

## Mothers and Daughters Finding Each Other Through Intercountry Adoption

*Through a process of self-inquiry and narrative analysis this paper highlights the experiences of five mothers who adopted girls from China. Results from these narratives are discussed as a way to begin to understand the emotional process of intercountry adoption for both the children and the mothers. Commonalities and differences in the experiences of the adoptive mothers are delineated. Using the results from the narratives and relevant research, this paper delineates emerging themes showing how adoptive mothers often need to forge a new identity that entails a great deal of personal growth and reflection. Discussion arising from the emerging themes found in the narratives uses current resilience literature as well as Feminist perspectives to highlight how resilience plays an important part in both the adoptive mother's ability to adapt as well as the way in which children find new ways to assimilate to their new environment. The strength of the emotional attachment between the mother and child as well as becoming a multi-cultural family were integral protective factors leading towards building resilience. Resilience in both the adoptive mother and child is necessary in order for the new family unit to become a healthy, thriving and creative extension of the community. In addition, women's relational approach to personal and professional roles provided a secure family structure for these children.*

Intercountry adoption is currently a topic of conversation at the coffee shop or in the media, due to “celebrities” now adopting children from other countries. It is also a way of parents finding children to adopt, as it has been increasingly hard to adopt children from within North America. Ironically, this is in part due to stricter regulations regarding adopting children of the same ethnic group or culture, although adopting from another country generally means bringing a child into a family from a different culture.

Due to the increasing interest in both the process and outcome of intercountry adoption, this paper examines the way in which mothers and daughters can become emotionally connected through this course of action. Through qualitative research completed with mothers that adopted girls from China, protective factors linking the strength of the emotional attachment between the mother and child to resiliency were discovered. Using the data gained through narratives, themes and clusters of themes were found that guided an understanding of how the data related to the issue of resilience. In particular two main topics or themes were found and a paradigm was developed to depict the relationship between these themes and resilience. The first main topic discovered was “Emotional Attachment.” Within this broad theme the sub-topics of “Becoming a mother,” “Family restructuring,” and “Caregiving” were found to be integral in supporting the positive emotional attachment of the mother and child. The second theme of becoming a “Multi-cultural family” had “Cultural identity” as a sub-topic and was also seen as a way in which the child could assimilate in a positive manner to her new environment.

Information from the literature on resilience as well as issues connected to caregiving and gender will be discussed as ways to understand how the emotional attachment between the mother and child progresses in these families. As well, the relational approach to personal and professional lives used by these mothers was found to play an important part in how well the children adapted to their new environment. This sense of cohesion within the family unit will be examined in conjunction with issues pertaining to protective factors and building resilience.

## **Background**

In Canada from 1993 to 2003 approximately 19,500 children entered Canada for the purposes of adoption (CIC, 2004). Currently about 2000 children are adopted by Canadian citizens and permanent residents of Canada from other countries ever year (CIC, 2006). In the United States intercountry adoption has been in place since the 1950's. However there has been a dramatic increase of intercountry adoptions beginning in the 1990's (Stolley, 1993). While only a small portion of children in North America become part of our society in this way, children who are adopted from other countries often present unique challenges as well as exciting opportunities for growth in our society.

Research in the area of intercountry adoptions is a relatively new field of study in North America. Due to the increasing interest in intercountry adoptions, scholars are suggesting a need to understand the issues of attachment, acculturation, racism, and resilience of children adopted from other countries. For example, Emily Noonan (2007) states that “the practice of transnational adoption needs to be analyzed for the ways it is embedded in the globalization of capital, people, cultures, and ideologies” (651). Other authors attempt to

examine the sociohistorical circumstances and inequities that make intercountry adoption possible (Dorow, 2006). Drucilla Cornell (2007) writes about the need to honor and recognize the rights of the biological mother. However, when the child is an orphan, as they are when they come from China, there is no information available on the biological parents. Therefore, we do not have any written documentation to give to the child about her birth mother. This does not preclude us, as mothers, from honoring the child's biological mother in the form of storytelling or finding other ways of helping the child understand the importance of this "other" mother.

