

(RE)CONSTRUCTING THE PAST: THE ROLE OF MEMORY AND IMAGINATION AMONG TRANSNATIONALLY ADOPTED CHILDREN AND THEIR ADOPTIVE PARENTS

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I discuss the outcomes of research conducted with transnationally adopted children between the ages of eight and 14, adopted from seven countries. I also interviewed one or both of their adoptive parents. My findings demonstrate the role that parents play in archiving and constructing their child's past. While most children rely on their parents for their biographical information, two children I interviewed who were adopted at significantly older ages often relied on their own recollections and knowledge of their lives. Their memories and selectivity in sharing this information enables them to become purveyors of knowledge, rather than their parents.

My understanding of memory is based on anthropologist Jon Holtzman's definition as "the subjective ways that the past is recalled, memorialized, and used to construct the present" (Holtzman 2006:363). This includes "a broad array of disparate processes" such as "how a sense of historicity shapes social pro-

cesses and meanings, nostalgia for a real or imagined past, and invented traditions” (Holtzman 2006:363). In the introduction to *Tense Past: Cultural Essays in Trauma and Memory*, Paul Antze and Michael Lambek suggest an approach that conceptualizes “memory as practice, not as a pregiven object of our gaze but as the act of gazing and the objects it generates. Memories are produced out of experience and, in turn, reshape it. This implies that memory is intrinsically linked to identity” (1996:xii). As will be further discussed, memories within adoptive families are valuable and contested domains of knowledge shaped by hierarchical relationships children have with their parents and other significant people in their lives.

Parents of transnationally adopted children often become the primary managers of their children’s histories and identities, selectively providing their children with information about their past and choosing what aspects of the birth country and culture their children are exposed to. Françoise-Romaine Ouellette (Ouellette and Belleau 2001:27) argues that parents tend to limit children’s knowledge of their origins as a way of managing difference within the family. She suggests that children’s histories are often limited to an archive of photographs, souvenirs and stories kept by their parents. Conversely, Toby-Alice Volkman argues that “parents seek ways of ‘activating’ the archive” rather than limiting it (2003:44). She suggests parents are genuinely curious and yearn for a deeper connection to their child’s past, for their own satisfaction and for their children. Responding to Ouellette and Volkman, Sara Dorow considers application of both perspectives by questioning “which histories are archived and activated and how” (2006:213). Through her research, Dorow (2006:218-227) finds that parents assist in constructing their child’s cultural identities through varying narrative frames, differentially employing objects and practices that assist in shaping their child’s identity. On the one hand, Dorow demonstrates that some parents practice assimilation, viewing their children wholly assimilated within their adoptive context while denying that the child is different or that difference mat-

ters. Alternatively, she found some parents were more accepting of their familial diversity, celebrating their multicultural origins and plurality. Lastly, Dorow classifies some parents as practicing immersion where they believe their children should be fully immersed in their birth “culture” and embracing of their minority status. In addition to addressing the role that parents play in maintaining their child’s biographical archive, Dorow’s research highlights how parents actively manage a collection of objects and memories that assist in constructing identity and a sense of belonging for their children.

CHILDREN’S HISTORIES AND PARENTS’ NARRATIVES

Throughout my research I have examined the roles parents have in creating imaginings and memories for their transnationally adopted children about their migration and birthplaces. In 2009, as part of a larger project investigating transnationally adopted children’s experiences of migration, I interviewed ten transnationally adopted children between the ages of eight and 14, adopted from seven different countries. I also interviewed one or both of their adoptive parents.

I used a comparative approach to examine the similarities and differences between children’s perspectives and those of their parents; however children’s ideas were placed at the forefront of the research study. Throughout anthropology and within transnational adoption research, emphasis is often placed on the perspectives of adults including parents, adult adoptees, and adoption professionals while research involving children often perceives their behaviours, actions, and bodies to be measurable and quantifiable (Scheper-Hughes and Sargent 1998:14). As a result, there is very little qualitative research that frames children as knowing and informative actors. My standpoint is based on the understanding that children are “articulate commentators on the social world” (James 2007:261) and it is from this

position that I highlight children's perspectives throughout my research (see James 2007, James and James 2008, Mayall 2002).

