International Adoption

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Abstract

Adoption has existed since the ancient cultures. There are multiple reasons for adoption, which include preserving the family line, offering children to childless couples, and supporting children who have been orphaned. The recent phenomenon of international adoption exists for similar reasons, which will be explored in this article. Both sending and receiving countries impacted by adoption will be discussed, and applications and issues surrounding the impacts of international adoption will be presented. For examples, the impacts of ethnic identity, economic, social, and attitudinal circumstances and resulting practices will be explored. An overview of potential issues will also be offered.

History of International Adoption

Kadushin (1980) indicates that adoption has continued to exist from ancient days in every culture. In previous cultures the main purpose of adoption was to offer childless couples the ability to raise male heirs in order to preserve families (Sokoloff, 1993). Hollinger (1991) pointed out that the family line could avoid dying out by adopting abandoned offspring. However, several other reasons support adoption. Sokoloff (1993) writes that one major interest in adoption, especially infant adoptions in the United States since the 1920s is the changed perception that environment, not genetics, is one of the primary factors in child development and outcomes. From a global perspective, approximately 148 million children have lost either one or both parents, and millions of other children are defenseless and vulnerable because of poverty, conflict, and disease (UNAIDS, UNICEF, & USAID, 2004).

Daughterty-Bailey (2006) revealed that in 2001, an estimated 34,000 children from over 50 countries were adopted on an international scale reflecting a rise of 79% from previous statistics (UNICEF, 2003). One estimate indicated that in 2001, 19,327 foreign adoptions took place in the U.S., which comprised about 57% of all international adoptions, making the United Stated first in the world as a recipient for children adopted from foreign regions (UNICEF, 2003). Since 1995, over 130,000 children have been adopted internationally into the USA (US Department of State, 2004).

The Declaration on Social and Legal Principles relating to the Protection and Welfare of Children and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 were international policies that advanced the practices that guided international adoption principles worldwide. Moreover, international adoption from developing countries seems to be an increasing trend in adoptions, not only in the United States, but also in North America and Europe (Freundlich, 2002). To better understand the phenomenon of international adoption it is highly important to understand the ethnic identity, economic, social, and attitudinal circumstances that impact adoption practices (Silk, 1990).

Ethnic Identity

One of the major ethnic groups impacted by international adoption is orphans in sub-Saharan Africa. Many of these children have lost one or both parents to AIDS, which has orphaned 12.3 million children with orphan numbers projected to rise to 18.4

Keywords

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million by 2010 (UNAIDS, UNICEF, & USAID, 2004). Overall infection rates for AIDS reached 38 percent in some areas (UNAIDS, 2004). Arguably, the AIDS pandemic has impacted young children the most. Nearly, 80 percent of the world's AIDS orphans come from this area and are then placed for adoption (Roby & Shaw, 2006, p. 203). Many researchers have indicated that racial and cultural identity for children in the adoption experience is very important (Freundlich, 2000; Kim, 1978; Melone, 1976; Serbin, 1997). As a result, transracial adoptions have been disapproved of by some child advocates in the United States. The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) vehemently opposed transracial adoption in the early 1970s, resulting in a dramatic decline in adoptions from Africa (Carter-Black, 2002; Hollingsworth, 1997).

From this perspective, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) policy declaration on adoption and foster care states: "the placement of choice should be within the child's family. If no relatives are available, every effort should be made to place a child in a home with foster parents of a similar racial and ethnic background to the child's family" (NASW, 2003). Arguably, one major issue among international adoptive families is the sustainability of an adopted child's cultural heritage and ethnicity. To support ethnic sustainability, parents are encouraged by multiple sources, including adoption agencies, other adoptive parents, and adoption family support groups that ethnic and cultural information should be transmitted in order to educate parents regarding their child's birth culture (Pertman, 2000). In order to understand potential ethnic identity issues in other countries, additional research should be done in this area.

Economics

It should be noted that issues pertinent to adoption can never be separated from class, income, or race. In many cases, parents are unable to afford to spend large sums of money to adopt children when their parents are unable to care for them. One researcher stated, "official data are unhelpful, but the broad outlines are clear enough. Poor countries export children to rich ones, black parents to white, poor parents to better off" (Pascall, 1984, p. 16). In reviewing adoption policies, additional work should be

considered in designing a system that constructs homes for all children that meets their material and emotional needs. Not only would this create a fair and affordable adoption system, but the development of policies to provide families with additional support should also be created that would help care for dependent children.

Social Impacts

From a social perspective it can be argued that international adoption is an exploitative act that takes advantage of unjust social structures in the "sending" countries from which children are offered for adoption. Many times, the biological families have not had the access to freedoms that children from advantaged countries enjoy. On the other hand, alternative perspectives indicate that families who choose to adopt internationally are making a deliberate choice to reach out to a child in need, rather than vie for the limited number of healthy infants available domestically. Second, international adoption offers a way of solving poverty problems and institutionalization for children who may be otherwise subjected to horrible injustices. Finally, international adoption potentially offers opportunities for children traumatized by their circumstances to grow up in a safe environment (Hollingsworth, 2003, p. 210). Additional research should be done in this area to better understand the social impacts on both sending and receiving countries as well as potential long term effects.

