

International Adoption

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## Summary

About 500,000 of people turn to adoption every year (Information About International Adoption. Educational Materials For Prospective Parents). According to National Adoption Attitudes Survey, “on balance more Americans think that international adoption is easier to complete than domestic adoption” (2002, p.42). Adopting a kid of another culture or race can be a quite rewarding choice for numerous families dreaming of a child. However, international adoption deals with many concerns as well as serious challenges. Among the greatest challenges and concern every family faces in this case is a loss of family, culture and identity.

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## 1. Introduction

*"Adoption is not about finding children for families, it's about finding families for children"*

*Joyce Maguire Pavao*

According to Bartholet "international adoption - involving the transfer of children for parenting purposes from one nation to another - presents an extreme form of what is often known as "stranger" adoption, by contrast to relative adoption (Bartholet, 2005). It is important to note that in international adoption adoptive children as well as parents face lots of differences from biological ones to race, socio-economic class, cultural heritage and ethnics, as well as nationality. International adoption can be characterized by controversy.

This type of adoption can also be called positive, because international adoption is able to serve the need for family. Over the last decades, international adoption has grown greatly, and nowadays thousands of parents cross the borders in order to adopt a child every year. Legislative policy has become more sympathetic to international adoption than it used to be in the past. However, this type of adoption continues the controversy surrounding making its future not definite.

From many perspectives, international adoption has lots of pros. However, many questions still remain. For instance, is it really so important to a well-being of adopted children to let them know their birth origin?; can it happen so that parents will cause even more problems by means of allowing their adopted children to learn more about their birth culture?; How can the adoptive parents get ready to cope with a bi-racial family?; etc. The aim of this page is to analyze the problem of the loss of culture, family and identity.

## 2. Culture issues

### Introduction

Today adopted children as well as their parents are encouraged to get as much information as possible about their origins of birth, including birth parents and cultures. For instance, if parents

decide to adopt a child from Korea, they along with their adopted child can take advantage of so-called “cultural training camps”. In such camps, they can get information regarding the country and its culture. However, is it so necessary to explore a birth culture?

Living together with a new family, adopted child can easily get the cultural perception of that family. Adopted children can easily master language and the local culture, because they become a local speaker in that culture. In such a way, such children can form cultural identity of the new place since they are raised in that place. Using some local language for a long time, adopted child gets a chance to build up the new culture perspective unconsciously and as a result he/she fits better in the new society. It means that the language combined with the environment makes every adopted child form new cultural identity associated with a new place and family he/she gets into. However, it works well with very little kids, but when it comes to those children, who understand the fact that becoming a member of a new family they lose not only their first family, but also their culture and language, it may not work so well. It may be difficult for older children, as it may lead to significant identity issues. When it comes to international adoption, any adopted child may get the feeling of isolation if his or her new parents do not belong to the same race as well as culture and belong to some community with few residents of child’s cultural and racial background. If to talk of cases when some loss of cultural connection takes place, intercountry or transracial adoption should be mentioned.

### 3. Family Issues

#### Introduction

The loss of family leads to the feelings of abandonment experienced by numerous adopted children at different points of their lives. How serious is that? To what should be parents ready regarding the issues of their child’s loss of birth family?

Researches show that even those children that are adopted as newborns experience a loss of the early connection with their mothers. Such a loss may not become evident till the moment the child grows older and becomes to understand the consequences.

Schechter point out that dealing with the loss of the biological parents is a process, contributing to formation of the adopted child's psychological development (Schechter, 1992). Generally, feelings of loss and abandonment by the biological parents are common themes of the books and articles created by people who were adopted and have a desire to share their experiences. Typically adopted individuals start wondering why it happened so that they adopted or whether there was something not right with them, something that made their birth parents decide to give them up. It should be noted that the adopted individual may have problems with finding an outlet for the feelings caused by the loss of their biological parents. In case the adoptive family is a good one and quite happy, the adopted person may start to feel guilty for their feelings regarding the loss of biological parents.

The adopted individual can also show reaction to the loss by means of depression, fear, anger, anxiety, and numbness. It should be mentioned that additional losses can trigger different memories of the birth parents' loss. Adopted individuals experiencing feelings of loss in adulthood can find a connection between the feelings they experience currently and their previous feelings regarding their initial loss of the biological parents. Sometimes adopted individuals suffer some secondary losses. For example, together with the loss of biological parents, the adopted child can experience the loss of sisters and/or brothers, cousins, uncles, aunts, etc.

#### 4. Identity for Adopted Individuals

##### Introduction

There comes time for every person when he or she begins to look for the answers regarding who this person is and what his or her place is in this world. Typically adopted individuals possess one more overlay of discerning why they cannot be with their birth parents and what relevance it may have if to mention their own identities. So, what does loss of identity mean to adopted children and how important is that?

##### 4.1. Importance of Identity for Adopted Individuals

Children who are adopted across culture and race often have to deal with the problem of integrating ethnic or racial identity without any input on behalf of a family with such a lived experience. For adopted children, identity formation may appear to be more complex if to consider numerous different challenges, including little knowledge regarding their pasts, an inability to get all necessary pieces of information, as well as social attitudes stigmatizing adoption. Thousands of adopted individuals make efforts to obtain information regarding their origin roots. However, adoption practices typically reflect a shift in understanding of how important identity is for adopted individuals (Carp, 2007).

