answers "they probably actually know that I am". Matti's answer, and the emphasis on "I" and "am", shows awareness of his own ethnic origin and thus the ethnic differences within the family. The fact that others know he has local origins also means that he is not necessarily perceived as a tourist by others. When it comes to ethnicity, he thus defines himself as being different from his family.

Excerpts 1 and 2 show how Matti makes claims and questions his mother's claims. His way of acting shows his awareness of diversity between cultural groups and that he is able to situate himself as belonging to all of these groups at the same time [48].

As part of the discussion, language becomes an issue when the interviewer asks how the family communicated across the language barriers. The sister explains that she used English, and the mother confirms that Matti "tested a little English too". The mother's explanation does not sit well with Matti, who wonders what his mother means by "testing". She explains by saying that he "tried" to speak, which indicates that Matti is not fully culturally competent in the sense that he is not skilled enough in English. This seems to annoy Matti.

An essential part of cultural competence is effective cross-cultural communication [48]. The ways in which individuals communicate with one another are the result of a complex network of cultural and social factors. It can be determined by family upbringing and socio-economic class as much as by the individual, the situation and/or the context [48]. Excerpt 2 with Matti and his mother demonstrates that Matti is aware of the need to be able to demonstrate certain language skills as a tourist in order to be able to engage with other people and cultures. The example shows that cross-cultural communication depends on the ability to mobilise different linguistic resources. His question about what he should have done if he had not tried is also a form of resistance to letting his mother dictate whether he is competent enough to talk or, for that matter, a competent tourist or not. His questioning can also be interpreted as calling his mother's competence into question [47]. What else is there beyond trying, he seems to ask?

The ability to mobilise linguistic resources is demonstrated by Matti several times during the interview. For example, it comes up when he speaks about a new friend of his own age that he made outside a local school. There and then, they struck up a conversation. He shows the interviewer a photograph of the boy on his mobile phone while describing how they have maintained contact via email even after the trip. He explains that he would like to meet this friend again. Matti is aware throughout the interview of the different communication strategies needed to maintain contacts and friendships across cultures and across national borders, including after having returned home [48]. By making his own, new, friends, he builds future reasons for travelling back and visiting the country again.

### 5.3. Returning and Visiting Again

In other situations, Matti does express himself about the differences between Sweden and his birth country. Towards the end of the interview, the interviewer asks whether Matti



and his family would do the exact same things or something different that they might have missed out on this time, the next time they travel to his birth country. Matti begins to answer but is interrupted by his sister and mother.

Excerpt 3

Matti: Stay at umm . . .  
 Sister: Go to [name of a city] or [name of a city] and meet [friend they met on trip]!  
 Mother: Meet [friend], yes that would be fun  
 Matti: Stay at the Sheraton  
 Mother: Stay at the Sheraton would be fun, yes  
 Matti: It was 5000 for, like, one night  
 Mother: Yes, wouldn't it be fun to see something other than what we have seen?

Neither Matti nor his mother or sister find the interviewer's question surprising, they all seem to agree that they will travel back to Matti's birth country again. Next time, Matti wants to explore and push his tourist position further by staying at the Sheraton Hotel. During the return trip, they stayed in what Matti describes as "a little cottage all by itself". Even though his mother agrees that a stay at the Sheraton could be nice, her initial answer is to agree with Matti's sister, who wants to go and visit people they met during the return trip, such as the boy Matti himself has met. Staying at the Sheraton seems to be used by the mother as a way of saying that it would be nice to do something different next time. This might not necessarily mean staying at the Sheraton, though.

At another point during the interview, when they talk about the cottage they stayed in during the return trip, the mother describes it as "cosy". This is the same cottage the family stayed in during their trip to adopt Matti. It was in this cottage that they became a family. The cottage has an affective value to the mother, as have the owners, a couple living locally and working for the Swedish Adoption Centre. By returning to the cottage and staying there again, the family was able to visit some local connections who remembered Matti as a baby.

