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Deconstructing the Nuclear Family Through Adoption

Not flesh of my flesh, nor bone of my bone, but still miraculously my own.
Never forget for a single minute, you didn't grow under my heart but in it.

--Fleur Conkling Heyliger, *Chicken Soup for the Soul: The Joy of Adoption*, 2015

Adoption tends to be described as an alternative form of family, but for a mother or father, family has no restrictions. This paper looks at the ways adoption deconstructs and recreates the idea of family. Existing research across fields of study surrounding family fails to cover specific research on adoption and lacks the research that looks at the ways adoption and other alternative family forms disrupt and distort the biological family unit. The word "family" can be defined in many different ways, and is a specific and individualistic concept. However, within the cultural sphere of family, biogenic families tend to be the culturally assumed and idolized form of family in today's culture. As an individual who is an adoptee and has grown up in what is assumed to be an alternative family dynamic, this auto-ethnographic essay focuses on looking at the ways adoption redefines family and motherhood, as well as how the binary institutions of our American society is built to maintain the biogenic family ideal.

Asian, Adopted, a Woman

I am adopted. I am Asian. I am a triplet. I am a woman. This paper examines what all four of those statements mean. Not many people can say they have been adopted, and

very few individuals can say they are a triplet. Growing up as an adoptee was a concept that, until I was older, was never a thought on my mind. Unsure of what adoption even meant, I grew up for a portion of my childhood life being unaware of what it meant to be an adopted child. Being a child of a different ethnicity was also a concept that I was never aware of or of great importance throughout my childhood and teenage years. Since the moment I knew I was adopted and different than my adopted parents, I continue not to let it affect who I am or how I define myself within my family today, which is another point I explain throughout this paper. Not being able to recognize my family dynamic and racial differences for the majority of my time growing is something that has impacted the ways I identify with myself and with others, but has not altered my definition of family or how I value myself within my family unit. I have struggled both internally and externally with being both adopted and of non-white descent at times during my middle school, high school, and college years. Being the target of negative, pejorative, and offensive comments and stares has affected both the way I identify with

myself and the ways I identify with my peers and family friends.

Our society coins the term “family” as both binary restrictive and culturally normative, while viewing adoption and other forms of family dynamics as alternatives and not truly a family. I, however, am challenging the cultural assumption that argues a family can only be formed or defined based on biological parenting and natural childbearing. “Although family continues to be a critical unit in demographic and social analysis, perceptions of what constitutes the ‘family’ vary across groups and societies” (Tillman and Nam, 2008, p. 1). More importantly, the definition of family has and continues to be one that has, for the most part, been seen as a universal definition that most countries worldwide agree with. Family, according to most societies, is a group of individuals affiliated by birth, marriage, or living situations. (United States Census Bureau, 2017). The United States ideologies on family may be accepting of intentional families, families that are not biological, but the way an adoptee is perceived by society and his or her peers is affected by the fact that he or she is adopted.

In college, during my second semester of junior year, I was sitting in a Women and Gender Studies class, when my classmate called me out on being adopted, and argued that adoption is both “a sad excuse for parenting,” and “doesn’t make someone a part of a family.” Similar to this experience, there has been multiple times growing up where I questioned both my identity and the role I played in my so-called “fake family.” I have been a victim of cruel bullying, such as being picked on with words describing me as “cornbread,” “banana,” “yellow colored” and having been asked questions such as “Why is your mom not Asian like you?” “Why are you yellow?” or “Why do you not look like your mom?” These questions put me in pause mode and made me question myself and my worth simply because I was both Asian and a child of a family who I was not born into.

Being able to challenge and speak on intentional families versus creative families is a topic that I hope more individuals become aware of and curious about. I am not arguing that biological families are not a valid form of family; I am stating that it is not the only form of family. Because family is one of the most important and key ways an individual defines themselves, I

am speaking out for other adopted and racially diverse individuals, in hopes that sharing my experiences with privilege, ethnicity, oppression, and discrimination, will help others better understand that a biogenic family is not the only way you can define what a family means.

