Adoptees and Adoptive Parents as "Other"

By

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Abstract

Although Americans may say that they support adoption, negative community attitudes toward adoption, adoptees, and adoptive parents persist. These attitudes reveal themselves in the ways that members of adoptive families are perceived and treated in a variety of settings. The authors, both of whom are sociologists and parents of international adoptees, explore how adoptive families are treated as "other"—that is, as "non-normal" in American society. They examine the meanings and roles that stigma play in separating adoptive families from biological families and how being adopted may function as a "master status" that affects an adoptee's identity. The authors include examples of experiences from adoptees and adoptive parents to illustrate how "time seems to have left adoptees behind in important ways" (Bright 2013).

Keywords: international adoption, transracial adoption, attitudes toward adoption, stigma, being adopted as a master status

Defining a Family: Who is Included and Who Is Excluded?

Families come about in different ways. Many families come about naturally and/or by choice, typically after a couple marries. Some families are shaped by circumstances and factors outside of human control. These days, many people say that we should celebrate diversity in all things, including how families are formed— through biology, adoption, and choice (fictive kinship). Do we really mean that we should celebrate diversity, or are we just giving lip service to an idea that is politically correct these days?

Adoptive parents may ponder this question at different stages in their lives: prior to adopting, after they have adopted, and, at times, throughout their children's lives. They do not *seek* to be different. However, the reality is that they *are* different. This is especially true when children look different from their parents *or* when people hear that a child in a family is *not* a biological member of that family. That is when stereotypes (i.e., oversimplified assumptions) about the adoptees, their bio parent(s), and/or their adoptive parent(s) reveal themselves. Sometimes the stereotypes are positive, like viewing adoptive parents as saints. Too often, they are negative, like viewing adoptees and adopters as damaged or defective. In this paper we focus primarily on the negative perceptions of adoptees, bio mothers, and adoptive parents.

Is Being Adopted a "Master Status?"

Everett C. Hughes (1945) introduced the term *master status* into the vocabulary of sociology. Hughes viewed a master status as a social position that outweighs other statuses a person holds. Although a master status may be achieved, a master status is often an ascribed status that influences his or her social identity and perceived standing in society. Hughes identified a person's race as a powerful example of a master status. Two other examples of master statuses are one's sex and occupation. Can one add adoptee to the list of master statuses a person may hold? We think you can, if you view being adopted into a family, rather than being born into it, as a master status that dominates the other statuses she or he holds *and* that influences his or her identity.

The Meaning of Stigma and The Destructive Role Stigmas Play

A stigma is a mark of disgrace that sets a person or persons apart from others in a society or group. Stigmatized people are labelled as "other"—less than, defective in some way. By being labelled as "other," the stigmatized person is no longer viewed as an individual with unique characteristics. But rather, s/he is viewed as part of a stereotyped group to whom characteristics are assigned. When a person is labelled as "other," prejudice (negative attitudes and beliefs) toward the persons are formed and negative actions (discrimination) toward persons labelled as "other" often follow.

In his influential book, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963), Canadian sociologist, Erving Goffman, discussed being viewed as "different from" others in one's society in some noticeable way. Society and culture establish norms about what is normal and what deviates from normal, i.e., is "atypical" or abnormal. Stigma is assigned to those who are perceived as different. Goffman identified three main types of stigma: (1) stigma associated with a **mental illness**; (2) stigma associated with a **visible physical challenge**; and (3) stigma attached to identifying the person with a particular race, ethnicity, religion, ideology, or status, either earned (i.e., criminal, prostitute) or assigned (i.e., adoptee, infertile woman.

More recently, in an editorial published in the **Journal of Epidemiology & Community** *Health*, Kleinman and Hall-Clifford (2009) reflect on how the concept of stigma has changed over time from the way Goffman defined it in the 1960s. In Goffman's view, stigma was part of a psychological and social process that affected the construction of a person's identity, transforming him or her from "normal" to a "discredited" (or "discreditable") social status. Based on new information that goes against what is normative (i.e., having a communicable disease, a developmental delay, or a serious problem with drugs or alcohol), a stigmatized individual passes from being viewed as normal to being in a category of being labelled as different/deviant.

