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Learning by Adoption: The International Adoption Experience of Canadian and Dutch Adoptive Parents of Children from the United States

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Abstract: This paper explores the international adoption experience of Dutch and Canadian adopters of U.S. born children through the lens of adult learning, adult education and lifelong learning.

I think also because we are more interested in background [U.S. history] and how things work-healthcare, the school system. I want to stay updated on what happens there and what's happened in the past. I have looked over African American [literature], we did know about the slavery and the cotton fields and Uncle Tom's story and stuff like that, but now you look through it with other eyes. You see it differently. (Dutch adoptive parent of U.S. African American child)

Problem Statement and Study Purpose

Renowned as a receiving country of international adoptees, the United States is, paradoxically, sought out by foreign families as a source of adoptable children. Over the last decade, approximately 1,500 children, mostly minority infants, have been placed in Canada, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and numerous other Western nations (Selman, 2012). Although substantial scholarship exists on the experience of adoption triad members when the United States is an identified receiving nation, virtually no empirical scholarship has explored the experiences of foreign adopters of U.S. children. Using a cross-national, case-based, narrative inquiry approach, this study explored the lived experience of 20 Canadian and Dutch adoptive families of U.S. children through the following research questions: (a) What psychosocial and cultural-historical factors influence Canadian and Dutch citizens to adopt U.S. children?; (b) What is the pre-and post-adoption education and learning of Canadian/Dutch adoptive parents when adopting from the U.S.?, and (c), How does adopting children from the U.S. affect meanings of self, family, community and worldview for Canadian and Dutch adoptive parents? Drawing upon themes primarily related to the question on adoptive parent pre-and post-adoption education and learning, the purpose of this paper is to describe and argue international adoption (ICA) as a substantive site for adult learning, adult education, and lifelong learning.

Intercountry Adoption in the Nexus of Adult Learning, Education and Lifelong Learning

Although ICA is a prominent area of study in social work, sociology, law, psychology, family studies, history, communications, and women's studies, among other academic disciplines, it rarely has been explored through an adult education and adult learning lens. This is surprising for several reasons. First, adoptive parents (APs) represent a unique population of adult and lifelong learners: They must complete domestic and international training and education requirements to adopt – learning that falls well beyond the sphere of formal education. For example, adoptions to and from the United States must comply with international standards set by the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-Country Adoption (The Hague Convention), which requires prospective adoptive parents (PAPs)

to complete at least ten hours of training covering adoption-related issues affecting children, birth families, and adoptive families. Some countries, such as Russia, may require up to 80 hours of preparation. Indeed, renowned adoption expert, David Brodzinsky, asserted that adoptive parent education should "be guided by adult learning theory, which emphasizes the efficacy of an active, multi-source, multi-method strategy of instruction" (Brodzinsky, 2007, p. 3).

Second, APs themselves engage in significant self-directed and informal learning activities aimed to increase knowledge in immigration, racial, ethnic, cultural, health/mental health and numerous other issues that are likely to emerge as they create families across transnational and/or transracial borders. With nearly 300,000 foreign adoptees entering the U.S. in the last several decades, scholars from multiple disciplines gained interest in understanding how adoptive parents learned about and then transmitted birth-and adopted- culture knowledge to their adoptive children (Dorow, 2006; Jacobson, 2008; Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001). Jacobson calls this the "call to keep culture" (2008) and notes:

> Whole industries (both formal and cottage) have evolved to support international-adoptive parents in their efforts to keep culture. …Adoptive family support organizations, electronic mailing lists, and internet groups have formed to help parents connect with one another, in part to share cultural information. [They] enroll their children (and sometimes themselves) in Mandarin class…They attend special "culture camps" for adoptive parents where they make traditional Vietnamese or Ukrainian crafts and engage in other camp activities. (pp. 2-3)

Akin to adult education scholars' arguments that international study or work abroad, or teaching in an ESL classroom foster transformative learning experiences (King, 2002; Lyon, 2001; Taylor, 1994), I argue that adoptive parents' learning of culture, language, developmental needs, health, racial and ethnic socialization, and innumerable other areas through the experience of transnational or transracial parenting also reflects a transformative process.

