

## **International Adoption: Parent Perspectives**

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### **Abstract**

This paper, “International Adoption: Parent Perspectives” articulates the proceedings of a follow-up project of the Milk and Medicine Project Evaluation 2013 (See Background and Introduction). The experience working on the Milk and Medicine Project in Zambia combined with personal family international adoptive experience led to an interest in exploring the world of international adoption - one aspect on the vast spectrum care of Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC). This study specifically examines the perspective of adoptive parents. Using a snowball method of sampling, twelve interviews were conducted with parents who have adopted internationally, representing seven countries. This exploratory study aimed to learn more about the perspective of adoptive parents concerning three categories that framed the thematic outcomes: pre-adoption, the adoption process, and post-adoption. Derived from Grounded Theory and an open-coding process, results centered around the three categories and nineteen micro themes including motivation to adopt, resilience, attachment, and post-adoption support. Given the exploratory nature of the study and its interdisciplinary and complex nature, there is a large platform for future research. This paper will explain the findings of the project and recommend directions for future research.

**Key words: Orphans and Vulnerable Children (OVC), International Adoption, Adoptive Parents**

### **1. Background and Introduction**

The Milk & Medicine Program is a supplemental feeding program for orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) sponsored by Christian Alliance for Children in Lusaka, Zambia. An evaluation of the program in May 2013 included a trip to Zambia and provided insight into variables surrounding orphan care, systemic and governmental functioning and issues, and the depth of need for sustainable global development. The program evaluation exposed the need for continued research in the field of social work and OVC care, while equipping the research team, made up of two social work faculty and two undergraduate student research assistants, with excellent analytical and pragmatic research skills. The “International Adoption: Parent Perspectives” project was a follow up project derived from the Milk and Medicine Evaluation. The primary interest was to learn more about what adoptive parents need to know when caring for children, spanning the wide range of possible scenarios in each aspect of international adoption. This includes a compilation of responses from participants on varying processes, experiences, contexts, and effects, both on adopters and adoptees.

### **2. Literature Review**

This literature review focuses on the micro level aspects of international adoption, including trauma and attachment, and adjustment and belonging. Though the literature chosen mostly addresses post-adoption realities, families at each phase of the international adoption process must take these significant factors into account to increase awareness

surrounding adoption motivation, preparation, and the relationship between expectations and reality. The gathered body exists to draw attention to and normalize complex facets of international adoption.

## 2.1 Trauma And Attachment

Trauma is anything that is deeply distressing to an individual. It might be physical or psychological, but in many cases, it is both. Many adopted children have complex trauma – trauma that has endured for a long duration of time as opposed to one or a few dispersed incidents. Many have had one or more attachment disruptions, experience of abuse and neglect, and neurological damage due to prenatal substance exposure. Many learn from an early age that the world is unsafe and people are untrustworthy, a worldview that contrasts one that develops within a safe and healthy attachment. This discrepancy often makes it difficult for families and service care providers to understand the depth of posttraumatic effects. Children who have experienced trauma have brains with highly developed and adaptive survival-based functioning, due to their early conditioning. They are not yet neurologically prepared to thrive in safe environments: what was once adaptive and crucial for their survival becomes maladaptive within these new, safe settings.<sup>1</sup>

The concept of developmental trauma, which includes the prenatal period, is imperative to understand when working with or parenting adopted children: “An infant’s neurochemistry reflects his or her very first home—the uterus.”<sup>2</sup> Research has shown that early childhood trauma can start right at conception: high stress pregnancies, the birthing experience, and separation from the primary caregiver of forty weeks gestation are shown to drastically alter the brains of these young ones. These children are neurologically fragile and at high risk for behavioral issues, vestibular issues, and insecure attachment: “without close and nurturing contact from another human being, it becomes physically impossible for youngsters to develop optimally healthy bodies and minds...a child who missed out on nurturing from the start has an entirely different developmental trajectory.”<sup>2</sup>

