The Colour of Difference: the adoptee's experience of transracial adoption

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Introduction

This paper is a brief introduction to some of the issues which have been raised by intercountry adoptees throughout the development of the book and the establishment of the Intercountry Adoptee Support Network. Sarah will first talk about the book and some of the key theme it raises. Lynelle will then give her own personal perspective on some of the issues that the book raises.

Why a book on transracial adoption?

At PARC a young woman who had been adopted from South America was having regular sessions with a counsellor, to explore some of her feelings of sadness and confusion around her adoption. We were unable to find anything for her to read which might assist the work that she and the counsellor were doing together. We found a couple of unsatisfactory American texts and some useful local articles and research studies, but nothing that really addressed the impact of transracial adoption on the adopted self.

So, PARC decided to write something to fill the gap. We advertised, got some press interest and eventually recruited 30 adoptees who were willing to have their stories gathered and published. The resulting book, published in October 2001, brought together 27 of these stories. There were 18 intercountry adoptees and 9 local adoptees who had been adopted transracially. Of the 9 Australian-born adoptees, there were those of Aboriginal, Chinese, Maori, African, Spanish descent. The countries of origin for the 18 intercountry adoptees were Vietnam, Bangladesh, Fiji, New Zealand (Maori), Burundi, Korea, Colombia, Sri Lanka, India and Canada (North American Indian).

The aim of the book was to learn from the adoptees what the impact of their adoption has been. The public perception of intercountry adoption readily allows the community to build up assumptions about who benefits from such arrangements and gives us some information about the demand for adoption and some short-term outcomes, but we felt that there must be much more to learn from the first adult generation of adoptees.

The adoptions of those adopted from other countries and with a non-white appearance, have been a badge that they have had to wear, like it or not. The adoptees told us that their adoptive status is so 'obvious' that perfect strangers can

see it and can feel justified in commenting on it, or giving an opinion on the benefits of such an arrangement to the adoptee. Taxi drivers and people in lifts feel that they have the right to question these black or Asian adoptees on their origins; waiters in restaurants have been seen to view the adoptee separately from their family when arranging a table; passers by have congratulated the adoptive parents on the charity they have shown the 'poor orphan' by taking them into their homes. In transracial adoption there is no place to hide.

Colour blindness, racism and culture

A significant number of the adoptees referred in their stories to looking in the mirror and being surprised by the face that looked back at them; they almost expected to see a white face, reflecting the way they imagined themselves, based on their place within the family and white society. In most situations, they were, for all intents and purposes, white.

> *"My way of coping with the fact that I am a Vietnamese girl adopted into an Australian family was to ignore it. I didn't want to be different, I wanted to blend in. As a young child, my mother said I used to stand in front of the mirror hitting it and crying. I wanted to know why I looked different. As I got older, my reflection would disappoint me because it reminded me I was Vietnamese. As a teenager, I felt like a white person trapped in a Vietnamese body" (Buffy)*

Research into the development of racial awareness shows that children as young as 2 ½ are aware of racial differences, and that the development of a positive racial identity does not just *happen,* but must be cultivated. Adoptive families where 'colour blindness' was the coping strategy for dealing with the transracial adoptee's place within the family therefore may be said to have compounded the adoptee's difficulty in developing a positive self-image. In these families, the transracially adopted child may well have been loved and accepted, but their difference was not acknowledged or named, and therefore it was impossible to build a positive self-image which included their racial identity. A self-image which excluded their racial identity was, of course, incomplete and unlikely to promote a healthy self awareness. It is not surprising that many transracial adoptees report a negative view of their own colour and culture, and that this is difficult to challenge and break free of.

As a group, the adoptees talked of the frustration they all seemed to have experienced at some time at having little or no awareness or knowledge of their birth culture. For some, this led to feelings of fear or awe towards their race. For others, it resulted in feelings of embarrassment or shame. They were almost all able to recount situations where it has been assumed that they would know the language, or some history, or some cultural nuance, which in fact they were ignorant of. Some of the adoptees managed to deal with these situations with humour and an open explanation of their situation. The less robust indviduals, however, allowed their experiences of coming across people from their birth culture to further influence their negative sense of self.

