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Supporting Families Created Through Transnational/Transracial Adoption

Bai Jia Bei

Contemporary families are more variable in composition than ever before. The number of international adoptions in Canada represents another shifting dimension to family formation. Critics of transracial adoption have argued that white parents cannot provide their children with adequate exposure and connection to their birth culture or understand how to deal with the racism their children will face. The present study was designed to address and expand on findings of our previous study by exploring the types and availability of pre- and post-adoption services. Mothers in this study explained that the accessibility of adoption services is like a “a patchwork quilt” and expressed the belief that they were learning how to parent their children by joining layers together—parenting skills and adoptive parenting skills.

We are living in an historical moment . . . the degree of variation in family forms and the amount of personal choice in making babies and making families seems to invite liberation and fulfillment. (Shanley 1)

The dominant portrayal of “family” in popular culture is that families are biologically related, include both a male and female parent, live in one place, and share the same ethnic/cultural/religious background and that extended family members live elsewhere. We know, however, that this model is clearly a less than accurate representation of many Canadian families. In fact, contemporary families are more variable in composition than ever before. Even the most homogeneous communities include more and more examples of foster families, children being raised by their grandparents and other kin, non-related households, step and blended families, and same sex families, as well as families formed or expanded by open or closed adoption. (Laidlaw; Galvin).

The number of international adoptions in Canada represents another shifting dimension to family formation. In the 1990s, Canadians adopted 21,973 children from abroad, with more than 60 percent from East Asia, Southeast Asia and South Asia, with China being the number one source (ACC “China Leads”). From 2000-2008, Canadians adopted 16,828 children from abroad, with China continuing to be the top source country (ACC 2008). The vast majority of people who choose to adopt East Asian children in Canada are white (Dorow; Volkman). The authors’ families are part of these statistics. Each of us has two daughters adopted from China, and we live in small communities where our children are highly visible minorities.

Learning from the Past

Critics of transracial adoption have argued that white parents cannot provide their children with adequate exposure and connection to their birth culture or understand how to deal with the racism their children will face (Diller and Moule). Indeed, research outlining the experiences of Canadian Aboriginal children raised outside their traditional communities in white-adoptive homes seems to support this belief. The problems that arose during “the Sixties’ Scoop” are well documented. Many of these children suffered identity problems, which contributed to an onslaught of personal problems and difficulties connecting with their adoptive families. The children also had difficulties relating to mainstream society because they were often discriminated against based on their skin colour (Bennett).

Despite the lessons learned from the difficulties of past transracial adoptions, adoptive families still face a challenge in Canada, especially outside larger urban centres, to integrate culture and strategies to combat racism into their everyday lives. Children isolated from their racial communities experience greater pressure to assimilate, face more stereotyping, and are both more visible and more vulnerable to institutional racism (Diller and Moule).

Study Design and Methodology

Three major findings emerged from an earlier study we conducted with white parents of Asian children on their experiences of race, racism, and racial identity (Corbin Dwyer and Gidluck, “White Parents of Asian Children”; Gidluck and Corbin Dwyer, “Families of Asian Children”; Corbin Dwyer and Gidluck, “Postcards from the Middle”; Gidluck and Corbin Dwyer, “Race Made Salient”). Parents spoke of the need to help their children acquire strategies, tools, and support to handle intrusive questions, racial teasing, and racial isolation. However, many also expressed worry that they were not equipped to

help their children deal with racism. These skills become particularly critical because of what parents view as a paucity of post-adoption services available to them and their children. Our present study was designed to address and expand on these findings by exploring the types and availability of adoption services and examining policy needs.

In exploring with parents their experiences with pre- and post-adoption services, we posed three overarching questions: 1) Have you or has anyone in your family accessed pre- and/or post-adoption services? If not, why not? If so, were they helpful? How? 2) What pre- and post-adoption services are available to you in your community; within an hour's drive; online; or via other long distance technology? 3) What services would you like to access that are not available to you?

Participants were recruited in various ways: through private adoption agencies, government departments, adoption support groups, listservs, and adoption publications. Data were gathered from online surveys and individual interviews (in person or by telephone). The online surveys were in English and French and included demographic information. Survey participants were asked to contact the researchers if they were interested in discussing their experiences in individual, in-depth interviews (the majority of which were conducted by telephone because of distance).

Sixty-six parents participated in the online survey (62 completed it in English and four in French). Of the 80 children adopted transracially, 58 (73 percent) had been adopted internationally and 22 (27 percent) domestically. Ten interviews were conducted with adoptive parents: two organize and host adoptive family support groups; two have children born in Africa; one has a Hispanic child adopted from the United States; and six have children born in China, one of whom also has a Korean son. One interview was with a husband and wife in the process of adopting a child from the Philippines.

