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Cultural Socialization in International Adoptive Families

by

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## Abstract

When a child is adopted from a country abroad, adoptive parents are faced with a myriad of decisions, both before, during and after the adoption process, that have a direct effect on how their child develops. Exploratory research inquired into the motivations behind adopting internationally versus domestically, the adoption process, parent-child relations, the issue of race, and more. The main research questions were: What are the experiences of raising an internationally adopted child? How do parents work to preserve their child's culture while simultaneously raising them in American society? To what degree do they prioritize cultural socialization and why? This research attempted to understand the realities of raising an adopted child from abroad in hopes of contributing to the eventual enhancement of culture integration in internationally adoptive families. Qualitative methods were used, involving eleven semi-structured interviews with parents of international children across the United States that were found using a convenience sample. Findings of this research include: adoptive parents of international children value culture preservation yet feel like they should be incorporating it more into their lives; parents seek a strong community and see those connections as beneficial for themselves and their children; barriers to cultural socialization include the waning interest of their adopted children in their birth culture and the location of the family; parents are engaged in an ongoing struggle to balance preserving their child's birth culture and promoting their assimilation in American society, attempting to establish a strong sense of identity and high self esteem in their children; and ITRA and same race families face challenges regarding identity formation, self esteem, and overall development of their children, but ITRA families see these as more relevant to their child's physical difference and race.

## Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of State, 233,934 internationally adopted children were brought into the United States between 1999 and 2011 (U.S. Department of State, 2011). Not only is the number of adoptions substantial, but the rate of adoption is also increasing, as intercountry adoptions (ICA) have almost doubled between 1997 and 2007 (U.S. Department of State, 2008). ICA is a worldwide phenomena and it is clear that the United States is a large actor in this process. Intercountry adoption initially began as a response to orphaned children exposed to poverty or war, yet has also been used as an avenue for couples, either unable to have children or not, to expand their family (Alstein & Simon, 1991). While ICA provides otherwise parentless children with a loving family, these children face a myriad of challenges once they begin their new lives in the U.S. Once these children are adopted, they find themselves in a completely different culture than the one they were born into. They may be surrounded by persons of other races, ethnicities, religious backgrounds, different languages, and cultural practices. The stories of these families do not end upon the completion of the adoption process but rather continue into all aspects of their daily lives. This project aimed to illuminate and personify these experiences and to explore the decisions that parents make within international adoption regarding culture preservation. I asked to what degree parents perceive the importance of preserving their child's birth culture and how they go about promoting that level of cultural competence within the home. These questions helped explain how parents of internationally adopted children juggle two cultures, the dominant American culture and their child's culture of origin, while raising their child.

Though parents interested in adoption can decide to adopt domestically or internationally, ICA may seem more appealing to parents for a variety of reasons. For example, the age and sex

of the baby may be preferable when adopting from abroad. 90% of ICAs involve children less than five years old, while half of these children are infants less than one year old (Fisher, 2003). The age of domestically adopted children are much higher in contrast, with less than 30% under the age of five and six percent under the age of one year old (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). If parents want to adopt a younger child, especially under the age of one, their chances of doing so are much higher in ICA cases. The same is true for girls; more girls are adopted internationally than boys, therefore if parents prefer a girl, it may be easier if adopting from abroad. Another attractive quality of ICA deals with the relationship between adoptive and birth parents. With an increasing tendency towards open adoptions domestically, parents may decide to adopt internationally, making the adoption feel more secure and decreasing the chance of the birth parents changing their mind (Hollingsworth, 2003). While ICA does have its benefits, it does not come without its own risks. Lebner (2000) noted that parents may hesitate when adopting internationally due to worries about general health problems, unknown medical histories, and racial and cultural differences. Choosing a specific adoption route is just the first step in a long journey for those involved, and once parents opt for ICA and welcome their new family member into their home, they are faced with endless decisions and challenges in regards to raising their child.

## **Literature Review**

When internationally adopted children are uprooted from their culture of origin and transferred to a completely different environment, they must familiarize themselves to a whole new way of life. Even young children or babies, who may not be accustomed to any particular culture yet, will develop and grow within a culture that was not initially intended for them and

often within a family that looks different from them. Fortunately, 75-80% of intercountry adopted (ICA) children function well in their new environment, with no more problems in school or home than other non-adopted children, and they have close relationships with their adoptive parents (Tizard, 1991). The seemingly well adjustment of these children has raised questions regarding the exact costs of successful adjustment in ICA cases. Kim (1995) also agreed with this percentage based on his own study. However, Kim's research dealt specifically with Korean adoptees and does not speak to the experiences of other ethnic groups. Despite this limited scope, he asked whether or not this successful integration is accomplished at the cost of the adopted children's birth identity and culture. The struggle of discovering the right degree to which parents should preserve their adopted child's culture or how much to assimilate them into American society has been long present in the history of international adoption, and this study aims to explore these families' personal experiences in this struggle.

### *The Importance of Preservation of Culture*

In the early history of ICA, parents were encouraged to take a "color-blind" approach in raising their children. This meant minimizing the differences between the adopted child and the family, and ultimately promoting the child's assimilation into the dominant culture (Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001). However, many scholars have now agreed that rather than assuming a "color-blind" approach, parents who adopt across racial and cultural lines have a responsibility to their children to promote their child's racial and ethnic identity while also developing their child's skills to cope with prejudice or discrimination they may experience due to their race (Vonk, 2001). The benefits of this culture preservation has been noted, as international transracial adopted (ITRA) children have shown a greater sense of belonging in their adoptive families,

greater self-esteem and feel less marginalized when their parents are active in cultural socialization (Vonk, 2010).

Recognizing the crucial development of a child's identity, the 1989 United Nations Convention called for respect of the preservation of a child's birth identity, including nationality, name, and established family relations in their home country (Article 8, No.1). Moreover, the U.N. also declared the importance of "cultural continuity in the child's upbringing, including the child's ethnic, religious, cultural, and linguistic background" (Article 20, No. 3). Lee (2003) deems cultural socialization as the parental practices that teach children about their racial/ethnic heritage including values, beliefs, customs and behaviors. For the purpose of this study, the definition of birth culture, or culture of origin, is very broad. The term birth culture encompasses all components shared among groups of people or nations, and includes language, customs and traditions, special events, arts, literature, food, history, sports, and more (Thomas, 1986). Due to the general acceptance of the importance of maintaining ties to an adopted child's culture of origin, the question that the majority of parents are now presented with is not whether to integrate their child's culture into their upbringing, but rather when, how, and to what degree to do so to maximize the adjustment of their child.