Racism was experienced, to some degree, by most of the adoptees and the way it was dealt with depended very much on the adoptee's resources within their family and the degree to which such delicate issues could be openly discussed. For those unable to talk about it, or where the power of the racism had gone unrecognised, the experience of racism was traumatic and, ultimately, damaging to the essence of their self esteem. The fragile sense of self described by adoptees generally is perhaps further compounded by cultural difference and, for many, racism is experienced as

truth; the verbal attacks and rejection experienced in childhood damages their ability to develop a love of self. Several of the participants have feelings of dislike, bordering on racism, towards their own race. Their own appearance, at odds with the way they imagine themselves to be, becomes a focus for their own distaste and self-loathing.

For some adoptees, their ignorance of their birth culture, coupled with the racism they may have experienced, created a overwhelming argument for turning their back on anything linked to their adoption or to their birth culture.

Gratefulness

Almost all adoptees talk about gratefulness in some shape or form. Transracial or intercountry adoption, however, seems to add even more pressure to the fragile balance in adoptive families. The degree to which the adoptees felt indebted to their adoptive parents depended on the circumstances of their adoption as much as on any pressure put on them by their family. Those in unhappier adoptions had often been made to feel grateful by being reminded of what their fate would have been had they not been 'saved' by adoption. These adoptions were predominately from overseas, with all the common perceptions about poverty and third world countries coming into play. Many of the adoptees said that their families would probably be unaware of the degree to which they felt grateful.

Abuse

Of the 28 adoptees, 5 disclosed some sort of abuse at the hands of a member or members of their adoptive family. This includes emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse and neglect. For these hurt and damaged adoptees, the question of why their family adopted them and why they were not protected naturally occurs. Again, he book gives us the opportunity to talk about what happens when things go wrong and has been a tool through which adoption agencies can raise these difficult issues with prospective and current adoptive families. From our, largely anecdotal, evidence from intercountry adoptees, the incidence of abuse amongst this group is high; too high for comfort.

Adoptive parents – gestures and choices

The adoptees writing in the book had broadly been raised in loving families and by parents who worked hard to understand and accommodate their child's needs. Our thinking on what is 'good enough' in transracial adoption has changed a great deal in the past 30 years. In the 1970's, accepting a child into the family and treating them as if they were no different was seen as adequate. Now, we ask a great deal more. We ask this, however, with reason, learning what we have from adoptees who were raised in families where little accommodation for their needs or difference was made.

The make-up of families seems to also have an impact, with children in families where there are others from their birth culture fairing better than where there were not, and children being raised in a family where the other siblings are all natural to the family faired less well.

The largest single factor in whether a transracial adoption is viewed as positive by the adoptee appears to be the adoptive family's attitude to the child's race and their commitment to maintaining a positive sense of the child's racial identity. This cannot be manufactured; it must be real. The adoptees whose parents made a 'token' gesture towards embracing their birth culture were not assisted to a positive sense of racial identity. This was only achieved in families who truly adopted the child's culture

when they adopted the child, and made continuous efforts to develop the child's pride in their race and in their appearance. These families were able to talk about the differences between the child and the other family members in a positive way. They were able to talk about the adoption and the possibility of future contact with the birth family. The birth family were real people with a real place in the child's past and present life.

It is true that an average Australian cannot teach the key elements of the child's birth culture, but what the adoptive parents can teach, through making ongoing efforts to include meaningful elements of the child's original culture in their family, is a sense of pride and acceptance which clearly contributes to the creation of a positive self-image which incorporates a positive racial identity.

