

The Communication Implications And Related Experiences Associated With Transracially Adopting A Child From Vietnam

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THE COMMUNICATION IMPLICATIONS AND
RELATED EXPERIENCES ASSOCIATED
WITH TRANSRACIALLY ADOPTING A
CHILD FROM VIETNAM

by

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B.S. University of Central Florida, 2007

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the communication experiences of adoptive parents of children transracially adopted from Vietnam. Though adoption has been extensively studied in communication research, transracial adoptions involving children from Vietnam has not. Thus, this study examined adoptive parent communication experiences using dialectic theory and relational dialectics. By examining adoptive parents' communication with their adopted child and others, we can determine tensions that occur in different communication experiences. Data were collected through eight qualitative in-depth interviews conducted with adoptive parents of children from Vietnam. Openness with both strangers and the adopted child(ren) and preservation of key aspects of the adopted children's original culture emerged as themes in adoptive parent communication. Theoretical implications of these findings are discussed.

For Jaydon and Natalie

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

According to Meier (2008-2009), Americans adopt a higher number of foreign children per year than the rest of the world combined. The United States Department of State (USDS, n.d.) indicates that from 1999 to 2009, an average of 16,038 children from foreign nations were adopted by U.S. families each year; with Vietnam accounting for an increasingly sizable portion of this number. For example, whereas only 110 adoption visas were issued for Vietnam children in 1993 this number jumped to 318 in 1995 (see Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism, 2009) when the two countries restored normal diplomatic relations. Vietnamese adoptions peaked at 828 in 2007 but dropped to 748 and 481 in 2008 and 2009 respectively. Vietnam has ranked either 6th or 7th in the number of US adoption visas issued to a sending country during the last three years (i.e., 2007, 2008, and 2009) (see USDS, n.d.).

Currently, U.S. adoptions of Vietnamese children are on hold because the adoption agreement between the United States and Vietnamese governments expired on September 1, 2008. An article published in *Foreign Policy Magazine* entitled *Anatomy of an Adoption Crisis* authored by E.J. Graff (reviewed in a later chapter) brought to light the systematic corruption that occurred in the Vietnamese adoption system which ultimately led to the dissolution of the adoption agreement between the United States and Vietnam (Graff, 2010).

Given such indications of the increasing presence of United States adoptees from Vietnam, it is surprising that little scholarly research has to date examined the experiences of United States parents with Vietnamese adopted children. The exception is Suter, Ballard, & Reyes (2008) who examined the experiences of U.S. parents of Vietnamese adopted children in a

cultural heritage camp conducted in Colorado. Although this study provided some important insights into how adoptive parents react when faced with questions regarding their adoption choice, more studies that employ different theoretical frameworks and methodologies are needed to provide a variety of data and analysis that would facilitate greater understanding of the experiences of U.S. parents with adopted children from Vietnam.

Since communication involves how people construct, reconstruct, and account for their socially constructed reality (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995), one way to begin understanding the experiences of the United States parents of adopted Vietnamese children is to engage communication theories to examine the parents' accounts of positive and negative experiences regarding their adoption choice. A communication theory that seems particularly suitable for this task is dialectical theory because it has been productively used to study step-family (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Baxter et al., 2004; Braithwaite, Baxter & Harper, 1998), blended family (Braithwaite, Baxter & Harper, 1998), and other relationship (Baxter & West, 2003; Baxter & Ebert, 1999) communication. Dialectical theory is appropriate for studying experiences of adoptive parents' based on their interactions with their children and other members of society because it explains the natural tensions and flux that tend to occur in all relationships (Baxter & Ebert, 1999; Braithwaite, Baxter & Harper, 1998).

This study, therefore, applied dialectical theory to understand the experiences of adoptive parents of Vietnamese children in communicating about their experience of transracially adopting a child from Vietnam. To provide context of how adoption has evolved over the years, in chapter two I review relevant literature pertaining to the definition of adoption, the history of adoption within the United States in general and transracial adoption with particular focus on

adoption of Vietnamese children and relevant adoption laws. In that chapter, I will also introduce and examine dialectical theory as a tool for better explication and facilitation of parenting of transracially adopted children. Chapter three describes the methods used in this study. In chapters four and five, I present the results and discussion of findings.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Adoption

Adoption, according to Carp (1998), is the “method of establishing by law the social relationship of parent and child between individuals who are not each other's biological parent or child” (p. 3). Similarly, Galvin (2003) stated that adoptive families are “constructed through law and language” (p. 239). Javier et al. (2007) further defines adoption as a “social practice, a solution to a social problem, and an act of making a family at a particular moment in time” as well as “a means of providing a permanent home for a child without one” (p. 18). Therefore, families created through adoption are different than traditional biologically related nuclear units. To be a conventional American family, it was thought that one had to be racially homogeneous and heterosexual; however, adoption has pushed the boundaries of what it means to be a family (Berebitsky, 2002). Galvin asserts that families formed through transracial and international adoption are an excellent model to study the role that communication plays in constructing and managing family identity.

There is evidence that the practice of adopting a child has existed in one form or another for thousands of years, dating even as far back as biblical times. In its most basic form, adoption occurs when a child spends some portion of his or her childhood being raised by someone other than the child’s birthparents (Javier, Baden, Biafora, & Camacho-Gingerich, 2007). Adoption can be either domestic or intercountry (also known as international). Intercountry adoption, which is the focus of the present study, is “the process by which you adopt a child from a different country than your own through permanent legal means and bring that child to your home country to live

with you permanently.” According to the United States Department of States’ (n.d.) sponsored web site, Adoption.state.gov., through intercountry adoption, the legal paternal rights of the birthparent(s) in one country are transferred from the birthparent(s) to the adoptive parent(s) of another country.

Through adoption, married heterosexual couples who have experienced difficulty getting pregnant with a biological child as well as homosexual couples can create their own “family.” Adoption has simultaneously upheld traditions of what it means to be a family while at the same time shattering that very image (Berebitsky, 2002). Reitz and Watson (1992) assert that adoption “does not signal the absolute end of one family and the beginning of another nor does it sever the psychological tie to an earlier family. Rather, it expands the family boundaries of all those who are involved,” (p. 11) including members of the birth family, the adoptive family, and the adopted child.

History of Adoption in the United States

What it means to be a family has changed so much that modern-day U.S. families are more varied in composition than ever before. Changes in laws, customs, and practices have legitimized if not fully accommodated multiple family forms (Galvin, 2003). Families built through adoption have evolved from bloodline responsibilities of extended families; to the practice of matching where adoption facilitators attempted to mimic biological ties, trying to create families based on physical and intellectual characteristics of unrelated persons thereby ensuring the adoption was not visible and could be kept a secret; to a more open system of creating families via connections that cross religious, racial, and national boundaries (Galvin,

2003). In North American culture, blood bonds have served as the basis and continuation of family kinship systems (March & Miall, 2000). Unlike blood bonds, adoption is a social construction which is based on the central concept of creating a family.

The American family has historically been viewed as a fixed, nuclear unit (Berebitsky, 2002). Bartholet (1993) argues that adoption creates families that are not nuclear, instead they are connected; one family, the adoptive family, is connected to another, the birth family. Through the birth family connection, adoptive families oftentimes find themselves connected to different cultures as well as other racial, ethnic, and national groups (p. 186). Families today are more diverse than ever as families are now formed through “combinations of blood and legal ties, as well as long-term, explicit commitments” (Galvin, 2003 p. 237). The probability that the public will at some time encounter a member of the adoption triad, whether it be a birth parent, adoptive parent or adoptee is quite high (Javier et al., 2007).

Javier et al. (2007) detail the history of adoption in the United States. The authors have identified seven eras in the history of adoption in the United States, they are: the indentured servant era, the early asylum era, the Victorian era, the progressive era, the social work era, the transracial placement era, and the social welfare reform era. Adoption in the United States began in colonial times and continues today. From the 1750s to the 1800s, children adopted were treated more like indentured servants; placed loosely within the biological ties of distant relatives. The 1800s to the 1840s, known as the Early Asylum Era, saw children being placed in asylums from which they were assigned out to middle-class families with or without biological children of their own. The belief was that while these adoptions could never “replace the natural home” it was “better than nothing” (Javier et al., 2007, p. 19).

Social change came over the nation in the 1850s when the practice of the orphan trains was initiated. Orphans living in the slums of big cities were placed on trains and sent out West where families were plentiful but laborers were few. At each stop, the children were put up on the platform for locals to see and adopt. Although few children were actually adopted, the orphan trains brought about legislation such as the 1851 Massachusetts Adoption Act, believed to be the first modern adoption law implemented in the country which became a model for other states to follow. In general, this law emphasized the “welfare of the child” (Carp, 2002, p. 6), established the process of adoption through a required “judicial review of the fitness of the adoptive parents” (Hawes, 2004, p. 91), and detailed the steps necessary to completely sever a child's legal ties to his or her biological parents and transfer them to another guardian (Berebitsky, 2000).

During the Victorian Era, the 1850s to the 1900s, a focus was placed throughout the country on keeping poor families together, specifically unwed mothers and their children. This was due to the prevailing belief held by social workers that not only did children need mothers to become good citizens but women needed children in order to fulfill their role as model citizens.

The Progressive Era, sometimes referred to by adoption scholars as the save-the-child campaign era, began in the 1900s and lasted into the 1920s. The social climate of the Progressive Era emphasized the importance of the nuclear family unit. Birthparents relinquished custody of their children for different reasons. Single mothers were once again considered unfit to raise children even though only a few years prior the opposite was believed. Hart (2004) noted that “young women relinquished to avoid social sanctions against illegitimacy and hopeless poverty” and to “spare their children abuse, provide them protection, food, and appropriate shelter.” While men relinquished custody so that their children could receive “consistent, caring female

nurturing” (p. 145).

