

October 2019

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Recommended Citation

White, B. J. (2019). When Deaf Parents Adopt Deaf Children: An Investigation of the Concept of Adoptive Parent Entitlement in Deaf Adopted Families. *JADARA*, 41(1). Retrieved from <https://repository.wcsu.edu/jadara/vol41/iss1/4>

When Deaf Parents Adopt Deaf Children: An Investigation of the Concept of Adoptive Parent Entitlement in Deaf Adoptive Families

Barbara J. White

Abstract

The literature on Deaf¹ people as parents in the past two decades is presented from both a culturally affirmative and a medical/pathological perspective (Jones, 1995; Lane, 1992, 1993; Meadow-Orlans, 1997; Spencer, Bodner-Johnson & Gutfreund, 1992), with the latter being more prevalent. It is rare to find an article that portrays Deaf people as highly competent and successful parents. It is even rarer to find an article that shows positive outcomes when Deaf parents adopt children (Shettle, 1997; White, 1997). The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the experiences of adoptive parenthood from the viewpoint of seven Deaf mothers who shared their experiences in parenting a Deaf adopted child and their perceptions and recommendations to the adoption professionals they worked with.

Theoretical Framework

There is an accepted cultural norm within the Deaf community that it is a good thing for a Deaf child to be raised by Deaf parents. When parents decide to adopt a Deaf child, this cultural norm seems to weigh into their decision and promote a sense of entitlement to that child. A theoretical framework that helps explain how Deaf parents make meaning out of adopting a Deaf child is symbolic interaction theory (Meade, 1934). Meade theorized that people interpret the meaning of their own situations and experiences through symbolic language and develop a view of themselves through interaction and the “reflected appraisals” of significant others in their environment. This theoretical framework guided this research in explaining how Deaf adoptive parents interpret the meaning of and experience the reality of adoptive parenthood from their own perspective, as well as how a Deaf child develops a positive self concept and cultural identity when the adoptive parents are also Deaf. Symbolic interaction theory provided a framework for understanding Deaf adoptive parents’ beliefs about being the “right” parents for Deaf children and their

¹ The upper case *Deaf* will be used in this paper, as it refers to the cultural construction rather than the medical construction of deafness.

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profound sense of entitlement to them. Entitlement has been identified in the adoption literature as a significant factor in promoting successful adoptive placements and strengthening family functioning (Groze, 1996; Smith & Miroff, 1987) and will be explained further in this article.

Rationale, Research Design And Methodology

The rationale for the study was four-fold:

1. Social work services to Deaf children in the American child welfare system (foster care and adoption services) are not being adequately addressed. Court cases have challenged Deaf parents' rights to adopt.
2. Social workers in adoption agencies are mostly uninformed about Deaf cultural issues and make assessments on Deaf children's needs from a medical perspective (deficit model).
3. Deaf parents who want to adopt Deaf children are available, but still face barriers to accessible adoption services.
4. There is a sizeable U.S. population available of Deaf parents who have successfully adopted deaf children who are available for study.

Criteria for participant selection were: 1) at least one parent is Deaf who has a 65 decibel or higher better ear hearing loss 2) at least one Deaf adopted child in the family with a 65 decibel or higher better ear hearing loss, 3) the Deaf child was under age 26 4) the family uses sign language in the home, and 5) the adoption has been legally finalized. A small (N = 7) was utilized for qualitative interviews. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to allow for open-ended questions. The interviews were videotaped and transcribed by the researcher, and qualitative software (Ethnograph) was used for data analysis. Content analysis determined the major themes important to these Deaf adoptive parents and explored their sense of entitlement to their Deaf adopted child, their experiences with the adoption process, and their recommendations to adoption social workers and other prospective Deaf adoptive parents. The data from these interviews pertaining to adoptive parent entitlement are the focus of this paper. The study does not attempt to make comparisons between groups of parents or children in terms of hearing status.

Review of the Literature

A review of the literature found that historically Deaf people have been misjudged, mistreated and disregarded when they petition the court to adopt a child or contest custody decisions (Gilhool & Gran, 1985). The developmental and sociolinguistic needs of Deaf children are largely unrecognized by the child welfare system (Arcari & Betman, 1987; White, 1990, 1997) and adoption and foster care workers are mostly uninformed about Deaf culture and the competence of Deaf parents as a resource for Deaf children.