Adoptive parents can also make choices about where and how they raise their children, and this was something raised many times by the adoptees. The factor of whether the adoptee's upbringing occurred in regional or metropolitan Australia seems to have been extraordinarily significant. Those who had been brought up in country areas, where there were no other people of colour, felt that they had been disadvantaged and discriminated against. The multicultural climate of Sydney and Melbourne allowed for a degree of anonymity and, whilst it may not have helped them develop a true cultural awareness, it at least protected them from the particular isolation of being the only non-white person in the community.

Lynelle

Context of own adoption experience

I was adopted into an Anglo-Saxon family at the age of 6 months. I don't have a birth date, I don't know where in Vietnam I was born – if at all. I have a Vietnamese name but have no idea who gave it to me. I don't know if I am Vietnamese. I only know that I had no parents, no history, no start, and my life history begins from when I was adopted.

My adoptive family has 4 natural birth children of which I am in the middle. Initially, my mum thought she couldn't have any more children after her first. Seeing the horror pictures of the Vietnam war and hearing the stories of thousands of babies dying in orphanages as portrayed by the media at that time, she began the process of adopting a baby from Vietnam. During this time, she fell pregnant with my sister who is just over a year older than myself. Continuing on with the adoption, my father flew to Saigon in 1973 to bring me back to Australia. I was then raised in rural Victoria until the age of 19, thereafter I moved to Sydney and have lived in the suburbs ever since.

I was the only adopted child within the larger context of my extended family and had no real contact with non-Anglo-Saxons until I left Victoria to come to Sydney. My adopted parents were given little advice on how to raise a healthy well-adjusted adoptee. Little was known about the issue even for social workers or psychologists and in the context of a guerilla war, social acceptance of inter-country adoption did little to warn of the potential issues that adopted children would experience. My adoptive parents were so intent on treating me as if I was one of them that my differences were never openly discussed.

I always knew I was adopted because of my looks. I hated having photographs taken of me as it was confronting to see the obvious – that I didn't really belong. I

knew that I looked different and wasn't there by birth but yet I was never encouraged to talk about it because people around me weren't aware enough to know to ask or acknowledge these feelings.

I grew up in schools in where, apart from a few Aboriginals at one public high school that I attended, I was the only non-white person. My family also had no exposure to anything Asian in culture – we never ate at a Chinese restaurant, we knew nothing of Chinese New Year, we never discussed Asian cultures or languages at home, and we certainly knew nothing about Vietnam. I grew up hearing racist comments expressed within my own family and whenever I questioned it, I was told, "but we don't mean you". This always confused me as the comments were often negative – for example, about how the "Asians were taking over Australia", etc. So I grew up getting the impression that Asians were to be feared, they were inferior because they weren't white. Hence due to me "looking" Asian - I felt torn. I was Australian in culture and thought, but Asian in looks and I didn't feel like I belonged to either group. At the same time, I felt a traitor to both because I knew that as an Aussie, I was "proud" of being Aussie yet I could never "look" fully Aussie because of my Asian looks. As an Asian, I felt ashamed that I couldn't be proud of being Asian because I knew nothing about Asia and only "looked" it but couldn't speak it or "be" it.

Impact of adoption & how this has changed

For the first 23 years – I didn't really think about adoption and didn't correlate it with the problems I was experiencing. I had all these confused ideas and feelings but never really linked it to being a result of being adopted. I just thought it was because of me – that I was some weirdo who couldn't get it together - that something must have been wrong with me in the first place to cause me to become adopted and was the reason why I felt so badly about myself. As a result, I suffered low self esteem, feelings of extreme isolation, unable to relate to anyone, feelings of sadness and depression and not knowing why, feelings of inferiority and ugliness because I wasn't white, feelings of having to be grateful even though I'd never had a choice in my beginnings or my adoption, feeling that I wasn't good, and feeling that I couldn't connect to anyone because I was scarred they'd find out how awful I felt. I also suffered in my family because even though I was meant to be "one of them", little things like sibling favoritism and expectations of working harder than others constantly reminded me that I didn't belong by birth. I also didn't feel I had anyone to trust to talk to - who would allow me to express my feelings without casting a judgement of being "ungrateful".