“When the natural evolution, from conception to care, is interrupted by postnatal separation from the biological mother the resultant experience of abandonment and loss is indelibly imprinted upon the children’s unconscious minds. The cognitive memories of these prenatal or postnatal traumatic experiences may be unable to retrieve, but the children’s bodies do not forget.”<sup>3</sup> Trauma can result from the abrupt severing of the only relationship they have ever known - the in-utero relationship with the birth mother. Furthermore, an adoptive mother is at a disadvantage from the start, as she has not had the benefit of the forty weeks of in-utero bonding to help her and her child become attuned to one another.<sup>4</sup> This has serious implications for adoptive parents. Post-trauma symptomology cannot be minimized.

“Attachment is a term used to refer to close, enduring, emotionally based interpersonal relationships...a continuum, with securely attached children at one end, completely unattached children at the other, and the vast majority somewhere in between.”<sup>4</sup> Attachment can be damaged or prevented by all types of trauma, including abuse, neglect, and high-stress environments, whether in utero or after birth. Attachment is a style, a pattern, affected by multiple various factors. Insecure attachments yield significant, negative ramifications.

Various scholars and interdisciplinary workers in related fields have suggested intervention theories and models to aid families in the restorative work of post-adoption, the most common forms including trauma- and attachment-focused interventions where biological, psychological, and social factors are wholly considered. Through clinical psychoeducation, support groups, and other means of intervention, adoptive parents can learn to provide physical and psychological nurturance, which stimulates neural development in the brains of adopted children: Adoptive parents can *become* biological parents by physically altering the neurochemistry of their children.<sup>3</sup> A new wave of literature surrounding childhood trauma and attachment will be of immense help to adoptive families.

## 2.2 Adjustment And Belonging

In addition to root issues of trauma and attachment within adopted children, ethnic and racial identity factors are central to adoptive family adjustment and the perceived belongingness of the child. Manifestations of early childhood trauma and insecure attachments may include behavioral misconduct, lack of interpersonal skills, difficulty differentiating between relationships, and parental stress and resentment. Racial and ethnic identity issues further compound posttraumatic symptomology, adjustment, and identity/belonging of adopters and adoptees. Issues for adoptive families arise when “the battered two-year-old face turns into the problem child.”<sup>5</sup> Trauma, attachment, and ethnic and racial tensions must be considered as interrelated players in the homes of (international) adoptive families.

The transition of bringing a child home is complex and difficult, specifically surrounding the integration of adoptive family and adoptive child norms. The clash between expectations and reality is often colossal. Formation of identity for the new family is a journey: “With a push toward more openness around adoption in general, with transracial and

transnational adoption making the creation of families through adoption more visually obvious, and with cultural and ethnic groups demanding more consideration in and control over the process, questions about belonging take on a sense of urgency.”<sup>5</sup>

International adoption raises racial and ethnic identity issues, playing a huge role in a child’s perceived belongingness in his or her new family. Adopted children “have to eventually base their emerging personalities on two sets of parents, one biological and one psychological.”<sup>6</sup> Margaret Haerens suggests four ways in which adoptive parents address ethnic and racial issues: 1) assimilation 2) celebrating plurality 3) balancing act, and 4) immersion.<sup>7</sup> Parents often base their decision to adopt a child of another race or culture on their own experience, immersion, and conditioning in ethnic and racial contexts. Even if adoptive parents take an open, honest, willing stance on how to address these issues, society pushes internationally adopted children more and more into marginal positions, creating vulnerability towards a perceived lack of belongingness: “all of the complicated issues of belonging for children are magnified in the global context.”<sup>5</sup>

These “‘found’ children always have histories, and are rooted both in and between the families and communities from which they originate and the new families and communities to which they migrate.”<sup>5</sup> The post-adoption healing process requires a lifetime commitment, as indicated by the complex and interconnected variables of trauma, attachment, and racial and ethnic identity. With the array of complexities that come with international adoption, we sought the perspectives of a sampling of adoptive parents’ for a preliminary study.