The concept of entitlement has a unique meaning in relation to adoptive family dynamics. It is conceptually defined as the perception of adoptive parents that they have the social, legal, and emotional right to take full parental responsibility for, and attach to, an adopted child and that the child is really theirs and belongs in their family (Denhalter, 1994; Johnston, 1992; Melina, 1986; Smith & Miroff, 1987.). Entitlement has been identified in the adoption literature as a significant factor in promoting successful adoptive placements and strengthening family functioning (Groze, 1996; Smith & Miroff, 1987). No studies have investigated the Deaf adoptive family to determine if Deaf parents have a particular sense of entitlement to their Deaf children. This qualitative study investigated this concept with seven Deaf adoptive mothers of Deaf adopted children.

Developing a sense of entitlement is an extra psychological task for adoptive parents because they are consciously aware that another set of parents gave birth to their child, and they may perceive that the child does not really belong to them (Smith & Miroff, 1987). Adamec and Pierce (1991) referred to entitlement as "the feeling of adoptive parents that they deserve their adopted child and can truly bond with him or her" (p.14). Smith and Miroff (1987) defined entitlement as an unconditional sense of belonging and "the feelings of parental rightfulness to the adoptive child" (p. 25). Reitz and Watson (1992) defined entitlement as "the adoptive parents' sense that they have both the legal and emotional right to be parents to their child. The legal right is conferred in court, the emotional right grows out of the parents' increasing comfort with their roles as mother or father to the child" (p. 125).

Some authors associate entitlement with feelings of belonging, bonding and attachment (Adamec, 1998; Cohen, Coyne, & Duvall, 1996; Smith & Miroff, 1987). However, Cohen, Coyne and Duvall (1996) pointed out that the constructs of entitlement and attachment are not interchangeable. Though entitlement relates to the notion of parental rights

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and responsibilities, attachment implies a strong emotional tie to a significant person. A parent can have a strong sense of entitlement, or feeling of rightness to the child, and not necessarily feel attached to the child. Conversely, a parent may have a strong emotional bond with the child, but not feel entitled to the child. Ideally, a parent should have both feelings of attachment and entitlement, as one without the other would lead to poor family functioning and parenting. When adoptive parents have a weak sense of entitlement, they may feel a sense of guilt for "stealing" the child, because the child is not their biological child, and feel they do not deserve the child (Cohen, Coyne & Duvall, 1996). This tentativeness regarding parental responsibility leads to feelings of inadequacy in discipline, sensitivity to rejection by the child, a need for reassurance from the child, a need to control the child, overprotectiveness, guilt regarding the child's own loss of a biological family, and discomfort about discussing adoption with the child (Smith & Miroff, 1987). Weak entitlement also causes strain in the parent child relationship when the child may want to search for birth parents (Jaffee & Fanshel, 1970), and there is higher risk for family problems such as overprotectiveness, poor communication, inconsistent or lax discipline, over-permissiveness, and an obsessive fear that the birth family may reappear to claim the child (Johnston, 1992).

Families built by adoption have to take an extra psychological leap to develop a firm sense that parent and child belong to each other (Smith & Miroff, 1987). Because there is societal ambivalence toward adoption, family members may not give the adoptive parents the support they need to confirm their bonds. This societal ambivalence is expressed by the axiom: "Blood is thicker than water" and the constant reminder in the media and in court cases that biological ties take precedence over adoptive relationships. Commonly used terms for birth parents are "real mother" and "real father," and these terms further increase the adoptive parents' ambivalence about their role as parents.

Entitlement is strengthened if adoptive parents work through their own discomfort about the child's birth parents, can openly communicate with their child about their adoption and portray adoption in a positive light so that the child will accept his adoptive status and incorporate it into her or his identity (Smith & Miroff, 1987).

Several studies found that open adoption arrangements, in which adoptive parents and birth parents have some contact with one another, may strengthen the adoptive parents' sense of entitlement because adoptive parents feel they have been given permission to raise the child by the birth

parents and this confirms their right to be the parents (Belbas, 1987; Chapman, Dorner, Silber, & Winterberg, 1986; Reitz & Watson, 1992).

Denhalter (1994) conducted a qualitative, exploratory study to determine the salient variables of entitlement. His comprehensive review of the literature on the construct of entitlement initially revealed four salient variables that influence a sense of entitlement: infertility resolution, birth parent loss, legal uncertainties and adoption practices. He concluded that the construct should be expanded to include other concepts that emerged from his study: attachment, bonding, parental caregiving, parenting status, and right. This latter concept of "rightness" includes the legal right and authority as well as a personal and spiritual sense of rightness.