#### *Characteristics of Child in Relation to Cultural Socialization Practices*

Although it is generally accepted that parents should actively work to promote their child's birth identity, there have been few systematic studies that investigate what parents' attitudes and goals are regarding their children's cultural upbringing and what they are actually doing within the home to promote these cultural ties (Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001). Tessler, Gamache and Liu (1999) explored parenting techniques and described four different approaches

to cultural socialization in raising ICA children: assimilation, acculturation, alternation, and child choice, in which the child decides which cultures he or she wants to learn about and identify with. They also addressed challenges in raising children in a completely bicultural environment, as parents may not have equal access to the necessary resources to reinforce their child's birth culture. In addition, parents may have a tendency to emphasize some aspects of culture while ignoring others (Tessler, Gamache & Liu, 1999).

In line with previous research, Scroggs and Heitfield (2001) found in their analysis of 251 surveys that 96% of respondents, ICA parents of either Asian or European children, felt that developing their child's connection and identity with their birth culture was important. However, they discovered that parents adopting from Asia placed slightly greater importance on maintaining ties to their child's birth culture than parents adopting from Europe. Specifically, 96% of parents who adopted from Asia answered that this was very important or important, while only 92% of parents who adopted from Europe gave the same answers (Scroggs and Heitfield, 2001). While the differences in percentages at which parents prioritize the connection to birth culture are not substantial, the qualitative nature of the study is enlightening; parents of adopted Asian children further explained this importance and attributed it to their child's appearance, which made clear their nationality and adoptive status (Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001). They felt they had to prepare their child for questions and stereotypes that they could experience in their lives, and therefore further emphasized their child's cultural heritage more than adoptive parents of European children. In addition, Vonk (2010) also found that parents of children from Europe felt less pressure to culturally socialize their children.

While these studies suggest how a child's birth origin, race or ethnicity may have an effect on the parental motivations and follow through of promoting their child's birth culture,



there are few other studies that explore this correlation and our knowledge is limited in this regard. This study aims to fill these gaps by investigating further this possible connection between origin of child and degree of cultural socialization. Furthermore, it will explore whether or not the type of adoption, either transracial or same race, has an effect on this perceived importance of culture preservation.

### *Cultural Competence*

The consensus on the importance of parental responsibility in the integration of their child's birth identity into their new lives has encouraged researchers to consider the best ways in which to conceptualize and promote this cultural development. Internationally adopted children will grow up attempting to develop their identity which includes their birth heritage, the acceptance of their physical appearance especially in relation to that of their families, and the heritage of their upbringing (Vonk, 2008). Because many of these children are too young to promote their own cultural identity, the task falls upon their parents in the initial stages of their development. While an array of approaches attempt to describe this process, I utilize Elizabeth Vonk's (2001) concept of cultural competence in order to frame my research. According to Vonk (2001), cultural competence is defined as a set of attitudes, knowledge, and skills that allow parents to meet children's racial and cultural socialization needs. Her framework, based on adoption experiences of parents and children, is catered to parents and their need to increase their awareness, skills, and knowledge, focusing in particular on racial awareness, survival skills, and multicultural family planning.

Racial, or multicultural, awareness deals with a person's awareness of how race, culture, ethnicity, language, and related power status act upon others and themselves (Greene, Watkins,

McNutt, & Lopez, 1998). This self awareness may prove difficult for many European Americans, as many have a lack of experience outside of the dominant culture and are not readily confronted with their racial and cultural identity (Vonk, 2001). In fact, the majority of white international-adoptive parents know little about the cultural heritages of their adopted children prior to adoption (Pertman, 2000). The idea is that if parents are aware of the issues of race, ethnicity and culture, they are better able to help their children in the development of these identities. Multicultural family planning refers to the child's opportunity to learn about and participate in his or her birth culture (Vonk, 2001). This cultural socialization is important in the child's formation of their cultural identity. Such activities can include reading about aspects of their culture, spending time with persons of the same culture, eating traditional food, attending ethnic festivals, and so on. Research has shown that while involvement in the child's birth culture is crucial to their cultural development, it is difficult for parents to facilitate this as they are not members of their child's culture and they should look to role models within the birth culture in order to further their child's cultural development (Steinberg & Hall, 1998). Finally, if the adoption is transracial, parents must prepare their children of color to cope successfully with racism (Vonk, 2001). Learning how to talk about race openly within the family and being armed with the skills to deal with discrimination rests in the hands of parents of these adopted children (Steinberg & Hall, 1998).

While I did not follow Vonk's (2001) framework of cultural competence exactly, I did use it to guide my exploratory research. I asked parents sets of questions that investigated their experiences in regards to their racial awareness, their survival skills, and their multicultural family planning. By looking at these three aspects of their experiences, I hoped to gain a full understanding of the ways in which they implement their cultural competence on a daily basis

and its effect on the child's overall development and adjustment. While all components of this framework are important in gaining a sense of their experiences, and even Vonk (2001) acknowledges that more study in this area is warranted, I narrowed my scope slightly and focused on multicultural planning.

### *Means of Acknowledgement of Birth Culture*

While parents may perceive a high importance of birth culture preservation, the actual realization of that involvement may vary. For example, Trolley et al. (1995) found in their study of 34 ICA families that even though 90% of parents believed that exposure to birth culture was beneficial to their child, only 70% of the sample actually exposed their child to their birth culture on a periodic basis. Silverman (1997) also commented on this discrepancy, noting that while many parents will say that they intend to acknowledge their child's culture of origin, many will not follow through in application. There may be a disconnect between perceived importance of preservation of birth culture and actual follow through, and this study could supplement academic research to further explore and possibly verify this trend.

Parents engage in a variety of multicultural family planning activities when raising their ICA children. The primary means for this exposure involves books and reading materials: 90% of Trolley et al.'s (1995) subjects and 67% of Scherman and Harré's (2004) subjects reported using books and literature on the birth country and culture. Other cultural activities included attending ICA support groups (57%), watching TV programs related to the country of origin (50%), and informally transferring the parents' knowledge about the birth country/culture (47%), and participating in cultural groups/activities (38%) (Scherman & Harré, 2004).