Kleinman and Hall-Clifford (2009) contend that, in the past, researchers who studied stigma have focused "too heavily" on using psychological approaches to investigate the construction and assignment of stigma. These authors believe that a too narrow approach makes it difficult to view, and understand, stigmatized individuals as people "embedded in local moral contexts." Kleinman and Hall-Clifford (2009) conclude that the definition of stigma needs to be expanded to include the moral context in which stigmas are assigned. Only then can effective and measurable applications-- anti-stigma interventions be designed and tested.

Stigmas about Adoption from the Perspective of People Touched by Adoption

In this section we include insights and personal narratives from adoptive parents and adoptees. Their perspectives and experiences help put a real face on people who are stigmatized because of their connection to adoption.

Adoptive mother, Chelse Schults (2017) identifies eight stigmas about adoption that she argues, clearly and reasonably, are *not* true. We organize the stigmas Schults divides into four social categories or themes: the adoptees, the bio parent(s) of a child available for adoption, the adoptive parent(s), and the adoption process itself. Adopted children are stigmatized as abandoned (unwanted) by their bio parent(s). Similarly, bio mothers are stigmatized as not loving the child for whom an adoption plan exists and as *not* taking care of herself while pregnant.

Adoptive parents are often stereotyped as rich, white, married, and straight. Adoptive parents are also stigmatized as defective (i.e., infertile), *not* "real" parents, unrealistic in their expectations, and as having suspicious or questionable motives for adopting. As a process, "open" adoption is considered "bad" and confusing for an adoptee regarding who his/her parent *really* is; the one who gave birth to the child <u>or</u> the parent(s) raising him/her. Adoption, in general, is stereotyped as *second best* (to giving birth), *easier* than giving birth, and *always* expensive.

Adoptive mother of four and attorney, Elizabeth Kirk (2018), raises the issue of the "soft stigma" against adoption: that people *say* they support adoption but *rarely choose* it for themselves or encourage friends or family member to choose adoption. Decades ago, sociologists, began to do research about community attitudes toward adoption (for example, Miall 1987, 1994, 1996; March & Miall 2000). Other sociologists, including Wegar 1998; and Perry 2013, report the persistence of negative community attitudes toward adoption, adoptees, and adoptive parents: that a majority of Americans consider *the crucial defining characteristic* of a family to be genetic, *not* choice. Such people view a family as comprised of a heterosexual couple and their biological children. This family structure is the definition of a "nuclear family," the family into which a child is born.

This narrow view of family ignores family types comprised of people who view their family as based on "chosen kinship." How many times do we hear someone say that she or he is closer to a good friend than he or she is to a sibling? What about those "only" children who turn friends into honorary siblings and friends' parents into a second set of honorary parents?

The Power of Language

Despite the sentiment of the old nursery rhyme, words can hurt as much as sticks and stones. The language people use to speak with, or about others, can uplift or bring down another person. Thoughtful **parents and** grandparents are very careful of the words they use in conversations with their children and grandchildren. Other people need to be just as aware of the language they use about adoption with classmates, customers, clients, and strangers even in casual interaction. Empathy and compassion for others matters in word and actions. We all need to "walk the walk" and "talk the talk" in ways that celebrate our similarities rather than denigrate our differences.

The experiences of adopted children provide good examples of what *not* to say. An adoptive father (Jacobson 2018) writes about his nine-year-old son's experience when this boy shared with his classmates that he was adopted. He was proud to tell his class this fact about himself and, no doubt, thought his classmates would think his status as an adoptee was a good thing and worth sharing.

The man's son was in for a rude awakening. During recess, a boy from his son's class approached him and said "that if he was adopted, it was because his real mom and dad hated him." The classmate also told the adopted child that his adoptive parents "weren't really his parents, so he had none." When the man's son came home from school, he had a major meltdown. When his father tried to find out why the meltdown was happening, the boy told his father what his classmate said to him.