In the 1930s well into the 1960s, the Social Work Era held sway. During this time, there was a significant decline in the number of infants available for adoption. Social workers turned their attention to unwed, single mothers convincing them to give their children up for adoption. Patton (2000) reported that while a large number of black infants was available for adoption during this period, most black mothers who wished to give up their children for adoption were turned away by adoption agencies because there was no “market” for their children (p. 46).

The 1960s and 1970s brought with them a radical change on the adoption front in the United States in that when there was no longer a supply of white babies, “any aversion to race mixing had to be abandoned; transracial placements had to be made” (Javier et al., 2007 p. 25). Scholars have identified several reasons to explain the decreased supply of babies that began in the 1970s which include “legalization of abortion, a shift in cultural attitudes toward illegitimacy, increasing use of contraception, later onset of marriage, and the modern view of 'woman' in greater control of her own body and destiny” (p. 25). Transracial adoptions as well as transracial families became much more prevalent in the United States at this time.

Day (1979) analyzed surveys conducted in 1973 and 1974 and found that 20% of all children adopted were black children and 40% waiting to be adopted were black as well. During this time, black families were encouraged to adopt black children with a small amount of success. But the number of black children waiting to be adopted remained overwhelmingly higher than the number of black adoptions processed, thus the placement of black children with white families (Berebitsky, 2000).

The 1990s brought about Social Welfare Reform in adoption in the United States. During

this time, poor families, who were no longer able to care for their children, relinquished their custody to the state which in turn placed those children in foster care. Welfare reform and transracial adoptions were both seen as a way to remedy the state's increasing foster care situation. Social welfare reform and early transracial adoptions in the United States paved the way for current adoption policies (Javier et al., 2007).

International Adoption

Galvin (2003) observed that increasing instances of international and transracial adoptions within the United States has challenged what it means to be a family resulting in an influx of newly formed non-traditional families. As such, international and transracial adoptions are placing the “contemporary adoptive family in the vortex of race, culture, class, and gender” (p. 238). In the past, to ensure the privacy and secrecy of adoptions, adoption agencies “attempted to match the physical, ethnic, racial, religious, and intellectual characteristics of prospective adoptive parents and children, thereby creating units that resembled biological families” (Carp, 2002, p. 10). This practice was known as matching. According to Modell and Damabacher (1997), matching is a policy based on the assumption that a child should “look like” and “be like” his or her parents (p. 4) and that a bond will be formed between a parent and child who share familiar traits (p. 10).

International and transracial adoptions have eradicated this practice, making it a thing of the past (Galvin, 2003). International adoption, defined earlier as adoption where the child being adopted is born in another country, has been on the rise in the United States during the past three decades because of the availability of legal abortions, rising infertility rates, more single mothers

keeping their babies and controversy surrounding transracial adoptions.

U.S. international adoptions, also known as transnational, transcultural, intercountry or transracial adoptions first surged in numbers after the end of World War II through returning veterans. Carp (1998) explains that from 1946 to 1953, individual Americans and American organizations helped to secure the adoption of up to 5,184 foreign-born orphans and abandoned children from war-torn Greece, Germany, and Japan. The next surge of adoptions occurred at the end of the Korean War. From 1953 to 1962, international adoptions increased significantly because of the country's movement towards the intercountry adoption of children displaced by the war (Berebitsky, 2000) which resulted in the transracial adoption of Asian babies. Between 1966 and 1976, 65% of the 32,000 foreign-born children adopted by American citizens were Asian, mainly Korean (Carp, 1998). Because of a decline in healthy white babies to adopt domestically in most industrialized countries, intercountry or transracial adoption grew more and more popular as a way for those who wanted to create or expand their family to do so (Triseliotis, 2000).

Process of International Adoption

Bartholet (1993) concluded that when it comes to adoption, the world is divided into two separate groups: countries with low birthrates and small numbers of children who need homes; and countries with high birthrates and huge numbers of children who need homes. There are fewer and fewer children available for domestic adoptions, yet the need by prospective adoptive parents as a result of infertility or other reasons remains.

Yet, bureaucratic procedures can make international adoption challenging for potential

adoptive parents. Although regulations vary country by country, adoptive parents must satisfy an extensive list of laws and requirements of not only their home state and the U.S. government but also those of the foreign country where they are trying to adopt from (Bartholet, 1993).

Requirements include issues such as “[suitable] parental age, marital status, economic stability, number of current or biological children in the home, and willingness to travel to the relevant country” (Galvin, 2003, p. 238).

According to Bartholet (1993), it is worth noting that Congress has taken steps necessary to limit the number of foreign adoptions by only allowing adoptees that fit the narrow orphan definition entry into the country. An adoptee qualifies as an orphan only if both parents have died or abandoned the child, or the “sole or surviving” parent is not able to care for the child (8 U.S.C. Section 1101 (b) (1) (F) 1976 as cited in Bartholet, 1993, p. 92). The orphan definition causes many problems within the international adoption process because the orphan status is not determined until the end of the adoption process. This means that throughout the adoption process, adoptive parents do not know whether or not the adoptee will be considered an orphan eligible for entry into and adoption within the United States. Visa decisions are not made until the adoption is completed in the child's home country and the parents are ready to return home with their new child (Bartholet, 1993). Adoptive parents must proceed through the entire foreign adoption process in the child's birth country, legally becoming the child's adoptive parents, without knowing definitely if they will be able to bring their newly adopted child home with them to the United States (p. 93). Even after arriving back in the United States, the adoption process is not yet over. Adoptive parents must decide whether or not they will re-adopt their child within the United States.

Although international adoption documents are legal and binding, the re-adoption process allows the adoptee to be issued a U.S. birth certificate and guarantees the child's "fully protected legal status as an adoptee" (Bartholet, 1993, p. 93). The next hurdle is to secure U.S. citizenship for the adoptee because being adopted by U.S. citizens does not automatically gain the adoptee citizenship; he or she still must apply for it. This process can take up to one year. Bartholet (1993) decries the international adoption process as unnecessarily cumbersome whereby "parent and child must be screened on multiple occasions by numerous agencies, dozens of documents must be accumulated, notarized, certified, stamped with official stamps, copied, and translated" (p. 93).

There is an ongoing debate about the desirability of international adoption as described by several scholars (e.g., Triseliotis, 2000; Bartholet, 1993). On the one hand, there is the view that favors international adoption as a positive form of adoption and on the other those who decry the practice (e.g., National Association of Black Social Workers [NABSW] 1994; Masson, 2001; Smolin, 2004, 2005, 2007;) arguing that international adoption is a form of exploitation. Explicating the viewpoint that favors international adoption, Bartholet (1993) and Triseliotis (2000) emphasize that the underlying foundation of adoption is to provide a child who cannot be taken care of by his or her own birthparents with a permanent family. If foster placement or an adoptive family cannot be found in the child's country of origin, then intercountry or transracial adoption may be a necessary alternative. Bartholet notes a vast number of circumstances (e.g. war, political turmoil and economic hardship) around the world that produce an abundance of children in need homes and lack of prospective adopters. Prospective parents, instead of fighting over the declining number of healthy babies available for adoption in the United States, reach out

to children in need in other countries. This is because as Bartholet (1993, p. 90) notes families built “across lines of racial and cultural differences can be seen as a good thing, both for the parents and children involved and for the larger community.” This presents opportunities for members of such families to appreciate diverse cultural, ethnic, and racial backgrounds while at the same time realizing the common bond of humanity.

But Bartholet (1993) also acknowledges the viewpoint of those that are opposed to international or transracial adoption stating that it can be viewed as the “ultimate in the kind of exploitation inherent in all adoptions” because they typically consist of the rich and powerful taking children born to the poor and powerless. Bartholet goes on to say that critics of international or transracial adoption charge that it “involves the adoption by the privileged classes in the industrialized nations of the children of the least privileged groups in the poorest nations, the adoption by whites of black- and brown-skinned children from various Third World nations, and the separation of children not only from their birthparents, but from their racial, cultural, and national communities as well” (p. 90). Other critics of international and transracial adoption include Masson (2001), Smolin (2004; 2005; 2007) and the NABSW (1994). Masson argues that money spent on international adoption would be better spent on improving child welfare programs in sending countries. Smolin implies that international adoption borders on child trafficking and that it strips children of their “national identity, native culture, and language” (Smolin, 2004, p. 283). In 1994, the NABSW clarified an earlier position which emphasized the preservation of families and that black children should only be adopted by black families. They believed that the placement of black children with white families was cultural genocide and would hinder black children’s ability to learn about their cultural heritage.

Adoption Laws

The laws that govern present day adoptions in the U.S. can be classified into those enacted by the U.S. government and those promulgated by international bodies to which the U.S. is signatory including the Hague Adoption Convention and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Beginning in 1851 with the Massachusetts Adoption Act which was mentioned earlier, and is believed to be the first modern adoption law in the U.S. (Carp, 2002; Hawes, 2004; Berebitsky, 2000), there have been numerous changes in U.S. adoption law that bring us to laws governing present day adoptions.

In 1952, Congress passed the Immigration and Nationality Act (Infausto, 1969) which explicated, among other things, the procedures and requirements for entry into the United States of foreign born children. Next was the Indian Child Welfare Act which was enacted by Congress in 1978 (Hawes, 2004). This act stopped the transracial adoptions of American Indian children by white families in order to only place American Indian children with adoptive families in the American Indian community. Then in 1980, Congress passed the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act (Carp, 2002) which was one of the first federal laws to ever address the problems of adopted children. It mandated that child placement agencies must “provide preplacement preventive services, take steps to reunify children with their biological parents, and periodically review cases of children in long-term foster care” (p. 16). The Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 which prohibited discrimination towards adoptive parents based solely on the person's race, color, or national origin was to follow only to be amended later by the U.S. congress to become the Interethnic Adoption Provision. The adoption of American Indian children is the only exception to the Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 and to this date still enforces the practice of

race matching allowing the adoption of American Indian children only by prospective parents within the American Indian community (Hawes, 2004). Then in 2000, the Intercountry Adoption Act of 2000 (USCIS, 2000) was signed by then President Bill Clinton. This act approved the provisions set forth in the Hague Convention (USCIS, 2000) which will be reviewed next.