Frequency distributions were conducted on the quantitative data, while hermeneutic phenomenology thematic analysis was used with the qualitative data. Hermeneutics as a research method is a way of systematically dealing with interpretation (Bolton). Max van Manen explained hermeneutic phenomenological research as follows: the study of lived experience; the description of the experiential meanings we live as we live them; the human scientific study of phenomena; and a search for what it means to be human. As Vangie Bergum explained, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach is concerned with describing the experience and interpreting it as a way of identifying the nature of the phenomenon.

In qualitative research, themes are usually expressed as statements, which highlight explicit or implied meaning that runs through most of the collected data or that involve deep and profound emotional or factual impact (Ely et

al.). One of van Manen's approaches to isolating themes in text, the selective or highlighting approach, was used to assist with reflective analysis. The text was listened to and read several times by the researchers, asking: "What statement(s) or phrase(s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon or experience?" (93). These statements were highlighted and arranged into working themes.

Once the themes and data were revisited several times and a consensus derived on the essence of the experience, the data were turned to again to find examples of the essence. To help make it visible, some features of the phenomenon were extracted (van Manen) by asking the following questions of the data: Of what aspect is this an instance? What questions about an aspect does this item of data suggest? What sort of answers to questions about an aspect does this item of data suggest (Lofland and Lofland)?

Quilting

Quilting is a sewing method, traditionally done by women, used to join two or more layers of material together to make a thicker padded material. The metatheme metaphor we chose was quilting, as the mothers in our study described the availability and accessibility of adoption services as "a patchwork quilt" and expressed the belief that they were learning how to parent their children by joining layers together—parenting skills and adoptive parenting skills.

Why is the "quilting" metaphor so apt? A tradition in northern China is to make a "One Hundred Good Wishes Quilt," or *Bai Jia Bei* as it is called in Mandarin, to welcome and celebrate a new life in a family. It is also said to be a blanket united by one hundred families as the quilt contains the luck, energy, and good wishes from all the families and friends who contributed a piece of fabric. In our study, mothers talked about what they wanted for their children—and what was missing—regarding pre- and post-adoption services. These mothers are essentially sewing a *Bai Jia Bei* by bringing together information they have learned from many different sources, with their most significant resource being other parents of transnationally/transracially adopted children because they are the people who understand their parenting situations the best. However, we question whether it *should* be the responsibility of parents to educate one another, particularly when they lack the financial support necessary to be effective, they are not compensated for their time and efforts in the same manner that professionals *are* who are *supposed* to be doing this job and they often do not have professional training.

Our findings indicate that many parents are not prepared for the challenges of helping their adopted children negotiate the difficult minefields of being a racial minority. To avoid the problems that arose involving transracial adop-

tions of Aboriginal children in the “Sixties Scoop,” we firmly believe that governments need to play the lead role in knowledge transfer by identifying the skills parents need and providing services so that parents learn these skills so that the result is not a patchwork quilt, but a quilt with a specific, coherent design, responsive to the needs of Canadian families.

Patchwork Quilt

Before any adoption, all prospective parents must undergo a home study to assess their skills as potential adoptive parents. Practice varies from jurisdiction to jurisdiction on how much emphasis, if any, should be placed during this assessment on the unique challenges of adopting children of a race different from that of the prospective parents. Post-adoption services to help parents and children deal with issues that arise also vary widely from province to province, particularly in centres outside large metropolitan areas, which typically lack services and support to help families manoeuvre through these challenges.

Of our study participants, 90 percent reported that their home study included a discussion of the unique challenges of parenting a child of a different race. However, only 63 percent indicated that their home study process offered guidance on how to address those challenges. One parent wrote, “Home study practitioner had no knowledge or experience of post-adoption resources or groups.” Another parent noted that the PRIDE (Parent Resources for Information, Development and Education) course, mandatory in some provinces during the home study process, did not specifically address the unique challenges of transracial adoptions. Another parent reported, “We had to do all the research ourselves before adoption. We recently started a support group.”

Learning to Quilt: The Need for Instruction

Parents in our study emphasized their belief that many people within their broader adoption community are either not conscious of race issues or not willing to acknowledge that they even exist. One woman who coordinates an online support group for children adopted from Africa expressed one way in which she is frequently challenged by other adoptive families:

You're being too sensitive. Oh my goodness, would you just shut up about the racism.... This isn't going to be such a big deal because all my friends love the baby, my family loves the baby, and they all embrace this black child, and race is not going to be an issue in our community even though they are the only black child in the community. (Survey participant)

Another participant, the mother of two daughters from China, recalled a recent conversation with a woman early in the adoption process who said that she would only consider adoption from Asia because she didn't want to deal with discrimination. She would not consider Ethiopia because then she would have to deal with race issues.