Attitudinal Issues

From a behavioral perspective, a a small group of international adoptees demonstrate difficulties at home or in school (Bimmel, Juffer, Van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2003; Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; Verhulst, 2000). Moreover, in a comparison with non-adopted children, international adoptees seem to have more behavioral problems at home and in school, and many more are referred to mental health services twice as often as with non-adopted children (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005). Juffer (2006) indicated that children adopted from Sri Lanka and Columbia seemed to have more behavior problems than domestic adoptees. Moreover, children in middle childhood seemed to understand the concept of adoption and this awareness made these children especially vulnerable to stress. As a result of these stressors, it can be argued that parents and internationally adopted children should be adequately supported (p. 20).

Other research that examined the impact of transracial adoption by white parents indicated that beginning in the 1970s heated criticism occurred regarding the placement of Black children with white adoptive parents. The National Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW) argued against transracial adoption on the grounds that white adoptive parents were incapable of "teaching their Black children how to resist and undercut potentially devastating and ubiquitous racial stereotypes and racist ideology" (Patton, 2000, p. 13). Moreover, adult Korean adoptees have also recently begun to speak out, some critically, about their experiences being raised in white communities (Cox, 1999; Robinson, 2002; Trenka, 2003). All of these factors indicate the many complexities in international and transracial adoption.

Applications

Two countries where research has been done regarding the implications of international adoption include Korea and China. Historical applications, a statistical overview, and legal implications are presented.

Korea

Since the mid-1950s, there have been more than 210,000 adoptions in Korea. Approximately 150,000 children were adopted by families in outside of Korea, and an additional 60,000 children were adopted by Korean families. These adoptions began as part of the effort to provide permanent homes for Korean War veterans (Seo, Cho, Park, & Ahn, 2004). Simultaneously, Korea went through dramatic economic, social, and cultural transformation. Unprecedented economic development occurred during this time. Since the early 1970s, the per capita gross national income has increased from below $300 to around $15,000 in 2005 (Korea National Statistical Office, 2005). According to Lee (2007), Korea has "now developed into one of the world's leading industrial countries" (p. 75).

Two main laws regulate adoption in Korea. These laws include the Korean Family Law and the Special Adoption Assistance Act. The Family Law was enacted in 1958 and was premised to serve "the best interests of the family" and specified that the main purpose for adoption was to provide the course by which to maintain family lines and estates (Woo, 2002). Since the passage of the Family Law in 1958, child welfare reformers encouraged the recognition of the "best interests of the child" (Bai, 1996, 1998; Kwon, 1997). In 1990, the Family Law incorporated the "best interests of the child" principle as the basis for adoption, and the revisions eliminated several specifications that had the primary purpose of adoption as continuing family connections (Kwon, 1997).

In 1961, the Child Welfare Law was enacted. In both 1961 and after its revision in 2000, significant implications originated for adoption policy and practice which stipulated that the government could intervene in the interest of child protection. Before this legislation was passed, there were no penalties for failing to report suspected child abuse or neglect, and abused children and their families were only supported by a small number of advocacy groups and private agencies. The revision was largely passed because of these shortcomings. The 2000 revision legally defined child abuse and neglect; authorized reporting systems, which included a 24-hour hotline; implemented regional child abuse and neglect prevention centers; and furnished a lawful foundation for government involvement in cases of alleged child abuse or neglect (Lee, 2007, p. 78). All of these issues have implications for domestic adoption in Korea.

Regardless of the recent push toward domestic adoption in Korea, over half of all children in Korea are adopted by parents in foreign countries. Statistically, only a few disabled children are permanently placed thorough domestic adoption; premarital birth is the main reason for why children are placed for adoption. However, Lee reports that adoption reform is still much needed in Korea using the guiding regulations that adoption policy and practice should be in the "best interests of the child" (Lee, 2007, p. 82). Each of these issues applies to international adoptions from Korea.

China

China has averaged over 5,000 adoptions per annum since 2000 and is one of the top countries that send children to the United States (U.S. Department of State, 2008). Typically, adoption in China has always been linked to abandonment and was recorded as early as 145 B.C. Male adoption was typically done for the purpose of continuing the family name. According to Confucian beliefs, only the male could continue the surname, which was one reason for adoption in Chinese culture. Raising a girl in this culture seemed like a risky investment. Also, in accordance with Chinese culture, baby girls were abandoned alongside the Yang Zi River. Female infanticide has existed in China for the last 3,000 years (Li, 1980). Girls in China have never been as highly valued as boys, are more easily given up for adoption, and historically, folk tales have described the common practice of ni ying, which was the practice of drowning second-born females in a bucket of water upon birth. In addition, it has always been a Chinese tradition that the eldest male should take care of his aging parents. Therefore, females have never been as highly valued in Chinese culture as males (Luo & Sook Bergquist, 2004, p. 24).