Many scholars have used the concept of identity in different ways in order to be able to refer it to a “sense of self,” which is developed through not only internal representations but also relationships with other people; social identity; and collective identity, for example, self-awareness of ethnic or national groups (Grotevant, 2006).

Numerous researchers have analyzed the development of ethnic or racial identity. For instance, Phinney distinguished stages through which a person progresses in investigating the meaning of his or her own ethnicity or race (Phinney, 1989). It happens by means of moving from denial of some differences to an awareness of ethnicity or race, which in its turn leads to the appearance of pride in the person’s ethnic or racial identity, and successful functioning in some larger society. Root offered one more racial identity theory, known as the ecological model. This model deals with the statement that ethnic or racial identity can be called fluid. Its main peculiarity is that it is constantly changing in response to different experiences human beings get and a range of influences (Root, 1999).

Cross, Strauss, & Fhagen-Smith provided a lifespan perspective, which integrates the models mentioned above and states that race can possess either a high or low salience in the identity. According to the perspective of these scholars, the best outcome of formation of individual racial identity does not always shape an identity, which is racially focused and has strong ethnic

identification (Cross, Strauss, & Fhagen-Smith, 1999). However, it integrates race into an individual's identity in some definite manner supporting self worth.

#### 4.2. Adoptive Identity Development

International adoption leads to the appearance of some complexity to identity development. It happens so because all adopted people have dual identities. One identity belongs to their biology, when the other belongs to adoption.

Kirk (1964) was probably one of the first researchers who noticed and studied how important addressing adoption issues are. The scholar claimed that every adoptive family moves from "rejection of difference" to "acknowledgment of difference," a point of view that sees inherent distinctions between those families that are formed through birth and adoption, and that facilitates that explore different adoption-related issues. According to Grotevant and colleagues, adoptive identity development can be defined as "how the individual constructs meaning about his/her adoption" (2000, p. 381). Dunbar and Grotevant who studied the narratives of adopted adolescents, differentiated between four adoptive identity statuses:

- Limited;
- Unexamined;
- Unsettled;
- Integrated identity (Dunbar and Grotevant , 2004).

Brodzinsky is famous for his "stress and coping" life stage model (Brodzinsky, 1990). It is also related to adoptive identity. The scholar identified that awareness of adoption loss, as well as a sense of difference leads to some stress, and the individuals' adjustment is influenced to the extent equal to the ways those individuals make sense of and interpret the experience of adoption, as well as cope with their stress.

#### 4.3. Identity and Self-Esteem Development

In general adopted individuals' questions regarding identity take place during adolescence. It happens because the matter of identity development at this period is a bit more difficult because of some additional issues of adoption.

The identity development of adopted adolescents contains questions dealing with the biological/birth family, the reason why an adopted person was actually placed for adoption. The adopted person may also be interested in whether he or she looks like the birth parents resembles them in some other characteristics, and the place of the adopted person in terms of social class, culture, education, etc. The question of the influence of inherited traits and acquired traits can be very important to the adopted adolescent, because he or she will try to find out the impact of such influences on the identity.

Identity issues can also continue to appear into adulthood. Some of the identity issues may be brought up by the birth of a child to an adopted individual, because the new parent can begin to experience some biological connection to that family member. This connection can make the adopted individual reanalyze some earlier identity issues.

Such issues of identity belong to self-esteem issues, as they represent the feelings of the adopted individual about himself or herself. Many studies have shown that, adopted individuals have lower scoring regarding self-esteem in comparison with nonadopted persons (Borders, Penny & Portnoy, 2000; Sharma, McGue & Benson, 1996). Such a result proves the statement that some adopted individuals may look at themselves as rejected, different, as well as out-of-place.

Such feelings may appear as a result from the initial loss of birth/biological parents, as well as from growing up away from them. They can also appear as a result of an ongoing feeling of being not similar to nonadopted people, knowing nothing about their genetic background and biological family and consequently, can be secure about their own identity.

## 5. Conclusions

Nowadays discussions of the processes related to international adoption are more accepted and are quite open. Those discussions are focused particularly on the adopted child, his/her birth parents, as well as the parents adopting this child. Numerous scholars dedicate their studies to the development of the adopted child in the new environment, including the issues of family, culture and identity losses. It goes without saying that every case of international adoption is unique, but a great number of researches prove that loss of family, culture and identity have an impact on the adopted child, and future parents should be ready to cope with that.

#### 6. Recommendations

Based on this study it is possible to recommend:

- International adoption should be followed by educating parents regarding, giving them instructions regarding racial identity development, issues and challenges they may face during such development. It is also important to provide some assistance to future parents choosing international adoption as a priority in understanding all aspects of racial discrimination and in the ways to protect their adopted children from stereotypes and various prejudice and stereotypes.

- It is also important to develop practices, as well as resources that would be empirically based in order to prepare internationally adopted persons to cope with numerous racial bias.

- It is quite necessary to try to promote practices that would provide important information for all adopted persons.

- It would also be valuable to educate not only parents, but also teachers, the media, etc. to let them see the adoption's realities. It would definitely help to erase stereotypes, as well as make it possible to minimize discrimination related to international adoption, providing adopted kids with more positive development they need.

- It is also necessary to make more researches on the risk of international adoption and protective factors shaping the adoptees' adjustment.

(Word Count: 2747)

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