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THE PROCESS OF AN INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION

The Role Of The Women Within The Couples Involved

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Catherine Marie Wilson

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ABSTRACT

This thesis studies the experiences of ten married couples in New Zealand, in particular the women, who have completed the process of adopting a child or children from overseas. It has two main objectives: first to highlight the role of the woman within a married couple applying to adopt intercountry; and second, to note any gender differences in the experience and perception of this process and the issues involved.

The research design for this study followed the approach of eidetic phenomenology which focuses on the perceptions and meanings that people use to interpret their own experiences. Data were collected using in-depth, audiotaped personal interviews with the participants, and detailed case notes made during the interview. Personal observations after each interview were also used. The data were analysed using content analysis with cross-case groupings of responses into themes.

The findings indicate that women are the main instigators and organisers in the process of achieving an intercountry adoption. Within this role the women often felt unsupported by both professionals and organisations involved. The findings also indicate areas for further research and review for professional practice and policy, in order to provide more effective and supportive assistance throughout the process of adopting a child or children from overseas.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	i
Acknowledgements	ii
Table of Contents	iv
List of Figures	vii
 Introduction	 1
Thesis Objectives	2
Definitions	2
The Controversy of Intercountry Adoption	3
Arguments in Support of Intercountry Adoption	3
Arguments Against Intercountry Adoption	4
An Overview of Thesis Chapters	7
 Chapter 1: Intercountry Adoption: Origins, Protective Measures and Processes	 10
The Origins of Intercountry Adoption	11
Organisations Formed in Response to Intercountry Adoption	12
<i>The International Social Services (ISS)</i>	12
<i>The Leysin Seminar (1960)</i>	13
Intercountry Adoption to the Present Day	15
<i>The United Nations Declaration 1986</i>	16
<i>The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC) 1989</i>	17
<i>The Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption 1993</i>	17
The History of Local Adoption in New Zealand	18
Maori and Adoption	19
The Statutory Acts of Adoption	20
<i>1881 Adoption of Children Act</i>	21
<i>1895 Adoption of Children Act</i>	21
<i>Adoption Act 1955</i>	22
<i>Adult Adoption Information Act 1985</i>	22
The Law Commission Review on Adoption 1999	24
History of Intercountry Adoption in New Zealand	24
Intercountry Adoption in New Zealand and the Law	27
<i>Adoption (Intercountry) Act 1997</i>	28
Intercountry Adoption Policy of CYFS	29
<i>The Process</i>	29
<i>ICANZ (Intercountry Adoption New Zealand)</i>	31
Conclusion	33
 Chapter 2: Literature Review	 35
New Zealand Research	36
Personal Experiences of Adoptive parents	36
Overseas Research	46
Adoptive Parents: Motivation	46
Adoptive Parents: Preparation	47
Adoptive parents: Types of Child(ren) Chosen	48

Development and Adjustment Issues	49
Psychological Development	49
Intellectual Development	50
Behavioural and Social Development	51
Health Issues	54
Cultural Issues	55
Attachment Theory	56
Conclusion	58
Chapter 3 – Research Methodology	61
Thesis Objectives	61
Method	62
Qualitative Research	62
Phenomenology	63
Theoretical Underpinning of the Thesis	64
<i>Feminist Theory</i>	64
Research Design	65
<i>Participant Selection</i>	66
<i>Contacting Participants</i>	68
Data Collection	68
The Interview Guide	69
Analysis	71
Ethical Concerns	73
<i>Voluntary Participation</i>	74
<i>Anonymity and Confidentiality</i>	74
<i>Potential Harm to Participants</i>	75
<i>Potential Harm to Researcher</i>	75
Conclusion	75
Chapter 4 – The Participants and Their Socio-Demographic Characteristics	77
Introduction to Participating Couples	77
Participant Characteristics	80
Age	80
Ethnic Self-Identification	81
Employment Prior to Placement	81
Employment After Placement	81
Marital Status and Children	82
Religion	82
Previous Experience of Overseas Travel	83
Languages Spoken	83
Conclusion	83
Chapter 5 – Motivation Behind Choosing Adoption	85
Deciding to Adopt Intercountry	85
Infertility Issues	86
Christian and Humanitarian Motives	86
Availability of Children in New Zealand	88
Previous Knowledge of Intercountry Adoption	90