The Hague Adoption Convention was enacted May 29, 1993 to protect the rights of children and their families and to cultivate international cooperation regarding Intercountry Adoption. For example, it prohibits any adoptions that take place outside the legal system or adoptions that may be out of order in other ways in any signatory nation. It operates in tandem with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 21) to shield intercountry adoptions from exploitation of children via practices such as abductions or trafficking (Hague Conference on Private International Law website, n.d.). Carp (2002) adds that the Hague Adoption Convention regulates adoptions by placing adoption agencies under international scrutiny. This includes those in the U.S. as the United States signed the Hague Convention in 1994 and ratified it 14 years later (USDS, n.d.).

U.S. Adoptions from Vietnam

Adoptions to the United States from Vietnam began during the Vietnam War. Between 1970 and 1974, over 1,400 adoptions of children qualified as orphans were arranged between the Vietnamese and U.S. governments (USAID, 1975). During Operation Babylift, 2,457 war orphans were processed (USAID, 1975) making this Western humanitarian project, to date, the largest mass overseas evacuation of children (Williams, 2003).

Operation Babylift was, however, surrounded by controversy. Zigler (1976) described

Operation Babylift as a way to “assuage the guilt felt by many Americans concerning Vietnam” (p. 333). Zigler further explicates the disrespect shown to the North and South Vietnamese people by a number of Americans due to a lack of understanding of Vietnamese culture in the United States; particularly the greater respect shown to the family unit within the Vietnamese culture when compared to American culture.

According to Zigler, the Vietnamese culture, dating back 2,000 years, was better equipped through the use of extended family systems to care for their orphans, even in times of war. Contending that the traditions of Vietnamese culture object to adoptions of children by strangers, Zigler decried the practice of adopting children which involved “[renaming] them with Americanized first names, and forever [denying them] access to their native heritage and culture” as an affront to many Vietnamese regardless of their political inclination (p. 334).

Another issue with the Babylift of 1975 was the fact that many of the babies airlifted out of Vietnam were of mixed race, many being of Afro-Asian descent. This highlighted once again, the National Association of Black Social Workers' 1972 public position deeming the transracial adoption of black children into white families “cultural genocide” (Simon & Altstein, 1977). It was believed that white families would not be able to provide black children with a sense of their racial identity (Adamec & Pierce, 2000, p. 273) or adequately prepare them to deal with the “complexities involved in black-white relations in the United States, black consciousness and pride, and a feeling of group identity so essential for black children to have” (Zigler, 1976, p. 334).

Culture and identity are not only issues regarding transracial adoptions of black children into white families but of all children adopted across racial lines. Writing about the experiences

of adult Vietnamese adopted as a result of Operation Babylift, Williams Willing (2004) emphasized that “adoptees' lack of exposure to positive accounts of Vietnamese people and culture in their childhood left them with little knowledge and power to see past the racism and cultural stereotypes that surrounded and devalued their past” (p. 655).

Currently, intercountry or international adoptions from Vietnam to the United States are not permitted. An agreement that the United States and Vietnam had previously enacted expired on September 1, 2008, and was not renewed due to the United States government’s dissatisfaction with the enforcement of the law against fraud and other abuses of the Vietnam adoption process. Therefore, on October 15, 2008, the governments of the United States and Vietnam jointly announced that for any new intercountry adoptions between the two countries to be considered either their governments had to ink a new agreement or Vietnam had to endorse the Hague Adoption Convention in addition to enacting a child welfare system that is acceptable to Convention stipulations. After all, “Vietnamese law requires that a bilateral or international convention must be in place to permit intercountry adoptions” (USDS, n.d.). Vietnam has signaled its intention to adopt the Hague Adoption Convention, though no date has been formally announced when this would happen (USDS, n.d.).

A study conducted by Suter, et al. (2008) provides some clues about the experiences of U.S. adoptive families with children from Vietnam. The study was conducted at a cultural heritage camp in Colorado designed for adoptees from China and Vietnam and relied on the method of focus groups to identify the metaphors which illustrate the experiences of U.S. parents who had transracially adopted children from China and Vietnam. The researchers found that the metaphor of the adoptive family as battleground structured how the parents perceived the

American society's image of their families. In addition, the researchers concluded that the metaphors of adoptive parent as soldier and adoptive parent as architect shape how U.S. adoptive parents respond to these perceived battles. Further, the researchers suggested that based on the parents' perceptions, "racism, biological normativity, and nationalism" are still prevalent in U.S. family ideologies (p. 27), a situation that does not necessarily bode well for adoptive families.

Despite the important insights provided by the Suter et al. study as reviewed above, many unresolved questions remain. For example, how do newly formed "blended families" communicate their adoption experiences with their adopted child and others while simultaneously creating a new, unique family identity? How do adoptive parents handle unsolicited advice, criticisms, and inquiries about their adoption experience and adopted child? As suggested earlier, the present study aims to bridge the knowledge gap about adoptive parents' experiences after the adoption is finalized, by using dialectics as a theoretical perspective to identify the intricacies of adoption related communication. Therefore, dialectical theory is reviewed next for its relevance in explicating some communication aspects of transracial adoptions.

Dialectical Theory

This theory as advanced by the scholarship of Baxter and colleagues (Baxter, 2004a; Baxter, 2004b; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Baxter, 1990) is best described as "a family of theories rather than a single, unitary theory" (Baxter & Erbert, 1999, p. 548) that make up a meta-theoretical perspective. According to Cornforth (1968), there are two root concepts which qualify a theory as dialectical: process and contradiction. Process, a central theme of dialectical theory, or being in process, focuses on developmental change where change is "the result of the

struggle and tension of contradiction” (Baxter, 1990, p. 70). Contradiction, a key construct of dialectical theory, is the “interplay or tension of unified oppositions, that is, two or more factors, forces, or themes that are interdependent with one another at the same time that they function to negate or oppose one another” (Baxter & Erbert, 1999). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) describe contradictions as “the basic 'drivers' of change” (p. 7) and state that change is “inherent in contradiction because the interplay of unified oppositions results in a system that is perpetually in flux” (p. 10).

Baxter (1990, 1993) identified three basic supra-dialectics that exist within relationships, each with an internal and external form. The three basic supra-dialectics are: integration-separation, stability-change, and expression-privacy. Connection-autonomy is the internal form of the dialectic integration-separation with inclusion-seclusion representing the external form. Predictability-novelty (internal) and conventionality-uniqueness (external) fall under the stability-change dialectic. Finally, openness-closedness (internal) and revelation-concealment (external) fall under the expression-privacy dialectic (Wood, 2004).

In 1996, Baxter and Montgomery further refined dialectical theory applying it specifically to personal relationships, thereby creating the construct known as relational dialectics. From the perspective of relational dialectics, they state that social life is enabled by people’s communicative actions via which people enact multiple, if not infinite, opposing inclinations. Social life, they conclude, is an incomplete, perpetual dialogue “in which a polyphony of dialectical voices struggle against one another to be heard, and in that struggle they set the stage for future struggles” (p. 4).

At a later date, Baxter described personal relationships as constantly changing therefore

“the interplay of contradictory forces is a process of ongoing flux” (Baxter, 2004b, p. 11). The author also introduced an important form of dialogic similarity within relational dialectics referred to as chronotopic similarity, or “the stockpile of shared time-space experiences that a pair constructs through their joint interaction events overtime” (p. 4). Chronotopic similarity is achieved through “mundane communication events” (Baxter, 2004b, p. 4) experienced by a pair in everyday relating as well as “momentous events that function as turning points (Baxter, 2004b, p.4) in transforming a relationship” (Bolton, 1961).

Turning-point events are significant for two reasons. One reason is that the parties jointly engage the turning points at the time they occur, thus provides a shared experience base for them. The other reason is that the parties tend to remember the turning points via communication phenomena such as “reminiscing, storytelling, commemorations/celebrations, rituals, and use of idiomatic expressions whose meanings are rooted in these turning-point events” (Baxter, 2004b, p. 5).

Dialectical Theory and Relational Dialectics, in particular, are relevant to the present research because adoptive parents are likely to experience dialectical tensions when it comes to revealing information about their transracial adoption, or openness, and when they want to keep details private or share no information, closedness. Openness-closedness falls under the supra-dialectic of expression-privacy. The supra-dialectic of integration-separation should be useful when discussing how adoptive parents manage the tension of culture keeping with their adopted child because it involves the tension between connection-autonomy or the desire to keep their adopted child's birth culture as an important aspect of their family identity versus fully assimilating their adopted child into American society thereby leaving their birth culture behind.

Finally, turning-point events can be used to illustrate the decision to transracially adopt and effectively become a conspicuous family.

As mentioned earlier, dialectical theory and relational dialectics have been used to study step-family (Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006; Baxter et al., 2004), blended family (Braithwaite, Baxter & Harper, 1998), and other couple relationship (Baxter & West, 2003; Baxter & Erbert, 1999) communication.

Braithwaite and Baxter (2006) used relational dialectics theory to study step-families, specifically the interaction between the nonresidential parent and his or her child who resides as part of a step-family household. The authors performed an interpretive analysis of 50 transcribed interviews with college-aged stepchildren and found that interactions were animated by two contradictions: parenting/nonparenting and openness/closedness. The contradiction of parenting/nonparenting was found in relation to stepchildren's uneasiness over the parenting attempts of nonresidential parents. The contradiction of openness/closedness was found in conjunction with stepchildren's want to be open with their nonresidential parent but finding this openness problematic, and therefore managing this contradiction via segmentation. Similarly, Baxter et al. (2004) used relational dialectics theory to study stepchildren's perceptions of the contradictions that occur in communication with stepparents. The authors conducted an interpretive analysis of in-depth interviews to determine contradictions commonly experienced in stepchild-stepparent communication and found three underlying contradictions. The three dialectical contradictions identified were a dialectic of integration characterized by closeness and distance; a dialectic of parental status, where the stepparent was not perceived to be a legitimate parent; and a dialectic of expression where a tension between candor and discretion existed.