Six years later, the impact of adoption has changed as a result of moving away from my family, dealing with the negative consequences of my adoption, and spending time with counsellors and friends who allowed me to slowly voice the feelings I'd bottled up inside for 23 years. Following on from this, I turned the energy from anger and sadness into something constructive – establishing and providing a network for other inter-country adoptees within Australia.

The main turning point to change how I felt about being adopted occurred after meeting the 27 adoptees from the "Color of Difference" project. Due to this project, I met other Vietnamese people as well as other adoptees for the first time. It had such a huge impact on me – to feel that I finally found a group to "belong" to, that I wanted to give this experience to others who have struggled like myself to fit in somewhere and find their identity. Creating ICASN has been an outlet for me to reach others. Through this network I've been able to share my story and do something to make a difference for others living a similar story. I've been able to be a role-model to assist others to feel proud of their birthright. I've been able to share the pride I have in

being Vietnamese and talk of the move from being ashamed to being proud of my cultural heritage and identity.

My first trip back to Vietnam since I was adopted was also a major turning point in my life. I had been saying for years that I would return, but after meeting other Vietnamese adoptees who had returned and sharing how it impacted them, I finally found the courage to face my fears. What I really feared was the possibility of returning and having nothing change in my life. I wanted Vietnam to mean something to me. I wanted to feel connected to the country. What would I do if I didn't? Would I be able to cope with another loss? The loss of the dream that I would return and know deep within, that yes - this is where I am from.

Well, I had nothing to fear because my return trip to Vietnam resulted in me being proud of my Asianness for the first time. I finally saw that I HAD inherited certain attributes from my Asian genes - my drive, my strength of character, and my courage. My visit to the War Remembrance Memorial showed me that anyone who survived the Vietnam War had to be admired! And the changes in Vietnam and their friendliness to people who once blew their country to pieces showed me how forgiving and willing to move on these people were.

The most important experience I had was a conversation with a Vietnamese lady I met whilst cycling around the Mekong Delta region. She asked me where I was from and I explained to her about being adopted as a baby to an Australian family and how this was my first trip back. In her broken English she said something that nobody had ever voiced to me before – but which I'd felt all my life. She said, "You've missed out on so much then?" And it was so true. This lady had summed up much of what is so frustrating to an adopted person from a third world country. Many times in my life, on hearing or discussing my adoptive status - strangers, friends or family would always say that I was so lucky. Not one of them ever acknowledged what it was that I'd lost – my identity, my culture, my birth parents and family, my history, my life, my beginnings. I grew up feeling like my life was staged – it could so easily have been some other child that was adopted and not me. It felt like just pure luck. I didn't feel special like people would often say. I didn't feel lucky. I felt unlucky. I felt robbed of everything that other people take for granted.

Racial identity

I grew up feeling that I hated my race. I didn't feel proud. I felt like I was ugly simply because I was Asian. I only saw white models on TV and in magazines stating what was socially "beautiful". There were no Asian cool people. There were no Asian role-models to aspire towards. I grew up keeping away from Asian people because I didn't want to be associated with the inferior group. At the same time, I was curious to find out why Asians were so "inferior" and "undesired". Whenever I did try to mix with Asian people, they would look at me strangely and I could see they knew that I wasn't "one of them" culturally. I felt like I had nowhere to belong. I didn't know what racial identity I was supposed to have. I had grown up so "mentally white" that I was racist in my attitudes like the white people around me. This scared and confused me.

It wasn't until I dated an open-minded Australian boyfriend that I learnt to be proud of my Asianness. He accompanied me back to Vietnam and taught me how to feel positive about the Asian characteristics that I had previously thought of in a negative manner – my shortness, my black straight hair, my little nose, my flatter than white Aussie girl's chest. He also taught me how to love spicy hot foods, to want to dress in trendy Asian styles, and to see and use my Asian attributes in a positive manner. It was all this that I had lacked whilst growing up.