Differences of Opinion Between Wives and Husbands	90
Issues Associated with the Decision to Adopt Intercountry	92
Choosing Which Country to Adopt From	92
Concerns Expressed Regarding an Intercountry Adoption	94
Number and Gender of Children	96
Conclusion	98
Chapter 6 – The Process of Achieving Intercountry Adoption	101
The Process Within New Zealand	101
The Main Organisers Throughout the Process	102
Length of Time	103
Doing the ‘Right Thing’	104
Repetition of Material	106
Support	107
Ageism and Sexist Attitudes	109
The Process in the Sending Country	111
Stress	111
The Legal Process	113
Meeting the Child(ren)	113
Making the Wrong Decision	115
Support	116
Womens Advice to Future Mums on Intercountry Adopted Children	118
Conclusion	119
Chapter 7 – The Homecoming	122
Issues and Difficulties Encountered	122
Health Issues	122
Support Needed on Their Return	124
<i>Family and Friends</i>	125
<i>Reaction from Strangers</i>	125
<i>Support from other Mothers of Intercountry Adopted</i>	
<i>Children</i>	127
<i>Professional Support</i>	128
Effect of the Adoption on Lifestyle	131
Effect of a Career Change	131
Friendships	132
Relationship with Spouse	133
Perception of Others	134
Conclusion	134
Chapter 8 – Where to From Here? Discussion and Recommendations	137
Review of Findings	138
Socio-demographic Characteristics	138
Motivation Behind Choosing Adoption	139
The Process of Achieving Intercountry Adoption	141
The Homecoming	144

Implications For Policy and Practice	144
Practice Issues	145
<i>Education and Preparation Programmes</i>	145
<i>The Assessment Process</i>	146
General Reviews Needed on Current Policy	148
Future Research	149
Conclusion	150
Appendices	
Appendix 1 The 12 Principles for International Social Services	151
Appendix 2 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child	153
Appendix 3 Family Profile Document	156
Appendix 4 Consent Form	164
Appendix 5 Interview Guide	165
Bibliography	169

LIST OF FIGURES

Table 1	Major Receiving Countries of Intercountry Adoptees 1993-1997	15
Figure 1	Child, Youth and Family Intercountry Adoption Placement Process	32
Chart 1	Age Distribution of Participating Couples	80

INTRODUCTION

This study came about due to my work as a social worker for the Department of Child, Youth and Family Services (CYFS), working in the area of adoption. Through this work I came into contact with many women who were either in the process of adopting a child from overseas or who had recently done so. On working with them it became apparent that they felt the process was not user friendly and that there was room for improvement. I also noticed that for the couples I dealt with the woman was the main source of all information and the main contact throughout the intercountry adoption process was gained through the woman, with little mention of the role her husband played in the process.

It also became apparent that there was very little local or international literature on the issues for women adopting from another country. The bulk of the literature is on the problems (i.e. development and adjustment issues) that children adopted from overseas and from an institutional setting have, with little mention of the process issues for the adoptive parents or the experiences of the women in particular. As a social worker, therefore, I was interested in finding out more about this part of an intercountry adoption in order to be in a position to provide more appropriate support for the women I work with. In producing this thesis, my hope is that I can help to make their role in intercountry adoption more visible and give them the recognition they deserve in an often long and difficult process.

In my experience, many of the women have found the process of intercountry adoption stressful and time consuming. Many commented that the information gained in the education programme of CYFS was often repeated by an organisation called Intercountry Adoption New Zealand (ICANZ) which many couples contacted in order to gain its assistance. I also noted that many of the women actually appeared to have made the decision to adopt intercountry

prior to any major discussion with their husbands. Once the women gained all the information they required on the process they then presented their husbands with the proposal to adopt a child(ren) from overseas. The husband's role in this process seemed to be one of agreeing, or disagreeing, with the proposal made. Agreement secured, the wife set about taking the steps needed to make the adoption happen with very little further input from her spouse.

THESIS OBJECTIVES

On the basis of the above observations, the two main objectives for this thesis are to: first, highlight the role of the women (in married couples) who apply to adopt a child or children from overseas; and second, to investigate if there is a difference between females and males in their perception and experience of the process and issues involved in an intercountry adoption. This thesis was accordingly developed to investigate the experiences by interviewing both the wife and husband of each couple studied.

DEFINITIONS

Before continuing it is important to clarify the terminology relating to adoption which will be used in this thesis. The New Zealand Adoption Act 1955 does not provide a definition of adoption, but Section 16 (2)(a) details the effects of an adoption order. It states that:

the child shall be deemed to become the child of the adoptive parent, and the adoptive parent shall be deemed to become the parent of the child, as if the child had been born to the parent in lawful wedlock.

