Complex Family Relationships in International Adoption:

Search, Reunion, and Contact

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Total Adoptions to the U.S.

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)

  together through an ever-evolving practice without clear rules and expectations

- 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


- 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
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”