

Communicating Family Identity with Adopted Children

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Abstract

The following paper explores the strategies and processes that families, mainly parents face when communicating family identity with their adopted children. These adopted children are usually a result of an international adoption and yield visible differences from their parents. These visible differences among others can challenge or support the family identity. The strategies used to maintain a positive and healthy identity of family relations. Many outsiders question the relationship between adoptive parents and their adopted child(ren), this paper is focusing on how parents navigate answering difficult questions and what strategies they employ to communicate family identity to their adopted children.

Keywords: family communication, family identity, adoption, parenting, children, international adoption

COMMUNICATING FAMILY IDENTITY WITH ADOPTED CHILDREN

“Mommy, did I grow in your tummy?” “No sweetie, you grew in my heart.” This was a typical response my aunt would give to my adopted cousin, when she was a little girl. This among other responses is how my aunt and uncle wanted my cousin to view her adoption as a loving exchange and special moment in our family’s life. I never questioned my cousin, not being biologically related to me. She is my cousin! However, the topic eventually came up and then family, friends, and outsiders began to ask the challenging questions that infiltrated our family identity. Adoption is an accepted family form in the United States. Yet, there are still questions that people want answered about the adoption process, adopted the child’s history, about the parents choosing to adopt to name a few. There are countless others, but all of these questions call into question the family’s identity when a child is adopted. The processes and strategies used to manage family identity in an adopted family situation via communication are very important. First, we will be looking at the types of contradictions that parents encounter in relaying identity to their adopted children. Then, we will look at how the comments made by extended family members or outsiders challenge or support the identity of a family and the strategies employed during those situations. Lastly, we will discuss Every avenue we pursue is used by many adoptive parents today and how they effectively communicate their family identity to their adopted children.

FORMING THE FAMILY IDENTITY

Adoption has become more commonplace in the United States, but many adoptions are international. This brings another layer to the identity work required of parents. They are consistently encountering visible difference between them and their child. These noticeably

visible physical differences can cause others to question the child and the parents. People tend to be curious about the origins of the family since there is evidence to support it is not a biological relationship. The article that this information is drawn from explores the contradictions parents engage in when conducting identity-work (Harrigan, 2009). Using relational dialectics theory, the contradictions examined were similarity and difference, invisibility and visibility, integration and distance, fortune and loss, openness and closedness, and community and privacy.

Throughout these six contradictions, Harrigan interviewed 40 parents in 31 interviews to learn what contradictions they experience most and how they handle the situations. All of the families investigated for the study were visibly adoptive families adding a depth to adoption that invisibly adoptive families do not always face. Harrigan found that certain contradictions were more prevalent than others under the three sets of dialectical tensions; expression and nonexpression, stability and change, and integration and separation. Under expression and nonexpression are the contradictions of openness and closedness and community and privacy. "Parents are working to manage the public and private nature of visible adoption by choosing when and what aspects of adoption-related information to share." (Harrigan, 2009, 653). This quote exemplifies how parents are continually at work to reaffirm their familial identity even in the face of contradictions. According to the study, all of the parents interviewed expressed engaging in all of these contradictions at different times. For example in the contradiction of similarity and difference, parents try to focus on similarities with their children, but highlight that they do have some difference from them and other members of their family (640). In the same category, parents view their family form as very similar to biologically tied families, but yet different because of the process of adoption. There are common examples found in all the contradiction categories, but the most prevalent in the responses collected by the researcher tend to be

similarity and difference, closedness and openness, and community and privacy. These contradictions prove to be more important in communicating than other contradictions at time. These contradictions provide a framework that structures how families tend to deal with identity within their families. The contradictions are not positive or negative, but show that parents can rely on others outside of the family to help manage communication of adoption in family identity (Harrigan, 2009). Outsiders can be a valuable resource in utilizing communication strategies in family identity work.