To summarize, adoption researchers refer to entitlement as the ability of adoptive parents to assume the parenting role, with its accompanying rights and responsibilities, and to become comfortable with discipline and authority. Entitlement also involves the perception of adoptive parents that they have the social, legal and emotional right to attach to a child not related to them by birth, and feel that the child is truly theirs without any hesitation.

Literature on Entitlement and Deaf Parents

This qualitative study investigated the sense of entitlement that Deaf parents have toward their Deaf adopted child. Although entitlement is not a concept found in the literature on deafness, the literature on Deaf children's development has themes which suggest entitlement is strong in families where both parent and child are Deaf. Deaf adults personally identify with Deaf children and are strong advocates for their well being (Harris, 1978; Lane & Bahan, 1998; Meadow, 1980; Meadow-Orlans, 1997; Schlesinger & Meadow, 1972). The meanings Deaf parents associate with deafness are very different than the meanings hearing parents attach to deafness. Quite commonly, Deaf parents long for a child who is like them--a child who will share their Deaf world and their language, and who can potentially provide continuity of Deaf culture:

Unlike most expectant parents with disabilities, expectant Deaf parents characteristically hope to have children with whom they can share their language, culture, and unique experiences--that is, Deaf children (Lane & Bahan, 1998, p. 298).

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Deaf parents' joy at the diagnosis of deafness in their infant baffles many physicians. The Deaf child symbolizes a genealogical connection to the Deaf community and continuation of the "deaf family heritage" (Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996). Deaf parents are prepared by their own life experience to cope with deafness and begin communicating with their Deaf infants in American Sign Language immediately following birth (Meadow, 1980). The condition of deafness to them is a cultural difference, not a biological defect (Padden & Humphries, 1988). Not only do many Deaf parents hope for a Deaf child during pregnancy, they are sometimes distressed when they learn they have given birth to a hearing child (Preston, 1996).

When Deaf parents adopt, they often request a Deaf child (White, 1990). This suggests that Deaf adults have a strong sense of identity with Deaf children even when they are not biologically related to them, and it appears that Deaf adults would have a strong sense of entitlement towards an adopted Deaf child.

The literature on Deaf children raised in biological families by Deaf parents has consistently showed positive outcomes in terms of the Deaf child's English literacy development (Padden, 1998; Padden & Ramsey, 1998), social development (Meadow, 1968; Schlesinger & Meadow, 1972) parent-child attachment (Meadow, Greenberg, Erting & Carmichael, 1981) and family communication (Schlesinger & Meadow, 1972). Other empirical research documents the positive effects of Deaf parent-Deaf child families (Meadow-Orlans, 1997; Schlesinger & Meadow, 1972; Spencer, Bodner-Johnson & Gutfreund, 1992). Jones (1995) found similar family functioning outcomes between Deaf-parented families and hearing-parented families.

Schein (1989) described the strengths of Deaf parent-Deaf child families and pointed to the communication efficiency in these families, the benefits of having a Deaf role model, Deaf family friends, and in a home where deafness is the norm, not a deviation. He also emphasized that Deaf children learn the coping skills needed to function in an oppressive society. Deaf children of Deaf parents represent the status quo in the Deaf community and often become its leaders and spokespersons (Christiansen & Barnartt, 1995; Preston, 1996). These "Deaf of Deaf" children are perceived as the "symbolic if not practical core of Deaf culture" (Preston, 1996, p. 7). Jones (1996) noted that many Deaf people today take pride that their Deaf family heritage reaches back to three or four generations.

To summarize, the sense of connectedness to Deaf children, the identification with the Deaf community, pride in a Deaf cultural heritage,

as well as the empirical evidence supporting Deaf mothers' efficacy in interactions and attachments with their Deaf child, may enhance Deaf adoptive parents' sense of entitlement toward their adopted Deaf child.

Characteristics of the Parents in the Study

All seven of the respondents were female; of these seven mothers, six were married, one was single. Their ages ranged from 31-49. All of the mothers had college degrees; two had Bachelor's degrees, four had Master's degrees, and one had a Doctoral degree. Combined household incomes for the sample was from \$30,000 to \$90,000 or higher. The sample was thus a highly educated and relatively affluent group, a finding that is not unusual among adoptive parents in general.

The degree of hearing loss of the respondents ranged from 73 to 120 decibels, representing a sample of parents with severe to profound deafness. Six respondents identified themselves as Deaf, and one self-identified as hard of hearing. Six reported having hearing parents themselves, and one reported having one Deaf parent. Six reported using only ASL at home; one reported using both spoken and signed English at home.