God knew...that it doesn't matter how your children get to your family. It just matters that they got there.

-Kira Mortenson, “Pregnant with ‘One of Your Own!’ . . . Cringe”,
2014

Western Ideals on Family and Adoption

The United States has long recognized and labeled the nuclear family as a father, mother, and their biological kids. Furthermore, the nation’s ideas about kinship and family have been based off the notions of biology, leaving Americans strongly defining parenthood in a biological sense. However, as of 2014, only 20% of all households in the U.S fit this definition (Stone, 2014). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, a family is defined as a householder and one or more other people related to the householder by birth, marriage, or adoption (Stone, 2014). Although we continue to see rising numbers in the types of

nontraditional families such as single parent, lesbian or gay, blended, or even partners who are not married, the ideal definition of family has been long seen and respected as a heteronormative, biological space (Lansford, Abbey & Stewart, 2001). This heteronormative, biological space is in every effort trying to be preserved as the “real” definition of what family means. The institution of family itself is reinforced by the state and society's expectations surrounding family and all it encompasses. How does adoption disrupt and challenge biogenic ideas of the nuclear family? Constructing and choosing to create meaningful bonds with individuals who you are not biologically related to you is a concept many Americans across the country consciously choose to do. Therefore, adoption comes to challenge the reconstruction of family, as well as the reconstruction of motherhood. Adoption, however, is simply one form of that alternative family.

Across the United States, there are multiple types and forms of adoption one can go through. Because there are many terms, I discuss them briefly. To begin, there are two main forms of adoption: closed and open adoptions. Closed adoptions do not involve any information given about either family, where there is also no contact between

both families. Once the adoption is complete, the information surrounding that adoption is sealed away. (National Adoption Center, 2017). Unlike closed adoptions, open adoptions require some form of communication and information shared between the adoptive family and the biological family, as well as the child. (National Adoption Center, 2017). Stemming from the closed and open adoptions, there are also different types of adoption that involve foster care, orphanages, and independent adoptions. Foster care and orphanage adoptions involve the adopting of a child that was either put in foster care because the parent cannot support the child, or that the child is placed in a home as a foster kid. Independent, international, and infant adoptions involve a child being adopted as an infant through a lawyer, facility, or physician, rather than through an adoption agency (National Adoption Center 2017). It is important to briefly identify and discuss the differences between the types of adoptions that exist in Western culture, because it helps contextualize my story as well as is important to my thesis and overlying argument.

Our skin doesn't match.
You don't have my eyes or mouth,
and our faces aren't the same shape.

..

Our skin may not match but
we match hearts.

--Christy Wagner,

<https://www.etsy.com/listing/101401715/we-match-hearts-pink-ombre-typography>, 2012.

My Story

In Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, on December 8th, 1995, I was adopted and able to become a part of a family. My family and I now celebrate this day in which my parents named "Gotcha Day." The date one is adopted is not a date that every family celebrates, but is a day my parents named to hallmark the adoption and the most important day of their lives. To this day, my family and I come together on this day to celebrate the adoption and our family.

Going back to the beginning, my soon-to-be adopted mother and father were waiting on a call from the adoption agency in Vietnam, praying and hoping for good news. It was a mid-evening in July when my mother answered the phone call and was asked if she wanted to adopt three Vietnamese girls instead of just one, who also happened to be identical

triplets. They were told that a set of triplets were dropped off to the agency and were available for adoption either separately or together. At the time, my parents were open to the possibility of adopting twins or a set of siblings, but never in their mind did they think they would be asked to adopt triplets. My mother says that it was the happiest day of her life being called by the agency; besides the day she arrived in Vietnam and we were given to her.

After receiving the good news and preparing for a long trip, she hopped on a plane to Vietnam with one of her closest friends to help bring us home while my father stayed behind to build cribs and prepare the house for a life filled with three Vietnamese babies.

Once my mother finally arrived to the adoption agency and all the paperwork was filed and complete, the agency performed a ceremony for myself, my sisters, and the other Vietnamese children who were being adopted that day as well (See Figures 1-6). This ceremony was something the Vietnamese adoption agency did whenever a child was adopted. This ceremony was unique to the agency I was adopted from, and it was very special to my mother. Concluding the ceremony, my mother was given the



Figure 1.