Finally, adult education, with its rich scholarship on informal learning, self-directed learning, narrative learning, and learning through life transitions, offers a particularly useful lens from which to explore the learning of adults as they enter and navigate a parenthood that profoundly alters their (and their family's) cultural, racial and national identities. Adoption agency staff or adoption-focused agencies usually provide the foundational base in specific training areas, however, to use Livingstone's (2002) and Tough's (1999) words, this is often the "tip of the iceberg" that sets parents off in myriad learning directions depending on the type of adoption they pursue (i.e., international, transracial, etc.), and the needs of their adopted children. Knowles argued that adults were motivated to learn when their "reservoir of experience" was insufficient to meet their needs (Jarvis, 2006), and his understanding of self-directed learning is useful concept when considering learning through adopting:

> a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, in identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. (1975. p. 18)

Conceptually, adopting internationally has much in common with adult education studies exploring patient self-direction when confronted with disease. Baumgartner (2011) and Rager (2003, 2004, 2007, 2009) both looked at patients' quest for information and utilization of a variety of resources (patient support groups, patient education written materials, Internet

research, family support) along the disease continuum and used self-directed learning as a referent from which to explore adults' learning activities when confronted with critical life events such as a diagnosis of a life-threatening illness. Findings from this study revealed a similar process in which parents' adoption trajectory (decision to adopt a child, learning the process, completing ICA classes, attending support/orientation groups, developing competence in adoptive parenting, and so on) resembled the episode-based and emotional journey of patients (learning about a disease, obtaining information, making treatment choices, learning the medical system, using community support and so on). Adults in both situations plan intentional learning opportunities (Livingstone, 2001) or engage in learning projects (Tough, 1979, 2002) as they assess learning needs, identify resources, seek support, and knowledge from professionals and peers, and learn through the embodied experience of disease or parenting.

Research Design

A narrative inquiry approach allowed focus on participants' accounts (stories) of becoming a family through international adoption. I sought families in Canada and the Netherlands because these two countries have long been the top receiving countries for U.S. adoptees. I used a cross-national, case study design (Hantrais & Mangen, 2007) because it granted analysis on multiple critical case levels: a view of U.S. adoptions in two international settings, a comparative analysis of total Canadian and Dutch total cases, analysis within and across total Canadian cases (n=12) and total Dutch cases (n=8), and analysis within each and across all cases (n=20). Purposive sampling (Patton, 2002) was used to identify families that had adopted in the last 15 years (pre- and post-Hague Convention), had finalized their adoptions, and were fluent in English. In all, I interviewed 30 adoptive parents representing 20 families (parents of 31 children); no children were included in the study. Data collection included (a) completion of a demographic questionnaire; (b) 19 in-person interviews and one telephone interview; (c) on-site observation in adoptive family settings (homes, neighborhoods, schools, health centers, etc.); (d) review of adoptive family artifacts such as family pictures, videos and other memorabilia; (e) document analysis of adoptive parent training materials and curricula, and (f), public documents relating to Dutch, Canadian, and U.S. adoption laws, policies and processes. I drew on Riessman's (2003, 2008) conceptions of thematic and dialogic/performance analysis as my analytic strategy and used NVivo 10 for coding and data management.

Findings

The findings argued for recognition of international adoption as a significant site of adult learning, education, and lifelong learning. Data related to adult learning and adoption- related education further revealed the following three themes: 1. To equip themselves as adoptive parents of U.S. children, participants from both countries needed to expand their foundational, agency- sponsored parent training. 2. Socio-cultural factors marked differences between Dutch and Canadian learning with negative Dutch national attitudes toward infant adoptions in general, and U.S. adoption specifically, led Dutch adoptive parents to form their own communities of practice for needed pre-and post-adoption knowledge. 3. Adoptive parents evolved from learners to educators as they transmitted adoption-related knowledge, sometimes to be used in service to and by their adopted children, and at other times to educate the community-at-large. The following segments briefly illustrate each of these themes.

Beyond training requirements: Taking on Self-Directed Research and Education.

Families in both countries identified deficits and targeted resources to shoal up their knowledge across a variety of areas pre- and post-adoption. The following list outlines learning topics identified by the majority of families, and indicates that pre-adoption needs typically focused more on pragmatic and logistical issues and post-adoption efforts were more psychosocially and socio-culturally focused.