Respondents' reasons for deciding to adopt were varied, ranging from infertility, wanting to provide a home for a child, wanting to have more children, and specifically wanting a Deaf child. When asked to describe their reasons for specifically requesting a Deaf child, four reported that they felt a Deaf child needs visual communication; three reported that they were familiar with the resources needed to raise a Deaf child, two reported that they wanted a Deaf child to pass on Deaf culture, and four reported they felt more competent than a hearing parent in raising a Deaf child.

All seven of the adoptions were closed adoptions without any contact with the child's birth parents, and all seven adoptions were through private agency auspices, ranging in cost from \$6,000 to over \$15,000.

Characteristics of the Children in the Study

Five of the seven children of the respondents were girls, two were boys. In terms of race, three were Caucasian, three were Asian, and one was Hispanic. All seven of the children were adopted internationally, representing the countries of Russia, Thailand, Columbia, and Korea. Their ages at the time of the study ranged from three to 12, with six of the

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children between the ages of eight and 12 years. Their ages at the time of placement ranged from ten months to age eight. Only two children were placed at age two or under; the other five were placed between the ages of five and eight. Five of the adoptions occurred in the past five years, whereas two occurred between five and ten years ago. Thus, the sample represented adoptions of mostly older children at the time of their placements. In addition, six of the seven parents reported that their child had at least one disability other than deafness; these included vision problems, learning disabilities, developmental delays due to malnutrition, and language delays. Two parents reported that their child also had behavioral and emotional problems. Five of the children lived in an orphanage or a residential school for the deaf before their adoption, and two were in foster care. The children's audiograms, when available, showed a hearing loss from 75 to 110 decibels, representing a sample of children with severe to profound deafness.

Themes of Adoptive Parent Entitlement in Deaf-parented Families

Though five topical categories were identified, this article focuses only on entitlement. The category of entitlement had ten sub-themes: communication, bonding and attachment, identification, competence and caregiving, limited opportunities, spirituality, blood ties, adoption story, hearing status and discipline.

Communication

Communication was a salient theme in the parents' discussion about their children. The commitment of the Deaf adoptive parents in this study to provide their Deaf child with a symbolic language system was profound. In spite of the severe language delays of many of the children because there was early language deprivation in their previous environments, these Deaf parents were determined to help their children catch up. These parents used creative approaches to help their child learn ASL and English simultaneously by using flash cards and ASL simultaneously, interacting with other Deaf friends in ASL, and reading and telling stories in ASL. The stories of the Deaf adoptive parents revealed that although language learning was a slow process, the children were benefiting from a symbolic communication system that they would not otherwise have had in their previous environments. Usually the children came from foster care and orphanage environments where they were the

only Deaf child and had no meaningful communication with their caretakers. Thus, in their new Deaf-centered environments, the messages these children received were positive messages of affirmation--that being Deaf is "normal" rather than "deviant."

He had no language when I adopted him, now [three years later] it is very obvious how much he is delayed language wise, but he is starting to use it more and more. I never gave up. I kept flooding him with experiences and language and stories and sign language, and he is now starting to use it to describe things that happened before being adopted. It's such a surprise, and a pleasure when he comes with these little gems completely out of the blue.

When we were able to begin the communication process. . . . I think that is the most important thing we've ever done. She didn't communicate at all. . . . When we taught her signs, then she was able to communicate her needs and wants instead of just crying all the time. That made me feel like I accomplished something as a parent, helping her break through that void you know.

All of the children were adopted from other countries, and all but two were adopted at school age. The children had little exposure to their country's spoken language or the sign language used by Deaf people in their home country. The orphanages where they lived prior to placement tended to use an oral approach, so the children did not have exposure to a visual language system. Therefore, most of the children had no formal language system, which resulted in language delays in the majority of the children at the time of placement. Parents in general felt they gave their children the gift of a visual language, and the children absorbed this language input rapidly. This does not mean that the children had caught up totally with language development. Many children still had language delays because of their early language deprivation. All the parents nevertheless persisted in continuing the process of language acquisition through ASL, with the intent of transferring ASL to written English.

Bonding and Attachment

This theme related to the parents' perceptions of the initial bonding process with their child, including learning about the child and bringing the child home; commitment to the child, ongoing attachment after placement,

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and feeling they had the authority to be the child's parent even before the adoption was legally finalized. Several parents said they were attached to their child the moment they saw the child's photo. Some of the most poignant discussions with parents concerned their perceptions of the initial attachment experiences when they met their child for the first time. Some of the parents went to the child's country of origin, and some of the children were escorted by plane; all of the parents reported feeling an instant bond with their Deaf child at the moment of meeting them, or shortly thereafter.

