



INSIGHTS INTO THE ADOPTION PROCESS: A QUALITATIVE STUDY WITH ADOPTIVE PARENTS IN ETHEKWINI, KWAZULU-NATAL

R Groger¹, R Bhagwan^{2*}

¹Master of Health Sciences; Health Sciences; Durban University of Technology,
krgroger@gmail.com; 079 497 1678

^{2*}Faculty of Health Sciences, Durban University of Technology; bhagwanr@dut.ac.za; 031 373 2197

***Corresponding author: R Bhagwan**

*Faculty of Health Sciences, Durban University of Technology, Email: bhagwanr@dut.ac.za

Abstract

This study explored the experiences of sixteen adoptive parents, in the eThekweni region, with regards to the adoption process. A qualitative research approach, with an exploratory descriptive design, was used to guide the study. Findings revealed that the primary reasons for adopting were due to infertility issues as well as personal religious reasons. Considering that the majority of adoptable children are Black, most participants had adopted trans-racially. Participants described the myriad of challenges they encountered, and emotions experienced from completing the application forms to waiting to find out if they had been matched with a child and then meeting the child for the first time. The paper also provided a lens on the experience of the formal completion of the adoption process and thus the support participants needed. Therefore, enabling stakeholders, including social workers involved in the adoption process to collaborate better with adoptive parents.

Keywords: Adoption process, adoptive parents, trans-racial, challenges, experiences, support.

INTRODUCTION

This study explored the experiences of sixteen adoptive parents, in the eThekweni region, with regards to the adoption process. A qualitative research approach, with an exploratory descriptive design, was used to guide the study. Reviewing the context for adoptions in South Africa and the existing literature, this study has sought to fill a gap in the adoption field. It does that by exploring the myriad of challenges and experiences, including those related to trans-racial adoptions, throughout the adoption process. These insights will enable social workers involved in the adoption process to better understand what parents experience to support parents through the adoption journey.

RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to explore the psychosocial challenges prospective adoptive parents face in the eThekweni region. The research objectives were to explore the reasons why prospective adoptive parents choose adoption; to enquire about prospective parents' fears and anxieties; to explore their

experiences when they first meet their prospective adoptive child and to understand what support exists for prospective adoptive parents.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study was undertaken as the primary researcher is an adoptive parent herself. Having traversed the difficult journey during the adoption process, she saw it necessary to further explore the challenges adoptive parents face. Thus, I sought to undertake research that explored the experiences of adoptive parents during the adoption process, with the hope that this would enable social workers and other stakeholders involved in the adoption process in South Africa to be more aware of the challenges linked to adoption.

Qualitative research methodology, with an exploratory descriptive design, was used to explore adoptive parents' experience of the adoption process in the eThekweni region. Those included were adoptive parents, who had adopted between 2014–2020 and who formed part of the Durban Adoptive Families group on social media platforms, Facebook, or WhatsApp. Gatekeeper permission was attained for recruiting and interviewing participants from these private groups. Once informed consent was obtained from participants, the interviews commenced. The study was approved by the Durban University of Technology Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) number: 093/20 on 5 October 2020. The study conforms to the principles set out in the Declaration of Helsinki regarding the ethical treatment of human subjects.

As the interviews progressed, the discussions produced rich information which revealed the importance and need for these parents' experiences to be heard and for changes to be made. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews using an online platform due to COVID-19. These were then transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

BACKGROUND

The social issue

Adoption occurs when a child is permanently placed with an adult other than their biological mother. Adoption is meant to primarily serve a child who needs a permanent family. All decisions through the adoption process that lead committees to deem a child adoptable and match them to a prospective adoptive parent are based on applying the universal principle of the child's best interests⁹. According to the Children's Act 38 of 2005, one factor to be considered is "the need for a child to be brought up within a stable family environment and, where this is not possible in an environment resembling as closely as possible a caring family environment"¹⁰. The Children's Act 38 of 2005 is clear, that adoption offers this environment and is considered more favourable than foster care, as it provides a permanent placement for the child "by connecting children to other safe and nurturing family relationships intended to last a lifetime"¹⁰.