Families engaging in informal cultural activities such as the ones listed above are more prominent than those actively engaging in learning about birth culture. In fact, Scherman and Harré (2004) found that only 42% of the children in their study were actively learning about their birth culture, and only 10% were studying their birth language. This trend was also described by Trolley et al. (1995), who found three areas worth noting: “(1) 50% of the sample said their family had seldom contact with people of their children’s race, (2) 46% of the parents exposed their children to their birth culture via interpersonal relationships, (3) this contact occurs primarily via culturally related social events followed by school contacts” (p.476). These numbers show that many families do not engage in more formal, dynamic, and interpersonal ways to connect their children to their birth culture as much as informal activities. ICA families’ reliance on informal multicultural planning as ways to preserve their child’s culture will be explored in this study, and related to previous studies in its commonality among this population.

Previous literature has been synthesized to present four main components of this study: parents’ perceived importance of preservation of birth culture, the characteristics of the adopted child in relation to cultural socialization practices, cultural competence, and the means of acknowledgement of birth culture. Because the experiences of ICA parents and children in the United States are so diverse it is important to recognize their journeys on an individual basis and hear their stories within their own contexts. This was the purpose of my research: to personify these models of adjustment and parenting and therefore delve deep into the lives of intercountry adoptive families in hopes of better understanding their day to day challenges and successes in culture integration within the home. Specifically, this research investigated: What are the experiences of raising an internationally adopted child? How do parents work to preserve their

child's culture while simultaneously raising them in American society? To what degree do they prioritize cultural socialization and why?

### **Research Design and Methods**

Subjects of this study were parents of internationally adopted children. I focused on adult parents of ICA children for two reasons: firstly, access to this population was much easier than children due to the International Review Board (IRB); and secondly, since many of these children are too young to make their own decisions on how they want to be raised specifically in regards to their cultural ties, and traditionally that role is given to the parents, the task of implementing the preservation of the child's home culture falls onto the parents. Parents' decision processes and motivations behind how they raise their children were explored. In addition, I received informed consent from all subjects and their identifying information is kept confidential throughout the paper. The names of participants do not appear on materials containing their responses. Consent issues were discussed before the first interview and periodically as needed throughout any follow up with contact subjects. Interviews were recorded by a digital recorder and later transcribed. During the transcription process all names were replaced by pseudonyms and all identifying features were altered to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Original recordings and transcriptions were secured in a password-protected file on my personal computer.

The nature of this study is qualitative and involved eleven semi structured interviews. A convenience sample based upon personal contacts and networks was used to gain access to my subject population of parents that have adopted from outside the United States. At the time of the interviews, participants were living in Texas, California, and various areas of Washington.

Interviews were conducted via email, over the phone, or in person based on convenience and feasibility. In person or phone interviews lasted half an hour to an hour and a half depending on time constraints and the talkativeness of interviewees. Participants were mainly open, willing, and excited to share and discuss their experiences.

Three interviewees were single mothers, while the rest of the eight families consisted of both a mother and a father. All mothers and fathers were Caucasian except two couples: one who described themselves as Japanese Hawaiian and Chinese respectively, and one Vietnamese mother who had a Caucasian husband. The ages of the children at adoption ranged from eight days to five years, while the ages of the children at the time of interview ranged from four to twenty two years. Three adoptees were Russian, four were Chinese, five were Ethiopian, and one was Vietnamese. Seven of those interviewed were a part of transracial families in which their adopted child(ren) was of a different race than both of the parents, two had children of the same race, and two described themselves as a mixed family, as one mixed race couple (Vietnamese and Caucasian) adopted a Vietnamese baby, and the previously mentioned Japanese Hawaiian mother and Chinese father adopted a Chinese baby internationally and a Hawaiian child domestically. One other family had children both adopted internationally (Russia) and domestically (Oregon). All other families' children were solely adopted internationally; no interviewees had biological children.

I interviewed the subjects in whichever way they preferred and was not particular as to which party I interviewed (e.g. mother or father, together or separate). Despite this flexibility in who I interviewed, all those interviewed were mothers of adopted children; fathers were not interviewed. This was not by design; rather, when referred to other possible interviewees I was always given names of mothers, not fathers. Heather Jacobson also ran into this while sampling

for her 2008 study on culture keeping. She mentions how her respondents also attested to the fact that the role of culture preservation was not shared equally by men and women, but rather was viewed as a mother's duty. As in this research, there was a lack of interest in the study from fathers during recruitment and often her requests for participation were redirected to their wives. This also hints at the gendered emphasis on child rearing and how the responsibility, or at least perception of responsibility, generally falls upon mothers. The ages and home locations of the adopted children are not pertinent to my research and were therefore not restricted; as long as the subjects have adopted a child, or children, from abroad, their experiences were valuable for my study. It may have been true that characteristics such as age and gender do have a relationship with how ICA children are raised within the home, but because that was not determined until after the data had been gathered, no specific characteristics were prioritized during sampling.

I intended to gain insight into the complex lives of adoptive parents and their children from abroad through semi-structured interviews. By conducting semi-structured interviews with them, which by design utilize a flexible interview format that seeks to encourage unplanned input from participants, I explored their methods of adjustment and culture integration. These interviews allowed me to better understand the issues that present themselves in their daily lives illustrating the challenges they encounter and how they address those challenges. Interview themes included demographics of the parents and children, pre-adoption motivations and preparations, the perceived importance of cultural socialization, the degree and means of cultural socialization, and the various challenges and successes subjects had experienced while raising their internationally adopted children. I transcribed each interview along with my own notes shortly after each one was conducted. This allowed me to look back at each individual interview and have the resources to connect main ideas and see trends or differences between interviews.

After data collection my systematic analysis of the data began. Although I had been tentatively linking main themes and comparing interviews along the way, the comprehensive analysis of all the information I collected was done later on.