From a less macro perspective, Sonya Corbin Dwyer and Lynn Gidluck (2007) have recently completed research in the area of mothering children adopted from China. Some of their results show the paradoxes inherent in North American's understanding of mothering a child from a different culture and country. For example, through their research they found that many mothers had not considered how the differences in ethnicity between them and their daughters would impact on their daily lives.

## **Resilience**

Over the past few decades the study of resilience, often defined as the ability to successfully adapt to a crisis or "bounce back from adversity," has propelled researchers into considering which characteristics or attributes of children allow them to adapt to new situations. Anne Masten (2001) suggests that resilience is common and usually arises from the normative functions of human adaptational systems (227). Protective factors in a person's environment help to ameliorate stressful life events. Roberta Greene (2002) suggests three primary characteristics associated with protective factors. They are: "(1) personal disposition, i.e., positive temperament, social responsiveness, ability, and self-esteem; (2) a supportive family milieu, including warmth and cohesion; and (3) an extrafamilial social environment that rewards competence and reinforces belief systems" (34). Another approach to understanding resilience is seen through the work of Froma Walsh (1998, 2002). She has suggested a family resilience framework. The term "family resilience refers to coping and adaptational processes in the family as a functional unit" (Walsh, 1998: 14). Within the family resilience model, it is family processes that predict resiliency, i.e., family belief systems, organizational patterns, and communication processes.

Questions about the normative functions in intercountry adoptive families and how families restructure and adapt to change can help to inform our understanding of mother-daughter attachment and how it is connected to resilience. Identifying specific protective factors for families can lead to a better understanding of how to "build resilience" in these families. More research is needed to explore the ways in which children from other countries connect with their new mothers as well as how these attachments allow the children to exhibit resilient characteristics. Understanding attributes and precursors

of resiliency provides policy makers with information to institute programs and resources needed in order to build resilience in children and other family members. Results from research in this area can also inform potential and current mothers of how to help establish positive and sustaining relationships with their daughters.

### **The research process**

As a mother of a child from China and a scholar interested in the area of resilience, I engaged in a self-inquiry in an attempt to understand issues associated with mothering a child from a different country. Following Adra Cole and J. Gary Knowles (2000) work, I believe that reflexive self-inquiry makes a significant contribution to knowledge creation, in that it provides an avenue from which a researcher can analyze his/her own experience within the context of society's interlocking structures of power, gender, race and class. Further, by placing myself in the position of a research participant, the hierarchical relationship is reduced that often exists between researchers and those researched, as well as providing a way for the participants to become more empowered (Kirby and McKenna, 2006; Rubin and Rubin, 1995). Thus, I participated in this study by completing my own narrative. Four other mothers of children from China were also asked to be part of this study. They all live with their daughters in various provinces in Canada. Some of them are single parents and others have partners that are also parents to these children. All of the mothers were over thirty years of age as this is one of the requirements for adopting from China. In this sample, all of the mothers were over forty years of age when they wrote an account of their experiences. All of their children were under ten years of age.

I passed on my self-inquiry to these other mothers a way of introducing some of the issues and ideas that had emerged from my experiences. Through their self-inquiries they wrote their accounts of how their lives had changed due to the advent of their daughters. They were asked to comment on various issues of mothering including: caregiving, economic issues, social support networks, cross-cultural implications, and family restructuring. Through their narratives they discussed all of these issues as well as highlighting the emotional components of becoming a mother and the complexities inherent in this form of mothering.

### **Results**

The following themes that emerged from the data provide a way to begin to understand how resilience in family members is linked to both emotional attachment and becoming a multi-cultural family. Figure I on the following page shows how the themes are interrelated as well as related to resiliency through a paradigm. The following descriptions of the themes highlighted through narratives of the mothers demonstrate the way in which these mothers and children have found ways to adapt and become resilient. These two main

themes or categories are “Emotional Attachment” and “Becoming a Multi-cultural Family.” Sub-topics within each main category are used to further understand the strength of these themes.