She obviously missed the whole boat in any of her pre-adoption sessions with her social worker... Maybe her kid is going to be Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, whatever. That doesn't mean he's going to be brilliant in math. It doesn't mean he is going to be a virtuoso pianist. There's reverse expectations because they are Asian ... positive discrimination.... It is not fair if they are not educated before they come down this road. (Survey participant)

This participant emphasized that the woman she was referring to was not unique. She indicated that she regularly meets other families who have adopted from Asian countries who do not believe their children will ever face discrimination. Racism is something, she says, many adoptive parents believe is reserved for people who have adopted Black or First Nations children.

Teaching the Basics of Quilting

Some U.S. jurisdictions, notably Minnesota, have put in place tools to educate families in the pre-adoption stage by assessing their degree of understanding of and ability to cope with the unique challenges and special needs of children placed cross-racially (Minnesota Department of Human Services). In Canada, practices vary widely from province to province as to how much, if any, emphasis is placed on preparing Canadian families for these challenges before adoption. Also like in the U.S., Canada offers a patchwork quilt of services for families post adoption. One study participant was very frank in assessing her own adoption readiness: "I'm not condemning international adoption. I support transracial adoption. That is obviously how I got my family, but I think people need to go into it with their eyes a lot wider open than I did."

One recent initiative in Canada holds tremendous promise for better preparing individuals to adopt transracially. The Halton Multicultural Council received funding from Ontario's Trillium Foundation to develop and pilot a Canadian-based pre-assessment education and training tool for families considering adopting or fostering children from a race or culture different from their own and to address the unique needs of children and parents involved in transracial adoption. The curriculum helps participants identify their strengths and limitations for parenting transracially; challenges them to think critically about race, culture and privilege for themselves and their child; offers them

the opportunity to reflect on their motivation for and commitment to raising a multiracial/cultural family; and offers tools and strategies to help them navigate the transracial parenting journey (HMC).

Becoming a Self-taught Quilter

Most of what I've learned has been self-taught by reading books and the Internet. (Survey participant)

A number of very positive comments were made about the agencies that facilitated adoptions. However, these same parents knew many other families that did not get the same type of support either before they adopted or once their children were in their homes.

Our agency did a very good job of training us. We had a three-day seminar, and they brought in lots of guest speakers and lots of families that were living in adoption right now, and so getting to hear from kids and from adult adoptees and from adoptive parents was very beneficial. I know a lot of agencies in town just have a workbook that you have to go through on your own. (Interview participant)

Another participant, who lived in a major metropolitan area, realized how fortunate she was to have chosen the adoption agency she did only after meeting a family that chose a different one, one that had provided them very little training before their adoption. This family appeared to be experiencing quite severe attachment and bonding problems with their adopted daughter, yet their agency had provided no post-adoption services for them to deal with these problems. The first they learned about bonding and attachment was from a family still in the pre-adoption phase. This family had no idea who to turn to for support even though they lived in one of Canada's largest metropolitan areas where, at least theoretically, they should have had more access to services than people in more remote locations.

They didn't know about bonding. They didn't know about attachment. We thought this was very basic. This was hammered home to us by the course that we took through our agency. (Interview participant)

Alberta, Ontario and Quebec are the only provinces with health clinics that purport to have specific expertise in adoption, and even these facilities may not be offering services directly related to some of the more complex psychosocial issues related to transracial adoption. One participant expressed concern to us

that her clinic is underfunded and understaffed and is not meeting the needs of the adoption community because, she believes, many families are not even aware that their clinic exists due to lack of promotion.

We started to do some advertising about seven or eight years ago when we got started, and we stopped because we were creating a wait list and were not able to meet demand without opportunity for getting more resources ... and resources not only meant getting money it meant finding the right [staff]. (Interview participant)

By the “right” staff, she was referring to health care professionals trained in child development and early intervention, as well as being knowledgeable about how adopted children may or may not fit the recognized norms for physical development, attachment and bonding, and other measurable indicators.

“Development,” she says, “is not integrated into social work school. It’s a different field.” She believes that better efforts are needed to do cross training in professions or develop multi-disciplinary teams.

If I can have multiple pairs of eyes and we can do this in a very structured, safe way, I think that we could get a better picture of the whole child than we are now. (Interview participant).