Braithwaite, Baxter, and Harper (1998) used dialectical theory to examine blended or step-families and how they manage the ongoing dialectical tension that exists between the “old” family and the “new” family. The authors conducted a qualitative/interpretive analysis of in-depth interviews with 53 members of blended or step-families. They found that blended family rituals were an important step in the process of how blended families embrace their new family while simultaneously remembering the value of their old family. This allowed blended families to pay homage to both the old and new family.

Baxter and West (2003) used a dialectical perspective to examine the dialectical unity of two contradictions: similarity/difference and positivity/negativity. The authors interviewed 27 friendship and 14 romantic pairs to identify phenomena that occurred with these two contradictions. They found that similarities and differences involved five different kinds of phenomena: personality, leisure pursuits, attitudes and beliefs, communication style, and demographic/family background. Similarities were perceived as positive as they aided communication between the couple. Differences were also positive because they contributed to individual growth which in turn led to better communication between the couple. Similarities and differences were negative because they resulted in conflict which challenged communication. Similarly, Baxter and Erbert (1999) examined the importance of the six basic contradictions of dialectical theory via the turning points of relational development between heterosexual romantic couples. The authors utilized a sample of 100 males and females that belonged to 50 heterosexual romantic couples. They found that autonomy-connections and openness-closedness were the most important contradictions across a wide range of turning points in events that occur in relationship development.

These studies provide insightful information into family communication; however, they do not address tensions experienced in the communication of adoptive families. Therefore, there is a need for more research to bridge the gap of knowledge that exists in adoptive family communication. Guided by dialectical theory and the need to investigate the experiences of United States adoptive parents of children from Vietnam; specifically the tensions or dialectics that adoptive parents may experience during communication about their transracial adoption, I pose the following two research questions:

RQ1: What dialectical tensions do adoptive parents describe regarding their adoption of children from Vietnam?

RQ2: How do parents describe the management of the dialectical tensions they experience in adopting and parenting a Vietnamese child:

a) In discussion with the children?

b) In discussion with outsiders?

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

The present study is grounded in the interpretive paradigm of communication research. Putnam (1982) posits that the interpretive paradigm assumes members socially construct reality through their subjective experiences by means of their use of words, symbols, and actions. Baxter and Babbie (2003) describe the primary objective of interpretive researchers as striving “to paint a verbal picture so rich that readers of the study feel as if they had walked a mile in the shoes of the group members” (p. 5). Therefore this study employed in-depth interviewing as its data collection technique. According to Smith (1995), qualitative researchers utilize in-depth interviewing to obtain a respondent's perspective, beliefs, perceptions or account of a topic in their own words. Marshall and Rossman (1995) noted that in-depth interviewing is a method of data collection that is used extensively in qualitative research and assert that qualitative in-depth interviews are more like having a conversation rather than a formal interview with prearranged, calculated answer categories.

Interview Guide

The unit of analysis for this study was family, as represented by parents of adopted children. A total of eight families participated in the study. Eight in-depth interviews, one per family were conducted. Five families were interviewed with both parents present and three families were interviewed with only one of two parents present.

The present study utilized a semi-structured interview guide. According to Smith (1995),

there is a “natural fit” between qualitative analysis and semi-structured interviewing (p. 9). The use of a semi-structured interview guide along with methods of qualitative analysis is particularly appropriate in interpretive research when the investigator is interested in gaining data where an issue is “controversial or personal” (p.10). A semi-structured interview guide consists of a list of open-ended questions as well as probes that allows the investigator to gain the participant's perspective in their own words. During the interview, the investigator facilitates and guides the interview using the semi- structured interview guide rather than the interview being dictated by the interview guide itself. Smith further notes that the use of this method allows the investigator as well as the participant to have greater flexibility in the interview process compared to a traditional structured interview, questionnaire, or survey. The researcher is able to follow up questions through the use of probes on interesting topics that may emerge during the interview process (Baxter and Babbie, 2003). This results in the participant being able to provide richer data and a fuller, more complete picture of their experiences (Smith, 1995) and “maximizes the depth of information gained from each participant (Marko, 2007, p. 6).

Sample

Participants in this study were recruited through purposive sampling. Purposive samples are not obtained randomly; rather, participants are recruited because they meet specific criteria set out by the study's investigator. Baxter and Babbie (2003) advocate that interpretive researchers use purposive sampling to ensure participants possess experiences that are relevant to the phenomenon under study. Because a random sample was not obtained, the results of the study cannot be generalized to the population of adoptive American parents of Vietnamese

children. In order to qualify for participation of this study, participants had to meet certain criteria. Qualifying criteria included: (a) participants must be an adoptive parent, (b) they must have adopted their child trans-racially, meaning they adopted outside of their race, and (c) they must have adopted their child from Vietnam. After this study attained approval from the Institutional Review Board at the University of Central Florida, participants were recruited through an advertisement in the form of a letter distributed through an adoption agency as well as through postings to an online discussion board about Vietnamese adoptions.

The letter advertising the study described the type of research being conducted as well as a brief description of what the study was about. The investigator accepted the first eight participants that responded to the advertisement, met the criteria established for the study, and were able to be interviewed during the data collection period. The sample of the present study consisted of eight families (a total of 13 parents representing these eight families). All couples in the sample were in a committed domestic partnership or marriage at the time of adoption and during the study.

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted over two months and took place from July 2010 to August 2010. Of eight interviews, five were conducted in person with four occurring in the home of the participants and one in a study room at a public library. Two telephone interviews were conducted as well as one Skype video call interview. Seven of the eight families live in the Southeast with the remaining family residing in the Midwest. Interviews lasted between 46 – 94 minutes, with the average interview duration of 70.75 minutes or 1 hour, 10 minutes and 45

seconds. A rapport was established with participants through conversations prior to the actual interview. During these conversations, a date, time, and place were agreed upon by both the investigator and each participating family to conduct the interview.

At the beginning of the actual interview, rapport was established with participants to put them at ease about the interview process. Then the investigator briefly explained the nature of the questions, informed the participants that personal and possibly invasive questions were going to be asked which they could decline to answer or withdraw from the study at any time. Letters of consent to participate in the study were distributed to the participants before the interview officially began. After reviewing the letter of consent, participants verbally gave their consent to participate in the present study.

The interview guide was divided into three categories: Family Identity, Communicating Tensions, and Reactions to Your Adoption. All interviews were audio-taped. Notes about the scene as well as the participant's physical appearance, non-verbal cues, body language, and notes about the location of the interview were discreetly taken during the interview process. Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant to protect their identity. Other identifying information was excluded to further protect the identity of the participants.

Interviews were partially transcribed with the researcher transcribing only the data that addressed the research questions of the current study. Transcription of interviews took approximately 45 hours resulting in 181 pages of transcribed data. The average number of pages in a transcript was 22.6 pages. After each transcript was completed, the investigator listened to the audio tape of the interview three additional times, following along with the transcript to ensure accuracy of the transcription. Once accuracy of all transcripts was established, the

investigator listened to the interviews again, following along on the transcript to familiarize herself with the data. Notes taken before, during, and after the interviews were also reviewed adding further insight into participants' responses.

Review of the audio tapes and transcripts along with the notes taken during the interview gave the investigator further insight into the participants' responses because the audio alone does not record the subtle nuances, non-verbal cues, body language, repeated words, and long pauses that together make a complete picture of the participants' answers and experiences.

Data were examined using Smith's (1995) guidelines for conducting a qualitative thematic analysis. The analysis included four main steps: (a) thoroughly read each individual transcript, (b) document themes that emerge within the transcripts, (c) categorize and look for connections between themes, and (d) determine patterns and create a master list of themes present in all transcripts. Transcripts of interviews conducted were coded for emerging themes and patterns.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

This chapter examines data collected during the eight in-depth interviews conducted in this study. Included in this chapter are participants' demographic information, their experiences adopting transracially from Vietnam and how it affects their communication with others and their adopted child. Quotes from participants are utilized to illustrate themes that emerged within the data.

Characteristics of Participants

Demographic information collected during this study included the age of participant, gender of participant, race of participant, location and year the adoption occurred, age of the adopted child at time of adoption and during the study, gender of adopted child, the presence of siblings, as well as the siblings age, gender and whether or not they were adopted. This key demographic information along with other characteristics of the participants is also located in Table 1 in Appendix D.

Out of the 13 participating parents, seven were women and six were men. Participants' ages ranged from 39-58 with the average age being 46.3 years old. The primary ethnicity of participants in this study was Caucasian, 10 participants, with the remaining three participants reporting an Asian (non-Vietnamese) ethnicity, two participants, or a mix of Hispanic, Caucasian, and Asian ethnicities, one participant. The year the adoptions occurred ranged from 2007 to 2009. Among the eight families there were a total of 10 children adopted from Vietnam, four

girls and six boys. Current ages of the adopted children range from one to four years old.

Findings

Two main themes emerged, openness and culture. The openness theme emerged in connection with the expression-privacy dialectic while the culture theme emerged in connection with the integration-separation dialectic. Openness refers to the level of information that parents are willing to share with others. Others can include their adopted child, family, friends, acquaintances, or strangers. Culture refers to the steps that adoptive parents take to reintroduce and incorporate the Vietnamese culture into their adopted child's life.

Openness

Throughout the research, the most prevalent theme that materialized was openness. When participants were asked about their decision to adopt transracially, all participants stated that they didn't believe it to be an issue as it was a widely accepted practice today. The perceived widespread acceptance of transracial adoption led adoptive parents to be open with others about their adoption choice. When asked how much information they would share with strangers, most parents stated that depending on the person and situation they would be fairly open and honest with a stranger about their child's adoption. Kevin, father of Isabella adopted from Vietnam and Sophia adopted from China, explained that openness with strangers was necessary because their adoption choice was obviously visible, he stated, "...there was no question about that, uh, well how do you say this, that we adopted because there would be such a distinct difference."

