

Internationally Adopted Siblings: Emergent Themes Related to Siblinghood

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International adoption has been studied from numerous perspectives, however, one perspective noticeably lacking from the literature is the relationship between adoptive siblings, particularly internationally and transracially adopted siblings. There are many important issues regarding how these siblings relate to each other and how they experience and deal with adoption and ethnicity related themes. Because so many families who participate in international transracial adoption do choose to adopt more than once, it is important that the topic of siblinghood within these families be studied. The extant literature reveals few studies with findings indirectly relevant to internationally adopted siblings (e.g., Phillips, 1999; Samuel, 1999). The present study examined emergent themes related to siblings among families with adoptive siblings, at least one of whom was adopted from China.

Method: This study is a subset of a larger project examining how families raising girls adopted from China navigate being a transracial adoptive family. The subsample included in this study (N=19) had adopted at least two children. None were biological siblings. Children's ages ranged from five to eleven (M=7.5). Families included two-parent heterosexual and same-sex couples, as well as single parents. Almost all families lived in urban (50%) or suburban (45 %) communities (5% lived in rural areas). Parents and children were interviewed separately; parents' interviews covered themes including cultural socialization, children's ethnic and cultural identity, parents' and children's public discourse experiences, parent-child discussions, reason for adopting and family rituals. Children's interviews covered themes including their racial/ethnic self-label, their public discourse experiences, family/home-based experiences. Each transcribed interview was reviewed for vignettes mentioning siblings or the sibling relationship. These vignettes were extracted for subsequent coding and identification of emergent themes, following Wolcott (1994).

Preliminary analyses with all parent data yielded nine distinct themes, each with sub-themes. Those discussed here, for illustrative purposes, include reasons for adopting more than once and comparison of siblings' abilities to deal with adoption issues. Regarding why parents

adopted more than once, although many noted the simple goal of providing a sibling or to have a larger family, several sought to provide support for the first adoptee (n=5): “We wanted our kids to have some sense of connection with each other - to have someone else who looked like them.” Regarding comparisons of siblings’ abilities to deal with adoption issues, parents pointed to developmental differences in understanding of adoption (n=9), differences in reactions to adoption discussions (n=11), and differences in siblings’ interest in cultural socialization activities (n=7). One mother spoke poignantly about the differences in her daughters’ engagement in talks about birthmothers: “M is very contented -- L sees the loss more than M does. So she sees that she had to give up her birthmother to be here.” Other emergent themes include support among siblings (n=8), and older children’s experience of sibling’s adoption (n=12). The poster will report emergent child and parent themes about siblinghood and will address implications for understanding better these themes for parents, practitioners and researchers.

References

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