One mother who participated in our study was clear in her belief that the medical community had failed her child and her family.

Medically we had a very hard time with our son. He came with a lot of unknowns about him.... We were able to get a pediatrician and one of the top pediatricians in [our city] who was the gateway to all of their services who in my opinion was very poor at his job. I think he was greatly overworked and there was not enough support services. (Interview participant)

Switching Designs Halfway Through the Process

Another parent was harsh in her assessment of social welfare officials involved in the adoption process. Active in the community of adoptive families with children from Africa, she was dismayed that families who had recently chosen to switch countries from which they would be adopting were provided no guidance or preparation for their change. She related a story about a woman who had come to her two or three days before she was traveling to Africa to receive her new daughter and had no idea that her African-born daughter would have any different hair or skin needs than her Chinese-born daughter.

You live in an urban city with a huge black population, and your social worker never even brings this up? You're not living in a rural population where it's 97 percent white. She was living in Toronto, and her social worker never brought this up. (Interview participant)

Skin and hair care needs, this parent suggested, are “just level one of the issues.” This parent firmly believed that:

The social workers and the agencies ... are failing miserably. They are not supporting the parents, and I think a lot of it is that the social workers don't know ... the difference between raising an Asian daughter and a Black son.... (Interview participant)

Educating Quilters: Whose Job Is It?

Most post-adoption services provided to families, even those officially run through adoption agencies, have been developed by parents themselves because they identified the need for, and took the initiative to organize them. One parent-activist who took the lead in organizing support groups and educational workshops for the adoptive community said she is burned out and does not know if anyone else will step into her shoes if she stops volunteering in this capacity. Furthermore, she expressed resentment that this type of service falls on the shoulders of volunteers.

It shouldn't be my job to go to a conference ... to get really excited about a video that can help other families. That should be the social worker getting really excited about a video that she can show her families.... (Interview participant)

Another parent-activist expressed even stronger feelings that child welfare officials “facilitating” adoptions rely too much on adoptive families to provide needed services.

I would like to see the Province get serious about providing appropriate pre-adoption and post-adoption support for families. Currently, there is no programming and no funding available for [the] development of programming by parent-led groups for adoption support. The funding requirements for a program to meet the needs of adoptive families in this province would not be great. However, there does not seem to be any will on the part of provincial adoption officials to even recognize these services as desirable or necessary. Families are expected to support one another, which

we try to do. As for the role of the Province ... once families are approved for adoption and the legal formalities are completed, they wash their hands of us ... and I believe this is the case for families who adopt domestically, as well as internationally. (Survey participant)

One mother expressed frustration trying to find professionals to support her family post adoption.

I have found a lack of help for the emotional needs of my child. Few professionals have even the basic knowledge of issues involved for a transracially internationally adopted child. Our social worker is among the more ignorant of service providers. She is cheerful and willing to learn but ultimately up to date only on domestic adoption. (Survey participant)

Another of our study participants added, “Of the services received, none came from the provincial department which ‘helped’ to facilitate our child’s adoption. These services were provided by our adoption agency located in another province” (Survey participant).

Some participants in our study felt the government’s role should be to provide guidelines for the agencies facilitating the adoption and regularly monitor them to ensure they are offering adequate pre- and post-adoption services.

I think if they [adoption agencies] are going to facilitate an adoption and take money for the adoption, they should put some work into it and offer some of those services as well and support for families who run into trouble when they come home, whether it’s sleep issues or health issues or something. Those parents should have a resource that they can go to. (Interview participant)

One Hundred Good Wishes—What Mothers Want

A quilter’s saying states, “When life throws you scraps, make a quilt.” This is what many of the mothers in our study have had to do with the scraps of pre- and post-adoption services available to them. But they have better wishes for their children. Asking parents who created their families through transracial adoption what they want and need is a critical first step in providing consistent, accessible and responsive pre- and post-adoption services. The federal and provincial governments need to acknowledge the inconsistencies and gaps in service provision so they can work together with parents and practitioners to provide appropriate services.

Acknowledging the importance of pre- and post-adoption services in par-

enting a transnationally or transracially adopted child is imperative but only a first step. These resources have to be available and accessible to all families, regardless of the province in which they live, the size of their community, or their socioeconomic status. As the diaspora of transnationally and transracially adopted children matures into adulthood, they, like other adoptee diaspora before them (e.g., Bishoff and Rankin; Koh), will have much to teach us. However, in the meantime, governments must respond to research that describes families' needs for supports to foster the development of socially, physically and emotionally healthy Canadian citizens.

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