

Brief/En bref

Anticipating the Adopted Child: Women's Preadoptive Experiences

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Cette étude-pilote d'orientation phénoménologique s'est penchée sur les expériences de 3 femmes ayant choisi l'adoption internationale. Ces mères ayant adopté au total 7 enfants venant de 4 pays différents ont échangé sur le parcours qui les a menées à l'adoption : le désir de fonder une famille, les longues démarches occasionnées par la procédure d'adoption, de même que la création de liens affectifs profonds avec leurs enfants. La période qui précède l'adoption est marquée par la préparation, soulevant des thèmes tels que le besoin de prendre sa vie en main, le désir de fonder une famille, l'attente, la contemplation heureuse de photos, les façons de respecter les origines de l'enfant, la nécessité de s'impliquer, et la création de liens affectifs. Ce travail de recherche contribue à affirmer l'importance et la pertinence des expériences vécues par les mères adoptives, et à approfondir, de manière importante, les connaissances des professionnelles en sciences infirmières qui travaillent auprès de ces mères.

A phenomenological pilot study looked into the experiences of 3 women choosing to adopt internationally. The mothers of a total of 7 children from 4 different countries shared the journey leading to adoption: the desire to create a family, the labour of the adoption process, and the experience of bonding with their children. The preadoptive period was a time of preparation, generating the themes of taking control, creating a family, anticipating, celebrating the pictures, honouring the child's origins, investing personally, and bonding. This research validates and adds credibility to the experiences of adoptive mothers, thus contributing critical information to the knowledge base of the nursing professionals who work with these mothers.

This brief report explores the experiences of three women who became mothers through international adoption. Several themes were identified in the process of developing a mother-child relationship in the pre-adoptive period. One mother poignantly described the experience:

We did talk about that bonding issue, about having 9 months to bond when you are pregnant. Would it be different? Would you not be able to bond? But we were adopting. You knew that at the end of this road there was going to be this baby and it didn't matter that we weren't pregnant.

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It was just a different road and we thought about that child and we talked about it and we prepared for him and you get a room ready, you choose a name...you know, all those things that you do to prepare for a child. It is all part of the bonding process and we did all that...we had a room set up...we shopped, we bought things, we got ready to embrace this child, to bring him into our life. He was coming into our family and there was already that bonding...how you open yourself up to embrace and bring this child in your life. Is that what bonding is? I guess it is.

Literature Review

Professionals working with mothers, children, and families are aware of the importance of every mother-child dyad beginning their relationship under the best possible circumstances. The only way to ensure healthy, positive beginnings for the adoptive mother-child dyad is to eliminate the stigma and celebrate the union. In order to do this we need to know what the natural path for the mother and child in adoption looks like. Research can provide this information.

Very little is known about the development of the mother-child relationship in adoption. The studies that have been done have addressed specific factors in the mother-child interaction such as reciprocity and attachment outcomes (Beckwith, 1972; Lucia, 1992; Singer, Brodzinsky, Ramsay, Steir, and Waters, 1985). Adoptive mothers fared as well as or, often, better than biological dyads in these studies. Smith and Sherwen (1984) looked at qualities of the child that seemed to facilitate bonding. They found that it was easier for adoptive mothers to bond with children under age 4, children of a similar racial or ethnic background, and children viewed as healthy.

Lobar and Phillips (1996) are the only investigators to have looked at the experiences and feelings of mothers and fathers during the pre-adoption and adoption phases. They used ethnographic analysis to explore the processes of parents making the decision to adopt and facilitating the adoption. Their study generated several major themes including uncertainty, unpreparedness, and commitment to an unguaranteed investment, as well as isolation, competition, judgement, and ostracism from a variety of sources. Lobar and Phillips' study lays a foundation for understanding the parents' process in the early stages of adoption. Their study differs from the present one in that they looked at domestic adoptions and did not focus on how these processes relate to the developing parent-child relationship.

Study Design

Participant Profile

Three mothers of children adopted internationally were recruited through network sampling and subsequently agreed to participate in the study. A total of seven children, two girls and five boys, representing four countries, were adopted by the three families. Three of the children had identified special needs, only one of which was known prior to adoption. The children were all adopted before the age of 2. Five had initially been cared for by foster parents, two by orphanages. The children now ranged in age from 3 to 9 years. All children were culturally different from their adoptive families and five were racially different as well. All parents were white. All parents were married, owned their own home, and were financially able to allow the mother to stay at home for an average of 1 year with each adoption.

Data Collection

Data collection involved interviewing each mother for approximately 2 hours. Interviews were open-ended within a semi-structured format designed to maintain the focus on the maternal-child relationship rather than on the adoption process. Early interviews helped inform questions for later ones. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Probing questions and questions generated impromptu by the mother's words were posed liberally throughout the interview. Procedures were conducted within university human-subject guidelines.

Data Analysis

Using an inductive approach, the coding process involved a series of strategies including open, axial, and selective coding (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This type of analysis was selected for its structure, which was necessary for the time frame involved. Inter-coder agreement was established on the coding of select transcript pieces. Theoretical memos were kept throughout the study to help guide the question-development, thinking, and coding processes.

Findings

The themes that were generated during this study of the preadoptive period were: taking control, creating a family, anticipating, celebrating the pictures, honouring the child's origins, investing personally, and

bonding. As one mother stated, "It's all preparing to bring this child into your life and commit yourself to him." The themes emerged out of the issues the mothers identified as relevant to their experiences of developing a relationship with their adopted child. Each of the themes is described below.

