Complex Family Relationships in International Adoption:

Search, Reunion, and Contact

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Total Adoptions to the U.S.

Adoptions to the United States

http://adoption.state.gov/news/total_chart.html
**Top Ten Sending Countries**

(http://adoption.state.gov/news/total_chart.html)

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Complex Families in International Adoption

- International adoption brings:
  - Birth Parents (from countries with social, economic, and political environments that can result in relinquishment or abandonment)
  - Children (orphaned, abandoned, or over-quota children)
  - Adoptive Parents (childless, altruistic, single-parent led, or religious)
  - Cultures (birth country cultures and adoptive country culture)
  - Countries (spans at least two countries)
  - Races (may span at least two racial groups)

- Does the international nature of these adoptions really mean little if any birth parent contact?

- Must families negotiate lifelong adoption issues with little, if any, expectation of birth parent contact?
Contexts for International Adoption

Triad Contact

- Relationship between international birth parents and adoptive parents
  - Adoptive parents as caretakers, biology endures, gratitude, fantasies
  - Affected by fears, disappointments, sympathy, resentment
  - Birth parents as foreign, unrelatable, trapped, child-like

- Relationship between international birth parents and adoptee
  - Birth parents are idealized, denigrated, feared, longed for, foreign, unrelatable, poor, pitied, powerless, heartless, victims of oppression (social and political)
  - Adoptee as angry, resentful, damaged, lucky, grateful, scared, sad, rejecting birth culture

- Other Contextual Factors
  - Social class differences between birth and adoptive families
  - Projections about the character of birth parents given cultural, social, and political constraints that led to relinquishment
Challenges to International Birth Parent Contact

- Translation services needed—dynamics dramatically affected
- Social class differences
  - Financial means to travel
  - Cultural responsibilities of children in birth countries (regardless of adoption status—bloodlines endure adoption)
- Cultural attitudes toward bloodlines and adoption differ
- If birth parent and adoptive parent contact ever occurs, it will have additional layers of complexity—race, culture, language
  - Complicated by hierarchical attitudes toward adoptees’ birth cultures (e.g., culturally disadvantaged or cultural anthropologist)
- Generational patterns of international adoption created vastly different adoption stories for adopted people
International Adoptee Fantasies About Birth Parent Contact

- Projections about poverty and cultural mistrust impact nature of fantasies
- Childhood fantasies impact by the foreignness, distance, and unfamiliarity of birth country
- Images of birth parents range from royalty to paupers
- Fantasy about identification with and acceptance within birth culture
- Dream of international custody options: one month w/birth parents, one with adoptive parents
Expectations for International Searches

- Little if any chance of search and reunion
  - Few or non-existent records
  - Language and cultural barriers
  - South Korea and cases of reunion in China
- Little likelihood of a birth parent reclaiming child
- If a child was “abandoned” and no “adoption plan was made, then the birth parents truly don’t want contact
- Birth families are “out of sight, out of mind”
- Generational shifts in searches
  - Korean adoption—searching as adults
  - Recent international adoptees—adoptive parents initiating searches
Searching for Person, Place, or Idea

- What is a “Successful” search?
  - Finding birth families?
  - Resolving the loss
  - Finding Person, Country/Place, Ideas/Knowledge

- Focus tends to be on finding a particular person rather than the meaning of the search

- International adoptees may search for their birth culture (which can be just as elusive as birth parents)

- Identity process for adoptees tends to incorporate some attitude toward search
Obstacles for International Searchers

- **Logistics:**
  - (1) Language, (2) Distance, (3) Lack of familiarity with the foreign country’s system, and (4) Lack of connections within the foreign country

- Cultural Taboos—unsure if the social (S. Korea), political (China), or personal circumstances that lead to your relinquishment have changed

- No format or systematic process for searching in some countries

- Birth country regulations on searches but new hope due to support via Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (1993)

- Pre-adoptive and/or early post-adoptive contact is virtually non-existent

- Supports for Searchers: Organizations, TV, Newspaper
Research on International Searches & Reunions: Complications

- Fear the reaction of the birth country?
  - Discontinuing international adoption programs
  - Closed adoptions

- Difficulty identifying birth families due to social stigma, policies, language, and cultural values
Research on International Searches & Reunions

- Tieman, van der Ende, & Verhulst (2008) studied international adoptees in The Netherlands via a longitudinal study. \(N=1417\) young adults aged 24 to 30 (\(M=26.24, \text{SD}=1.365\)).

- Uninterested Non-Searchers (36.41%), Interested Non-Searchers (31.97%), Searchers (17.64%), Reunited Searchers (13.97%)

- Complicated findings:
  - Searchers had higher problem levels but those problems were not caused by search itself but were present before search began
  - Contradictions with prior research: Search is normative
Complex Families: Observations & Themes

- Lack of definitive reasons for birth parent relinquishment creates boundary difficulties for adoptive parents
  - Leads to avoidance of full adoption story so children have no grounding or basis for contact fantasies
- Greater commitment to heritage tours for adoptees
- Focus of adoptive parents may be on celebrating and exoticizing birth countries’ cultures
- Families may struggle with connections to American communities from adoptees’ birth countries
- Adjustments and search issues for international adoptees are often conceptualized as “adoption issues” rather than issues about race and culture
- Tendency to focus on whether issues are related to adoption status or whether they are part of “normal development”