Cruel comments like what this child's classmate said to him happen all too often. However, most adoptees likely never tell their parents about the incidents and comments, outside the home, that cause their emotional upsets and, sometimes, their subsequent acting-out behavior at home. For example, on the school bus going home after school, one boy hits another boy on the head with a book. The mother asks her son why he thinks the other boy did that. Her son does not explain. Instead, he tells his mother that if he does nothing

about what the other boy did to him, that boy will keep treating him badly. She fully understands what he is saying but tells her son that she wishes he would talk to an administrator about what happened *rather than* retaliate against the other boy. Her son thinks that a school administrator will likely do nothing because the incident did not happen on school grounds.

The next time her son comes home on the school bus, there was another incident with the same boy. This time her son tells her that he has been suspended from school for the remainder of the week because he stood up for himself with the other child. His mother inquires further and finds out that the other boy was *not* suspended. A bit more digging on his mother's part uncovers the fact that that the mother of the boy who originally hit her son is an old friend of the school administrator who suspended her son. In the small town where this family lives, life-long residents know each other and treat each other as privileged insiders.

Newcomers (i.e., non life-long residents) are viewed by some as outsiders. If the newcomers are also known to be an adoptive family, just by being adoptive parents, they may be suspect and their adopted children more vulnerable to negative treatment by kids who feel "entitled" and adults in positions of power. To assign the unknowns a status, old-time residents ask two questions: Who is your mother? Who is your father? If the unknowns answer with parentage unknown to the insiders who ask, an invisible gate goes up and the unknown newcomers are labeled and treated as "other."

An interesting on-line article by an adult adoptee (Bright 2013) talks about how time seems to have left adoptees *behind* in important ways. The author and her brother were both adopted at young ages. Their parents made sure that being adopted was part of both children's identities from the time they were toddlers. The family considered adoption to be a positive choice for them. Just as biological families celebrate birthdays as special occasions, adoptive families may *also* choose to celebrate "Family Day" or "Gotcha Day"—the day on which they officially became a family through adoption.

As she was growing up, Bright (2013) began to notice a lot of things that were stuck in the past about adoption. One example she gives is that doctors' forms *do not* have an adopted/no information box to indicate that some information being requested on the form is unknown to the patient and/or her/his adoptive parents. She also talks about attitudes about adoption that are stuck in the past. One example comes from a conversation a newly-married friend has with the author about the priority order of her future children: first, natural born,

then fertility treatments, followed by fostering a child. The friend lists adoption is as a last resort decision. Meanwhile, Bright says that she *can not* believe what her friend is saying about fostering versus adoption— that raising a (foster) child who is *not one's own in any way* is preferable to making a child *your own through a legal adoption*. Apparently, her friend thought fostering was better than adopting because, with fostering, she and her husband would be "making a difference in that child's life." Bright concludes her essay by reinforcing the point that, despite this being the 21st century, adoption is still as stigmatized and mired in myths as it was during the last five to six decades of the 20th century.

Some years ago, in an annual holiday note from an old friend of Ruggiero's, the friend wrote that Ruggiero got her children the "easy way"—the implication being that going through pregnancy and childbirth were much harder than adopting. The card-writer, who Ruggiero first net when they were both 12 years old and in junior high school, is the biological parent of two children born decades before Ruggiero adopted. Although they lived in different states, Ruggiero knew this friend's children since their births.

Ruggiero was stunned by the insensitivity of the comment. Her first thought was that, perhaps, the writer was trying to be funny. But, because of the longevity of their friendship, the comment hurt and Ruggiero could *not* let it go. So, she promptly wrote back all the reasons why hoping (and trying) to adopt, waiting for years to adopt, and becoming a parent through adoptiion was far from an easy way to achieve that status. Sadly, Ruggiero has not heard from this "friend" since that eventful exchange. No apology. No, "I'm only kidding." Just silence and the demise of a friendship.