Similarly, Nina stated, "...because you are a conspicuous family, everybody knows that, that's not your biological child." Megan stated: "You know, when you adopt, and you don't look like the child could pass for your child, it makes you very much be in the spotlight when you're out in public." Parents were also asked how much information they would share with their adopted child about their adoption. Every parent responded that they would give their child as much information as they could about their adoption. Megan, mother of Dylan shared how she plans to communicate Dylan's adoption story to him, she stated:

... they have this three picture story that they recommend, where you have like a picture, the referral photo is the number one photo, and the second photo is you on the day that you get united with your child and the third photo is them home with your family. And I think this presents, like, a pretty easy way for your child to see, you know, that they were over there and you came to get them and now they are with you and they're your family.

Because of the range of situations that the theme openness encompasses, I have split the theme of openness into two sub themes: openness with strangers or others and openness with their adopted child.

Openness with strangers or others

While most parents expressed that they would be fairly open to answering questions from strangers about their adoption, all parents agreed that they would take into consideration the intentions of the person asking them questions as well as the location of the conversation. Nina stated, "... I think it's just the personality of the person you are talking to, how open you are with them, what you want to share with them and what you don't." I found there to be multiple layers that make up the sub theme of openness with strangers or others including superficial openness with strangers or others, protection of their adopted child's privacy coupled with parents'

perception of questioner's intent when faced with invasive questions and how parents combat the savior stereotype regarding transracial international adoption.

Superficial openness with strangers or others

Parents described situations where while they were open about their adoption with strangers or others, they did not give them their full story; instead they provided a few details replying in short, concise answers to satisfy the questioner's curiosity. Parents emphasized that the location and interest level of the person asking questions greatly affects the amount of information they will share about their adoption. Mia, mother of Isabella adopted from Vietnam and Sophia adopted from China, explained the difference between what she sees as sincere and superficial questions and how she answers them:

Usually, the people that have more questions, we can tell are the ones that are truly interested, something they're considering, something in the back of their mind. If it's somebody just standing in line at the grocery store, you know, we just answer one or two questions, or, and that's it, just until you get through the line. If they are just being nosy we can tell.

When asked how her boundaries regarding how much information she is willing to share changed according to the group she is interacting with, Alice, mother of Molly, stated:

Sure, uh yeah, I think I would, I mean both my husband and I are in sales so we read our situations pretty quickly and it it's a silly question like how much did you pay, I think, you know, we'll handle it. I don't, I don't have a canned answer but um, yeah, I think I would consider the situation and the place that we are in before talking. You know, I don't, I'm not comfortable getting into deep conversations at Walmart.

Michael and Emily, a couple who consider themselves particularly open about their transracial adoption with strangers, recounted two different experiences from the supermarket when strangers inquired about their son, Kyle. The first:

Michael: Usually what we'll be in the supermarket or somewhere and someone will say,

oh where is he from? And, you know, I'll say Vietnam and that's usually the end of it. Emily: One lady came up to me and said, um, 'Is his daddy Asian?' And I said, 'yes.' 'Oh, your husband is Asian?' I said, no, we adopted him from Vietnam.

Michael and Emily went on to reveal the question they are asked the most about their adopted son, Kyle. Michael noticed that the question they are asked the most is "... How much does he cost?" Having taken the Conspicuous Families course presented by Adoption Learning Partners, Michael and Emily were prepared to answer such questions and react accordingly. Michael stated that he typically answers "Between 30 and 50 thousand dollars, depending on which agency you use, you know realistically" and "that usually pretty much shuts them up".

Protection of the adopted child's privacy and perceived intent of questioner

When curious or sincere questions turn into invasive questions or criticisms, parents aren't as willing to be open with strangers about their adoption and are more careful with the answers that they provide. Their responses indicate that protection of their adopted child's privacy was more important than being totally open and honest with strangers at that time. Typically, parents take into consideration what they perceive the questioner's intent to be and how their answer might affect their adopted child before answering invasive questions dealing with private details about their adopted child or reacting to criticisms or negative comments. When asked about the process of preparing answers and readying her daughter Molly for situations where strangers ask invasive questions, Alice stated:

Um, I just don't, I don't have any pre-canned answers, um, and I probably should, but I haven't, you know, thankfully, I haven't had any negative uh experiences yet, or things that are, you know. I, I suppose what is probably going to happen is, you know, they are going to start saying the [word] adoption in front of her and I haven't quite gotten to the point of explaining it. So, I definitely need to deal with that so, when I do respond to people asking, I can look at Molly and she'll know that, she'll understand what it is I'm

saying, what they're asking and what I'm saying back.

Amber shared a negative experience that occurred at a grocery store, she recalled:

People were, invaded [sic] your personal space, they were very forth-coming, they were nosy, um, and I, I just worried about, how, at what point would she start to remember or put two and two together, how that would affect her. Uh, early, early on, going to the grocery store, I actually had a friend [laughs] who was pushing the cart with Emma in it and some lady kept looking at the two of them and she hadn't quite said anything yet and Heather, without missing a beat [snaps] she said, 'AsianBabies.com, you should check it out!' And she turned and walked away. And you know, I would have never, of course, never said that but, it was really getting to bother me.

Further, Amber explained why she thought she experienced more invasive questioning when her husband John and herself first arrived home with their daughter Emma versus now that Emma is 4, she said:

You know, I think, I think also people feel comfortable when they're really tiny and that in their mind it's perfectly ok to ask all those questions, I mean, at least I'm assuming so since our questions have ended, but ... that was my overall concern, the longer that continued, the worse off it would be for her.

David implied that if he was put in a position where a stranger was criticizing him, he would:

If we were in the situation where people were asking [questions] and they were too invasive, we would basically either ignore them or tell them it's none of your business... Yeah, I just ignore it because if you don't, in my opinion and you start arguing, you're not benefiting the child who happens to be with you. Um, you know, I think you may be at risk of saying a comment that you wish you never would have mentioned, so I would just ignore it ... I just think the privacy and safety of your child is the most important.

Conversely, most parents recognized that not all invasive questions were meant to be hurtful. Many parents agreed that most of the invasive questioning they experienced they realized was in fact just ignorance on the part of the questioner. Daniel, father of Nathaniel, stated:

And yet, I would cut them the benefit of the doubt, and say, they must be trying to ask me, 'Is this an expensive process to go through' versus 'Did you go down to Winn-Dixie and buy a can of peas for two for 89 cents?'

Mia, mother of Isabella, echoed this sentiment stating:

Even, even with friends in the beginning when we, when we came home um, and they would use the term, when asking certain questions out of earshot, they would use the term real mother, and I would always correct them and say birth mother. And I still do, but they have learned that now, I mean, uh, they don't use those questions now, but once in a while, if it comes up, they know the difference now that I am the real mother and there is a birth mother and that it's two separate things. So um, I have no problem correcting people on that but a lot of it's, they don't know, they're not doing it to be mean, they just don't know, you know, unless they went through an adoption themselves, they're not going to know that terminology.

Combatting the savior stereotype

The last key finding under the sub theme of openness with strangers or others is how adoptive parents combat the savior stereotype that within the general public is widely accepted about transracial international adoptions. The savior stereotype is the belief that an affluent person adopts a child who is lucky to have been saved from whatever living situation they found themselves in and adopted into a more prosperous living situation. Parents who participated in this study did not believe in the savior stereotype. Most parents interviewed indicated that at one time or another, someone, whether it be a family member, friend, acquaintance, or stranger commented on how lucky their adopted child was to have been adopted or saved by them. When addressing the savior stereotype with friends, family, acquaintances or strangers, most parents corrected the commenter, stating that they, as the adoptive parents, were the lucky ones to have had the privilege of adopting this child who brings such happiness and joy to their lives and completes their family. Some parents even felt that their adopted child was meant to be in their family. Megan, mother of Dylan, recalled this instance of encountering the savior stereotype and clarifies her motives for adopting:

Some people would say, when we first came home with him, 'Oh, he's a very lucky baby' or something like that, you know, um, and I would say 'No, we are the lucky ones' ... But Matthew and I didn't adopt to save a baby or whatever, we adopted to add to our family. Which is also like, we are never going to treat Dylan like, you know, we could have left him at the orphanage or whatever ... they never asked to be left at an orphanage, you know?

Kevin, father of Isabella, relates:

But you know, we get far more out of them, out of having them, than we give to them, just the satisfaction and the joy and everything that comes with it ... so often so many people will say, 'Oh how lucky the girls are,' and I always have to correct them and say, 'No, we are the lucky ones.'

James and Nina talk about how their children Chase and Lily saved them by providing them with the family that they desired.

James: We don't feel like we've saved them from anything, we don't. They, we wanted a family and this is just what happened to work out for us, so I don't want to make them feel like we saved them, you know?

Nina: Everybody is satisfying a need for everybody, you know, we're giving the children a home, no matter where they're from and they're giving us the family that we desired.

Nevertheless, some adoptive parents themselves expressed some aspects of a savior mentality. For instance, David, when asked what the most satisfying aspect of the adoption process was for him, and how he feels about having "saved" his sons Carter and Ethan, stated:

The most satisfying thing is the fact that you actually have saved, I hate the word saved, you know, it's got some negative connotations, big saviors who came down from Heaven and saved you, that's not what we meant, but having the ability to share our success and resources with children who would have not necessarily been as successful, now I can't say they would not have been successful had they stayed in the orphanage, they may have, who knows, you know they may have been successful in whatever, whatever you want to define success, but I think we have been able to give them a better ability to succeed, using our standard of the word success, because we have resources that we would have otherwise wasted. You know, both my wife and I are both in healthcare, so we are providing, you know, we help people every day, so this is our ability to provide, you know, if not, what the hell is the purpose for me being here?