A local (or domestic) adoption is defined as (1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption):

an adoption that involves adoptive parents and a child of the same nationality and the same country of residence.

Intercountry adoption, on the other hand, is defined as (1993 Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption):

one that involves a change in the child's habitual country of residence, whatever the nationality of the adopting parents.

THE CONTROVERSY OF INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION

Controversy surrounds the issue of intercountry adoption with members of society having strong feelings either for or against it. The following is a brief summary of the major arguments that have been raised with regard to this subject. It is important to gain an understanding of these issues as the arguments can be seen to underlie some of the perceptions and experiences presented and discussed in the following chapters, including the literature review and the history of intercountry adoption both within New Zealand and internationally.

It is important to understand that couples embarking on an intercountry adoption come into contact with these issues and the views expressed via the media and/or people who offer their opinion to applicants during the process of adopting. They are then reflected in the beliefs formed by many of the couples who come forward to adopt as well as in the beliefs of the professionals who are employed to assist these couples throughout the process. Obviously the beliefs and opinions of professionals who have dealings with couples throughout the process of an intercountry adoption may play a significant part in the overall service that they give to couples.

Arguments in Support of Intercountry Adoption

The argument frequently used in supporting intercountry adoption is that of saving the life of a child and giving that child a better life. This view is often supported by the media with items and programmes on television which portray the plight of poor, homeless and sick children

in third world countries. The following are examples of this argument.

McDonald (1994) writes that the "language of rights" is used to reinforce a moral argument in which it is the child's right to have a secure and stable family. To do otherwise would be "...a case of abandoning children of their rights" (McDonald, 1994:50). Christian duty and self-interest are also noted as reasons for intercountry adoption (McDonald, 1994:51):

Saving children is not only the highest expression of lived Christianity, but it also connotes selflessness, and the preservation of family values. To rise above politics and to do battle for moral principles against apathy and impenetrable bureaucracy can be most fulfilling.

Plant (1990:10) furthers this argument by stating that with the growing accessibility of the world we have become a global village and as a result it would be anachronistic "in matters of duty and charity, to attach great significance to local or national boundaries". He continues that "to limit my moral responsibility I should not read or watch television reports of drought and disaster. I should not look at charity advertisements".

Arguments Against Intercountry Adoption

Arguments against intercountry adoption focus on four main areas. First, it is argued that the cultural needs of a child will not be met in a foreign culture with parents of a different colour and/or race. Second, it is argued that encouraging intercountry adoption ignores the economic and social problems that lead the children to be orphaned or abandoned. In doing so it can support the status quo and delay the much needed long-term changes required in the countries from which the adoptions are made. Third, it is argued that intercountry adoption exploits people on the basis of race, class and gender. This argument includes concern that children from third world countries are being sold into more affluent countries. Finally, the question of who the adoption is for, is raised. It is argued that intercountry

adoption is seen as an answer to infertility and an adult's need for a child. In putting adult needs before the child, the wellbeing of the child is not protected. The following are specific examples of the above arguments.

Opponents hold that intercountry adoption undermines a child's sense of racial identity. This can lead to the child not being able to cope with the majority culture and not being able to integrate with their minority subculture. It has been argued in the United States, for example, that no matter how well intending a white couple may be, they cannot teach a child of a different race how to survive in an essentially racist society (National Association of Black Social Workers, 1994). Ngabonziza (1988) notes that adopted youngsters from Korea, India, Lebanon and Zaire all reported that they were suffering from negative racial discrimination. Ngabonziza (1988:39) further raises the question of "whether the child could not be better off in a poorer but more accepting environment in its own country".

Another argument supported by Ngabonziza (1988), and further advanced by Triseliotis (1993), is that money should be spent on providing services in developing countries to prevent children from being abandoned. Ngabonziza believes that intercountry adoption disguises the needs of millions of children who are left to grow up in poverty or disease. Furthermore, by allowing large numbers of children to be adopted overseas, adoption will be viewed as a solution to unwanted children, rather than making available programmes of family support, health and welfare.

Triseliotis (1993) also notes that generally it is not the children most in need who are adopted but healthy children who are either new-born or less than three years of age and European. In other words, intercountry adoption takes from the country potentially productive adults who could assist in that country's development. An alternative could be to adopt the child from a distance (i.e. act as a sponsor or

benefactor), therefore giving the child material support and care which enables the child to grow and develop in their own culture by improving the country's welfare programmes.