### **Emotional attachment**

Although the mothers discussed various themes suggested to them, they gravitated to particular issues that had been challenging, rewarding or that dominated their journey. One recurring theme was the intensity of the relationships between the mothers and daughters, the emotional attachment between the mother and child. As well, issues associated with “Becoming a Mother,” “Family Restructuring” and “Caregiving” were related to the idea of mothers and daughters becoming attached emotionally to one another. While emotional attachment is often discussed in conjunction with motherhood, mothers who adopt often seem unprepared for the intensity of the reciprocal emotional attachment between themselves and their daughters. This is exemplified through many of the mother’s narratives. One mother wrote, “*I can’t believe how much I have come to adore my daughter. She is also very attached to me. I call her my ‘velcro child’ as she is never far from me when we are together.*” Another mother simply wrote, “*Our daughter is clearly as madly in love with us as we are with her.*”

### **Becoming a mother**

It became apparent that the decision to become a mother was often associated with the decision to adopt a child from another country. One of the mothers wrote, “*After much soul searching my husband and I realized we do not live in a perfect world. Therefore, the question to adopt from China became less about the legitimacy of cross-racial adoptions than about filling needs, both ours and hers.*” Other mothers discussed the issue of infertility and how they had struggled with that issue. Yet other mothers were single and did not have the option of becoming a biological parent. Adoption was an alternative for all of these women. Intercountry adoption seemed to be a faster way to locate a child as the wait lists for provincial adoptions are often long, some of them having a ten-year waiting list. To illustrate this point one woman wrote, “*My decision to adopt a child from China was based partially on wanting a girl and partially on knowing that I was too old to be eligible to receive a child from Canada due to wait-lists.*”

One of the mothers made her decision to become a mother at later in her life based partially on a past experience visiting China. She stated,

*I chose China as an adoptive country for several reasons. I traveled there in 1987 and visited an orphanage as part of a tour package. The stark conditions and over-crowding made a lasting impression on me. I really felt my maternal instincts emerge and since then have felt a special bond with children of Chinese heritage.*

## Family restructuring

Many of the mothers commented on how drastically their lives had changed with the advent of their daughter. They expressed feelings of surprise, joy, exhaustion, and thankfulness in how much their daughter had changed their family structure. The following two examples from the narratives show how their family has been restructured with many family members benefiting from this new structure.

One of the mother's wrote,

*My daughter's presence has brought a new dimension to the relationship between my partner, his children, his father and his sister and I, as well as to their own relationships. My daughter is a combination daughter/granddaughter and is the only grandchild in the extended family structure.*

Another mother wrote,

*As is the case with most parents of young children, the time my husband and I have for each other has changed dramatically. However, our marriage has not been strained by the demands of childrearing: the addition of a child has enriched our lives together more than we possibly could have anticipated.*

Many of the mothers spoke about some of the changes in lifestyle and the additional monetary costs of caring for an additional person in the household. While they did not see it as a burden, they did see monetary issues as needing to be addressed within the restructuring of the family unit. For example, one mother has been able to be a "stay at home mom" since the adoption of her daughter. Another has changed her lifestyle to enable her to work part-time along with spending more time working from her home. Yet another mother took on various part-time employment opportunities in order to incorporate her daughter's schedule of child-care. While these changes are not unique to intercountry adoption, they do suggest that the mothers have prepared themselves for a dramatic shift in lifestyle in order to ensure their daughters have a feeling of security within the family unit by being able to spend more time with them.

## Caregiving

While some of the issues of caregiving have been implicit while discussing the other themes, i.e., mothers changing their work schedules to incorporate caring for their daughter, this issue was discussed at some length by some of the mothers. Many of the mothers have taken on the primary role in caregiving, even if another parent was part of the family structure. For example, one of the mothers said, "Even though I now have a full-time job, as does my husband, I still have the majority of the caregiving responsibilities, i.e., making decisions about

*our daughter's childcare, buying clothes, ensuring doctor's appointments are made.*" Another mother wrote, *"While it is obvious that my daughter and her father have a positive relationship, I still provide the majority of the caregiving to my daughter."* As well, as two of the mothers were single parents, they were the sole providers of both the emotional and physical care for their daughters. The single parents were more apt to talk about their social support networks and how important they were in helping them with specific tasks. They often used more childcare resources and/or family support systems. Support systems were discussed only briefly by these mothers. Many of them did not have many extended family members living in the same vicinity. Others talked about creating new networks for themselves and their children by becoming involved with the Chinese community or other parents who had also adopted from China. The mothers who needed to work outside the home, either on a full-time or part-time basis discussed using more formal support networks, e.g., home daycare or pre-school alternatives.