Openness with strangers or others versus openness with the adopted child

Parents interviewed in this study were adamant about the boundaries that exist between being open with strangers and being open with their adopted child. While the setting of the situation and what adoptive parents perceived to be the intentions of the questioner determined the amount of openness that occurred between adoptive parents and others; parents in this study indicated that there were no secrets that would be kept from their adopted child and they would be completely open with their adopted child.

Tracy and Daniel exemplified how openness with strangers can affect communication and openness with Nathaniel, their adopted child, and Chloe, their biological child. When discussing how much information they reveal to strangers when their children are present, Daniel and Tracy stated:

Daniel: I, I, I kind of, it's easier for me, because obviously it's amazing how much he looks like me at my younger age. So people are far less likely to ask me questions as they would ask Tracy questions. Or together, they get, they get, they might be a bit puzzled and again that might, you know, bring up some very friendly, interesting questions, you know. Usually with me, if I have the two of them and someone asks 'Oh are they twins?' to me, I just say 'Ya.' It's easier that way.

Tracy: You do say yes?

Daniel: Yeah.

Tracy: But they are listening to you say that.

Daniel: Who?

Tracy: To me, I'm like, I'm more interested in what my kids are listening to me say versus what this other person, like, if you ask me a question and my kids are around, I don't really care, frankly, like, what you think or what, you know, whether I share information or not. To me, the important part of that whole interaction is that my children are listening to me explain their, who they are, you know?

Daniel further explains:

And that usually satisfies, they are just about twins, so that usually people will say, 'Oh, ok' and that pretty much answers their question. It typically fulfills their need to know and I'm happy with that. That's about it, casual contact.

Openness with the adopted child

During interviews, parents were asked a variety of questions ranging from how they communicate to their adopted child their decision to transracially adopt, to how much information they share with their child, as well as how they communicate their child's adoption story to them. All 13 parents interviewed emphasized that they would be open and honest with their adopted child, giving them as much information as they could. Some couples were apprehensive because they did not have a lot of background information to give to their child or the information they had might not be entirely true and realized that may become an issue in the future. Though all of the participants expressed that they believe their children are too young to understand the concept of adoption right now, all of the parents stated that they either have a plan or will make a plan in the future of how they want to tell their children about their adoption.

Kevin explained his and his wife Mia's plan this way:

With the girls I think we're open about everything, but we've, we've discussed it in advance how we are gonna deal with certain questions, and in particular, that the birth mother had a plan, you know, and this was, her plan was to make sure that, you know, her daughter was going to get the best possible life because she wasn't able to do those things, you know, the things that she wanted and so, you know, you have to phrase it in those terms because you know that as the questions pop into their head as they get older, they are going to have some insecurities about it. And even if you have the best, you know, explanations in the world, that doesn't mean they aren't going to think about it differently ... so we'll just kind of see and adjust as it goes along.

Being honest with their adopted child was also a concern for Amber and John. When discussing the authenticity of the estimated birthdate of their daughter, Emma, Amber stated:

I think it's fair to tell her that it's an estimated birthdate, and it was, you know, from what little we saw in that paperwork, in the 4 pages that you have to make a decision, somewhere it did say that she was dropped off or brought to the orphanage at approximately 6 weeks.

Being open with his adopted child about his origin story into their family was very important to

Daniel, he explained that he would tell his son Nathaniel:

You came to us in a different way than Chloe came to us, Chloe came to us in this way and you came a different way. And I will say, just like all the rivers that lead into the pond and the lake, they come from different directions but once they're there, everybody is in the same body together. It doesn't really matter at that point, you came in differently, but that's still good.

No matter the situation at hand, all parents interviewed indicated that they would be open and honest and give their adopted children as much information that was available.

Culture

All parents interviewed indicated that they believed reintroducing or keeping Vietnamese culture was an important aspect of raising their adopted child. If their child expressed interest in their birth culture, they would enable them to keep their Vietnamese culture integrated into their life. Conversely, if the child expressed no interest in their birth culture, they would not push the subject or force the child to identify with the culture of their birth country.

Negative and positive experiences can affect how adoptive parents present their child's birth culture to them or in turn how their adoptive child will perceive their cultural heritage. Positive experiences usually revolved around strangers commenting on the appearance of the adopted child. Michael stated, "But people all the time say what a beautiful kid he is... he'll just pop a big smile and everybody loves him." Negative experiences ranged from strangers staring at the child or invading their personal space, racist remarks, remarks made by Vietnam Veterans, questions of why they didn't adopt domestically, to offering to help with the purchase of their next child. James described an incident at a barbershop with a woman who was cutting his hair, he stated, "This woman, who um, remember [laughs] who told me to cut my hair. I think she was

just ignorant, she's like, why didn't you, how did she say, why didn't you, how come you didn't get no American baby?"

Daniel related an experience that occurred with a friend who was a veteran of the Vietnam War:

I, I, you know, that just reminds me of one thing, I think the worst one was about, a person who will remain nameless who was in the Vietnam War, who went through some pretty horrendous situations and watched friends die. [Pause] 'Oh, you're adopting from Vietnam, really?' And I'm like, yeah I am. 'Alright, well, that's a, that's a pretty gutsy move.' And I was trying to read into what he was saying about that and I realized that a lot of these guys are just, they're just, oh you know, they're PTSD people, they're shell shocked... the fact that I'm supporting a person who came from a heritage that [he] was at war with 40 years ago, nearly died and watched a bunch of [his] friends die and now you are supporting these people?

Conversely, Megan stated that as a family, they have had positive experiences with veterans of the Vietnam War:

We actually, by and large, have had like overwhelming support by Vets... when they see Dylan and they ask us where he's from and we say Vietnam, they feel this immediate sense that they're like bonded with him, um, so that's actually been very positive.

Alice recounted a negative experience that occurred when they were having dinner with some friends:

We were out to dinner with very close, everybody was very crammed into the, you know, there were four adults and Molly, small table, so we were all kind of jammed in. And she's watching her DVD, we use that portable DVD, so she watches the movies while we chit chat and have dinner, um, so this man came up behind me, I didn't even see him coming, and he drops his business card on the table and he says, 'Let me know if you want another one.' And I thought, and I didn't even look at the card, and I'm like, like what? Another DVD? Another DVD player? Ok. And I looked at it, and he walked away, and I saw Adoption Agency, you know, and I thought, another one, I thought, that was just, I didn't even think, you know, a child, you know, I just thought, it's really going to the convenience store and picking one out.

Families integrated their child's birth culture into their family life mainly through food

and sometimes participation in Asian American community festivals celebrating Tet or Chinese New Year. The first step to keeping the adopted child's culture as an integral aspect of their family life was to reintroduce their adopted child to the Vietnamese culture. Alice explained how she plans to broach the subject with her daughter Molly:

As she gets older, I will introduce all of these things to her, if the interest level is there, and the only way you know it's going to be there is by showing her and talking about it, and showing her different things ... So I will introduce things as they become known to me or as I research and I find, you know, ways to uh introduce things to her, but I'm not gonna push it.

Alice goes on to share her hopes for her daughter Molly:

I do, I do hope that she learns about her culture, you know, that she is interested about learning and I would just, I look forward to that day when we can put our, that lifebook together and talk about it and research more because she's not gonna know much more about the Vietnamese culture than I know. I didn't study the culture and that's not how I made my decision. So it would be a learning experience for both of us and something that we could do together. But, you know, until she expresses the interest, after I prompt her, you know I will bring things to her, and if the interest is there, then we'll go, we'll go into deep details but until then, we're waiting ... if it's important to her, then it will become important to me.

Most parents interviewed indicated they had little knowledge of Vietnamese culture but they were interested in learning about it so that they could in turn teach it to their adopted child. When asked why they specifically chose to adopt from Vietnam, parents stated that while they researched other sending countries to adopt from, because of age restrictions, average time of adoptions or other factors they chose Vietnam. When asked how much they weave their adopted child's heritage into their family life Tracy responded nil to none, but:

I would love to learn how to cook Vietnamese, um, and I've been trying to find a Vietnamese person to come in, even if it's like one afternoon a week, just to either cook, to play, speak Vietnamese in front of him, like something you know.

Amber and John indicated that they had little knowledge themselves about the Vietnamese

culture but they tried to solidify Emma's cultural identity by keeping part of her Vietnamese name within her new American name, John stated: "Well, we kept her, her first name as her middle name ... so, and uh, so I mean, we want her to have that identity, it's something unique." When asked how she, along with her husband Michael, plan to incorporate the Vietnamese culture into their family life, Emily, mother of Kyle, said: "We're choosing to include this Asian part, I mean, it's, you don't, you don't have to, it's, it's what we feel is right, both for him and for us." Most parents stated that at this time, their children's age and comprehension level greatly affected how much they expose their adopted child to the Vietnamese culture. Emily affirmed that the age of her son Kyle was the biggest factor that keeps them from integrating the Vietnamese culture into their lives, she stated: "His culture will not be left behind, he is just much too young right now. I mean, there's not a whole lot you can do ... So as soon as he gets a little bit older, we will go."

Throughout the research, it appeared that at this time, most parents felt that the best way to expose their adopted children to Vietnamese culture is through Vietnamese food. John explained his own Cambodian family's relationship with Vietnamese food and how it benefits his daughter Emma's cultural identity:

We do make Vietnamese meals, they're very similar to Cambodian meals, so we make a lot of, and we do, my father, who lives in town, or fairly close to here, will come here, will meet with our, and he and I will go to Vietnamese restaurants, it's like our favorite thing to do because it is the closest thing to Cambodian food. So she regularly goes to a Vietnamese restaurant once a week ... [and] our Vietnamese friends will cook. So we, unfortunately we don't know the language, otherwise we would teach her the language and but uh, and the culture we don't really know much about besides the food, but we try.