In South Africa, adoptions have become more necessary due to the number of children in child-headed households and the high rate of abandonment of children by biological parents, who have either left them to be cared for by extended family and friends or the State³. However, not all vulnerable or orphaned children have extended family or access to community care, thereby making fostering or adoption of unrelated children important¹⁴. Owing to South Africa's history, Black children were mainly affected, therefore making the adoption of unrelated children and transracial children more recurrent. Transracial adoption occurs when a child is placed with unrelated/'stranger' parents who are of a different race, ethnicity, or culture⁷. To support families through the adoption process, an understanding of their experiences and needs is paramount⁷.

The literature and gaps in the literature

In the African context, adoption is regarded as a sensitive topic with many arguments for and against adoption, due to social and cultural expectations and stigmas^{7-9,13}. Kinship care is considered standard practice in the African context in which a child is taken in by an extended family member but is not formally adopted¹³. This has been culturally favoured, and many believe

formal adoption administration is unnecessary^{6,8,11}. Thus, findings from studies exploring kinship care are different to those of the current research on the formal adoption process.

Nationally, there have been a few studies exploring parents' experiences of adoption, with transracial adoption being one of the major themes and topics in the literature^{1,6}. Many studies locally have focused on the challenges faced in transracial adoption⁴. Local researchers also explored how society, families and social workers perceived adoption, specifically transracial adoption, and the adoption process^{2,8,14}. Thus, there is a large gap in local research that explores prospective adoptive parents' experiences, the challenges they face at various stages of the adoption process, and structures for pre-adoption support services, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Theme one: Reasons for adopting

The study found that the primary motivation of participants to adopt was their desire to be a parent. This was often due to medical challenges, but secondary motivations emerged, which were to meet a need in society and because of religious reasons.

M – I didn't need to carry a child. I was more than happy to adopt. It didn't matter how I became a mom, but I wanted to become a mom.

For some participants, adoption was always something they had thought about at a personal level; for others, there was a conviction to adopt either in response to a present societal need or for religious reasons. Participants' consideration and subsequent decision to adopt appeared to occur before they started the adoption application process.

B Father - When we were still courting, we decided that adoption is something we'd...look into...B Mother - We both felt very strongly about it.

Some participants, who entered the adoption process to fulfil their need to become a parent, saw a high number of children needing a permanent family. Upon seeing this, their motivation to adopt altered to include altruism and the desire to meet a need in society.

J - There are enough children out there that need to have moms or a dad in their life...so why must I bring another child into this world?

Mokomane, Rochat and The Directorate's⁸ study in South Africa found that social responsibility was a significant reason for adoption "among [W]hite middle class families who already have children or single adults who are financially secure and choosing adoption as a route to family building". Amongst other participants, their Christian duty or religious conviction strongly contributed to the participants' decision to pursue adoption. Those Christian participants expressed the belief that God guided them to adopt. This was reflected in the following excerpt:

I - A lot of our motivation for adopting in the first place was religious, so our belief that we've been called to make a difference and specifically our family in the form of adopting...it was a strong conviction.

Furthermore, many participants said that although they could not conceive of a child through normal means, they still desired to be parents. Pursuing adoption as opposed to continuing with fertility treatments or experiencing painful losses again, was also a factor for adoption in the current study. This is reflected in the following excerpts:

M - Because of the miscarriages...I didn't want to go through that heartache again...but I knew our family wasn't complete...we so wanted another [child] to be part of our family...

To avoid the painful uncertainty that accompanied recurring miscarriages, adoption was the preferred choice in their pursuit of an additional child. Sohr-Preston et al.¹², supported this by saying that "[adoption] makes it possible for adults to become parents despite infertility".

Theme two: The journey from applying to first meeting the child

Subtheme one: The application process

Before meeting the prospective adoptee, the administrative part of the adoption process was experienced as emotionally challenging. This included gathering all the necessary paperwork and

multiple in-depth interviews with social workers and other professionals. Throughout the screening process, participants constantly worried that they would not be found to be eligible to be parents.

F Mother – It was worrying that at any step, [it may be] they can tell us that...you not good for adoption.

P – You don't want to give the wrong answer, and you don't want to say the wrong thing...you want to convince them, 'I've got this, I can do this, I know I can be a good parent'.