### **3. Methodology**

The participants were gathered by means of a snowball sampling collection. The research team surveyed a sample of twelve adoptive parents. The countries of adoptees represented in the study were China, Hong Kong, Korea, Uganda, Zambia, Ethiopia, and Guatemala. The survey was developed following the literature review and encompassed many themes and topics we found critical to expand upon, focusing mostly on the micro-level psychological aspects of international adoption and the unique and specific array of factors that affect families who adopt internationally. The Human Subjects Review Board of Hope College approved the study. Interviews were held either in person or over the phone, and they were recorded with participant permission. Participants answered questions concerning their specific adoption experiences, including motivations to adopt, details about the preparation and process, and post-adoption realities. This exploratory study aimed to learn more about the perspective of adoptive parents concerning three categories that framed the thematic outcomes: pre-adoption, the adoption process, and post-adoption. Derived from Grounded Theory and an open coding process, triangulation was utilized to prevent bias.<sup>8</sup> Results centered on the three categories and nineteen micro themes, some of which included: motivation to adopt, resilience, attachment, and post-adoption support. Using this approach in exploratory research enabled researchers to allow thematic results to guide further research. At the time of the study, the age range of the adopted children was two to fifteen, and the sample adoptive families had from one to three adopted children in the home. The children ranged from ages birth to three years when placed in institutional care, and from six months to eleven years when placed in adoptive homes.

### **4. Results**

The results of the study led to three organizing themes: Pre-Adoption, Adoption Process, and Post-Adoption. Nineteen micro themes fell under these umbrellas as seen below:

Table 1: themes from adoptive parent interviews

Pre-Adoption	Motivation to Adopt Initial Concerns & Fears Resources Choosing International Adoption Extended Family & Other Networks Resilience
Adoption Process	Social Workers/Agency/Government Involvement Process Details Perspectives on the Process: Best and Worst Parts Resilience
Post-Adoption	Familial Adjustment Adopted Child Adjustment Greatest Joys and Hardships Child Acceptance of Adoptive Parents Identification with Home Culture Post-Adoption Support Resilience

## 4.1 Theme Discussion

To best articulate and demonstrate what emerged from the data, the themes are explained and followed by representative quotes from some of the participants.

### 4.1.1 *pre-adoption*

#### 4.1.1.1 *motivation to adopt*

When exploring the driving force behind each family's choice to adopt, answers centered around faith, experience, or a combination of the two. Participants often mentioned feeling a call or conviction to act on behalf of orphans and vulnerable children, derived from the Christian faith. Encountering orphans throughout global travel and work heightened the experiential motivation to adopt. As such, some families actually met their children and then pursued adoption. Other motivational factors included family planning and infertility. One participant said:

The Bible says that I have been adopted into God's family, and so scripture is where I derive my motivation to adopt. I would say secondary to that, encountering a real life orphan and looking an orphan in the eyes and recognizing their significant needs, and that I, in my lifetime, have an opportunity to meet the needs of at least a few for a significant portion of their lives."<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.1.1.2 *initial concerns and fears*

Hearing of the many and varying pre-adoption concerns and fears, answers centered around anticipations of the unknown. Most mentioned a significant clash between expectations and reality, many times because of the lack of clarity in differing international adoption cases. One participant explained, "sometimes international adoptions can get drawn out for extended lengths of time. The health and welfare of the child and the waiting period and whether also there would be any big either physical or mental health issues were basically some of our fundamental worries."<sup>10</sup>

#### 4.1.1.3 resources

Every participant in the study had used pre-adoption resources. It was highly recommended that prospective adoptive parents do their research to be prepared for the wide variety of scenarios and issues that could occur.