David, father of Carter and Ethan, explicates the steps that he and his wife Catherine are taking to incorporate the Vietnamese culture into their sons' lives:

We are reintroducing the Vietnamese culture into their lives. With the 2 year old it's a little hard to do that but the 3 year old is already starting to understand. So we do, we expose them to Vietnamese culture. There is a Vietnamese town here in [the city where they live], we cook Vietnamese at home, we read books about Vietnam so that the culture is not something strange to them, so they'll grow, grow up knowing where they came from and the background of where they came from.

David goes on to demonstrate what he believes is the importance of integrating the Vietnamese and American cultures:

I think it's more important to keep them intact as much as possible and integrated but not necessarily Americanize them. There are many things that are good about this culture but there are many things bad about this culture but I think the best thing is combine and integration.

Similarly, Daniel, an immigrant himself, emphasized what he believed to be the importance of teaching his son about both his birth culture as well as the culture of his adoptive family:

I think I can pretty much model that how my parents did it, you know, being an immigrant myself, because I wasn't born in this country. We came here, you are who you are, you contribute, you participate without having to be ashamed or having to be apologetic for where you came from because that's what you are about. It is important to be, to understand, this is where you are now, this is what you do, but this is where you came from and it's a good thing... So he will be integrated, it will be important for him when he has that capability to understand where he is from and what he came from, I think that should be encouraged, this is what your culture, your heritage is about and be proud of it and this is where you are now, and at the same time, it's good to be here and we're glad you are here.

When asked why they specifically chose to adopt from Vietnam, Megan answered:

We just felt really drawn to Vietnam, anyway, so it was kind of amazing that we ended up adopting our first child from there, um, but, um, let's see, what drew us to it? I guess the idea that we could possibly, um, instill in our child a little sense of culture having lived there and had all of the experiences that we did and hoping to preserve some of that for him.

Summary

In summary, two main themes seem to have emerged throughout the data: openness and

culture. Openness refers to how much information adoptive parents are willing to share across boundaries among different groups. Adoptive parents in this study were found to have differing boundaries when it came to openness with strangers or others and openness with their adopted child. When facing questions from strangers, adoptive parents would take into account the location and situation where the questioning was taking place as well as what they perceived the intent of the questioner to be. If they thought the questioner was just prying or being nosy then they would either give short, concise answers or no answer at all, allowing them to protect the privacy of their adopted child. If they perceived the questioner to be sincere then they would be open and forth-coming with details about their adoption and adopted child. Parents also talked about the savior stereotype, when people comment that their child is lucky to have been adopted by them. Adoptive parents correct them by saying that they are the lucky ones to have had the opportunity to adopt, not their adopted child. When communicating with their adopted child, parents interviewed in this study stated that they would be completely open with their adopted child, giving them as much information as they could about their adoption.

The second theme that emerged throughout the data was culture. Adoptive parents interviewed in this study indicated that they believed it was important to teach their adopted children about their Vietnamese birth culture even though many of them had no knowledge of it themselves. Food was found as a common thread of celebrating Vietnamese culture with their adopted children. Although parents were eager to learn more about Vietnam and the Vietnamese culture, they stated that if the adopted child did not show interest in their birth culture then they would not force it upon them.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study was similar to a study conducted by Suter, Ballard, and Reyes (2008) in that those authors, too, examined families who had transracially adopted from Vietnam; however their purpose was to study the metaphors that adoptive parents employ to describe communication experiences between themselves and others. The purpose of this study was to examine the communicative experiences of parents who have transracially adopted a child from Vietnam, identify the dialectical tensions they describe regarding their adoption, as well as how they manage these tensions in differing communication situations. This chapter begins by analyzing themes that emerged from the data to examine how they relate to Dialectical Theory. Limitations and future research will then be presented. The chapter ends with a note on reflexivity.

Dialectical Theory

The present study uses the theoretical framework of the dialectical perspective and relational dialectics to examine how parents of transracially adopted children manage tensions experienced while communicating with their adopted child and others. Relational dialectics, as defined by Baxter and Montgomery (1996) is based on the belief that social life is “a dynamic knot of contradictions, a *ceaseless interplay* between contrary or opposing tendencies” (p. 3). A variety of contradictions have been identified by scholars of dialectics that organize the relating process (for review, see Montgomery & Baxter, 1996). This study concentrated on four of the six frequently identified contradictions that reflect the three underlying supra-dialectics: the dialectic

of integration-separation and the dialectic of expression-privacy. All the supra-dialectics are experienced both internally within the dyad and externally at the intersection of the dyad and society at large (Baxter 1993). The emergent themes of openness and culture are examined using the supra-dialectics expression-privacy and integration-separation, respectively.

Openness and the Dialectic of Expression/Privacy

The supra-dialectic of expression-privacy dictates that within a relationship, each party involved experiences tension regarding their need to share information with the other party as well as their need to retain their privacy. As expected, adoptive parents interviewed in this study stated that they would be open and honest with their adopted child in regard to their reasons for adopting transracially as well as with details of the adoption itself. In this sense, there was no tension between openness and closedness. Surprisingly, most of the adopted parents interviewed also stated that they would be open to questions from strangers regarding their transracial adoption and depending on the situation, give them honest answers. This indicated a tension between the dialectics of openness and closedness. While adoptive parents wanted to educate others about the adoptive process, they weren't always willing to sacrifice the privacy of their adopted child to do so. This general openness of families who have adopted transracially can have a greater impact on the general public. This openness can be explained by identifying unique qualities that families who transracially adopt possess. When in public, these families have no choice but to address their transracial adoption because for many, it is obvious that their children are not biological.

The finding that families who had transracially adopted from Vietnam did not report

many negative experiences with others was surprising. For the most part, participants did not label many experiences as negative, even when faced with invasive questions from strangers. It appears that they did not perceive these experiences to be negative, instead recognizing the lack of knowledge or ignorance of the questioner, they turned these experiences into a positive by educating the questioner about transracial adoption so that eventually they can eradicate stereotypes about transracial and international adoptions and gain total acceptance from society. The mixed reactions of Vietnam Veterans were also surprising. Two families reported differing experiences with Veterans of the Vietnam War; one positive and one negative. It is possible that the different experiences of these families regarding Vietnam Veterans can be attributed to situations the Veterans themselves experienced while in Vietnam.

An additional interesting aspect of openness and how adoptive parents communicate with strangers or others is the experience of interracial or biracial couples. When parents belonging to an interracial couple were individually seen in public with their adopted child, the Caucasian parent recalled an increase in attention from strangers or others. On the other hand, when the adopted child was seen in public with the Asian (non-Vietnamese) parent, they reported a decrease in attention from strangers or others. Couples shared that while they had been enduring the stares and glances of strangers for many years, the differing experiences of parents when they were individually in public with their adopted child added an additional tension within their family communication. Though the parents indicated that they would not respond to the stares of strangers or others, by choosing to ignore these situations, parents are indeed choosing a response. Parents manage the dialectical tension of openness-closedness by ignoring the situation completely.

Culture and the Dialectic of Integration/Separation

The supra-dialectic of integration-separation dictates that within a relationship, each party involved experiences tension between the wish to integrate with others as well as the desire to be separate from others. This supra-dialectic can be used to explain the tension or indecision experienced by adoptive parents regarding whether or not they want to keep their adopted child's birth culture as a central theme in their family life or not.

Culture is learned; therefore the ideas and opportunities that adoptive parents instill in their adopted children will have a tremendous impact on the culture that their adopted child will inherently learn as he or she grows older. Until adopted children mature to a point where they can decide for themselves whether they want to research or explore for themselves the culture that they have gained or lost, it is the choice and responsibility of the adoptive parent to shape their culture. Just because someone is born in one country does not mean he or she will automatically identify with that culture. Adoptive parents need to provide a place where culture is a fluid concept. A person can be American and Vietnamese. If adoptive parents provide, not force, information and opportunities to develop an integrated, unique, and personal cultural experience, they will benefit their adopted child more than if they simply cut off the child's birth culture or conversely, force it upon them in a way that leaves no place for assimilation into their new family. Surprisingly, many adoptive parents did not have much knowledge about Vietnam, either as a country or the culture that defines it. At the beginning of this study, I anticipated that knowledge about the country they were adopting from, including the culture, would be an important factor to adoptive families when considering which sending country to adopt from. Most participants in this study indicated that it was the less rigid regulations of the Vietnamese

Government regarding adoptions, not the culture of Vietnam that solidified their choice of adopting from Vietnam. It is noteworthy that all adoptive parents interviewed expressed an interest in learning about Vietnam and its culture, especially the food. Most participants stated that food was the easiest way to integrate their child's birth culture into their family life, as they could easily visit Vietnamese restaurants.

But knowledge of one's birth culture cannot be limited only to its food. Because these parents, for the most part, chose Vietnam just for expedience, perhaps they may not turn out to be as resourceful about linking their adopted children to their birth culture as they could have been. There is basis for speculation that for adopted children both positive and negative experiences regarding their birth culture, whether it be criticisms by a stranger or a lack of information, experiences, or cultural role models, will affect how they accept or reject their birth culture as they grow and mature.

Limitations and Future Research

Because a random sample of adoptive families was not obtained, the results of this study cannot be generalized to the general public. Although the findings of this study could benefit the general population, and specifically other adoptive parents or prospective adoptive parents, because of the small sample size, it is unclear if the communication experiences reported by participants of this study represent the norm for all parents of transracially adopted children, including but not limited to Vietnam. However, the results of this study enhance the foundation for future studies by providing a comparison base.

Another limitation of the sample was the age of participants. This study contained

participants between the ages of 39 – 58. It would benefit future studies to gain the perspectives of adoptive parents in their twenties and thirties who were not included in this study's sample as their experiences may or may not differ from those found in this study. The researcher relied on participants of this study recommending other adoptive parents known to them to participate as well. This resulted in a homogenous network sample of families who had all adopted through the same agency. Future studies should employ random samples.