In discussing adoption as a path to parenthood, Sohr-Preston et al.¹² wrote, "adoption is often an arduous and unpredictable process during which prospective parents are scrutinised in a manner biological parents typically are not". Gerrand and Stevens² conducted a research study in Gauteng, which found that the eight social workers who participated in their study, agreed that assessments were necessary to ensure parents are physically healthy and psychologically ready to take on and promote the child's best interests.

After being screened and their application submitted, participants had to wait to be cleared, as fit to adopt and then be matched with a child. Participants expressed much anxiety over the waiting period. Unlike pregnancy, where one could see and feel the growth, participants had no time frame for when they could be matched with a child. Thus, they often felt impatient and frustrated at the long wait. Most participants expressed that they could not adequately prepare emotionally and physically for receiving a child, due to not knowing when they would be matched or not knowing any of the child's characteristics. Anxiety around this waiting period was described as follows:

F Mother – It was stressful in the beginning...not knowing 'Is it going to [happen] now?' It can happen in a year, two years, three years.

M – Impatience, anxiety, all of the above...it's an emotional roller coaster...we were like, 'how is this taking so long?'.

The most stressful parts of the application process were found to be two-fold; waiting to hear (i) if they were declared fit to be adoptive parents and (ii) about being matched with a prospective adoptee. Overall, the waiting period brought about a feeling of loss of control amongst participants over advancing the process and, therefore, the adoption timeframe. Rochat et al.'s¹¹ study reported, "[long] waiting periods led to descriptions of the adoptive system as being unkind, unfair and [unempathetic] to the needs of adoptive parents".

Subtheme two: Concerns related to becoming an adoptive parent

One participant described her fear of becoming an adoptive parent. She said:

K – I [feared] being a new parent because I didn't know. We started the adoption process, and I knew that's what we wanted...to be a parent, to get a baby is different...it was just hard for me in the beginning.

Most participants knew or were told by the social worker that most children who were adoptable were Black, meaning their adoptions would be transracial. Most participants expressed a willingness to continue with the adoption regardless of the race of the child. They were, however, not prepared to adopt a Black child, in terms of racial identity, cultural competence, and social stigma. Instead of worrying about what it would mean for them as parents to have a Black child, participants were concerned about how their family and society would respond to transracial adoption. Transracial adoption as a pre-adoptive stressor is seen as follows:

N – Even though we were told [repeatedly] that 'it most likely a cross-cultural [adoption], we won't find an Indian child', I was worried about...how it would be viewed in my community.

Breshears¹ argued that communities often consider adoption as a non-traditional way of forming a family. The denial of the legitimacy of adoptive families in society further adds to the stress of adoption. Hence, participants were anxious about whether their community would accept the child and family.

Another concern was the potential health, developmental and behavioural challenges that may accompany the child with whom they are matched. Participants feared that the child's history could prove challenging and that they would not know how to deal with issues that arise. Concern about

birth parents withholding information regarding the pregnancy or the child's history was another fear parents endured.

N – I was worried about the child being difficult to manage, having behavioural issues or maybe foetal alcohol syndrome or some serious disease, because we don't know the parent, or the parent could have withheld information.

Subtheme three: Getting 'the call'

Participants were both excited in anticipation of the meeting and frustrated at waiting an additional period before getting more information and meeting the child.

B Mother – Excitement, anticipation, even a little bit of panic...You don't know what you're going to get...Overwhelmed, totally overwhelmed.

E Father – We were playing all different kinds of scenarios. 'What would he be like? What kind of child is he going to be'...we were stressed...E Mother – 'Is he going to like us?...what if he doesn't love us?'...[That] was like a big thing.

Most participants were unhappy with having to wait a further period to meet their prospective child. However, this wait before the meeting brought a definite end to the waiting period they had previously been through while waiting to be matched and allowed them a chance to start preparing to become parents.

Subtheme four: First meeting with the prospective adoptive child

Most participants felt a combination of excitement and feeling overwhelmed that they would be parents after a long wait.

J – You go into your first meeting with the child...you are so excited and nervous, and you have all these emotions running through you...you've got all these pressures, [such as] it could not be [the right match as] your child.

Participants described their first interaction with the child as follows:

B Mother – I didn't want to scare her...she's real...so first I sat next to her and played with her, and she connected with me a little bit.