The Special Cases of International and Transracial Adoptions

So far, our analysis has dealt with stigmas associated with adoptions generally. There are, of course, special cases of adoption stigma. We would like to address **two** of these here, since they add layers of stigma to the layers we have already addressed: stigmas associated with international and transracial adoption. In many cases, these additional stigmas are attributable to differences in racial appearance between adoptive parents and their adopted children.

In the most downloaded article published to date in ***Sociology Between the Gaps***, author and international adoptee, Peter Dodds (2015), asserts that international adoption is so like the institution of slavery that it must be abolished. Dodds makes two major points to support this claim: 1) that, in the countries from which adopted babies come, patterns of "baby stealing, child trafficking, adoption agency corruption, re-homing, coercion of natural parents into giving up their child" (2015: 76) are often implicated and 2) that, from the adoptees' perspective, "a set of irretraceable harms, particularly the tragic problem of children who suffer the loss of being separated not only from their natural parent(s), but also being separated from their ancestral homeland, culture, and language" (2015: 77) are created.

One of the disadvantages of "think pieces," or point of view essays, like Dodd's is that they do not need to face the complications of either plausibility or evidence. Dodds *does* successfully make the case that international adoption and slavery are similar in some respects, even though he starts with the rebuttable premise that "adoption is, in and of itself, a violence based on inequality" (he borrows this notion, and quotation, from Ibn Zayd [2012]). A powerful image, but one that compels us to ask whether raising any child, adopted or not, isn't such a violence as well.

And the differences between international adoption and slavery are stark. The latter, for instance, implies, by definition, forced labor on the part of the slave. The former, ideally at least, is more likely to conjure images of voluntary labor on the part of the adoptive parent. The latter (slavery), a lifetime of dependence by the more dependent party; the former (international adoption), a period of dependence that normally does not exceed that of birth children. One needs more evidence (on children of international adoption and those with biological parents, for instance) than Dodds supplies to argue effectively that international adoption is as inimical to the public and private good as he suggests. And to suggest that international adoption is the moral equivalent of slavery indulges a potential stereotype that demeans the love and effort that go into raising a child from another country—or, indeed, from any country. As people who have adopted children from abroad, we, the authors of this piece, point out that the first synonym for "adopt," when you Google synonyms for it, is "embrace." We prefer the word "embrace" to the word "enslave." We will discuss the undeserved attribution of stigma to parents of children adopted from abroad in our conclusion.

There are related stigmas associated with transracial adoption, most commonly referring to the adoption of Black children by White parents. As Samuels (2009) points out, transracial adoptive families contradict "biological and monocentric racial norms." A common

belief is that transracial adoption engenders internal conflict and confusion, especially for the adopted child (Dalmage, 2000). Samuels (2009) observes "the daily lives of transracial adoptive families . . . are riddled with questions from strangers (e.g., 'What are you?' 'Is that your mother?') requiring public defenses or declarations of one's racial ties, authenticity, and allegiance within single-race communities." Some may see transracial parents and children as "racial traitors," though some may actually see them "racial heroes," providing a visual embodiment of hopes that racial divisions are being effectively challenged. Neither stereotype is necessarily one that transracial families need or deserve, but the negative one, the stigma, can do real harm.

Docan-Morgan (2008) more simply refers to the "intrusive interactions" transracial adoptees and adopters may be subject to (like the "What are you?" or "Is that your mother?" questions), during which visibly adoptive families are asked to speak about their families' composition. One of the co-authors, Roger, would frequently encounter questions like "Is that really your daughter" when shopping with his daughter, whom he had adopted from Korea. Such questions can seem innocuous enough until one thinks about the possible effect on the adopted child, who may be led to question the legitimacy of her family. And, of course, some intrusive interactions occur in the absence of the adoptive parent, as when the child is asked, "Do you know your *real* parents?" Questions like these may be more difficult for the child, inasmuch as there isn't a parent around to immediately sort out how to think about them.