The age of the adopted children also could be considered a limitation. Participants of this study reported that their adopted children's ages ranged from one to four years old. This implies that the adoptive parents were “new parents” as they had only recently, within the last one to three years, completed their adoptions. Future studies should look at adoptive families that have older adopted children as their point of view and communication experiences may greatly differ from those included in this present study.

Other areas of Future Research

A common thread emerged among the three interracial or biracial couples interviewed but since the findings did not pertain to the research questions of this study I was not able to draw definitive conclusions or a theme about this topic at this time. However, I believe it would be an interesting avenue of research for future studies. Couples involved in interracial or biracial relationships reported that when in public together as a family or when the adopted child was alone with the parent of Asian heritage, people did not ask if the child was adopted at all. Parents felt that strangers perceived it to be, on the outside, an acceptable match by looks. Future research could be conducted focusing solely on the experiences of interracial or biracial couples

who adopt. Conversely, some Caucasian parents interviewed in this study reported that sometimes when they are alone with their adopted child or children in public, because questioners do not know the ethnicity or racial identity of their partner, they do not know definitively if the child is adopted, a step child, or that the other parent is Asian; which sometimes results in less questioning. Parents suggested that this could be caused by their children's "light" features or lack of strong Asian features. Future research could be conducted to identify what motivates strangers to question a parent who has adopted transracially.

Another topic of future research suggested is looking into corruption that occurred in adoptions from Vietnam in recent years. As reviewed earlier, during the last month of this research study, an article was published in Foreign Policy Magazine entitled Anatomy of an Adoption Crisis authored by E.J. Graff. This article, based on information received through a Freedom of Information Act requested by The Schuster Institute for Investigative Journalism and published on September 12, 2010, brought to light the systematic corruption that occurred in the Vietnamese adoption system, how the State Department of the United States of America handled it, and ultimately what led to the dissolution of the adoption agreement between the United States and Vietnam (Graff, 2010). This would be an important subject for future research as the results would be meaningful to adoptive families and could also indicate aspects of adoption law that could be strengthened to limit corruption in adoption.

Reflexivity and My Research Experience

Throughout the duration of completing this Master's thesis, I have been acutely aware of my personal stake in the research as an adoptive parent of a daughter from Vietnam. Having had

the experience of being part of an interracial couple and adopting a child myself, I immediately established a rapport with participants and could relate to their adoption experiences. I understood their hopes of becoming parents, fears of an unknown process, the anxieties and emotional turmoil that can ensue during the adoption process, and most importantly, the sacred bond that is formed through adoption between parent and child. Because of this knowledge, I have taken extra precautions to hold myself accountable in the collection, protection, interpretation, and discussion of experiences that these adoptive parents have entrusted in me. I have made a conscious effort to set aside my personal experiences and preconceived notions and to open myself up to what participants had to say rather than what I wanted to hear. Awareness of my bias led me to be conscientious in my analysis, judicious in my interpretations, and candid in the explication of results resulting in rigorous and meaningful research.

Conclusion

The decision to transracially adopt removes an adoptive family's choice of if and when they want to disclose their status as an adoptive family to their adopted child, family, friends, or others. As a result, their family acts as a visible reminder of their adoption choice, therefore openness is a necessary quality in navigating communication experiences.

APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL LETTER



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Lan-Marie Malin**

Date: **June 03, 2010**

Dear Researcher:

On 6/3/2010, the IRB approved the following minor modification to human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination
Modification Type: Interview questions have been revised and condensed and participants will be recruited via advertisements on Internet forums.
Project Title: The Communication Implications and Related Experiences Associated with Trans-racially Adopting a Child from Vietnam.
Investigator: Lan-Marie Malin
IRB Number: SBE-09-06556
Funding Agency:
Grant Title:
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Joseph Bielitzki, DVM, UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 06/03/2010 04:52:17 PM EDT

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Joanne Muratori'.

IRB Coordinator

APPENDIX B: ADVERTISEMENT

Participants Needed for Study on Adoption

I am a Master's student at the University of Central Florida in the Communication Department. I am conducting my Master's Thesis on the communication experiences of parents who have adopted their children internationally. I would like to speak to parents whose children were adopted trans-racially from Vietnam when they were infants and toddlers. Participation will consist of an interview, conducted in-person which will last between 1 to 2 hours at a time and location that is comfortable and convenient to you. Interview questions will be about the adoption process, family life and your adoption experience. Participants will be guaranteed anonymity. If you would like to participate in this study, or would like to receive further information, please contact me, Lan-Marie Malin, at (407) 243-8281 or LanMarieMalin@knights.ucf.edu. I will be happy to talk about the study in more detail and answer any questions you may have about this study.

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Topic: The Communication Implications and Related Experiences Associated with Transracially Adopting a Child from Vietnam.

Interview Guide:

Introduction and Instructions

Hello. I'm Lan-Marie Malin and I'm a graduate student at the University of Central Florida. I am also the adoptive parent of a four year-old daughter from Vietnam. Through my personal adoption experiences I became very interested in the experiences of others. Today I will be talking with you about your transracial adoption of a Vietnamese child. The purpose of this study is to assist in academic research.

This interview will be more like an informal discussion. There are no right or wrong answers. Just describe your own opinions and stories of your adoption process. I want to hear these in your own words and in as much detail as you can. I'm also interested in hearing as many experiences as possible. Be candid. Say whatever you want. I'm here to learn.

If there are any questions asked that you prefer not to answer, then you do not need to answer them. Answer only those questions you feel comfortable discussing.

The session is being audio-taped. The tapes will not be used except for analytical purposes so that I can more carefully evaluate the results. Your identity will be kept confidential.

The session will last between one and two hours. Are you ready? Okay.

Basic Demographic Information:

Please state your name:

Where you live:

Age:

What is your race?

What is your partner's race?

Did you adopt your child from Vietnam?

Where in Vietnam?

Province/City:

Family Identity:

Describe how your family came to the decision to adopt a Vietnamese child?

What specifically interested you about Vietnam?

What other countries did you consider adopting from?

Did you talk with your spouse about the fact that you were adopting transracially?

If yes, what kinds of things did you talk about?

What conclusions did you reach about your adoption choice?

How do you communicate or discuss your decision to adopt with your child?

With other family members? Strangers?

How do you decide how much information to share about your adoption and when to share it?

With your child? Other family members? Strangers?

How do you communicate your child's adoption story to them?

Other family members? Friends? Strangers?

How does the complexity of the adoption story you tell your child change over time/with their age? Explain how the story changes or will change over time.

How much do you weave your adopted child's heritage into your life?

Celebrations? Holidays? Food? Religion?

What is a blended family?

What does being a blended family mean to you?

How did your ideas about what it means to be a family change after you adopted your

child?

How did you construct a new family identity as a blended family?

Dialectical Tensions:

Expression/Privacy:

How do you manage the desire to be open and forth-coming with details about your adoption versus the desire to keep details private?

When you share more information about your adoption, do you feel more connected to that person?

How do you feel revealing private details (private facts about your baby or adoption) about your adoption?

Does it make you feel vulnerable? Uncomfortable?

How much do you reach out to other adoptive parents for advice or to share experiences?

How much do family or strangers offer (unwarranted) “advice”?

Integration/Separation:

How do you manage the want or need to nationalize or “Americanize” your adopted child versus keeping their culture unique, intact, or integrated into your family life?

How do you manage the desire to conform to “typical family behaviors/ideals” but also keep your family identity as an adoptive family independent?

How much do you reach out and participate in the adoptive community, as well as your family and friends versus keeping your adoption private?

Reactions to your adoption:

Think back to the time when you first decided to pursue adoption as a means to expand

your family, what were the reactions of your family, friends and others?

Think back to when you first arrived home from Vietnam with your adopted child. What was the reaction of your family to your adoption?

When in public with your child, what are some of the most positive experiences you had?

When in public with your child, what are some of the most negative experiences you had?

Who was it?

What happened?

When did it happen?

Where did it happen?

Why?

How did you react? Did you react?

What did you say?

Did you prepare for this situation beforehand and have an answer ready?

After that experience, did you prepare a response for any future experiences?

Did you experience any situations where the commenter was a family member?

How did that make you feel about your adopted child and your family's new identity as a blended family?

How do you decide how much information you are willing to share about your adoption?

With your child?

Family and friends?

Strangers?

Do you find that your boundaries regarding how much information you are willing to share change according to which group you are reacting to?

How specific are you when the comment comes in the form of a criticism?

When it is positive vs. negative?

When it comes from someone close to you vs. from a stranger?

Closing on a Positive Note:

What has been most satisfying about this process?

What advice would you give to someone thinking about adopting from Vietnam?

What advice would you give to someone about creating a blended family?

Closing Questions:

Is there anything else you would like to add about your adoption experience?

Thank you for participating in this research study. I really appreciate your time and help.

APPENDIX D: TABLE 1: CHARACTERISTICS OF PARTICIPANTS

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants*(n = 13)*

Characteristic	n	%
Age (years)		
39 - 49	10	77
50 - 58	3	23
Gender		
Male	6	46
Female	7	54
Ethnicity		
Caucasian	10	77
Asian	2	15
Caucasian/Hispanic/Asian	1	8
Year of Adoption		
2007	3	30
2008	3	30
2009	4	40
Age of Child at Adoption (months)		
6 months	3	30
7 months	1	10
8 months	1	10
11 months	1	10
12 months	2	20
15 months	1	10
22 months	1	10
Current Age of Child (years)		
1	1	10
2	3	30
3	4	40
4	2	20
Gender of Adopted Child		
Male	6	60
Female	4	40

Table 1 Continued

Biological Siblings		
Male	2	66
Female	1	33
Age of Biological Siblings (months or years)		
18 months	1	33
22 months	1	33
18 years	1	33
Adopted Siblings		
Male	1	50
Female	1	50
Age of Adopted Siblings (months or years)		
18 months	1	50
4	1	50

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