L – She took to my husband, and I was just too scared to go to her, but she came to me...She just came and clung to me, so that was like so nice...I didn't want to leave her.

For some participants, spending time with their adoptive child was an emotional experience. Meeting birth parents at the same time compounded this emotional experience. Those participants who met the biological parent felt empathy towards the birth mother's loss.

O – I was very emotional when I saw him. She [birth mother] gave him to us...so she was holding him, and he was asleep and then she passed him to me, so I felt horrible for her and very happy at the same time...I was very emotional because she said goodbye [to the child].

Theme three: Feeling unprepared for a child

One participant said:

K - I wasn't prepared at all...I had nothing...I wasn't prepared to be a parent...

Another said:

E Mother - We didn't have a cot...E Father – [we didn't have] a clue... E Father - People that have...conceived, there's the nine months of pregnancy, you preparing yourself for this kind of thing.

As evidenced, some participants compared their journey to pregnancy. However, pregnancy offers a more distinct timeframe, with physical indicators of the progression of the pregnancy, thereby allowing pregnant parents to prepare themselves physically and emotionally for the arrival of a baby.

Theme four: adoptive parents' experiences of support and preparedness from the social worker

The findings showed different experiences of interactions and support from the social worker. The experiences were polarised, either extremely negative or incredibly positive. Participants seemed to have had high expectations of the social worker's role in facilitating the adoption, which was often unsaid. The social workers either exceeded their expectations, which allowed participants to feel supported or did not meet their expectations, and participants felt disappointed and unsupported. Clear expectations of the social worker and parent need to be stated throughout the process to ensure a good working relationship, reducing stress for both parties.

Some of the participants experienced the social worker as being supportive. From the start, they found the social worker to be accessible and competent which helped ease their anxieties about the process and parenthood. Offering orientation sessions was also beneficial. Their support helped make the transition to parenthood less stressful. They said:

J – She [social worker] had time to answer any question...so it was really easy with her... so I was very grateful for her being on top of everything.

E Mother – The actual induction where you sit around a table with other moms and dads...It's heart-warming...it was so informative...but the actual process of that table...I loved it...E Father – Meeting other people that wanted to adopt, I think, was one of the best things for us.

N – She was counselling and telling us what to watch out for ...We had a very good social worker... [She gave] very practical advice about 'telling' [the child their story] ...child-rearing advice...and discipline.

Those who had negative experiences with the social worker found them to be unsympathetic, unhelpful in answering their questions, and did not provide adequate information to put their fears at ease or support them in the transition to adoptive parenthood. Some social workers were even unclear on the adoption process. This increased their anxiety levels.

C – It's almost like they didn't give much support in the beginning, and they haven't given much support at the end.

E Mother – I think that's the only thing, is just the person that's dealing with us at the moment and the lack of communication or lack of urgency is what's making it so horrific.

Several participants had to interact with more than one social worker. The first one was the one who facilitated the participants' screening and application. Participants were then handed over to the second social worker after being matched with a prospective adoptee. This second social worker was primarily responsible for facilitating and completing the child's profile, including the finalisation of the adoption. In cases where participants were dealing with two social workers, some parents expressed negative interactions with the second social worker.

F Mother - I think with her social worker...[it] was the most stressful, the wait and the not knowing. She wasn't very keen to explain...at one stage, they [social worker's organisation] said that 'there's important cases that they're dealing with', and I felt like 'okay, my case is not important at this point'.

J – When A* [child's social worker] got involved, I understand...she had to, I don't know how many cases on her hands as well.

A few participants also expressed that they expected the social worker to guide them as they transitioned into parenthood, yet they did not receive the desired support. In contrast, social workers in Kausi's⁵ study which was conducted in East London reported having assisted adoptive parents and adoptees in placement transitions and offered post-adoption support, as they believed it was especially necessary when the adoptions were transracial. Participants in the current study would have benefitted greatly from such support.

O – It would've been nice if she was more supportive...[with our] anxiety and confusion and just been more clear about everything before we adopted him and then throughout the process, just helped us by understanding that we're new parents...you have a child that you're trying to connect with and we don't even know [how]...