Some variability may be expected because both heterosexual married couples and single mother families were interviewed. While this could possibly skew the validity of the research, it has been found that there are no significant differences in cultural competence between single parents or married parents (Massatti & Vonk, 2008). Rojewski (2005) also supports this finding, discussing how no statistically significant differences have been found on the beliefs, practices, and acknowledgement of cultural heritage between the two family types and furthermore, there is no evidence to suggest that single parents are at a disadvantage when culturally socializing their children. While family structure may not seem to have an impact on the level of culture preservation within the home, studies suggest a positive correlation of cultural competence and income, as opportunities to explore one's birth culture can lead to identification with that culture, but may prove to be costly (Thomas & Tessler, 2007). In line with my own research and because of the expensive nature of international adoption, many of the parents I interviewed seemed to be of higher socioeconomic status and discussed their various opportunities to culturally socialize their children.

While qualitative data lacks the statistical support of quantitative data, this project has been able to deeply investigate the lives of respondents. Their narratives depict their lives in a way that quantitative research is unable to and promotes a better understanding of their daily experiences in raising international adopted children. A limitation of this study is in the small number of subjects and the sampling methods. Because I relied on a convenience sample, respondents may not be distinct from another. In addition, the sample may not be representative



of the total population of ICA families in the United States. In addition, the convenience sample used minimized the diversity of the sample. Because interviewees were found through social networks, many of the subjects knew each other from various support groups or friends who had adopted around the same time. Being involved in a post-adoption support group increases a family's level of cultural socialization (Vonk & Massatti, 2008), making the sample consist of those already performing higher levels of culture preservation. Ideally, with further research I would be able to interview adoptive families who do not participate in post adoption support groups, or at least do not know each other through these groups, in order to maximize the diversity of my sample. Randomization would be a great way to increase the validity and reliability of this research.

## **Findings and Discussion**

This paper will discuss six themes that were presented in the research: parents' perceived importance of culture preservation, the various ways in which parents culturally socialize their ICA children, barriers they face in regards to cultural socialization, the sense of community that ICA parents seek and value, how parents attempt to balance cultures in the development of their child's racial and cultural identities, and the similarities and differences between transracial and same race families.

### ***Perceived Importance of Culture Preservation***

*"I think in adoption there's always a hole in the heart and the more information I can give about her background and her identity, I should say identities, the better." --Blair, discussing daughter Reese*

This study found that while parents placed a great importance on maintaining ties to their child's birth culture, they also felt like they should be doing more to incorporate the culture into

their lives. All interviewees felt that promoting their child's birth culture was important. One mother, Karen, stated bluntly that for her adopted daughter "...it is crucial. It is crucial for her self concept, for her to understand where she came from. It's vitally important." Not only did parents stress that for their children, understanding their cultural roots was good for their sense of identity, but some also discussed how it may work as a replacement for lack of knowledge of their biological roots. This sense of loss is also recognized in the literature. In fact, Kim, Hong & King (1979) further address the "shock of transplantation," the loss of biological parents and roots, and the potential identity crisis created for these children who have been adopted internationally. At one point in their development, children begin to recognize that being adopted does not only imply building a family (adoptive), but also losing one as well (biological) (Reinoso et al., 2012).

Many parents acknowledged the absence of firm knowledge of their children's backgrounds. For example, Bethany expressed her worries about the development of her own daughter, saying how she feels "sadness for her that we don't know anything about her birth parents." Bethany approached this situation by emphasizing an open discussion with her daughter Lexie and often discusses what her birth parents might be like based on the little information they know about her background. In addition, when asked about her views on cultural socialization, Bethany responded: "We feel like it is very important. Lexie has always known her cultural heritage. Especially since we do not know anything about her birth parents we feel it is important for her to have a good connection to her birth country and culture." As seen in this case, a knowledge and understanding of where these children came from can grant adopted children a sense of heritage in place of a biological family.

Not only do parents recognize the loss of a biological family as being a potentially troubling idea for their children, but many acknowledged that there are many unanswered questions their children may have about their past. These may include: who are my biological parents, why did they abandon me or give me up, what would my life be like if I was never adopted? Single mother Karen named addressing the unknown with her Chinese adopted daughter Penny as one of her biggest concerns in raising her child:

There are a lot of questions that we won't ever know the answer to...I think that that's ["her recovery, her integration of her complex history into her own personal narrative"] something that is an issue for all adopted children, especially children who were in international adoptions, transcultural adoptions, becoming who they are and making sense of that.

Parents are aware of their children's coming to terms with their complicated and often mysterious past and attempt to aid their child in the development of their personal identities. It seems that parents respond by encouraging communication about the child's past, and emphasizing cultural ties and heritage to their birth culture in order to instill a sense of roots to some aspect of their past.

### ***Means of Cultural Socialization***

*"The food we eat, cultural holidays we celebrate, and family get-togethers, are all Asian/Chinese oriented and intermixed with family traditions which are a melding of Chinese, Hawaiian, and Asian-American cultures" --Molly, mother of a Chinese ICA child and domestically adopted Hawaiian child*

Cultural socialization can be performed in a variety of different ways. Avenues of exposure to a child's birth culture include those that are cognitive, such as reading books relating to the child's ethnic or cultural heritage, or those that are more experiential, such as spending time with people from the child's birth culture (Vonk, 2001). Studies have shown that the most commonly utilized practices require the least amount of integration, involving little contact with people of the children's race. In fact, Vonk et al. (2010) found that the most frequently used

methods of cultural socialization included reading racial/ethnic books (92%); preparing ethnic or cultural food (82%); having friends who have similar ethnic or cultural backgrounds (74%); and choosing multiracial or multicultural entertainment (79%). Living in a racially or culturally diverse neighborhood and choosing child care providers or other role models similar to the child's ethnicity occurred in less than 50% of the internationally adoptive parents.

These findings are similar to the ones discovered in this study. Many of the families performed cultural socialization in many of the same ways. For example, ten out of eleven respondents mentioned that they celebrate certain cultural holidays. Ethiopian New Years for example, is very popular among adoptive families with children from Ethiopia as it falls in September, and does not coincide with any main holidays. Blair, single adoptive mother of one, mentioned how this holiday is easier to celebrate than engaging in Ethiopian Christmas traditions. She hinted at the fact that when cultural events conflict or cultural socialization activities may interfere with American traditions, the American culture trumps the birth culture in priority. Books were also heavily mentioned and utilized by the interviewees as a means to expose their children to their birth culture. Some books were culturally specific while others pertained to race, encouraging children to accept their identity, and others discussed what it means to be adopted. Parents relied on books to achieve a number of different results, yet their presence was undeniable in this study. Another way in which parents engaged in their child's birth culture involved food. The majority of families mentioned cooking cultural food or going out to eat at restaurants that served food from their child's adoptive country. One family even took Ethiopian cooking classes so that they could learn how to cook the foods themselves rather than rely solely on recipes from the internet. This family also engaged in Ethiopian ceremonies from their same cooking teacher.