By suggesting staying at the Sheraton next time, Matti distances himself from a more local way of living, advocating for a more upscale touristic experience [5]. He does not express the same nostalgic feelings for the cottage as his mother [9]. Staying at the Sheraton does, however, involve a larger financial outlay, which Matti shows awareness of. As such, while his sister and mother talk about wanting to meet up with a new friend who they just met and who lives in Matti's birth country, Matti nails down the possible cost of a hotel room at the Sheraton. A lack of interest in socially connecting to the country could lead to isolation from people living there [5]. Without travelling together as a family, Matti, who really does not have any memories to return to [9], could find himself in that position. The example also shows that, just as with the VFR travel, the adoption return trip segment is not homogeneous. Families travel for different purposes, which is why the trips consist of sub-segments [19,54].

As already mentioned, his mother neither denies nor confirms that a future trip will involve staying at the Sheraton. By taking this neutral stance, she gives Matti the opportunity to dream of being a fully fledged luxury tourist. Matti here expresses what can be called an inventive agency, as it is unexpected and breaks with the family patterns [41] and the patterns of him going local and learning about his birth country.

Even before going on the trip, accommodation is a concern for Matti. Being adopted today, you grow up looking at photographs from your parents' or family's adoption trip. You might have a photograph of your orphanage and of people who create links back to your biological birth [55]. While planning the return trip, Matti, his mother and sister look at photos of the cottage and both the mother and the sister talk about going back there (Interview 1). They look at a photograph taken by the mother from the balcony of a hotel in Matti's birth country. He looks at it and says: "we live [their accommodation in Sweden] much better here" and adds that there are more wars in Africa. Thus, even before going to his birth country, Matti is distinguishing between the living standards in the two countries and in this way he is doing awareness of cultural differences [48]. He charges

this difference with the values of better and, indirectly, worse. His mother joins in with the discussion by using a diversity discourse, suggesting that the countries are different, yes, but not necessarily better or worse than each other. In this way, she introduces a way of respecting cultural diversity [48].

By ranking Sweden as having ‘better’ accommodation than his birth country, Matti reinforces his Swedishness over his biological background. His expression suggests that he feels more ‘at home’ in Sweden and identifies more with his adoptive country than with his birth country. Is the birth country perhaps challenging to him? Exactly what his cross-cultural argument and interpretation means is not what is important here. Matti is still doing cultural competence just by being able to compare and interpret what he sees [48]. Growing up with faraway places and people as part of your birth history means growing up with an awareness of cross-cultural matters. The constant negotiation of these values is part of what it means to be an adoptive child and an adoptive family making adoption return trips to visit and create a biography, while also having a family holiday and being/doing a tourist.

#### 5.4. *Being/Doing a Tourist*

All tourists buy cultural artefacts and bring souvenirs back home [56]. Adoption return trippers are no exception [8,18], and, with great enthusiasm, Matti shows the interviewer souvenirs purchased during his return trip. One of the items is a small painting. The interviewer asks if the painting was made by a local artist or sold at the market he has just described visiting. His sister explains that they were sold in a restaurant, which Matti and his mother confirm by mentioning that the restaurant was Italian. Italian restaurants are very common in the country, along with more traditional restaurants serving the national cuisine. Talking about the paintings moves the discussion into talking about the restaurant as such, and whether there were many tourists there or not. This initiates a discussion about Matti’s and his family’s status as tourists or not:

##### Excerpt 4

Interviewer:	Were there many tourists there at the same time as you?
Mother:	Were there lots of tourists?
Sister:	Yes
Matti:	Yes, but we were also tourists, right?
Interviewer:	Yes, you’re also tourists
Matti:	Some were Swedish
Mother:	Yes, some Swedes were there, yes
Sister:	Some were Norwegian
Mother:	And some Norwegians, uh-huh
Matti:	Some that looked like [inaudible]
Mother:	Some that looked like me?
Matti:	Yes

In the excerpt, both the interviewer and the mother start talking about tourists as others [48]. Matti challenges this by stating that they themselves were tourists too, a challenge that is accepted by the interviewer. Matti continues by explaining that some of the other tourists were like themselves, Swedish, and this is confirmed by the mother and leads Matti’s sister to mention other Nordic nationalities among the tourists, such as Norwegians.

Matti self-evidently identifies or includes himself and his family in the tourist category. He also acknowledges ethnic appearance as an identifying factor in what and who is included in the tourist category by comparing their looks with the look of his mother. This suggests that, although Matti is positioning himself as a tourist, he is also aware of his own ethnic appearance, which differs from his mother’s. Nevertheless, he still positions them together as a tourist unit.