Theme five: Anxieties while waiting for the formal completion of the adoption process

Participants had often heard that they would endure a long wait for the adoption to be finalised, even after the child was placed with them. Dealing with government departments caused much anxiety for many participants. Additionally, fears and anxieties around something going wrong, such as their documents being lost that could jeopardise their newly formed family, were heightened.

F Mother – [We] got the pack that we had to send there [the Registrar of Adoptions] and her birth certificate; the original is in there...[it was] also stressful [because] people [were] telling me that their papers just get lost, so you need to keep phoning there to find out do they still have your paperwork?

K – Waiting for everything to be finalised and the fear that something could happen, that is by far the worst, because...the moment Z* came home she was my child, the fear that someone can take your child away from you because a form isn't stamped or signed is just crazy, I think that was the worst for me.

N – The truly difficult...part was... [waiting for the final adoption certificate] and dealing with home affairs, changing his name [getting the new birth certificate].

This stage was described as a state of limbo, with no control over the process or outcome. Participants indicated they wanted the adoption formalised to get on with life and be viewed as a legal family.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The many obstacles that can and do cause emotional turmoil during the process may negatively affect the family and thus have a negative impact on the adoptee. Stakeholders should explore how the process can be enhanced to lessen unnecessary challenges and prepare parents adequately for the journey because ill-prepared and unsupported parents cannot help their child attach, adjust, and thrive.

Based on the findings participants felt they needed much more support from social workers and adoption agencies; formal support needs to be present to help parents through the various stages of the process as well as adoptive parenting. Formal support can be offered through workshops, training sessions, group sessions, individual counselling sessions, and recommended reading materials. A further study comparing the adoption process conducted by social workers in Welfare versus social workers in private practice, with a specific interest in the support provided.

Most of the adoptions (15 out of 16) were transracial, where the adoptee was a Black child. There were no adoptees of another race group except the one same-race adoption of a White child. The same-race adoptive family had significantly different social experiences from the transracial family. Whether this is a common experience or not, cannot be established from this study. This predominance of transracial adoptions may be owing to KwaZulu-Natal having more Black children who are adoptable. Moreover, the primary demographic on the Durban Adoptive Families social media groups are White parents, limiting insight into the experiences of prospective adoptive parents of other racial groups. Further studies comparing perspectives and experiences of same-race and transracial adoptive families are recommended. Furthermore, with specific reference to transracial adoptions, social workers and other relevant professionals should help with facilitating racial integration¹⁴ and help parents develop cultural competence.

CONCLUSION

This paper focused on the adoption process in the South African context, with specific reference to the experiences of adoptive parents in the region of eThekweni, KwaZulu Natal. This study fills a gap in the research field as research studies related to pre-adoption services and prospective adoptive parents' experiences are limited. Through using a qualitative research methodology, with an exploratory descriptive design, valuable insights into the experiences of parents related to the adoption process were found. Findings revealed that the overwhelming motivation for pursuing adoption was a personal desire for parenthood. Throughout the adoption journey, there were many challenges and experiences, both positive and negative. The application process was significantly

more stressful for some than for others. During the period of visiting the prospective adoptee, some participants felt unprepared for the physical and emotional demands of becoming a parent. Throughout the process, participants had mixed experiences with the social workers. However, many received support from being connected with other adoptive families. Participants felt they needed much more support from social workers and government departments throughout most of the adoption process. The lack of support they experienced exacerbated the fears and anxieties they experienced at different points in the process. Offering prospective adoptive parents adequate support to reduce fears, prepare them for parenthood and adoption, and assistance during challenging periods would enable them to be equipped and focus more of their energy and attention on their adoptive child and newly formed family.

DECLARATIONS

Ethical approval

The Durban University of Technology granted ethical approval for this study on 5 October 2020 (Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC) number: 093/20).

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Declaration of originality

I, Roxanne Groger, declare that this study originates from my work, except where otherwise referenced. This work has been submitted to the Journal of Population Therapeutics and Pharmacology and shall not be submitted to another publication unless rejected or withdrawn. Whilst the author shall retain copyrights; the Journal of Population Therapeutics and Pharmacology gets the sole and exclusive right to publish the work for the full length of the copyright period.

I further declare that the co-author participated in the research process, and that their inclusion in the publication has been gained and that they are not a 'ghost' writer.

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