Another way in which parents preserved their child's culture dealt with their relationship with their child's birth language. In fact, six adoptees were in the process of learning their birth language, and one mother mentioned that she hoped to enroll her daughter in language classes when she was older. While many expressed their hope that their child would eventually learn the language of their birth country, respondents described how learning another language could often be overwhelming for their child, especially if they were struggling with school, friends, or their own personal identity. Some parents continued their child's tie to their birth culture through language a different way: by preserving their cultural names. In this study, nine of the fifteen adoptees had culturally relative first names, one had her birth given middle name, while the rest of the adoptees were given more Americanized names at the time of adoption. Four of the adoptees with cultural names were adopted between the ages of two and six, so parents may have preserved their name out of respect for their personal identities. The majority of parents opted to change their child's name to less conspicuous American names, possibly in hopes to better assimilate their children. This could also stem from parents' level of comfort in engaging in their own culture on a daily basis, and the tendency to prioritize American culture over their child's birth culture by default.

While celebrating cultural holidays, reading cultural and ethnic books, and cooking and eating cultural foods are accessible and informal activities to engage in, others require more active participation. One common way to do this among the interviewees was through culture classes, culture camps, or cultural community centers. Seven families had enrolled their ICA children in culture classes or had been to culture camps. A number of parents sent their ICA children to Saturday classes in which they learned about their birth culture. Others went to summer camps with the same agenda. This varied by family, and typically was related to

convenience. Some families were extremely excited that their chosen culture center was just around the block, while others expressed their frustration that theirs was too far away. This accessibility had an effect on the degree of cultural socialization, as a few parents mentioned that they would like to take their children to classes or to camp, but just didn't have the time or means to make that happen.

The findings in this study are in line with previous studies regarding the means of cultural socialization in ICA families. This wide variation in cultural socialization practices among internationally adoptive parents has been recognized in the literature, and acknowledges that while some parents may rely primarily on ethnic or cultural books and foods, others form deep bonds with adults or children of their child's race or ethnicity, or move to a more diverse neighborhood to facilitate that exposure (Rojewski, 2005; Massatti & Vonk, 2008; Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001).

### ***Barriers to Cultural Socialization***

*"I think that there is a will on part of everybody [to promote a child's birth culture] but family life just gets so complicated and busy and with that we don't really get together with other adoptive families and that's something that I regret." --Blair, mother of Ethiopian child Reese*

Parents seemed to agree on the importance of maintaining connections to and promoting their ICA children's birth culture. However, while interviewees felt like promoting birth culture was significant, they also expressed that they wished they had done more in the past or were currently engaged in more culture preserving activities: "I think it's important however we have not done a very good job... It is one thing I regret a bit" (Lisa). There may be a disconnect between what parents want to do, and what they actually do in regards to culture preservation. Three possible explanations for this will be discussed. One reason for this may stem from the child's disinterest or resistance to learning about their birth culture. A second possible reason is

that parents are very sensitive to how their children respond to learning about their birth culture, and follow a “child’s choice” approach to their degree of cultural socialization. Thirdly, a family’s location may present challenges to the extent and means of culture preservation.

A perceived challenge for some parents in their attempt for cultural socialization is their ICA child’s lack of interest in cultural activities (Vonk et al., 2007). While adopted children may have been interested in learning about their birth culture when they were younger, as they grow older especially into the teenage years, their interest wanes. Jane’s personal experiences are very telling as she has seen both of her adopted children’s interest in Russia decline over the years. Lisa’s family participated in a Russian holiday, Grandfather Frost party every year, and said that while her children were extremely interested and excited for it when they were younger, they do not have the same enthusiasm as teenagers and do not feel that it is an important event: “I don’t think that it plays a major role to them... they’re just typical preteens and teenagers. Anything that requires extra learning and studying, no. They don’t want to do it.” She elaborated, saying that they think their Russian heritage is just a novelty, and they enjoy telling people that they’re Russian. Further:

As they get older, they don’t necessarily get as involved, other than telling everyone that they’re Russian. When my son is given a list of books to read, he will a lot of times pick the books that have to do with Russian history or Russian culture. He will more likely pick something that has to do with Russia.

While their active role in learning about their birth culture may decrease, ICA children still show an overall interest in their birth country.

Bethany said that now that her daughter is a teenager, maintaining those culture ties seems more important to them as parents than her. While she sees that her daughter’s interest in her birth culture is declining, she still does not want to push it upon her: “I know that there are families that bring their children there [culture classes] when the kids are just like ‘I don’t want

to be here' but I haven't encountered that with her yet. I try to encourage her when she has other interests to follow those as well". Sarah also noticed this trend, noting that her daughter has "just aged out of it". These findings are congruent with those in the literature, as Vonk et al. (2010) found that it was usually the child that became less interested in cultural socialization as time went on. In addition, according to Scroggs and Heitfield (2001), parents' awareness of the need for cultural socialization practices increased with the child's age. However, it has also been shown that parental interest in cultural socialization declines over time (Bergquist, Campbell & Unrau 2003; DeBerry, Scarr & Weinberg, 1996). One mother had a possible explanation for this, and described how easy it is to forget that your children are anything but your children, and how routine day to day life always gets in the way of remembering where they came from (Alexis). While parents may be noticing that their children's interest is waning, their own interest or implementation may also fall short of what they want it to be.