### 5.5. The Involved Child Tourist

Matti dreams of the Sheraton and he acknowledges that it costs a lot. Throughout the interview conducted after the trip, Matti highlights and wants to talk about costs. His mother has had to save for quite some time to make the trip possible (Interview 1). When, towards the end of Interview 2, the interviewer asks how much the trip has cost and whether they want to answer this or not, Matti enthusiastically encourages his mother to say what the costs have been:

#### Excerpt 5

- Interviewer: How much did the trip cost, roughly? If you [as in all of you] don't mind telling me, you [to mother] don't have to if you don't want to.
- Matti: Yes, we want to, we want to! Tell her.
- Mother: The flights, return tickets.
- Matti: They were cheap.
- Mother: Yes, about 13,000 for the three of us. So, it's quite cheap. The expensive part was ...
- Matti: it was the guiding and stuff.
- Mother: Yes, the inland trip, 'cause there it cost as much for the domestic flights, and then we had guides and drivers in both places, and that cost several thousand actually.

Matti's mother confirms Matti's exclamation that the international flight tickets for the three of them were cheap. What was expensive, Matti explains, "was the guiding and stuff". His mother also mentions the internal travel. Matti and his mother co-produce and combine their knowledge in the retelling of the costs. The way the interaction flows indicates that this is not the first time they have talked about the costs of the trip. The entire situation emphasises that Matti is involved in the family finances and holiday consumption [8,29,31]. This is strengthened by Matti saying that 'we' want to talk about the costs, even though the interviewer directs her second comment to the mother by addressing her directly. Matti has an interest in money; we saw this when he was talking about the Sheraton. During the interview, he often returns to money, such as, for example, when the interviewer asks if everything turned out as planned and expected during the return trip. In answer, Matti explains how the cash machine did not work when they were going to change money.

#### Excerpt 6

- Matti: The cash machine didn't work
- Sister: Yes, they snatched really a lot of money from us, like 20,000
- Mother: No, not 20,000. No, but it's always a bit like that when you change money and stuff and keeping track of that, but actually, I thought it went better than expected with the ATMs
- Matti: How much did they snatch from you?
- Mother: 3000 it kind of became
- Matti: But after that?
- Mother: But then we also got a lot of the things we wanted to do done. We got to travel a bit, we were in [name of city] and we were in [name of city] and [name of city]. We were in [capital city] a lot, where we went swimming
- Matti: Of course, we were in [capital city] a lot, that's where they [people from the adoption trip] lived

Both Matti and his sister are involved in the family finances for the trip, and this is evident when the sister talks about 'us' having money stolen, rather than the mother. However, according to the mother, they did not lose 20,000. The mother's "No", is soft and followed by a delicate piece of reasoning around the difficulties with changing money and keeping track of, presumably, the exchange rates. She concludes by stating that the cash machines worked better than she had expected. In this way she blames no one, not herself and not the country. The country has worked above expectations and she, herself, did not have full insight into the exchange rates. The 'snitching' of lots of money is thus downplayed by the mother, who presents shortcomings on both her own and the country's

part. Still, Matti wants to know exactly how much they lost and the mother offers the figure of 3000 Swedish crowns to him and the interviewer. It is hard to know what Matti's question following on from this information concerns. His mother moves swiftly on and gives another answer to the interviewer's initial question.

This example clearly expresses the social and cultural interplay between Matti, his sister and his mother. Together, they create a web of co-produced knowledge generated by a dependency between them. Matti's agency in relation to the family finances builds to a large degree on the empathy between him, his sister and his mother as they each respect the different features offered in the interaction. The way in which they interact with one another and the interviewer is a joint enactment of the dependency of human sociality [44,48]. They are all aware of the costs involved in being adoption return trip tourists. It involves all of them.