Negative experiences of adoption

The most negative experience of my life growing up in an adopted family was of sexual abuse. Until I dealt with the abuse and its effects through counselling, I had always thought that my abuse happened because I wasn't "blood" related. Now I know that abuse is about power and that as an adopted child, I was more vulnerable and hence more easily taken advantage of then my other siblings or cousins. The abuse had many consequences in my life which I still struggle with today – and sadly, having met many other inter-country adoptees, I've realised that abuse is a common experience amongst the inter-country adoptee population. Being adopted is difficult enough without doubling it with abuse. I believe there needs to be better psychological/emotional screening of prospective parents – to ensure they are fully aware of the dysfunctional patterns amongst their own and their extended family's relationships. Adopting a child who has started off with a traumatic experience of losing everything they know and having no identity is not the best scenario for a couple who are themselves struggling to deal with being open, honest, and real with themselves.

Two other experiences that are most often talked about amongst adoptees as being damaging to adoptees is the divorce of the adopted parents and racism.

The impact on other relationships

As a baby, I experienced the reality of losing the closest and most important person to me, my mother. Due to this being my reality, I've always had the deep fear that this type of loss will occur again – it is a possibility because it happened once before. Hence, I've found it difficult to really trust and be close to others – and my abuse compounded this impact on me.

I've also felt that I always had to prove I was worthy enough to be loved – leading to my constant over-achieving and drive to always improve. This has made it difficult to have relationships because I can't relax and I haven't been able to feel loveable for just being me.

The other impact was that I because I felt totally isolated in such a huge world, I became extremely self sufficient but to the point where I didn't need anybody. Over time, I've learnt that these protection mechanisms actually cause me to shut people out of my life – and I'm learning now how to use newer and more effective methods of protecting myself without adversely affecting my ability to have close and healthy relationships.

Rural adoptions

I believe much of my isolation and feeling I had no-one to identify with was due to being raised in a rural region. I was always the only ethnic-looking person in my school, church, and social circle. People were always asking questions or assuming I didn't belong to my family when we were out together. I got tired of constantly being told I was so "lucky" or being picked out in the family as the "different" one. After meeting other inter-country adoptees who were raised in city areas where most had no problems feeling accepted for looking different – I believe that adoption is made easier when it is in the environment where multiculturalism and difference are better accepted. Rural Australia is slowly catching up with the rest of Australia in terms of ethnicity and multiculturalism – but we mustn't forget that 30 years ago, Australia had

a "White-Australian policy". Without doubt, change occurs – but slower in some places than others.

A community of adoptees

Finding a community that I belonged to, who knew exactly what I meant when I talked of feeling different, hating how I looked, feeling lost, etc, has made a big impact on my life. My adoptive family could not meet every need I had as an adoptee. Reaching out to a community of people who share a similar experience to myself has been key to my growth and establishing a healthy identity. Since establishing the adoptive network, I've seen that in this environment where it's okay to express anything – negative or positive about adoption – adoptees are given the space to grow and move though the difficulties. As a young adoptee, I was too afraid of expressing the negatives because I felt I had to protect my adoptive parent's feelings otherwise I would be thought of as appearing "ungrateful".

Through the community I've created, I've also been able to be a role-model to others. I encourage them to try, to continue to move, to heal from their pasts, and to reach back to our adoptive parents who have without doubt, given us so much, and have helped mould who we are today.

There is a definite need for a community of adoptees - to support one another. It is in this community that we share experiences - going back to our birth countries for the first time; how it feels being torn between our adoptive families and our new found birth families; the frustration of never being able to search because we have no known birth date/place/ parents; the pain caused by being abused and being hurt by the people who were meant to protect us. It is in this community that a person says "yes I know what you mean" – and we know they really do.

For more information on the community of adoptees that Lynelle has established called the Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network (ICASN), see www.icasn.org/

To contact the Post Adoption Resource Centre:

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