Another barrier to cultural socialization is that parents want to promote their child's heritage only so far as it will be received well by their children. Parents expressed how they do not want to thrust their child's birth culture onto an unwilling child, and therefore allow their children to decide how much they want to learn about or engage in. This approach to cultural socialization, deemed as child's choice (Gamache & Liu, 1999), allows the child to determine how much they want to learn about and identify with either culture, their birth culture or American culture. A number of parents expressed this view and described their experiences in promoting their child's birth culture. For example, Jane stated: "We have a little bit of grasp of it [birth culture], but I want to have a better grasp. It's important only as long as it's important to them. It's not important enough to cram it down their throats so to speak." Not only does this show that Jane and her husband wish to understand where their child came from, but also that



they will only expose their child to that knowledge to a certain extent. Many parents discussed how they let their child determine the degree of culture preservation or learning about the birth culture that went on. Bethany elaborated on this, saying that she will encourage these cultural ties “as much as we can and as much as she wants.” Parents want to promote these cultural understandings but also want to respect their children’s wishes in what they want to be involved with.

A family’s location may also present a challenge to the level of cultural socialization that occurs. Lack of access or resources to cultural or ethnic celebrations, culture centers, or overall cultural exposure may make it difficult for parents to promote their child’s birth culture. For example, Alexis described how initially, she would only buy handicrafts or items that she found if they were specifically Ethiopian. However, she has come to the realization that the United States is very West Africa focused, and rarely finds Ethiopian handicrafts when shopping. She now buys anything African, thinking that it is “better than nothing.” This is a different experience than many Chinese adoptive families described, as access to the Chinese culture via culture centers, handicrafts, restaurants, and festivals seemed to be more accessible. This was especially true for those families living in the Washington area due to the high number of Chinese residents. As previously mentioned, location also played a role in the likelihood of my interviewee’s participation in culture centers. For example, Karen enrolled her child in weekly Saturday Chinese classes because it is only a few blocks from her house. On the other hand, Blair is not certain she can enroll her daughter in Ethiopian classes over the summer due to its far away location.

Not only does location affect accessibility of certain cultural events or activities, Scroggs and Heitfield (2001) discussed how a family’s location is often perceived by parents as

problematic. Their study found that not only does it limit access to certain cultural socialization opportunities, but it is especially seen as challenging for parents who describe their locations as “homogeneous, nondiverse, or White.” Alexis was hyperaware of this issue of location, but in a different way. When choosing schools, she opted to enroll her children in a school that was further away, less academically rigorous, yet more diverse in its students, than the closer, “better,” yet homogeneously white school just around the corner and in her school district. She prioritized her children’s development of their racial identity over the perceived academic gains they might have experienced had they been enrolled at the closer school. If she had been living in a more diverse neighborhood, Alexis would not have to make such a decision to prioritize between her children’s academic or racial development. Overall, this study has found that while many parents believe in the importance of culture preservation and set out with the best of intentions to culturally socialize their children, life often intervenes and their actualization does not line up with their intentions.

### ***The Valued Sense of Community***

*“It’s good for everybody! The kids see the other kids, and not only are they black kids with white parents but they are Ethiopian kids. Even though they don’t fully know what that means now, they do know that it is some sort of connection. For parents, you just need the support structure of people who know what you’ve been through: the funny things, the not so funny things. That support network is really great.”*  
--Alexis, discussing her adoptive community.

Many respondents discussed the importance of a strong sense of adoptive community in their lives and its positive impact on their ICA children. This sense of community has been expressed in three ways: the child’s relationships with other adoptees or children with a shared ethnicity or heritage, the child’s relationships with role models, and the parents’ relationships with other adoptive parents and families. Some parents mentioned that their child’s exposure to other adoptive children were important for their development. Karen’s daughter has two good

friends of Chinese descent: a Chinese American of immigrant parents and a Chinese American who was adopted from China into a Caucasian family. Karen said:

It's healthy for her. I don't want to limit her options, but I think that it's very important for her to have those connections. It helps to see that she's not alone. It also helps her connect with Chinese Americans who are not a part of that adoption process, so it's really important to me that she has those role models as well.

One study conducted by Friedlander (1999) found that all participating children had contact with other ICA children, who were usually adopted from the same country. This not only allowed the adopted children to share in experiences of the international adoptive process, but also with adoptees of the same race and heritage. This process provides children with a reference group with whom to identify, which may allow an easier comprehension of a child's understanding of what it means to be Ethiopian, Russian, Chinese, etc. (Reinoso et al., 2012).

Role models were also seen as constructive relationships for adoptive children. For example, Lisa's son has a friend whose dad is Russian and speaks fluent Russian. Although they don't see him much anymore, she stressed the importance of having that role model in his life. Sarah also discussed how these relationships came about through her daughter's participation in a Chinese culture academy: "I really liked having that community, and I really like her having those female role models of Chinese women, because a lot of teachers are Chinese. I thought that that might be really important for her especially as she got older."

One mother, Alexis, recognizing the benefits of role models for her Ethiopian children, sought out African American adults to fill these roles. These were people that she and her family encountered on a daily basis, and included her child's principal, a woman grocer at a neighborhood store, and Fred, a sixty something volunteer at an afterschool reading program ("I don't think he [Alemu] gets a lot out of these sessions but I like to have him go just so he can see Fred!"). Alexis viewed these connections as crucial for her children's racial identity, and sought

out cultural role models for the same reason. She takes her two children to an Ethiopian community center in Seattle not only to expose them to their birth culture, but also because of the connections that it provides:

They see other black kids with white parents, or black and white parents, but they don't see a lot of Ethiopian adults. So what's cool about the community center is that these are immigrants, they weren't adopted as children; they're from the old country. The way they greet the kids, "dehna nehsh, dehna nehsh," and kissing them on the cheek almost smothering them, I almost wanted to start crying. It's just great to expose them to that.

Alexis understood the impact of having not only African American role models for her black children but cultural role models as well, emphasizing the importance of that exposure. Often, TRA (transracial adoptive) parents are unable to teach their children about a culture that is different than their own, and instead must introduce them to role models within their birth culture (Steinberg and Hall 1998).

Racial and cultural exposure was valued by the majority of parents in this study. In fact, all but one interviewee was a member of some sort of adoption support group or more culturally specific group, or participated in cultural organizations or centers. These groups and schools were seen as useful in two ways. Not only did they help ICA children learn about where they came from, but they also gave both parents and children a sense of community with others who understood the realities of adoption. Jane worked with an adoption support group for Russian and Ukrainian children, and felt that her connection with the group positively influenced her children: "My kids have always known kids from other families that have adopted internationally, largely from Russia. It's been such a common thing, it's always been a non-issue. They've always known other people, which I think is important." Vonk and Massatti (2008) found that the degree of cultural socialization activities was positively associated with participation in post-adoption support groups. It is especially important for parents who need

encouragement and access to resources to develop cultural socialization skills that they do not have or feel comfortable doing. Overall, participation in adoption groups, community centers, cultural educational classes and forming bonds with other adoptive families or members of similar racial categories are not only common among ICA families but beneficial for the cultural socialization of their children, and the sense of community offers parents and children alike with a sense of belonging and understanding.