### **Multi-cultural family**

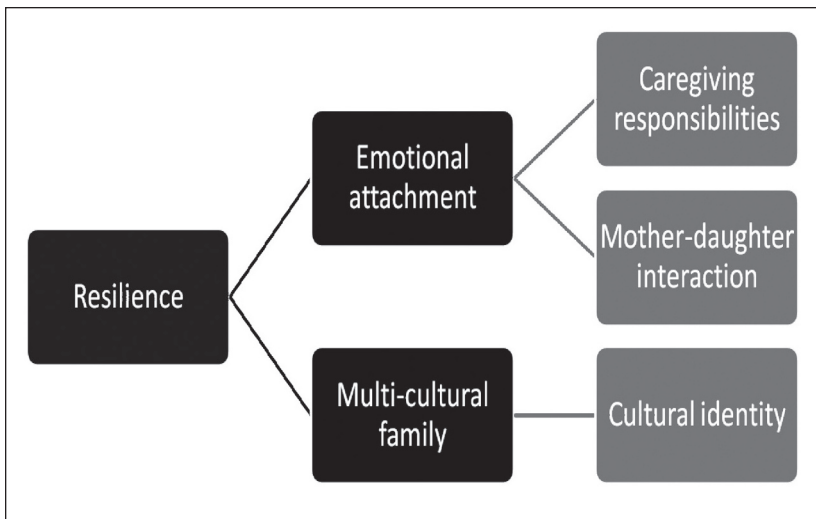
Becoming a multi-cultural family was another major topic found through the analysis of the data. The way in which the family adapts to the addition of a child from another country was seen through the ways the parents incorporated the child's biological cultural identity. The ability of the family to restructure itself around a different culture appears to have a high impact on how well the child can adapt to a new culture. This is a protective factor and builds resilience in the child as well as within the new family structure.

### **Cultural identity**

All of the women discussed how important it was for them to find ways to have their daughters exposed to as well as be part of their culture of origin. This included taking them to play groups in which other adopted children from China were present, having the child take Mandarin lessons or ensuring the entire family took part in Chinese holidays or other cultural celebrations. The mothers disclosed some positive experiences for the children as well as some challenges they felt their children had to overcome with respect to cultural integration. For example, one mother stated, *"It is very clear that our daughter loves being in Mandarin language classes and fully understands the differences in appearances between Chinese people and others. She does not put any values on these differences, but simply sees them as differences."* Another mother stated, *"Although we have not encountered any overt discrimination, my daughter has said she feels, 'different' from her classmates. She seems to sense that some of her peers would rather not spend time with her and thinks it is because she is different."*

### **Discussion**

Figure 1 shows the pathway in which resilience can grow. As is depicted in this paradigm resiliency is a bi-lateral process that flows from the intensity



*Figure 1: Paradigm  
Promoting Resilience through Mother-Child Attachment*

of the emotional attachment that is tied to the level of the mother-daughter interaction and grows from the caregiving responsibilities of the mother. From a feminist perspective, caregiving needs to be addressed due to the way in which society perceives it as being a woman's job. For example, Nancy Hooyman and Judith Gonyea (1995) indicate that society identifies caregiving as a women's issue, and in doing so overlooks the fact that it is a social problem. In these women's narratives caregiving was seen as a way to help the family adapt, restructure and to promote the changes needed in order for their daughters to feel secure. Building on a feminist perspective, questions need to be asked with respect to why these mothers took on the majority of this role and responsibility. For example, could the fathers have taken on a larger role to ensure the attachment of the child was in place through providing more of the caregiving? Was it just assumed that the mother would carry out the larger caregiving role due to decreased outside work demands? Further, does the resilience of the child and new family structure depend on the mother assuming the larger caregiving and emotional nurturance role?

The other aspect of this paradigm shows how the resilience of the child can be tied to the family becoming a multi-cultural family. As families incorporate cultural elements into their day-to-day lives, this allows the child to tap into external resources, such as the local Chinese community or Chinese cultural centre, in order to exhibit resilient attributes of self-esteem and self-efficacy. Allowing the child a way to embrace part of her heritage also helps her find ways to use protective factors and build her resilience.