#### 4.1.1.4 choosing international adoption

Many factors were included in participant responses to addressing *why international adoption?* A few had been living and working in the countries of their adoptions. Many had traveled to the countries of their adoptions. Overall, there seemed to be an understanding of the needs of orphans and vulnerable children globally. Other more secondary but practical factors were included as well: guidelines of countries, what families were able and willing to handle, and matching logistics. One participant shared part of her journey, “There were so many families waiting for infants that were available for adoption...I just didn’t feel okay with that when I knew there were so many kids in orphanages in other countries waiting.”<sup>11</sup>

#### 4.1.1.5 extended family and other networks

Though the levels of extended familial support greatly varied, it was strongly emphasized that a support network of any kind is imperative in the adoption process. Many participants utilized support networks for pre-adoption advice, counseling, and encouragement. Extended family support seemed to be of utmost value to participants, making things very helpful or in some cases, discouraging. Many extended family members were reported to have significant moments of transformation upon meeting the child – some turned from non-support to advocacy. It seems that extended family members have to go through their own process in coming to terms with the adoption(s). A widely expressed response was that families experienced a false sense of support; that support networks generally cared deeply, but could not understand their circumstances. Participants expressed isolation, as represented by:

I would say our immediate family was very supportive. They didn’t understand – we heard a lot of *why don’t you just have another baby?* We heard an earful. *Why not adopt somebody here? Why go overseas when we have so many kids here?* People didn’t understand, but you know, once he was here, they were very welcoming, but they didn’t understand why – they didn’t get our motivation for doing that.<sup>12</sup>

#### 4.1.1.6 resilience

During the pre-adoption phase, much has to be discussed, decided, approved, and endured. Both implicitly and explicitly, resilience emerged from the data in these families who were or are pursuing adoption. Amidst difficult details and decisions, setbacks, and resistance from others, many families expressed the need to be resilient for the adoptive process to become a reality.

If I was at all wishy-washy about the idea of adoption, they would have totally hit on that, *maybe you should think about that, maybe you should not do this*, but I was so firm in it and my belief that this was supposed to happen – they didn’t really have a lot of movement. So they either accepted it or they weren’t really a part of the whole process. So I kind of forced them to accept it, but I think once they met [my child], it was such – now they talk to him all the time, want to see him all the time, he’s just like one of the grandkids.<sup>13</sup>

### 4.1.2 adoption process

#### 4.1.2.1 social workers/agency/government involvement

The relationships participants had with their agencies, social workers, and in-country governments varied greatly. Some experiences were flawless and others were incredibly taxing. Each country’s process varied thus, affecting all relevant aspects. Other issues like corruption altered the entire experience for families – specifically in independent

adoptions where the families see the intricacies of the process. Participants valued field experience as critical for the professional competence of their agencies and social workers. One family “had four Social Workers with that adoption, so not as smooth...if that would have been our first time, I would have been freaking out.”<sup>14</sup>

#### *4.1.2.2 process details*

There were many commonalities and many discrepancies within the participants’ adoption processes. Independent adoptions yielded much different experiences than agency adoptions. Many more in-country details were known, and families are more responsible for completing casework roles that agencies often fill. Thus, the main differences we saw in the processes were due to whether the adoption was through an agency or independent. Other factors to consider were cultural differences, trust of the agency or government, and whether or not the country was a Hague Convention country.

#### *4.1.2.3 perspectives on the process: best and worst parts*

It seems patience, frustration, and confusion is demanded of parents in the adoption process. Whether or not details were known, whether the child was pre-identified or referred, and whether or not the family was in-country there were ambiguities parents experienced. However, every family said that the patience and frustration was worth it for their children. One noted, “It’s impossible to expect it appropriately...you can read books about it, but until you experience it you just don’t know... But, we expected the unexpected – that’s just kind of the way we go.”<sup>15</sup>