### ***Race, Identity, and the Balance of Cultures***

*“I’ve tried to balance my feeling like she might want that connection later when she understands more what it’s like to be Chinese in American culture with not wanting to constantly shove it down her throat and making her feel like she’s different in a way that she doesn’t seem to want to acknowledge or deal with.”--Sarah, discussing her daughter Della*

Parents are constantly grappling with the balance of promoting a birth culture and trying to facilitate their child’s assimilation. Many parents believe that this assimilation often leads to a higher self esteem and healthier development of their identity. However, parents also stress that their child’s understanding of where they came from, namely their birth culture, helps them better conceptualize their whole self. Lisa said “I would emphasize how important it [culture preservation] is. I regret not doing more for Alec in this aspect. I think he would probably feel more connected and perhaps have a higher self esteem.” Jane focused more on her response to her children’s perception of the importance of their Russian heritage:

If it’s importance to them it’s important to me. I think that if it’s important to me, then they feel important...What makes a difference honestly is that if they see that it’s important to you, they can choose whether they want to study about it, read about it, learn about it. If you see that it’s important to your parents, well that makes them feel good. They think, ‘that’s important to my mom. My mom thinks that’s important, so that makes me feel good.’

Jane stressed the interplay between parents and child and the perceived importance of birth culture. In her opinion, her children will benefit from and feel more accepted and connected if the parents promote how special their Russian culture is.

A number of interviewees discussed how finding the balance of varying identities was crucial for their child's development. Identity can have multiple dimensions, but for the purpose of this study will be discussed as either racial or cultural identity. Racial identity is defined as "one's self-perception and sense of belonging to a particular group...including not only how one describes and defines oneself, but also how one distinguishes oneself from members of other ethnic groups" (McRoy 1994: 66). Cultural identity is "determined by the particular society to which the individual belongs [and includes] behaviors, beliefs, rituals, and values" (Steward & Baden 1995: 6). Many parents discussed their child's identity in terms of both racial and cultural identity. Karen mentioned her own daughter's identity, and stated "I want her to develop as a whole person- her Chinese ethnicity is a part of her, but it's just a part." She expanded, and discussed how her daughter needs to learn how to integrate her complicated history with her new personal story, discovering who she is along the way. Being adopted from another country places ICA children in a precarious position. Often with little or no knowledge of a birth family, internationally adopted children must learn to establish their own cultural identity within two cultures: their one from birth and American society. In addition, if their race differs from that of their parents, siblings, and immediate surrounding area or community, the development of their racial identity may also be troublesome. According to Vonk (2001), ICA children are in an ongoing struggle to understand their identity through an integration and acceptance of their physical appearance, their birth culture, and the culture of their upbringing.

Some families found this integration of cultures and development of identities as uncomplicated, while others struggled to find a straightforward solution. Molly and her two children, both internationally and domestically adopted, found this balance to be relatively easy:

It was quite natural for us to integrate birth cultures of our adopted children into our home and when raising our family because the cultural backgrounds were similar to both of our backgrounds. The food we eat, cultural holidays we celebrate, and family get together, are all Asian/Chinese oriented and intermixed with family traditions which are a melding of Chinese, Hawaiian, and Asian-American cultures.

This facilitation of culture blending came easy to Molly and her family, as her children were of similar descent to her and her husband. For other families, this transition and decision making process of how to integrate two cultures was not so easily attained. For example, Blair discussed her own Ethiopian daughter's journey to self discovery:

She's perceived by American black culture by everyone around her whether or not she has any background in that, so she's representing three different cultures in her life and she needs to be comfortable in all three of them. And that's my big challenge. I don't know if we're going to achieve that but I'm at least aware of the need for it.

Blair demonstrates how parents understand the effects their decisions regarding cultural socialization have on their children, especially in regards to their self esteem and identity, and work to find a balance that will be most beneficial for the well-being of their child.

According to Jacobson, parents find themselves in a constant balancing act: "They are afraid of promoting their child's birth culture too little, but also of going overboard, which made their child at risk for feeling different and excluded, and the risk that their child would reject the culture in the process" (2008: 99). Parents want the best for their children, maximizing the positive experiences in their life and boosting their self esteem, comfort, and understanding about who they are. With ICA children, this process involves an integration of their past, often wrought with unanswered questions, their present, and their future, determining who they want to become. With two or more cultures present in their child's life, parents are faced with daily

decisions in regards to their child's cultural and racial socialization. While the decisions of the degree and means of how to accomplish this goal may differ among ICA parents, the goal of establishing a strong and positive identity in their children is shared and prioritized.

### **Similarities and Differences between ITRA and Same Race Families:**

*"They've talked about skin color. There's only one time when Debelo said he wished he had white skin. I didn't make a big deal about it because I didn't feel like he was really distressed about it, but they're things we need to be ready for." --Grace, mother of Ethiopian sons Debelo and Brehan*

Unfortunately, my sample did not offer a wide enough variety in order to thoroughly address the similarities and differences between international transracial adoptive (ITRA) families and same race families. Two same race families were interviewed, and were Caucasian parents of adopted Caucasian children from Russia. Two families described themselves as mixed or blended: a Japanese mother and Chinese Hawaiian father who adopted a Chinese girl internationally and a Hawaiian girl domestically, and an internationally adopted Vietnamese mother, a Caucasian father, and an internationally adopted Vietnamese daughter. The rest of respondents were part of ITRA families in which the parents, both Caucasian, were of a different race than their adopted children. While some literature has suggested that same race families may culturally socialize their adopted children less than transracial families, this was not supported in this study, mainly due to the characteristics of the sample. Despite this limitation, interviews suggested the following themes regarding parents' experiences with race and the overall development of their ICA children.