Although many children I interviewed could not recall their lives before adoption, it became apparent to me that parents repeatedly tell them stories using souvenirs, photographs, books, and movies to narrate and illustrate their origins. For example, one family recorded their first moments meeting their daughter at the orphanage. They frequently watch the film on the anniversary of the day she joined their family. Other families created scrapbooks displaying important documents, pictures, and objects pertaining to their child's adoption. One participant, Elsa, frequently referred to the scrapbook her adoptive mother had crafted for her when talking to me about her birthplace and adoption. Elsa read me excerpts from the scrapbook, trying hard to change the wording from her mother's perspective to her own, as if to tell me the story in her words. The following excerpt is an example:

I had a Chinese mom and a Chinese dad. But they could not take care of me. They brought me to a children's home where many nice aunties gave me milk, played with me and patted me to sleep... (Elsa, 9)

She then goes on to negotiate the perspective from which she tells the story:

The paper in China said that we could adopt you – I mean you could adopt me, if we promised to take good care of me. We were so happy excited that we showed the picture to everyone. (Elsa, 9)

Elsa finds her scrapbook and her parents to be informative sources on the earliest parts of her life. Many children I interviewed often referred to sources such as this, proclaiming that they had heard or received stories from their parents. One 14-year-old participant explained to me that it was odd for him to talk about his migration because he did not have all the information. He said,

Well, it's odd because I've seen a picture of me when I was in [my birth country] with my parents and then my mom told me a story about how I was yellin' or smiling at passengers on the plane. And then, I learned a little bit about immigration. So basically what I have in my mind is a picture of me in [my birth country] and then me on a plane playing and then me teleported into some office to sign – my parents sign papers and then me teleported back to [my Canadian city] and that's pretty much it. I guess I never really thought about the blank spots, just the information that I know of. (Frankie,14)

Frankie was able to explain to me what it felt like to not know all the details of his life, labelling these as “blank spots.” Most children I spoke with attempted to fill these “blank spots” by referring me to their parents; it was common for children to tell me to ask their parents for answers to my questions because they could not remember. It became clear to me throughout the research that although I intended to focus upon children’s perspectives, these cannot be viewed in isolation to the information they gather from other people. Mom and dad become the narrators and storytellers of their children’s lives, creating and managing a dominant history that not only describes where their children came from but essentially who their children are.

However, this understanding of parent-child roles within adoptive families was challenged when I met two young participants: Ivan and Polina. A number of factors made these children quite similar to each other, but very different from the other children I spoke with. Ivan and Polina were both adopted from Russia at the ages of seven and eight, respectively, which was considerably older than most of the other children I interviewed. By being adopted as older children they had many more stories to tell about what they could *remember*, unlike other children who claimed to have few memories of their lives before being adopted.

IVAN: REMEMBERING COLD WINTERS

Ivan arrived in Canada at the age of seven. He met his adoptive parents on two occasions prior to his migration. Several months before his adoption, a language tutor helped Ivan learn English to better communicate with his adoptive parents and helped him understand his impending adoption and migration. He recalled stories about meeting his adoptive parents for the first time, going on excursions with them, and eventually coming to Canada. When I asked him to draw an image of his move to Canada, the moment that stood out for him was standing in front of his new house with his mother while his father took a picture of them to capture his moment of arrival (see Figure 1).

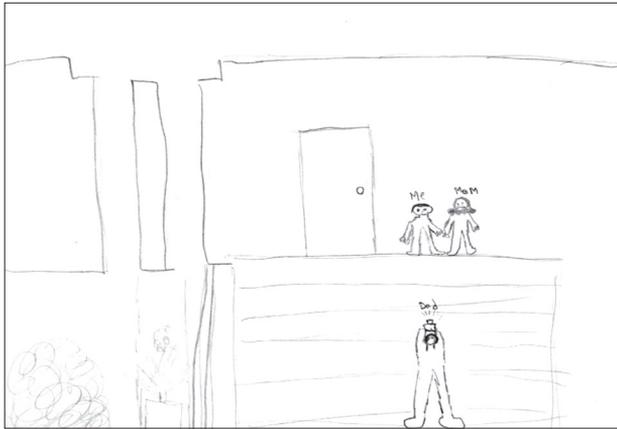


FIGURE 1:

IVAN'S (AGE 11) ILLUSTRATION OF THE DAY HE ARRIVED AT HIS FAMILY'S HOME IN BRITISH COLUMBIA.