It's hard to explain; for me, the attachment was instant . . . I belonged to her and she needed me much more like a baby would. I think she needed that bond, she never experienced a mother, so she was hungry. I could not deny her that.

In most instances, the children were not aware right away that their parents were also Deaf, but they soon discovered this fact. The mother below is explaining her first meeting with her child in the orphanage:

All these people around me were chatting in Spanish and I felt they were waiting for the magic moment to occur and it didn't happen. He just sat there on the floor. Then I had an idea. I noticed his hearing aids and then pointed to mine so he could see them. I could see him staring at me and his thoughts about us both being Deaf.

Finally, we started to bond with the feeling 'Deaf like me' coming from him.

Bonding and attachment processes for these parents and their children were closely related to the need of the child to communicate, and the enthusiasm of the parent to provide them with ASL so they could begin meaningful communication and true symbolic interaction.

The positive part is that I love this child to death. He is very difficult to raise, but I feel very attached to him and really love him. I get frustrated . . . but I do feel he is my child and I love him.

Identification

When we first read about her being available for adoption, the fact that she was Deaf made me feel very connected to her, and because I am Deaf I think that I will be a good mother because I know what her needs will be.

Deaf people strongly identify with Deaf children, even when they are not related to them (Lane & Bahan, 1998), and the data collected from this sample strongly supports this. Many of the respondents reflected on their own experiences growing up Deaf, the isolation and loneliness they felt, and their strong desire for providing their child with better communication. Most of the subjects in the sample specifically requested a Deaf child to adopt, although two said they would accept a Deaf or hearing child. One mother said she felt she was lucky because her agency would only place "special needs" children, and she was glad that deafness fit under this category because she preferred a Deaf child. Other respondents reported that the "perfect Deaf child" is hard to find; it was rare to find a Deaf child with no other emotional or physical disabilities other than deafness, and that prospective parents should be open to whatever challenges the Deaf child presented. These Deaf parents showed a keen intuitive sense about what their Deaf child needs and responds to, especially regarding communication.

I was able to share a lot about what it means to grow up as a Deaf or hard of hearing person without support and help the child with their identity.

Competence and Caregiving

Denhalter (1994) reported in his study on adoptive parent entitlement, that the tasks related to caregiving increases the parents' sense of entitlement. This was also found to be true in this sample; the normal processes of socialization, daily caregiving and parenting responsibilities seemed to enhance feelings of competence.

It's really the process of taking care of kids and normal growing up that matters. That's what makes you a parent--the daily responsibilities and care, playing with the child, reading to the child, things like that, including discipline.

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Of particular interest is the observation that these Deaf parents felt they were positive role models for their children, and that the opportunity to share their own experiences growing up as a Deaf person increased their sense of competence. This is reflected in respondents' comments about their role as advocates for their child, knowing about resources that were available to them, making a commitment to their education, and teaching values.

I think I model for her the need to persevere and reach her goals, to feel proud of who she is, that she is capable, that she has rights the same as others. Also, that reality in some situations is not easy, some situations are not fair.

Several parents made a point to move close to the residential school for the Deaf, so they could live at home, expressing concern that another institutional environment would be detrimental to their child's sense of permanency. These Deaf parents were sensitive to the child's losses and demonstrated much patience in helping the child adjust to the home environment. The researcher observed as well, that all of the parents showed sensitivity to the child's native cultural heritage. Some families had items in their home representing the country's heritage, had made photo "life books" for their child which describe the child's life up to the time of placement, and after their arrival in the U.S.

Limited Opportunities

The respondents reflected on what their child's life would have been like if they had not adopted them and how limited their lives would be if not brought to the U.S. It may be typical for American parents who adopt internationally to feel on some level that they are rescuing their child from unfortunate political and economic circumstances, especially if they adopt from third world countries. The parents in the sample, however, talked more about the oppression, discrimination, and low expectations, as well as the limited educational and employment opportunities for Deaf people in their child's native country. As one parent said, "If you have to be Deaf, it is best to be Deaf in America." Another mother commented:

It is very clear she would not have gotten an education and would have had a life of menial labor. . . . She would be

cleaning homes, working in a factory maybe. I doubt she would have become literate.

Several other mothers commented on the theme of limited opportunities in their child's home country:

I saw where she lived and it was a dismal place. I'm telling you, it was a small room with ten or 15 other disabled children, and she was the only Deaf child in that room. I thought to myself, 'What if we didn't take her?' She'd still be living there. . . . When I saw that, I felt instantly attached to her. I needed to take her home with me. . . . She needed a better life than that.