WORKING THROUGH FAMILY IDENTITY CHALLENGES

As families continue to work on managing their family identities, visible adoptions can insight questions more quickly from outside sources. Suter specifically investigated U.S. families that adopted children from China since there has been such a high number of adoptions from this country. With children and their parents being visibly dissimilar in their appearance it can be more difficult to manage family identity. The control over how and when self-disclosure takes place is harder to contain in a visibly adopted family scenario. The child's visible markers almost immediately give away adoptive status (Suter, 2008). Suter investigates how questions and comments by outsiders can support or challenge their family identity and do different response strategies used by the parents support or challenged the family identity. Under the theories, that family is a social construct and family identity is built and sustained on social interaction help develop the scope to view family identity of children adopted from China (2008, 130). Suter used a volunteer national sample of 245 parents with children adopted from China. One drawback to the research was most of the participants were female 84.1% and 14.3% were single. In the overall analysis of the data collected, the respondents considered most questions and comments to be challenging to their family identity (2008,131). By using close-ended and

open-ended questions, the researcher was able to gather information, on which items were the most challenging for example the topic of birth parents and the child's history, but how parents respond to commenting or questioning is just as important at managing family identity as the inquiry (2008,137). When others are questioning the parents and child identity one of the most important tools in a parent's toolbox in education, many parents see this as an opportunity to inform the questioners about adoption. The reason comments, questions, even stares can be challenging is because the family is being focused on in a negative light. They are highlighting the visible differences between parents and their children, when that would not normally be the case in a biologically related family (Suter, 2008, 142).

Using implications from the same sample used above, Suter and Ballard teamed up to investigate the decision making that underlies adoptive parent's responses to inappropriate remarks. By using the same samples, they were able to focus on the responses and the motivations for parents responding to comments in certain ways. When responding to comments parents consider certain factors: the identity of the commenter, the question, factors related to the child, timing/setting of interaction, and the disposition of the parents (Suter & Ballard, 2009). These factors gauge how and in what tone a parent responds to inquiries. Responses are relationally dependent, but can be interactionally dependent as well. According to the study, interest or experience with adoption overrides any relational connection associated to choosing to respond to a comment or question. However, there are questions that parents would never answer and those center around cost, the child's China story, about the adoption decision, related to visibility, or other topics (2009, 115). Most parents responded that providing information in those matters violates their right to privacy. Although like most parents, adoptive parents are proud to receive and respond to some questions like compliments about their child, affirmation

of familial relations, questions about or related to adoption, comments on similarities between parent and child, and compliments about their parenting (2009, 117). Adoptive parents strategies for responding to questions and comments change over time and that is due to better boundary management, time/experience/knowledge, being more insightful, and increased self-assurance as an adoptive family (2009, 118). One strategy that was discussed is developing a more natural response over time or a more direct response, but this comes with the sharing of less informational content according to Suter and Ballard. Parents altered their responses to accomplish identity-work for themselves and their children. As the study drew to a close, it was obvious that parents need to be armed with an arsenal of strategies to make the best decision possible when responding to undesirable remarks. However, the research calls for more research into how family identity communication can be captured more accurately.

PROMOTING FAMILY CLOSENESS

Family communication and family identity are closely related to each other. Identity can change based on how families communicate with each other. Rueter and Koerner explore the effect of family communication patterns on adopted adolescent adjustment. Being an adolescent is a difficult enough time without some of the stigma that can be associated with being adopted. However, adoption is associated with adolescent adjustment, but conversation is not universally positive for adolescent outcomes (Rueter & Koerner, 2008, 724). On the flipside Samek & Rueter found that family identity and sibling closeness can be related to adoption status of a child. Along with adjustment feeling a part of the family and close to other adopted or biological children is important in children form a family identity and communicating within the family. Utilizing the family communication patterns theory to create a shared social reality between adoptive children and other sibling bringing emotional and behavioral closeness within the

family (Samek & Rueter, 2011, 1025). The results of both of these studies find that communicating a positive family identity with outsiders and within the family unit are important in family communication.

CONCLUSION

Family identity and identity-work that is required when having visibly adoptive children is important to make the child feel similar, but still special. The limitations of the research previously mentioned is there is not much in the way of family communication regarding adopting children especially of non-Caucasian couples adopting visibly dissimilar children. Also, Harrigan only consulted heterosexual couples and did not include if same-sex couples have as much, less or even the same types of decision to make when encountering family identity challenges. These are avenues that future researchers should consult to determine if all adoptive families across the board encounter similar hardships. Yet, it is important to note that adoptive families have a delicate balance ahead of them that not all parents understand.

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