#### *4.1.2.4 resilience*

Resilience was expressed strongly in the participants whose processes were independent, of which the majority were prolonged and confusing. Many confounding variables presented themselves, and families could either cave to the complications or choose resilience and fight through, no matter what the cost. Generalizations are difficult to make, however, as all adoptions are very different. With the lack of consistency specifically in international adoption, resilience is likely common in most adoptive families. Resilience emerged strongly through this participant:

My husband and I traveled to Ethiopia where we stayed for maybe ten days...we met him, spent time with him, and then we went to court and agreed to adoption. Then we had to get back on a plane and come back here without him, which really sucked, because there was a waiting for immigration...waiting for his visa...so, we were supposed to go back and get him in three weeks. However, it took six months. So, we came back for six months and waited and waited and waited...it was awful...so finally, one day we just got an email. I woke up and had an email in my inbox saying, “come get your son,” and we left that day.<sup>12</sup>

### *4.1.3 post-adoption*

#### *4.1.3.1 familial adjustment*

Preparation was highly recommended, though each participant stressed the large amount of unknown when entering adoptions. Expectations are critical. Many indicated the importance of taking things in stride and flexibility without huge expectations, with an unwavering commitment to your child. It is normal for things to feel “off,” and even negative. It is normal to not “feel” love for your child right away. Marriages may be shaken, siblings may be thrown off, but all twelve participants said the familial commitment to adopted children, regardless of circumstances, has been of utmost importance in navigating the new normal. One participant expressed their adjustment experience: “I would say for my girls –they know sacrificial love because they see it every single day. They understand that. My husband and I – it’s been very stressful on us...And we kind of alternate I feel like with [our adopted child]...I’ll be doing ok for a couple of months, and then I’ll have a really hard time, and then my husband will step it up...”<sup>12</sup>

#### *4.1.3.2 adopted child adjustment*

The post-adoption process is a lifetime commitment. The adopted children’s adjustment into a new, forever family varied. Their adjustment depended on many factors, including but not limited to attachment, trauma, culture, age,

institutional or foster care, and medical issues. These issues should each be highly considered in preparing to open one's home. Scenarios can vary greatly, from child to child, and even day to day: "It's very disorganized. In a time where she is very vulnerable, I'll see her holding on to me, not wanting to let me go, sometimes panicking...where in other times, when she *should* be that way, she'll just go sit on someone else's lap that she doesn't know...she is more stable when I am more consistent."<sup>9</sup>

#### *4.1.3.3 greatest joys and hardships – post adoption*

Re-entry seemed to be one of the most difficult experiences for these families. Many noted the first few days, weeks, or months were extremely challenging. Getting into a new routine while sometimes taking a "nesting" period to foster attachment can be difficult and longstanding. One of the most difficult things seemed to be a realization and understanding (in part) of the children's histories – but in that, finding the greatest joy in being able to be an agent of healing in their lives.

Specific to adoption, I would say it's amazing to see that my kids "get it" in a sense of their heart of compassion – it's huge for other kids. They really get the adoptive call, and you know, one author has basically said children who have been adopted into a loving, secure, forever family, don't really need it explained to them – God's love explained to them, because so much of our relationship with Christ as Christians is totally reflected in that act of adoption physically.<sup>15</sup>

No matter how much I read or how many people I talk to, children that become mine are going to have unique and specific needs that are even unique to general and normal issues that come with adoption. My children won't be textbooks – they just won't – because they're children. It's not an equation...be aware of the lifetime commitment that it is to pursue understanding the specific and unique needs of your child with the cognition and thought of knowing that you don't know what actually happened to them. You have part of the story...you have to understand there's a lot of grace for a parent that takes in a child who is not of their own flesh and makes him/her flesh.<sup>9</sup>