Pre-adoption learning activities	Exemplary Quotes
• Learning about and applying to a U.S. adoption program • Creating an adoptive parent/ Dear Birth Parent letter, portfolio • Understanding U.S. English language, Dutch-U.S. cultural differences (ongoing) • Understanding U.S. and Canadian or Dutch immigration, adoption and re-entry requirements • Understanding issues of adoption triad members	*But you know, we didn't know anything about U.S. adoptions. I had to go through the Internet for [U.S.] domestic adoption. So I took my information from there. So the Dutch laws I understood but the American laws I didn't understand. So then I taught myself… I read it all…I think you have to do research yourself when you want to adopt. You have a responsibility of your own.* (Dutch mother learning U.S. adoption/immigration laws) *There were these birth moms [at a panel forum] telling their stories, saying, "You know what? We don't want our babies back; we just want to know that they are okay."* [Birth mothers] *want to know that they made the right decision, so they're happy or they are at peace with themselves. So the education, the education can tell you so much, but when you hear it firsthand, it was totally different.* (Canadian couple discussing how they gained some insight to birth mothers concerns).
Post-adoption learning activities	**Exemplary Quotes**
• Parenting children from infancy on • Learning about and gaining competency in hair, skin, diet and nutrition for Black/minority children • Understanding racial and ethnic socialization and identity development of internationally adopted children • Gaining competency in managing racialized encounters • Understanding medical, psychological issues and needs related to learning disabilities • Deepening understanding of U.S. cultural/racial history • Negotiating adoptive –birth family relationships over time	*"And then I went to the Internet and I found out that 70% of African Americans are lactose intolerant. So I thought then, 1 + 1 = 2 then so let's skip it [lactose]. And his behavior changed completely…That was something that took real investigation. Unfortunately it took four years."* (Dutch family of African American son) *"We do Hanukah. The boys [older, non-adopted sons] will participate too. I make latkes, and do all of that. They get presents, and my sister comes over with her kids, the cousins. We just do that…She [adopted daughter] says the prayers and tells us a lot about it which is nice and good. And American Thanksgiving, she's aware of that. We went down [to the U.S.] for that because that's a big holiday…the boys are aware too. They've really embraced a lot of it.* (Canadian, non-Jewish, adoptive parent of white, U.S. daughter of Jewish heritage)

Dutch-U.S. Adoption Networking as a Community of Practice

A finding in this study indicated that the socio-cultural context of adopting U.S. children in the Netherlands moved the level of informal networking and social support that circulated among prospective and successful adoptive families to a learning system akin to the concept of a community of practice. The process began with an invitation to meet with a Dutch family that had already successfully adopted from the United States. This meeting was described as almost a vetting process whereby the experienced adoptive family shared information with the newcomers about the U.S. adoption process, assessed their level of interest and commitment (to adopting), and subsequently referred them to U.S. adoption resources. The informal but connected group of veteran U.S–Dutch adoptive families took on this role of responding to the interests, and learning needs of prospective families. Prospective adopters moved through subsequent levels of involvement and contributed to the community as they themselves evolved from prospective parents to adoptive parents–a learning process that coheres with Wenger's (1998) description of legitimate peripheral participation (LPP). Participants in this study discussed documents they produced to help new parents, documents created for prospective parents, mutual aid groups among members, and a quarterly newsletter produced by core members for distribution to other members of the community.

Taking on New Roles – From Learners to Educators

Almost all participants offered accounts of their movement from anxious prospective parents to more confident, experienced adoptive parents. For example, one Canadian mother recounted her response to her deepening awareness of how transracial adoption would significantly alter her life and engagement within her community:

> I remember before we adopted [son], we were waiting. Our friends that had adopted from [U.S.]—I was on the phone with her for hours at a time, coming up with all these hypotheticals, like 'What if someone says this or this?' And I remember her just saying to me, 'You just take it as it comes. You can't foresee everything that will come about and you can't live on edge like that. You have to just take it as it comes and deal with it when it comes.

And later in our interview her husband offered this observation:

> But certain questions, too, I think I just try to explain to people what's incorrect about their question. For example, when they say, "Who are their real parents?" or "Did you know anything about their real parents?" I'll say, "Yeah, [my wife] and I are really their parents and they have a birth family as well; that it's their story to tell. And that's our thing, right?" So it's just basically made it clear to them that what they've stated is actually incorrect or inappropriate, but in a loving kind way I try to steer the language towards them, so they kind of know how to address it the next time.

Contribution of study

This study contributes to adult education and studies in lifelong learning in offering rich evidence of the extensive self-directed (SDL) and informal learning that occurs within and across families engaged in international adoption. It aligns with arguments shared by Stehlik (2003) that "the home in fact is a valid site for adult learning, despite being pointedly overlooked in the literature" (Stehlik, p. 378). The study also links activities of learning for a life transition (to parenthood through international adoption) to discourses of lifelong learning and globalization. Parents in this study, for example, would likely not have explored U.S. racial history or immigration laws or learned to braid Black hair and care for Black skin without the joint stimuli of transitioning to parenting and doing it through an internationalized process. Eva, a Dutch

parent, sounded almost wistful as she described a hoped-for outcome for her two African American children: "I hope that we can teach them…living in both worlds and that's why I'm reading all of the books—being different and being the same and that kind of stuff—so I can teach them to cope with that."

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