The adoption of children from a third world country can also be seen and interpreted as exploitation on the basis of race, class and gender, as in most cases the adoptions involve foreign, middle class white couples who are adopting the children of poor women from another race. McDonald (1994:49) notes that this argument has also focussed on the exploitation of women and the right of all women to be able to nurture their own child (Else, 1991; Dietrich, 1992). This view is taken further in stating that intercountry adoption is a systematic and self-perpetuating exploitation of women under the patriarchal society that legitimises those practices (Herrman & Kasper, 1992; Else, 1991).

The exchange of money in some intercountry adoptions has also caused concern. Under international law it is illegal to buy, sell or trade children. In some third world countries, however, there have been documented instances of women being encouraged by brokers to sell their fertility and children (Chun, 1989; Lewin, 1990; UNICEF, 1986). Cases have been cited in Honduras where teenage girls are paid by baby brokers to get pregnant and are then cared for in order to gain healthy babies to offer for adoption through a 'known' orphanage (Else, 1990). Cases of kidnapping babies from peasant and transient women have also been cited in Indonesia (UPI, 1990) and Bolivia (ICWR, 1984). Other countries where children have been reported as being stolen and bought include Thailand, Guatemala, the Philippines, El Salvador, Sri Lanka, Romania, Taiwan, Turkey, and Peru (Chaponniere, 1983; Serrill, 1991).

Finally, Triseliotis (1993) states that in some northern European countries, adoption has become synonymous with intercountry

adoption. In so doing, it is primarily meeting the needs of adults who wish to gain a family as:

...Beyond the altruism of rescue lies the primary reason [which is] that so few infants are available for adoption by involuntarily childless couples and single women in most developed countries (Triseliotis, 1993:47).

Due to a lack of safeguards in intercountry adoption using Section 17 of the New Zealand Adoption Act 1955, concern has been raised as to the wellbeing of the children and the motives of the intercountry adopters in New Zealand. An example occurred in 1996 where a Protestant Minister, who had adopted 19 children from overseas over a five-year period under section 17 of the Adoption Act, was found guilty of sexual offences relating to 3 of his adopted children (Couchman, 1997).

Although there is more written on the arguments against intercountry adoption, this is not a reflection on whether this is the majority or the minority view. Regardless of the number of arguments about intercountry adoption, advocates on both sides can be very passionate and emotional about their views and believe that their view is the right view.

AN OVERVIEW OF THESIS CHAPTERS

The first two chapters of this thesis form a background to the study by introducing a history of adoption, both intercountry and local, as well as the literature currently available on this topic. Chapter 1 begins this process by giving a background to the origins, protective measures and processes of intercountry adoption both within a New Zealand and overseas setting. In Chapter 2 both the national and international research pertaining to this area is reviewed. The first section of this chapter concentrates on literature within New Zealand, including articles from the media, on the experiences of New Zealand couples, while the second section focuses on overseas literature and brings into focus background research on the issues that children

adopted from overseas may bring with them and discusses attachment theory.

In Chapter 3 the research method used in this study is outlined. The process of selection of participants and the use of in-depth interviews for both wife and husband are reviewed as well as the use of the interview guide. The process of collecting the data and then analysing it is depicted, together with a description of the relevant legal and ethical issues and the establishment of the study's trustworthiness.

Chapter 4 provides a brief introduction to the participants and then presents the socio-demographic characteristics of the couples in this study and, where possible, compares the results found here to research completed both internationally and within New Zealand.

The motivation behind the choice of intercountry adoption is discussed in Chapter 5. Here the aim is to present the factors identified by the couples that underlay or influenced their decision to adopt intercountry. Related questions concerning the number and gender of the children adopted are examined and the chapter also investigates whether or not there were differences of opinion between spouses on these matters.

Once the decision to adopt intercountry was made, what were the issues that participants had to deal with in achieving this adoption? This is the subject matter of Chapter 6. In order to discover the issues this chapter is divided into two main sections. First, attention is focused on the experience of couples throughout the process in New Zealand. Second, the focus then shifts to their experience in the country they have decided to adopt from.

The process is completed once the couple have gained their child(ren) and returned home to New Zealand. Chapter 7 focuses on

the initial period of the homecoming and brings forth the issues and concerns that faced the participants during the first six months on returning home with their child(ren).

A discussion relating to the findings from the previous chapters occurs in Chapter 8. The implications of the results for policy and practice as well as future research are also outlined.