We found out that in their country, Deaf people are on the fringes of society, they can't drive a car, they have low paying jobs. They are really behind, like second class citizens.

If I had left him there, then what kind of life would he have had? Here he has a better life, he has friends, he has a school, he has a mother who loves him and a good life.

Spirituality

The respondents were asked about the spiritual aspects of the adoption, or their sense that the match between parent and child was "meant to be" due to their belief in God, a Higher Power, or fate. The intention of exploring spirituality was twofold. First, Denhalter (1994) found in his qualitative study that adoptive parents' sense of entitlement comes from a feeling that it is "right" to be the parents of their child, and his respondents described this right in a spiritual sense. Second, the researcher's intent was to triangulate this finding with the spirituality factor from the Adoptive Parent Entitlement Scale, which she developed for the quantitative portion of the study. In general, the parents in this sample each had examples to share about a higher purpose for being matched with their child, either through God, a Higher Power, or fate. This spiritual connection seemed to strengthened their sense of entitlement to their child and provided them with a feeling of "rightness" to be their child's parents, as illuminated in the following quote:

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I just felt like it was the right time and the right place and we found her. That's how I would describe the feeling. . . I am not a religious person by nature, but I do believe in having faith in one's life. . . . So I feel we were meant to be together.

I don't think I'm special because I adopted him, but I know God has a purpose for me.

I almost feel like she was born to another woman who gave birth to her because I was not in the position to do that. . . . It was because I wasn't ready, someone else had to give birth to her. That's how I feel we came together.

Blood Ties

A question asked of the respondents was whether they had difficulty accepting the child as their own because they were not related by blood. The adoption literature cites the social importance in our culture of blood ties, particularly Kirk's (1981) work on the cultural stigma of adoptive parenting in our society that strains adoptive parents' task of establishing a firm sense of entitlement to their child. The Deaf parents in this sample did not have strong feelings about the blood tie, and showed an unconditional acceptance of their deaf adopted child.

I think of them as my children. I don't think of them not being mine due to blood.

I never really thought along blood related lines. It was just that she needed a Mom and Dad, and I felt really connected to her.

Adoption Story

Telling the child about their adoption is an important, and sometimes difficult, task for adoptive parents. Being able to acknowledge the existence of, and talk openly and honestly about, the child's birth parents, and being able to answer the child's questions about their past allows the child to develop wholeness and an "authentic sense of self" (Lifton, 1994). Many of the adoptive parents in this sample were quite

open with their child about their adoption, and were prepared to explain their child's past circumstances to them, even though some struggled with whether to reveal painful facts about their child's birthparents, such as prostitution, attempted abortion, and abandonment. The observation that these parents were in touch with this issue, and prepared for it, is impressive considering that, as a group, they had almost no exposure to educational workshops or conferences where this topic is often discussed. In addition, most of their Deaf children were young and had insufficient language to be able to explain the complexities of adoption.

Several parents showed the researcher the photo albums and "life books" they prepared for their child to aid in telling the adoption story, which is often recommended by adoption experts (Johnston, 1992). In this way, adoptive parents act as their child's historian, providing the child with a life record and history.

I took a lot of pictures of my child's home country so he knows where he comes from, and I have made contact with local people from there on the Internet. I log on to newspapers in that home town, which have pictures and list events like carnivals.

One respondent traveled with her child to her child's native country, visited the orphanage where she lived, and inquired if the child's birth mother had expressed interest in making contact. All of the children in this sample had been in an orphanage or foster care before their placement, and this fact seemed to allow the adoptive parents to feel more strongly entitled.

Because she was never home with her biological parents, I didn't feel like there was a struggle about who she belonged to, them or me.

I was very open and honest with her from the beginning and we had some challenging and difficult discussions about her birth parents and her history even when she had very limited language. . . . One day she says 'Mother and father don't want me, why?'....I tend to believe that they probably wanted her very much and couldn't take care of her and that is basically what I have been telling her all along.

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At the same time, there was a sense that these parents had great respect for the birth parents, and understood they were caught in the social, political, and economic problems of their society.

One of the things we do on her birthday is to put an extra candle on her cake to honor her birth parents for giving her to us. . . . She is still very young and still developing language, so I won't be able to explain that now. . . . We'll see what kinds of questions she has and move on from there.

Some respondents said they would like more information about the birth parents, especially for medical reasons, but that contact with birth parents was not permitted by some countries.

I have no contact, none at all. I see them as victims of their society. Thousands and thousands of children there are in the same situation.