Today, attitudes toward males and females have not changed dramatically. Two primary reasons exist for this phenomenon (Johnson, 1996, cited in Luo & Sook Bergquist, 2004). First, males continue to hold the chief responsibility for taking care of parents; women belong to their husband's family. While national law has changed and legislates that all children are responsible for care of aging parents, many peasants living in rural areas continue to believe in the old traditions. The second reason for the abandonment of female infants is the one-child/one-family policy enforced by the Chinese government in the 1980s, which mandated that every family could only have one child. The only exception to this mandate was for families living in rural villages, and only if the first was a girl. Prior to the family planning policy, the adoption and abandonment of girls had significantly decreased during the 1950s and 1960s (Johnson, 1998, cited in Luo & Sook Bergquist, 2004). During this era, the Chinese government supported a larger population that would create a more powerful China. This movement ended in the 1980s after Chairman Mao's death when the government realized that overpopulation was circumventing China's goals of competing with the economic powers of the West (Luo & Sook-Bergquist, 2004, p. 24). The multiple applications of international adoption in terms of sending and receiving countries create multiple issues.

Issues

Most of the present research regarding international adoption has explored the post-placement experiences and perspectives of the adoptees' of parents in receiving countries (Bagley, 1993; Rojewski & Rojewski, 2001; Tessler, Gamache, & Liu, 1999). Communication barriers could be one reason for the limited

information available from birth countries of adopted children. Arguably, most researchers are potentially unable to speak native languages or are unable to afford additional costs of translating instruments or data. Moreover, in foreign sending countries, participants may be unwilling to respond freely to research questions, especially studies conducted by non-native researchers (Luo & Bergquist, 2004, p. 22). Keeping these issues in mind, it may be difficult to thoroughly understand the multiple impacts of international adoption and resulting consequences on both adopting parents and children given for adoption.

Child Development & Behavior

One potential issue involved with international adoptees is child development. Some international adoptees do not develop as favorably as non-adopted children. Reportedly, many children show developmental difficulties either at home or in school or both (Bimmel, Juffer, Van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2003; Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; Verhulst, 2000). Additional research in this area may help social workers better understand the impact of child development, attachment, and "nurture versus nature."

Another significant area affecting internationally adopted children are behavioral issues and the comparisons and contrasts between adopted children and non-adopted children. In studying this phenomenon, researchers should explore behavioral problems and the life stages at which different problems might occur. Researchers should also understand that children placed in adoption during infancy present similar behavior problems as children placed in adoption after their first or second birthday (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2005). One significant factor impacting the phenomenon might be the developmental phase of the children. For example, children in middle childhood demonstrated more dramatic behavior problems than during adolescence. Moreover, researchers have conjectured that international adoptees may struggle with adoption and identity issues earlier than domestic adoptees, because of the impact of the racial, cultural, and ethnic issues experienced between adoptive parents and adoptees, which are "more obvious and visible in international adoption as opposed to domestic adoption" (Juffer, 2006, p. 2).

From another perspective, issues created because of adoption should never be disconnected from social issues like class, income, and race. Often, individuals who can afford to spend excessive amounts of money to adopt children do so when birth parents are unable to afford to raise children. The real issue in international adoption is that a system should be created that supports all children and meets their material and emotional needs. To this end, researchers should consider applying Maslow's hierarchy of needs in their understanding of children and meeting their needs. Maslow's original theory (1968) held that people's basic physiological needs must be met before they can meet their social and emotional needs or become self-actualized. Increased attention to these issues may create a more affordable and fair adoption system while aiding in the development of policies which support families and their dependents (Kahan, 2006, p. 70). All of these issues offer the potential for various conclusions

and enhanced understanding of international adoption and the impact of international adoption.

Conclusion

Future research into the area of international adoption and its specific cultural impacts should include an improved representative overview of different cultures, and more personalized methodologies that would offer an improved chance of obtaining personal answers rather than only official responses from governments. Historically, international adoption has been a complex phenomenon interwoven with broad historical, cultural, political, and social relationships. Additional research in this area is a recommendation, because of the potential for barriers that thwart communication and obstruct the broader sociopolitical context. Moreover, additional research should also be considered on a potentially larger sample that seeks to understand socioeconomic impacts, gender, geographic locations, age factors, and the impact of government regulations on the adoption process. This would be useful in facilitating improved conditions and communications between individuals, organizations, and governments impacted by this phenomenon (Luo & Bergquist, 2004, p. 37). Additional research in this phenomenon is needed to more fully understand the influences and experiences of individuals impacted by this phenomenon. Lastly, from a sociological perspective, international adoption raises innumerable issues pertaining to social justice that "should be of interest to social workers" (Hollingsworth, 2003, p. 209).

Terms & Concepts

Adoption: Adoption is the legalized process of entrusting the child of birth parents either domestically or internationally to be raised by an adoptive family as if the child was born to the adoptive family.

Birth Country: The birth country is the country of origin for a given child given up for adoption and living in another country.

International Adoption: International adoption is the process by which children from various countries are adopted by parents from foreign countries.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Maslow's original theory (1968) held that people's basic physiological needs must be met before they can meet their social and emotional needs or become self-actualized.

Transracial Adoption: Transracial adoption is the process by which parents of a given ethnic group or race adopts a child of a divergent ethnic group or race.

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