Figure 4.



Figure 2.



Figure 5.



Figure 3.



Figure 6.

three of us and sent off on her way. We spent our final days in the hotel room in Ho Chi Min before flying back to New York.

Awaiting us at the airport in New York were about fifty to seventy people, including photographers and local news reporters, my father, grandmother, close colleagues, and local residents of the area.

Days and weeks following our arrival, newspaper articles were published about my parent's adoption, and in ways, our lives were being put on display (See Figures 7-8). Even David Muir, the host of our hometown news channel Nightly News, included a segment on our adoption that televised multiple interviews with my parents, family friends, and other local residents. My mother told me she took interviews over the phone in Vietnam, to and from the airports, and even outside our home. I can remember reporters with their photographers coming to our house. They would hang around in our backyard to ask both my parents, my sisters, and me various questions surrounding our emotions, experiences, and reactions to the adoption, constantly taking photographs. My parents were even asked if they wanted to put my sisters and me on television, in local commercials and other advertisements.



Figure 7.



Figure 8.

Unfortunately, I do not remember the exact moment when I realized I was adopted and of a different ethnicity than my parents. I believe this is mostly because I never questioned those differences.

Earlier, I wrote about the surrounding stigmas that comes with adoption, such as the stigma of illegitimacy which can influence the ways adopted children and their families view themselves and their family, as well as how open children and/or parents are to discussing the adoption itself (Kohler, Grotevant & McRoy, 2002). People who do not

know my story or my parent's story may likely see my adoption as illegitimate, similar to how the majority of Western culture views parenting and family as inherently biological. However, my parents never treated me as illegitimate in any sort of way. In fact, I was only treated with the most love and passion any parent would give to his or her child. And that is exactly what I hope readers take away from my personal account. No matter who you are, where you come from, and where you end up, you should never let patriarchy, society's definitions, or people's negative words tell you something is not real, valid, or right.

As years passed, I continued to never realize I was growing up in a family that wasn't most people's typical version of a nuclear family. I faced multiple forms of racial discrimination and bullying like I previously mentioned, but so did my parents.

One instance I remember was in second grade on Martin Luther King Day, when my sisters and I were first coming across race and differences in skin color. A few boys in our class made many statements addressing my sisters and me as "weird and different" because we did not look exactly like the majority of the students. Ultimately, the boys told us that we should not be in the class.

Both of my parents, especially my mother, have experienced this type of prejudice in public from their colleagues, members of the church, and even bystanders in the grocery store. Complete strangers would gawk and make judgmental glares at my parents and me in public simply because we looked different. But why is that? And why does looking different than the majority in a crowd always cause people to stare? Is it because we are Asian, because there are three of us, or because we are not white? Adoption answers these questions.

Although there were many times that the difference in my skin color was pointed out, I cannot recall the moment I asked myself "Why am I different?" I remember every instance I was bullied and every moment I was questioned about my adoption, but I cannot pinpoint the moment when I realized I wasn't my parent's biological child. It was never a topic of discussion my parents even brought up, and if it was, it obviously had little to no effect on what I defined as family.

If I could remember a time my parents talked about our adoption, I know that those talks we had never put into question what my family meant, and specifically, what adoption even was. As I grew older my parents and I had more discussions about where I

was from, what had happened to my birth parents, and the possibility of going back to Vietnam one day to experience for myself where I was from. Although some of the conversations left me with hundreds of thoughts going through my head, I never understood why all of these details mattered. Until I was old enough to recognize difference in skin color and what racial discrimination was, not once had I thought about my birth parents or going back to Vietnam to discover where I was from. Throughout my entire life up till those moments, I believed to have only one mother, father, and one family.

I have found myself asking the same questions over and over again: “Why does being adopted or having an adopted child matter in terms of being a ‘real family?’” and, “Why does being both adopted and a racial minority have to affect other people’s opinions about what constitutes a family?” My parents are my parents and I have never, not even once, thought otherwise.