Hearing Status

I feel very strongly it is most important for Deaf kids to be placed with Deaf parents first.

Communication is a priority over anything else. If the parent can't sign with them and communicate, then that's no life for them. I've seen Deaf children with hearing parents and their parents don't sign.

Respondents were asked to describe the "ideal" home environment for a Deaf child, and whether they thought the adoptive parents should be Deaf themselves. This question was considered important in establishing a firm sense of entitlement, because research has established that Deaf children with Deaf parents outperform Deaf children with hearing parents on many measures of social and academic success. These parents' views on this subject highlight their beliefs about the unique qualifications of Deaf parents to adopt a Deaf child. In general, respondents conveyed a belief that the best environment for a Deaf child would be one where there was visual communication at all times, preferably with Deaf parents who use ASL. If the placement is with hearing parents, respondents felt that

ideally the parents should be fluent in ASL and always use it at home. Additionally, respondents felt the home should be equipped with visual alerting devices, such as flashing phone and door lights, and TTYs, which are already part of a Deaf household.

I would say always, if other things are equal, it should be a home where at least one of the parents is Deaf, because in this situation there would be accessible communication all the time due to parents' signing. If both parents are hearing. . . most of the time they won't be signing and the Deaf child would not have an opportunity for incidental learning that hearing children have in the home.

Our house is very accessible with flashing lights for the door, phone, fire and emergency procedures.

Another respondent who was not supportive of hearing parents adopting a Deaf child, raised the issue of income in the cost of an adoption. Research has demonstrated the significantly lower incomes of as well as higher rates of underemployment of Deaf compared to hearing people (Schein, 1989).

It is not unusual to find out that hearing families who know nothing about deafness have adopted a Deaf child, like 'Oh, cute little Deaf kid.' It's cheaper to adopt a special needs child.... and it bothers me when I hear about those kind of families of Deaf kids when there are Deaf families who want to adopt those Deaf children but can't afford to.

One respondent, who felt strongly about Deaf children being adopted by Deaf parents, related her sense of pride in being Deaf that she role models for her children.

I come from a Deaf family. I'm confident in my ability to function in both Deaf and hearing worlds. I feel confident when I take my kids out, we sign all the time. And if I can't understand hearing people, we find a way, and it's good my kids see that. When my kids sign in public and use their Deaf voices, even if hearing people make

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negative faces and show they can't understand them, they look confident and sign on and on anyway. That shows me they are confident about their deafness and their language. So, I'm teaching them coping skills as a Deaf person and functioning in the hearing world.

Finally, there was an appreciation of hearing parents who were willing to adopt Deaf children, if the hearing parents were willing to learn to sign, and an acknowledgment that the demand for adoptive homes is too great to dismiss qualified hearing parents.

I don't think they [hearing parents] should be turned down, because if they are willing to learn sign, it is better than some hearing biological parents of Deaf children who refuse to learn sign.

Discipline

Comfort in handling discipline was identified in the literature as a strong indicator of adoptive parent entitlement (Cohen, Coyne & Duvall, 1996). From the interviews, it appears that these respondents had very little difficulty accepting their role as disciplinarians, and felt comfortable with their authority as parents.

I feel comfortable with the fact that I have control of situations or discipline overall without losing my temper, without being negative, without using violence.

The special challenge for these parents was explaining proper behavior to their children, who had limited language, and introducing discipline techniques that were new to them, like time out.

Both kids are from a corporal punishment environment... We talk about appropriate ways of discipline. I've learned to teach my daughter breathing techniques and relaxation techniques to help her with her temper tantrums.... I explain my expectation and use time out. I give them choices and tell them the consequences and choose fair consequences. It works, but it's still a process of learning for them.

Summary of the Findings on Adoptive Parent Entitlement

The interviews revealed that Deaf parents' sense of entitlement was exceptionally strong and appeared to be reciprocal; both parent and child felt they belonged to each other. Deaf parents in the sample demonstrated an unconditional sense of entitlement to their Deaf adopted children even though most of them had language delays and were older at the time of placement, confirming that Deaf parent and Deaf child dyads form a "goodness of fit" for adoptive placements. Although the literature reports that adoptees often feel stigmatized, and suggests that adoptive parents talk openly to their children about issues of abandonment and loss, the Deaf parents in this study were more concerned about establishing bonds with their children, role modeling strategies for communication success, and instilling a sense of normalcy as Deaf people. It appeared that discussion of adoption issues was put on hold until the children developed more language, or until they were older. For the time being, these parents wanted to focus on language and social development to help their children catch up developmentally.