Ivan also shared stories about his life prior to meeting his adoptive parents, which reveal a very different childhood compared to his life in Canada. He recalled enduring cold winters in Russia and playing in the snow. He remembers living with a young relative in an abandoned house that may have belonged to his absent grandparents. The children were relatively self-sufficient collecting their own food, water, and daily necessities. He

did not attend school and did not have regular adult caretakers until he was taken to the orphanage and eventually adopted into a comparatively affluent Canadian family. During my conversations with his parents, Ivan's mother reflected on stories he told her. She said,

“he tells a story about... going into a farmer's field and eating a cabbage, a raw cabbage and how wonderful that was. He'll tell stories about picking mushrooms in the woods, picking blueberries in the woods. Mostly stories like that.”

When I asked Ivan to draw an image of his birthplace, he recalled an occasion when his young relative had played a trick on him by coaxing him into a dark room and then closing the door to scare him. His illustration, shown in Figure 2, depicts this moment. He says that although he was scared at the time, it was a “good” memory because it was funny.



FIGURE 2:
IVAN'S (AGE 11) ILLUSTRATION OF A MEMORY FROM HIS BIRTHPLACE,
DEPICTING WHEN HIS RELATIVE CLOSED HIM INTO A DARK ROOM
WHILE PLAYING A JOKE ON HIM.

POLINA: REFLECTIONS ON
ORPHANAGE-LIVING

Polina was adopted from Russia at the age of eight. During the interviews, she could also recount personal details about her life prior to adoption. Not only is she aware of how different her life has become since adoption but she, like Ivan, confronted two very different experiences of childhood. She remembers residing with her biological mother who was often emotionally and physically absent, and her older biological brother who often left home only to be returned by the police when he was “caught.” She was required to be self-reliant in order to meet most of her needs. She was able to describe in great detail her life in a Russian town and could reflect on what the space was like in and around her residences. She showed me a photograph of her former home and described the details of the interior such as where her bed was placed and where people would eat and sit. She also described how she used to walk to the store, down many streets, around corners, using landmarks such as trees to identify her path.

Polina moved into an orphanage when her birth mother was no longer able to care for her. The orphanage and adjacent school became main topics during our interview conversations and when I asked her to draw her birthplace, she decided to draw images of these institutions (see Figures 3 and 4). She explained each detail of the drawings including the graffiti on the orphanage staircase and the broken glass at the foot of the tagged wall. She explained what it felt like to be in the school area which she described as “tight” due to the spatial boundaries set by fences and the surveillance of the staff and teachers.

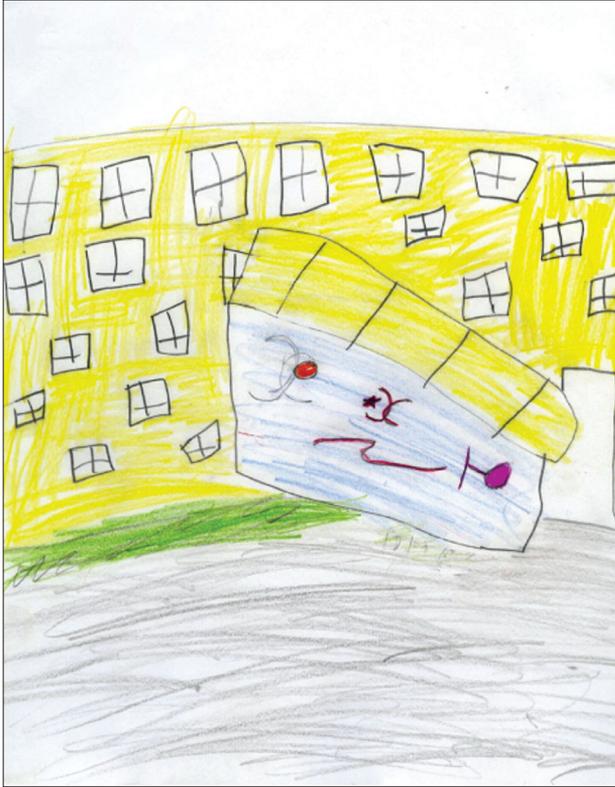


FIGURE 3:
POLINA'S (AGE 10) ILLUSTRATION OF THE ORPHANAGE WHERE SHE
LIVED IN RUSSIA. THE DRAWING PORTRAYS SPRAY-PAINTED IMAGES
ON THE STAIRCASE LEADING TO THE ENTRANCE DOOR, AND BROKEN
GLASS ON THE GROUND.



FIGURE 4:
POLINA'S (AGE 10) ILLUSTRATION OF HER SCHOOL NEAR THE
ORPHANAGE IN RUSSIA.