Telling my story gives me a chance to explore these questions, as well as gives other people a chance to read what it is like for a 21-year-old adopted college student to continually face prejudice and discrimination based on the color of her skin and family background. Furthermore, by telling my story, I

hope it speaks to others to rethink and challenge the social construction of family. My story shows that a child does not have to be “related by blood” or “biologically related to” a parent to be considered part of a family, and a member of a real family.

Motherhood Defined through Adoption

“Adoption as a parenting option separates the biological from the social, nurturing part of parenting, thereby challenging notions of parenting as a process of childbearing and childrearing” (Miall, 1996). The relationship between feminism and motherhood continues to be a complex one with multiple perspectives, experiences, and beliefs. Many feminist scholars and researchers such as Betty Friedan (1967) and Shulamith Firestone (1970) are just a few of the iconic feminists who have written and argued against gender inequality, and the barriers and restrictions motherhood has on women. “Family is almost synonymous with a woman and is unsurpassed in importance in most women’s lives” (O’Connell, 1994, p. 75).

Society assumes women derive a certain sense of identity, self-worth, and accomplishment from being a mother and from her family. In fact, becoming

a mother can be one of the most defining moments in a woman's life.

Mother/father/child relationships are typically understood to be based on "blood" relations. Single mothers, lesbian mothers, adoptive mothers, divorced mothers, and mothers of interracial relationships are just a few of types of mother/child family forms that go against the traditional nuclear family, thus being considered the minority. Adoptive relationships between a mother and her adopted child are assumed and argued to be different and unlike the "true" mother/child relationships biologically based families have. However, the relationship between a mother and child is simply unique and different based on the individual, and that is where adoption comes into the picture.

In addition to the relationship between a parent and child, there is the western idea that motherhood is derived from pregnancy. A woman's ability to birth a child is considered her greatest accomplishment, her most powerful form of agency and control. Due to the many institutions that have placed women's bodies as a defining feature of their self-worth and value, society places specific attention on the women's main role as a reproducer and mother. (Motherhood and Feminism, 2010). Furthermore, motherhood and

the biological relationship between a mother and her child are both glorified and praised throughout Western culture.

In her book *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone (1970) proposes the argument that the problem women have with breaking against the notion of reproduction was the biological ideology that pregnancy was a necessity for all women to reach their fullest potential. Firestone argues that this thinking oppresses and exploits women who go against this biological notion. Similar to Firestone, feminist Sara Ruddick's (1995) book *Maternal Thinking* argues that the idea of maternal instinct should not just be attributed to biology. I agree with both Firestone and Ruddick. I additionally argue that adoption is another valid form of agency that goes against the idea of pregnancy as a woman's greatest accomplishment. I argue that a woman's option to either reproduce or not, or to choose another form of child rearing, is a valid one. Pregnancy and motherhood is indeed a wonderful and valid option; it is not the only option.

Adoptions are viewed by society as a woman's "last resort" to motherhood while biological parenthood is assumed to be the primary model of a family. Many mothers who do not follow this are not as accepted or viewed as "real"

mothers, which are challenges my mom struggled with and experienced throughout her life once she adopted my sisters and me.

Although I focus strictly on motherhood through adoption, my story is not meant to disregard or devalue fatherhood and what adoption defines fatherhood as. My father defines himself in the ultimate category of a “real” father and has never seen adoption as something that redefined his role as a father.

Telling my story about my adoption and my experience growing up in a non-biological family helps me further understand that family does not have to be defined by the number of same genes I have with my parents. Just because my mother is not the woman who gave birth to me does not mean that she is not my mother. I argue that biology does not equate family and motherhood. Adoption creates a family just as much as biological motherhood does.

Ethnicity, Authenticity and Privilege

Although I cannot pinpoint the exact moments in my life when I recognized the privilege my adoption has given me, as well as the ways my ethnicity played a role in my family, these experiences have helped me identify the ways my ethnicity both put me in privileged and

racially oppressing experiences. My ethnicity and privilege have both contributed to the authenticity of my adoption and my experiences growing up as an adopted child. I was fortunate to be adopted into a stable and loving family, and this privilege also plays a role in the authenticity of my adoption and growing up in a white and western culture. Although being Vietnamese and of a different skin color than my parents, growing up in the social class I was blessed to be a part of, and the privileges social class can provide for an individual or family, has provided me access to many opportunities that many people do not have.