The Deaf parents in the study also served as "buffers" from hearing environments (Hughes & Demo, 1989). The hearing environments were not overtly hostile, but parents had to negotiate and make them more accessible. For example, when the child was ignored or when a stranger offered sympathy, the Deaf parent would not accept this, and would attempt to educate the stranger about communication strategies. In this way, Deaf parents were positive role models for their children, teaching interaction strategies that work for them with hearing people, such as writing down messages, and being assertive about their needs.

All of the Deaf parents assumed a cultural construction of deafness -- they all had Deaf social networks, and they all used and valued American Sign Language. The stories they told reflected their own experience as Deaf persons and had a view of themselves as part of a cultural and linguistic minority group, rather than as persons with "hearing impairments" that should be cured. Although some of the children used hearing aids, the parents placed little importance on speech skills. Instead, the parents overwhelmingly placed a high value on ASL in teaching language visually. Because ASL is a defining value in Deaf culture, this is not surprising. All of the parents used ASL to help overcome the many delays their children experienced with language. Given encouragement and time, these parents saw ASL as the best path to language acquisition and opening up cognitive processes which allowed their children to make sense

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of their world. Some parents reported that after several years of exposure to ASL, their children were able to tell stories about their previous lives in their home countries and institutions, which helped them cognitively and psychologically work through their experiences related to adoption. At the same time, the parents were realistic in not expecting overnight success, given the early lack of language that most of their children endured.

Entitlement was largely enhanced by the strong bond and communication that took place within these families. Deaf parents saw it as their responsibility to nurture their Deaf child in a visual communication environment, and almost immediately attached to their child. These parents had a strong commitment to their child's education, and often supplemented their education at home by providing structured literacy activities. Some parents moved to be closer to their child's deaf school, even before locating a job. Due to their own problems with deaf education systems growing up, these parents were committed to providing their children with the best learning environment. Entitlement was also evident in that the parents did not need the legal sanction of the courts to feel that their child belonged to their family. This is in contrast to the Denhalter (1994) study, where 74% of the hearing respondents reported that legal finalization increased their sense of entitlement. Entitlement appeared to be established even before the child arrived home; the parents commonly reported feeling a connection when they first received a photo of their child and learned of the possibility of the adoption. The identification that these parents felt toward their child was also evident; most wanted assurance that their child was in fact Deaf before proceeding with the adoption. In contrast to the literature that reports that adoptive parents feel a tentativeness to their child or feel they "stole" the child (Reitz & Watson, 1992), the Deaf parents in this study readily assumed the role of parent without any hesitation. One parent at first felt guilty about taking the child from his foster mother, but quickly confirmed to herself that she was the best person to parent him because she was Deaf herself.

Conclusion

Federal law requires that children waiting for adoptive homes must be placed and matched with parents who can provide the child with a healthy and safe environment and promote the child's well being, but recent legislation (the Multiethnic Placement Act) now eliminates race and culture as primary factors in matching a child with an adoptive family (Pauao, 1998). Nonetheless, it is hoped social workers and other professionals

involved in the adoptive placement of Deaf children will pause and consider the critical importance of language and culture in making placement decisions for Deaf children, as well as the unique qualities and strong sense of entitlement that Deaf adoptive parents have for their Deaf children. Ideally, when out of home placement decisions are made, they will be made with the Deaf child's "best interest" in mind--with attention to the unique linguistic and cultural needs of the Deaf child.

An adoption social worker contacted me several years ago and explained she had two applicants who wanted to adopt a Deaf child from her agency. One couple was Deaf couple and the other couple was hearing and knew sign language. Although both couples met the qualifications of the agency and had a home study completed, the agency was hesitant about placing the Deaf child with Deaf parents, due to an assumption that the child would not be exposed to spoken English. With much determination and effort, the Deaf couple organized an advocacy campaign on their behalf and overwhelmed the agency with letters and phone calls from professionals in deafness who advocated for their right to adopt the child. Eventually, the agency was convinced that the Deaf couple was the best "fit" for the child and proceeded with the adoption. Nevertheless, Deaf people are typically faced with the need to prove themselves as qualified to adopt and become parents. Professionals in the adoption community need to recognize the untapped potential of Deaf parents. The finding from this study that entitlement is exceptionally strong among Deaf parents adopting Deaf children can hopefully guide agency policy in placing Deaf children in adoptive homes where one or both parents are Deaf.

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*Barbara J. White, DSW
Gallaudet University
Department of Social Work
800 Florida Avenue, NE
Washington DC 20002*