Docan-Morgan (2008) distinguishes "racial interactions" from these "intrusive interactions." Racial interactions may involve malevolent and/or essentializing questions related to the adopted child's perceived race. Both of Roger Clark's Korean adoptees, for instance, were forced to ward off comments about the "slanty eyes," usually offered and received as "jokes" from friends. But his daughter actually reported in an earlier article on *Sociology Between the Gaps* a horribly hurtful moment in a high school English teacher tried to make a joke at her expense:

> One day, during my sophomore year, my English teacher was showing the class a video about a poet we were studying. He fast-forwarded through part of the video in which an Asian-American man was reading poetry. A student asked why he was fast-forwarding, and my teacher replied, "Because I hate Asians. Especially Wendy." He looked right at me with a smirk on his face as the class broke out in an awkward laughter (Clark and Clark, 2015).

Thus, in addition to dealing with the normal stigmas associated with adoption—e.g., that they don't have a family that was made "the proper way"— families created through international or transracial adoption— may encounter additional stigmas associated with the visibility of the differences between parents and children.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have used the concept of "stigma" to organize the variety of ways in ways in which adoptees and their parents are occasionally treated as "the other" in American society. In fact, we have defined stigma as a mark of disgrace that separates people apart from others. We first suggested a variety of ways in which the stigmatization of adoptees and their parents is reflected in behaviors of others that can be hurtful to adoptees and their parents generally. Adoptive parents, we suggested, can be seen as biologically defective and/or morally suspicious. In general, the kinds of behavior that result from such stigma are more subtle, and perhaps a little less hurtful, for adoptive parents than they are for their children. These can come in form of other adults simply saying their first priority would be to form a family through biology, not choice, and that they would only choose adoption as a way of having children if biology failed. Or in the form of medical questionnaires that do *not* allow for the possibility that adoptive parents may *not* know the medical history of the child's biological parents or even of children adopted beyond infancy.

Stigma associated with being an adopted child can be more hurtful, if only because children can be less thoughtful of others, more willing to inflict emotional pain, than most adults are. Again, the children that adoptive children encounter may stigmatize the adoptive child simply because their families were formed in a different way from what they consider "normal." Even children who are initially proud that they belong to a family in which parents have "chosen" them can be made to feel inferior and/or ashamed by other children who tease them because of their "difference."

Our paper then turns to the special cases of international and transracial adoption. Transracial adoptees, whether or not they are international adoptees, are apt to experience what Docan-Morgan (2008) calls both "intrusive interactions" and "racial interactions," thanks to their visible physical differences from their adoptive parents—often, though not exclusively, white European Americans. Intrusive interactions usually involve other people asking adoptees and/or their

parents about the composition of their family. These interactions can be innocently intended, but nonetheless remind transracial family members that their family differs from what is seen as a "normal" family. Racial interactions typically involve malevolent intent on the part of others, in some ways the same kind of intent that is involved in any racist speech or behavior. These potentially-hurtful interactions are almost always directed at adoptees.

We also refer to efforts to create an analogy between international adoption and the institution of slavery. This effort, while undoubtedly directed primarily at international adoption agencies, can easily be seen as an effort to create yet another kind of stigma for adopting parents and seems to be aimed at making them feel guilty about what they likely see as an act of love.

In fact, for many adoptive parents and their adopted children, the act of adoption is an act of love as well as a "leap of faith." To diminish adoption through the creation of, and actions based on, stigmas is unwarranted and unkind. We would argue that, especially when adopted children and their parents experience unwarranted and unkind actions based on their adoption experiences, their adopted or adopting statuses are much more likely to become "master statuses"—statuses that take a front and center position in their minds and lives—than if they are treated as if they belonged to "normal" families. Under such circumstances, they are made acutely aware of their minority status in a society that privileges parent-child relationships that are created through biological processes and stigmatizes other modes of creating such relationships.

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