Matti's straightforward way of telling things 'as they are', having insights into costs and financial failures and knowing that, at one point during the trip, his mother lost her bank card and then found it again, could possibly be explained as Matti 'having' agency and/or 'having' tourism competence. That, however, would mean only looking at Matti as autonomous and independent [47]. By situating him within the interview practice, it becomes possible to see how competence and agency spring from the situation, such as: bodies, inclusive talk, smooth and empathic talking, acceptance of failures, acceptance of sharing, of expressing one's mind and being able to be wrong and corrected. These encounters show that competence and agency involve movement between being both incompetent (having money stolen) and competent (they did not have 20,000 crowns stolen, just 3000) and yet aware that a lot of money was involved, as 3000 is a lot of money to lose during a family vacation. Together, excerpts 5 and 6 highlight different ways for Matti to express himself around doing child tourism while travelling back to his birth country together with his family in order to create bonds by visiting significant places and creating new friendships; that is, to give Matti his own reasons to travel there again.

## 6. Concluding Discussion

Methodologically and theoretically, we have singled out seven-year-old Matti in order to discuss what it can mean to be a child tourist when a family engages in a special type of VFR and family travel; that is, an adoption return trip. Matti has been situated in the midst of his family's planning and retelling of the adoption return trip, together with his mother and sister. We have analysed cultural competences and agencies, partly through his and his mother's and sister's dependence on one another, and partly through the material and non-material cultural entities [41–46] that make up an adoption return trip.

The analyses show that such a trip is neither just an adoption return trip, nor an ordinary VFR trip or a family holiday; rather, it cuts across and intertwines with them all. This becomes evident when letting the empirical material guide us. By focusing on Matti's way of relating to his adoption return trip, to his family and to making a trip to visit significant places and friends, this entanglement becomes evident.

The analysis of Matti's actions in the interviews reveal that, even though the trip was made in his name, it is not necessarily he who was returning to friends and relatives, or to significant places in his birth country. He was far too young to remember any of these when he was adopted [9]. His family members, especially his mother, however, have strong memories and express nostalgia about the return. Matti seems content with his Swedish life and defends it. He has no problems pushing his tourist position further by, sometimes, distancing himself from the local living facilities, while his mother and sister seem more willing to adapt to a more local way of doing things [5,19].

There is no doubt, though, who Matti's family is. The analyses show how the talk about the trip strengthens the family as a family [7,22]. This is done through the way in which they make joint decisions and take a shared interest in and responsibility for who they are, even when they are negotiating which version of the retelling of the trip is more reliable. For example, as the analyses show, Matti does not conform to pre-set

adult expectations in the interview, or during the retelling of the return trip [47]. However, the analyses show his awareness of diversity between people, how he moves between expressing himself about the country and making cross-cultural references involving both his birth country and Sweden. Matti's knowledge about the country and his opportunities to make himself heard are dependent on how his mother, in particular, interacts with him.

Although Matti's way of relating in the social, cultural and material world is sometimes limited, he challenges his mother's statements and does not concur with her explanations in response to his questions or challenges. Analytically, their discussions can be described as a flow in which power, agency and subordination move between the participants. It is this communicative openness [48] between him and his mother that enacts the different forms of agency and competence making the position of the child tourist possible. Furthermore, an open space is created for Matti to describe his travel experiences, his knowledge, his evaluations of situations and his participation in actual decisions [31,33,34].

There is a genuine lack of focus on individual children in tourism research, even within family holidaying and VFR studies [13,21,26]. In adoption return trip research, children have a self-evident position because the travelling is being undertaken because of the child. This is an approach that tourism research can learn from. The fact that recent adoption return trip research also engages with research on children's agencies and competences [7–9] strengthens children's position even further. Because adoption return trips have become a way of travelling as families, however, these children are always acting as part of their families. It is at this theoretical and methodological intersection that adoption return trips become important and relevant for tourism research. Matti helps us to rethink the position that is usually given to children in tourism research and of the material and non-material entities that make up a family. The notions of the child and the family used within child studies make it possible to expand and extend the concepts and stay with the complex intertwinements between them.

As the analysis shows, there are multiple ways for Matti to be a child tourist. Drawing on Lee's (1998) [44] theoretical thinking, we want to accentuate the incompleteness, ambiguity and immaturity of doing/being an agentive child tourist. Adoption return trips, as well as Matti and his family, show that any tourist needs to be understood through their material and non-material situated practices. In Matti's case, this means being situated within the family while focusing on its relations to, for example, his family history, memorial places and photographs in order to capture agencies, competences, dependencies and family dynamics.

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