Taking Control

The first step in adoption is, of course, deciding to adopt. Mothers described this as taking control, a theme represented frequently in their adoption journeys. Taking control encompasses the mother's process of beginning to develop a mother-child relationship. Mothers took control of their lives and their environments in order to make a place in the world for a family purposely created through adoption. All made a conscious decision not to pursue pregnancy, seeing adoption as a natural, proactive choice that put them in control of their reproductive health and desire to be a parent. As part of taking control they intellectually prepared for international adoption by learning about adoption from adult adoptees and attending adoption classes.

Creating a Family

The second theme to emerge was that of creating a family. Mothers saw adoption as the predestined, natural path to creation of their families. They embraced adoption and assumed a proactive role in navigating the road ahead. Mothers believed adoption would provide them with the family they were meant to have. All mothers stated clearly that their goal was to create a family, be a parent, and have a child. One mother summed it up nicely:

It's a feeling, like you've been on this road all your life and everything that came before was bringing you to this point. These were the kids meant to be in this house, in this home, to be our children. I have no doubt about it. This is just the way and the time they had to come to us.

Anticipating

Once parents had made the commitment to adopt and had navigated the initial bureaucratic roads on their journey, they eventually learned of their child. Mothers did not see this simply as a waiting period; they anticipated and dreamt of their children. They welcomed them into their hearts long before they were able to hold them in their arms. The waiting was charged with emotion, preparation, and expectancy. They socially prepared for their children by sharing their anticipation and the

adoption process with family, friends, acquaintances — and even strangers who were willing to listen!

Celebrating the Pictures

A significant component of developing the relationship was receiving pictures of the child. All mothers described the pictures of their child as things to hold on to, share with others, and help prepare them for the actual arrival. The pictures seemed to serve as transitional objects. The mothers took them everywhere they went and shared them with everyone they met. They even slept with them. The pictures became a tangible connection to their baby a world away, like a pregnant belly to rub and soothe.

Honouring the Child's Origins

Mothers shared a sense of honouring both their child's early caregivers and their child's country of birth. Believing that their child-to-be was in good, caring hands while waiting to be placed in their arms seemed extremely important to all the mothers. Even orphanage staff were spoken of with high regard, except for the case of one baby who had been severely neglected and malnourished. Trusting that their infant had been in quality care during those initial months seemed to be, for the mothers, an extension of themselves and their affection for their baby.

In addition to honouring the caregivers, the mothers honoured their child's country of origin. Learning about their child's land and culture seemed to be for them a way of paying tribute to the country that was giving them their child. Some mothers visited their child's country just to learn about it; they studied some of the language and customs, read books about it, and learned to cook its foods. They saw the child's time in their country of origin and with their early caretakers as worthy beginnings.

Investing Personally

The investment of these mothers went beyond money, time, and resources; they invested of themselves. The mothers pursued adoption with blind determination. Once they began, stopping the pursuit to adopt seemed no longer an option. Mothers travelled internationally, lived for weeks in foreign countries, flew on questionably safe aircraft, and exposed their lives to a host of adoption-related professionals.

Bonding

Mothers used the word *bonding* to describe what they did during the preadoption period (the term was generated by each mother, not by the interviewer). It was a significant theme running throughout their experience of developing a relationship with their adopted infant. The mothers found places at all stages where seeds of bonding were sown. The natural association they all made between their work in developing a maternal-child relationship and bonding speaks to the expectation that bonding was inherent in their relationship with the child, and that it occurred in the context of their adoptive experience and in the absence of pregnancy. One mother summarized:

The bonding starts with all the preparation you make in your home, just psychologically, all the anticipation, having the pictures. What is that like? Maybe it is like parents who first feel their child kicking. The things that we did to bond, many of them are the same as the couple who are pregnant. I mean you paint a room, you get a crib, you have a baby shower. Many of those things are the same, and then some of the other things are different.

Discussion

The narratives of these three women describe themes in the process of preparing to welcome a child. These themes were different from those that emerge during pregnancy, yet there are parallels between the preadoptive process and pregnancy. Value was attached to the child in the earliest stages of adoption just as value is attached to the fetus in pregnancy. The maternal work of pregnancy includes seeking safe passage, securing and ensuring acceptance of the child, bonding with the child, and giving of oneself (Rubin, 1984). The adoptive mothers went through all those processes, only in a different context. They fulfilled adoption requirements to secure the child, shared each step in the process with everyone around them, used pictures to bond with the baby, and went beyond the normal limits of safety and comfort, traveling to unknown lands.

Interestingly, the mothers in this study did not share feelings or experiences consistent with the themes identified by Lobar and Phillips (1996). There were no reports of pain, fear, or angst. Evident instead were feelings of confidence, proactiveness, and affection. This perhaps reflects the fact that the mothers in the present study were interviewed after they had successfully adopted instead of during the preadoptive period. It may also reflect the fact that the questions were posed in the

context of the maternal-child relationship rather than the adoption process itself.

The stories of these women demonstrate the strength, commitment, and resilience inherent in their journey to create a family. Future research might focus on providing adoptive mothers with validation of both their journey and the processes inherent in it, credibility for this alternative but natural path to motherhood, and recognition of the beauty of the adoptive mother's development of a deep, loving, lifelong mother-child relationship. The accounts of adoptive mothers can educate and inform other women seeking to adopt, as well as the professionals who work with them. Nurses can benefit from knowing what waiting for the adoptive child involves and can increase their sensitivity to the needs of the preadoptive mother. Pregnancy is a time of honouring and pampering. The preadoption process deserves similar compassion and recognition; the adoptive mother-to-be is worthy of care and treatment equal to that accorded the pregnant mother-to-be.

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