Polina's clear ability to narrate her experiences and memories of this place to me was demonstrative of her capacity to also inform her parents' knowledge. Her father said he tries to ask Polina about her life in Russia but she is selective with the information that she shares and does not answer all of his questions.

Polina's parents expressed some frustration over their lack of knowledge about her life in Russia. When they went to get Polina, they attempted to gather more information from the adoption facilitator, wanting, in their words "to know her history." Polina's father repeatedly asked the social worker and adoption facilitator to provide them with more information to which the facilitator would provide the simple response that Polina was "very poor." Polina's mother added that it was particularly frustrating because the adoption professionals, "talked in Russian with each other for ten minutes and then go, 'Well, she was very poor.'" Polina's parents felt as though they were missing information about their daughter's life. Polina is their key source of information, depending on what she is willing to share. This particular case study is an example of how children who are the key informants within their family have a sense of agency in choosing what to share about their past.

CONSTRUCTIONS AND CONTESTATION OF IDENTITIES

Similarly to other parents I interviewed, Polina's parents are concerned with maintaining her ethnic and cultural ties with Russia. Polina's father often attempts to speak to her with his limited Russian vocabulary, but admits that she never responds and refuses to speak in Russian. When he or anyone else refers to her as "Russian," she interjects and describes herself as "Canadian-Russian." Polina told me that she feels more Canadian than Russian "because I speak it and I forgot a little bit of Russian and I don't ever think about that I am, only if like somebody asks me." Similarly, Ivan expressed that he is uninter-

ested by his parents' attempts to draw his attention towards his Russian background. He affirms that he feels "more Canadian" than Russian "because when I was in Russia I was little and I don't remember anything but in Canada I'm older and I know, I know things, I know about it. A lot more than I knew in Russia."

Interestingly, Polina and Ivan both felt distanced from their Russian origins because they say they "forgot" or "don't remember" much about the place or having lived there. Despite the many recollections they shared with me throughout our interviews, their own perceived lack of knowledge regarding Russia but substantial knowledge about and connection to Canada enables them to feel more "Canadian" than "Russian." Both sets of parents expressed concerns that their children may be losing or forgetting their Russian origins. Like most parents I interviewed, they also try to maintain the connection by creating an archive representing their children's histories. This archive specifically reflects their ideas of a Russian ethnicity and culture. However, dynamics within Ivan and Polina's families were very different than other adoptive families I spoke with because children, rather than parents, are the primary purveyors of knowledge.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the theories developed by anthropologists explaining how adoptive parents manage and construct children's histories and identities is interesting as they demonstrate not just the role of knowledge production in adopted children's lives, but also the ways in which power dynamics shape children's experiences. Similarly to the works of Ouellette (2001, 2009), Volkman (2003, 2005) and Dorow (2006), I found that parents construct an archive of their child's cultural and biographical history by retelling their early stories through mementos, photographs, souvenirs and books. Parents often expressed that it is important for them that their children know about their origins, and feel ethnically and culturally connected to their birthplace through

archived objects and practices. Many parents acknowledged that they act as main sources of information for their children.

However, parent-child roles in narrating and negotiating knowledge are not so straightforward. A critical examination into the ways biographical information is shared within adoptive families highlights crossroads of knowledge and experience within a hierarchy of age and generation. What is revealed is an intersection between the authoritative knowledge of adoptive parents, that may leave some children wanting to know more, and the imaginative, experiential and even memorable knowledge some children maintain regarding their past. Children who primarily imagined their adoption and migration look to their parents for information. Children adopted at older ages answered my questions with greater confidence because they are able to remember earlier aspects of their childhood, which is highly encouraged and valued by their parents. However, when children are selective in the information they choose to share, parents may also be left unfulfilled and wanting to know more.

Not only was I able to examine transnational adoption from the perspectives of children, but I discovered that the age when children are adopted is an important factor in their ability to recall their past and contribute to or contest the cultural archive that is created for them by their parents. This research contributes to the understanding that memory and the past are not simply “out there,” but rather they emerge through a social process of negotiation and practice within particular contexts. This research shows that although parents actively try to maintain and create memories for their child, these memories and imaginings neither fully belong to the parents, nor the children themselves. Rather, they are a valuable and contested domain that is inseparable from the power and hierarchy within the family. Thus, parents and children selectively work together to actively manage an archive of memories through which identity and belonging are constructed

NOTES

- i. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

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