In order to gain a better understanding of the interrelationships of the above-mentioned themes, information from the work of Pauline Boss (2002)



was examined. Part of her approach suggests that we need to highlight the importance of perception and meaning in determining how and why families respond in a resilient manner. Using this contextual approach we can see how resilience, or the ability to adapt to a new situation, is part of how these families live. An example is again pulled from the narratives of the mothers. Due to prior home studies needed to complete the intercountry adoption process, these mothers had to articulate how and why they wanted to adopt a child from a different country. This allowed for introspection and a way to begin highlighting issues that needed to be addressed in order to incorporate a child from another culture into their current family structure. As an example, one mother stated, "In retrospect we have come to appreciate just how valuable was the reflection asked of us by our social worker as to what kind of parents we wanted to be and what our chief aspirations for our daughter were." In other words, resilience can be viewed, as suggested by Boss (2002), as a process that implies growth, as well as being stronger for having had the experience (4). These families have all adapted to their new family situation by finding and creating new problem solving and coping mechanisms. Evidence of this is seen through the writings of these mothers. They all discuss the exciting process of going to China, meeting their daughters, and then growing stronger as a family unit by finding solutions for many of the challenges of parenting a child from a different country. Although issues of attachment and caregiving are identified as needing more attention due to the developmental needs of an older infant or child, these mothers all found ways of overcoming these challenges. Many of them did so by changing their own lifestyles and career directions in order to spend more time with their daughters that in turn, allowed their daughters to feel more secure in their new environment. As well, all of these mothers have attempted to incorporate their daughter's original culture into the dominant family structure, thereby creating a multi-cultural family. As one mother explained, "*Although we created a cross-cultural family when we picked up our daughter from China, as we began to identify and incorporate Chinese traditions, occasions and language into our lives, we now see ourselves as a multi-cultural family.*"

### **Implications**

Due to the increased interest in intercountry adoptions this topic is fast becoming an area of scholarly and personal interest. Although the information obtained from the mother's narratives only represents a small sample of those who have adopted from other countries, it provides us with a starting point for those interested in the emotional processes of various family members involved in intercountry adoption.

The relational approach to personal and professional lives used by these mothers appears to be integral to building resilience in both the child and the family unit. How these mothers were able to strengthen both their informal and formal support networks, as well as changing their lifestyles, allowed

them to find ways of providing time for their daughters to feel secure. In other words they provided a sense of cohesion to their family unit, which has been shown to be tied to adaptive functioning and resiliency. It is also interesting to note that all of these mothers were mature women, well-educated, and able to adapt and cope with new situations. These qualities helped them to understand their daughter's needs as well as providing a secure and positive home environment.

This study has shown that through intercountry adoption mothers and daughters find each other, as well as falling madly in love with each other. The emotional experiences of both the mother and daughter appear to be fascinating and exhilarating. As one mother stated,

*I love my child more than I ever thought possible to love anyone and I know that my daughter loves me just as much." But it didn't start that way. When we first met each other in China, she couldn't stop crying and didn't want to have anything to do with me for two days. I wasn't sure if I had done the right thing by going to China and taking her away from her foster parent. Who could have imagined how drastically feelings can change?*

The other side of this issue is how the child will understand issues associated with her "other" mother as she grows older and begins to have questions about her birth family and why she was taken to a different country. Information gained from this study may help us as mothers of these children. We know that "building resilience" and maintaining a cohesive family unit can help our daughters feel secure, loved and able to adapt to new situations as well as stressful life events. In this case part of building resilience for our children means giving them access to Chinese culture and community, building their self-esteem and self-efficacy, and finding ways to enhance both their internal and external resources. Building resilience as a family unit means communicating openly about the intercountry adoption process as well as honoring the "other" mother through discussions and storytelling.

As is seen through the self-inquires of the mothers involved in this study, children adopted from other countries can do well in terms of attachment, adaptation and feeling loved and secure, if the mother builds on protective factors that allow the child and other family members to exhibit resilient behavior. While this study only begins to examine how themes emerging from the narratives are interconnected, it provides some insights into how connected these mothers become to their daughters and why they feel they have "found each other."

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