My story of my adoption opens people’s eyes to becoming more aware about the types of family dynamics that exist, as well as how privilege, ethnicity and patriarchy all work together to create the experiences I have been through. My adoption story also is a power story to anyone who has struggled with patriarchy’s restrictive binary family definitions to push individuals to not let our patriarchal society define who you are.

Telling my story reinforces my adoption as an authentic form of family, but also opens the question of the cultural authenticity of my story, which asks, “Why were the reporters so interested in grabbing at my story?” Is it

because my sisters and I were Vietnamese, or is it because international adoptions across different countries were not popular? Was it because people saw my parent's journey to adopt my sisters and I as a rescue narrative? Or was it because we were triplets? My story became important enough to be reported and published on, but why? My paper may not answer these questions, but it brings these questions to light as to why my adoption was so fascinating to so many people across the country.

There are arguments surrounding the idea that adoption is a way for many underprivileged children to gain access to a better, healthier and stable life. I can say that if I was not adopted, my life would be completely different, but I cannot say it is simply because I was adopted that I was given a better life. Having grown up and been raised by two white, middle class parents is what has given me the privilege I am beyond lucky to have. It is all because of them that I live the life I do, and because of them that I am able to get a college degree and have access to better opportunities than I might not have had in the same way if I was not adopted.

Adoption and its Importance

Kinship does not have to be strictly based on genetics but has and will

continue to be based on an individual's choice. By sharing my story and exploring the ways adoption and motherhood through adoption disrupt the binary assumption of family, I reject biology as a basis for kinship and defining family. Adoption does more than just blur the lines of the nuclear family; it reveals the ways family does not have to be defined based on only blood. I am not trying to reject or disprove the notion that both motherhood and family in a biological sense is not a valid form of family. I am simply arguing that a biologically based family, or motherhood through pregnancy, is not the only valid form.

When telling my story to others, or explaining to strangers that I am a triplet who happens to be adopted into a white family, I find myself realizing how lucky and privileged I am to have been adopted, raised, and have grown up in such a loving and caring family. Unconditional love, acceptance, care, and the bonds I carry with my mother and my father are what equates a family, not my genes. In fact, the family I am a part of gives me the most "biologically real" feelings I have ever experienced.

Being adopted has not changed the way I view myself or what I think constitutes a family. My adoption has instead only intensified my urge to increase people's knowledge and

understanding about motherhood and adoption. I ask you to stop and rethink the idea of kinship and how adoption can break down the barriers and social constructions around the nuclear family.

Conclusion

This work emerged from a place of frustration and anger, as I was struggling with my identity and how my family dynamic and racial background affected that identity. I argue that regardless of being part of a non-biological family, the family I have can be considered the most authentic family there is.

What constitutes a family is based on the individual and no textbook, no reported statistic, and no person can dictate what a family truly means. It is both critical and important to continue challenging and disrupting the biogenetic family and the assumptions and stereotypes that come with motherhood, pregnancy, and childrearing. We must continue to push towards further acceptance of different

family dynamics -- family dynamics that are not what is considered most comfortable, or normal. We must also realize that increased knowledge of adoption and motherhood can lead to the push for more adoption policies and research done on adoption and the way adoption challenges the idea of biological motherhood.

It is so important to me as a feminist and an adoptee to help others gain a better understanding and knowledge on the various forms of family dynamics, as well as to show people that we have the power to break down the binary barriers that are placed on family and motherhood. I will not let patriarchy and the labels patriarchy tells us we should or should not be define who I am. Labels and definitions are simply words and should never restrict who you are or who you want to become. By telling my story, I have come to a sense of what family means to me and the importance of what it means to be part of an alternative form of family. So I ask you, what does the word "family" mean to you?

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