Race or physical differences between parents and children in ITRA families are ever present issues and ones that can't be ignored, and these comprise the main distinction between multiracial and same race families. These differences can be seen both within the family and outside of the family, and are realities that same race families do not have as apparent in their



day to day lives. It seems that because same race families do not have to address this issue as readily, they are able to focus their energy on more pertinent issues in their lives, such as identity, self esteem, and overall development. ITRA families also deal with these developmental challenges, yet their issues seem to stem more from the child's racial difference while same race families are more pertinent to their adoptive status.

Each ITRA family had something to say about race and its role in their lives. Alexis described how her family's social worker prepared them for being conspicuous in their community: "She said, 'Be prepared to stick out. There are going to be times when you'll be like gah can we just go out and eat pizza? Do we have to be the poster child for transracial adoption?'" Blair also discussed how others were aware of her Ethiopian child's difference, and mentioned many times when kids in Reese's preschool would say "hey wait a minute, she can't be your mother!" Because Reese is only four years old, Blair acknowledges that "I feel like I'm ready to talk about it but she's not yet, she's kind of oblivious at this point. That will be an interesting challenge." Despite her daughter's young age and her incomprehension of her physical difference, Blair's story is telling in that people outside of the family do recognize these physical differences and may see ITRA families as unusual. It also hints that parents are aware and ready to address the various challenges that may arise as a part of these differences, which was supported by many other interviews in this study.

Despite the physical differences that make ITRA families stick out to outsiders, race is also a prominent issue within these families. Many ITRA parents described how their children were becoming aware or had already mentioned looking different than the rest of the family. Karen described how her adopted daughter from China, Penny, is realizing these differences: "She is starting to say 'Why do I have straight black hair? Can we curl my hair?' That's

something I'm keeping an eye on because I want her to have a healthy self image of herself...I think that she is starting to get a sense of the difference of physical resemblance." Karen wasn't the only mother concerned about their children's identity development in regards to their race. Alexis reinforced this trend, and described her experiences with her Ethiopian daughter Zema:

Kids always want to look like their parents. With my daughter, she's always like 'I wish my hair was gold mommy like yours!' and 'I wish my skin was lighter like yours.' We try to be really big in turning it around. I'll say 'well honey I wish my skin was like yours because yours is like chocolate and chocolate is yummy.' We always try and reinforce the positive aspect of that.

ITRA parents are very cognizant of their children's development of a healthy racial/ethnic identity, and want to instill a positive self image in their children, especially when those children begin recognizing their physical difference. While same race families, such as those who adopted from Russia, may have physical differences that can lead to these challenges as well, Alexis put it well when she said "You just can't get more obvious than black and white."

Both types of families deal with challenges in identity formation, self esteem, and overall development, but ITRA families see these as more relevant to their child's physical difference and race. When the obvious differences of race are not present, same race families are allowed to focus their energies on other issues, which for many include the development of a healthy self image and discussed this in regards to their children's ties to their birth country. While multiracial families also discussed these connections, they had the additional task of addressing their child's race as well.

## **Conclusion**

This research has identified a number of findings: adoptive parents of international children emphasize the importance of maintaining cultural ties to their children's birth culture

yet often do not fulfill this ideal level of cultural socialization; barriers to culture preservation include the location of the family and the declining interest of both child and parents; parents seek a strong adoptive or racial/ethnic community and see those connections as being beneficial for themselves and their children; parents are constantly trying to balance preserving their child's culture and promoting their assimilation in American society, attempting to establish a strong sense of cultural and racial identity in their children; and ITRA and same race families face challenges regarding identity formation, self esteem, and overall development of their children, but ITRA families see these as more relevant to their child's physical difference and race.

The exploratory nature of this research was both beneficial and hindering in regards to its results. Firstly, the extensive investigation of ICA parents' lives lead to a large number of commonalities and conclusions, making it difficult to focus the findings into a more cohesive discussion. Another downside of the exploratory research design was its inability to fully address one of the initial research questions, which sought to explore race and its effect on cultural socialization. This question has yet to be answered due to the small sample size and lack of quantitative analysis of the study. With more interviews and an incorporation of quantitative research of same race and transracial adoptive families, this question could be explored more in depth. An approach based on mixed methods would be beneficial in further research.

Despite its shortcomings, this research has brought up a number of themes within the international adoptive community which can be addressed. The main goal of this project was not only to investigate, but to understand the lives of ICA families in order to better address the issues they encounter. One way in which this can be done is through emphasizing participation in support groups. The majority of interviewees were already engaged in these groups, but some were not. Their degree of participation could also be increased. This would be significant for

many families as they place a large emphasis on the importance of community, and these groups can instill that sense of belonging and understanding among international adoptive families.

Along with increasing this sense of community, the degree of cultural socialization may also be increased as a result. As previously discussed, this positive correlation between participation in support groups and cultural socialization has been discovered in many studies.

Another issue that should be addressed is in ICA children's interest in their birth culture. It was found that their interest wanes as they grow older, especially into their teenage years. Through the promotion of adolescent and teenage adoptees interest in their birth culture, parents would be more willing to culturally socialize their children. Because many parents depend on child's choice to determine the amount to which they preserve their child's culture, having a more willing, open, and excited child would increase the degree to which they were exposed to their culture. This maintained interest could be encouraged by making culture camps or classes more engaging and exciting for adolescents, rather than making them feel like a chore. Having ICA children's friends involved in these could also be beneficial. Adoptees could learn about their birth culture while simultaneously spending time with their friends who are also learning about a new culture. This could promote inclusion, understanding, and an improved interest in their heritage because it is seen as something fun and exciting.

Utilization of support groups and cultural exposure activities and events are crucial for the cultural socialization of ICA children. However, there is a gap between how much parents want to engage in these activities and how much they are actually doing. This disconnect is hindering their ability to be culturally competent parents and to share that knowledge of international heritage with their children. Programs need to be implemented or reworked to present parents with the tools to bridge this gap. Preparing parents especially for the various

challenges they will encounter with their child's racial, ethnic, or cultural identity and self esteem issues will be crucial in their child's overall development. If parents are taught how to balance the assimilation and preservation of their child's multiple cultures and are ready to respond to situations regarding race, culture and identity that are bound to occur while raising their internationally adopted children, we can hope that those children will develop into happier, healthier, more integrated and balanced adults.

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