#### *4.1.3.4 child acceptance of adoptive parents*

The attachment journey takes much time, physical and emotional energy, and intentionality. Some children attach more readily; others have severe difficulties. Manifestations of attachment issues vary in children as well. Attachment is a two-way street – child to parent and parent to child. Outside intervention can be utilized to facilitate and aid in the process. Other relevant considerations in the attachment process were children's interactions with strangers or those outside the family and whether or not the family had implemented boundaries or strategies to appropriately and healthily facilitate those interactions. One participant expressed her experience with the journey to acceptance: "[My child] has a distinction in her mind – she knows her "tummy mommy" is a different woman who brought her into the world but she now knows that "mommy mommy" – this is the one who is going to walk this life out with me."<sup>9</sup>

#### *4.1.3.5 identification with home culture*

It was mentioned regularly that when adopting inter-culturally and/or interracially, no parents would ever be able to adequately give their children an authentic experience of their home culture. Many families try to incorporate aspects of the children's home culture into their lives to retain as much as possible. However, participants had different perceptions on what culture was and/or what aspects should be retained. Varying from food to sense of time and everywhere in between, families chose to convey their children's home culture to them based on their understanding of culture and of that specific culture. One participant explained "it's impossible for us to adequately convey Ugandan culture to them because we're not Ugandans...but we have friends who are Ugandan, and we really encourage that involvement."<sup>15</sup> Another participant noted, "depending on where we are in the world, we will take turns being in the minority."<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.1.3.6 *post-adoption support*

Many families mentioned their awareness of post-adoption services, though only a few have utilized them. Of the few who have, it was seen as one of the most helpful and strong support networks available to them, and they were recommended highly to anyone going through post-adoption issues:

I would say the role of my daughter's pediatrician and her trauma therapist right now is probably the tightest support group I have – in terms of being a parent, I am being affirmed every day... That's very encouraging to me, because when I take my daughter to school and I face the pushback and things like that ("there's nothing wrong with your child"), but these are the things that we are facing day in and day out – and so having a trauma therapist and a specialized, very precise pediatrician who deals with children like my daughter has been very encouraging...they're exceptional.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4.1.3.7 *resilience*

Resilience in the post-adoption processes emerged both from the families' dedication and commitment to their adopted children and from the children themselves. Getting through the transition periods, creating new normalcy, and addressing issues, concerns, and family life seemed to demand resilience on everyone's part. Resilience in the post-adoption process was not strongly expressed by all families, but many commented on its essential role to "make it through."

She just has this resiliency about her, and I know that she's had to have it, but she does have a resiliency about her, and she's just taken a lot of things by stride.<sup>16</sup>

It's not for the faint of heart. But, I should add though, she's made so much progress in every single way...I think she's regulating much faster than she used to...lots and lots of good...it just takes a while – it'll probably take a lifetime...You've gotta be in it for the long haul.<sup>16</sup>

I could never imagine my kids being so horrible or so broken from their post-adoption and their adoptive reality that I would consider dissolving that contract before God and before them and abandoning them again.<sup>15</sup>

## 5 **Conclusions and Future Research**

This study was exploratory and therefore broad. As suggested by the literature, the study confirmed that the complexities of adoption are further intensified when in the international context.<sup>5</sup> The international adoption processes of each participant varied greatly, though a commonality arose of striking gaps between expectations and realities. Variations of motivation, support, resources, resilience factors, and in-country experiences/legalities demonstrated that each family's journey of international adoption is unique. Likewise, the adjustment phase and post-adoption reality of each adopted child and family is unique, though commonalities were present. Presenting trauma and attachment factors, and ethnic, racial, and belonging factors affected each participant and his/her family in distinct and overlapping ways.

The hope of this study is, therefore, that it would be of value to adoptive parents – that it would be a study validating both streamlined and unique experiences, of exposing and consolidating thematic outcomes, and of offering resources and further research to assist families in navigating all aspects of international adoption.

Future research could focus on several areas. Topics of interest to us in the international adoption sector include: ethics, cultural implications of the Hague Convention, agency adoptions vs. independent adoptions, parental education on post-adopt issues, adoptive family vulnerability to extended family, grief and loss in the adoption triad, resilience, gender differences, special needs, and marriage and family transitions/effects.



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