

2010

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Harrigan, Meredith Marko and Braithwaite, Dawn O., "Discursive Struggles in Families Formed through Visible Adoption: An Exploration of Dialectical Unity" (2010). *Papers in Communication Studies*. 85.

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Published in *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 38:2 (2010), pp 127-144.  
doi 10.1080/00909881003639536

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This article grew out of the first author's dissertation, directed by Dr. Dawn O. Braithwaite at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. This research was partly funded by the Warren F. and Edith R. Day Dissertation Fellowship, awarded by Graduate Studies at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. A previous version of this article was presented at the annual conference of the National Communication Association in San Diego, California in November 2008.



# Discursive Struggles in Families Formed through Visible Adoption: An Exploration of Dialectical Unity

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## Abstract

Grounded in the interpretive paradigm and framed by relational dialectics theory, the present study addressed the question: What discourses interpenetrate to reflect dialectical unity as parents communicate about their child's adoption? Interviews with 40 parents across 31 visibly adoptive families—families with an obvious lack of biological connection—highlighted four instances of dialectical unity resulting from the following discursive struggles: (a) pride and imperfection; (b) love, constraint, and sacrifice; (c) difference, pride, and enrichment; and (d) legitimacy, expansion, similarity, and difference. Each struggle contains seemingly disparate discourses that, in combination, contribute to how parents discursively make sense of adoption. Practical implications of these findings are discussed to provide insight to researchers, educators, and members of visibly adoptive families.

**Keywords:** Visible Adoption, Relational Dialectics Theory, Dialectical Unity, Interpretive Research, Family Communication

Despite the established history of adoption in the United States, the process of adopting has seen significant changes over time. One such change involves the frequency in which people involved in the adoption process have moved from matching family members' biological characteristics to crossing racial and/or national boundaries (Galvin, 2003). Such

a change has increased the number of families formed through visible adoption or “families in which members’ racial characteristics provide visual evidence of a lack of biological ties both to insiders and outsiders” (p. 242). Although domestic adoptions may result in visible adoptions, increasing numbers of international adoptions have highlighted the prevalence of these families. Between the years 1989 and 2005, US parents adopted over 234,000 children through international adoption (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). In the year 2005 alone, US parents adopted 22,710 from countries outside the United States. The need to study meaning making processes regarding adoption by family members intensifies as the number of international adoptions continues to increase in the United States (Child Welfare League of America, 2007; Kinder, 2003).

Galvin (2003) noted that members of families formed through visible adoption may face “significant challenges as they engage in sense making processes” (p. 237). For instance, because most internationally adopted children leave their country of origin during infancy, these children may find it difficult to make sense of their particular ethnicity or group to which they trace their heritage (Gudykunst & Lee, 2001). This potential “absence of a reference group with which to identify” (Friedlander, 1999, p. 45), may pose challenges to identity development. Because meaningful relationships, such as the parent–child relationship, are integral to personal and familial identity development (Wood, 2000), one might question what, if any, steps parents take to communicate about the meaning of their child’s ethnic, national, or cultural identities in order to fill this void. Likewise, parents of visibly adopted children need to consider how, if at all, they will communicate about topics including: the visible differences that exist in their family (Friedlander, 1999), their child’s birth parents, and the circumstances surrounding their child’s adoption.

To address these questions, it is imperative to investigate the intricacies of communication processes surrounding adoption. Researchers continue to acknowledge the significant role communication plays in sense making, particularly regarding personal and relational identities (e.g., Baxter, 2004, 2006; Bergen & Braithwaite, 2009; Tracy, 2002). This is especially true for members of “discourse-dependent” families (Galvin, 2005, p. 149), including families formed through visible adoption, who rely on communication to construct and negotiate their identities. A constitutive perspective on communication and identity challenges the assumption that identities are intrinsic or extralinguistic. Illustrating the constitutive perspective, Steier (1989) argued that family members themselves are “constructors of family worlds” (p. 15) and therefore it is important to understand “how family members define their ‘family system’ for themselves, as a result of their own history of interaction as family” (p. 15). More specifically, Galvin (2005) noted that in adoptive families, despite the legality of the family relationship, “the members’ ongoing communicative interactions create the family identity, an identity that the family manages discursively over time” (p. 137). To date, there is a shortage of knowledge regarding the discourses that members of discourse-dependent families voice while making sense of the adoption experience, including their personal and familial identities (Galvin, 2005). Accordingly, our goal in the present study is to illuminate the discourses—or systems of meaning—that are

significant to parents' communication about adoption in one particular type of discourse-dependent family—families formed through visible adoption.

### **Theoretical Perspective: Relational Dialectics Theory**

The present study is grounded in relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2006; Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, 2010; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Relational dialectics theory serves as a lens to sensitize researchers to see the ways family members communicatively constitute and negotiate their multivocal, fragmented, and often tensional experiences (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010). An understanding of multivocality necessitates a careful reading of Bakhtin's theory of dialogism (see Holquist, 1990) and an understanding of discourse as any system of meaning, either situated in the specific relational or larger culture, which makes relational partners' communication comprehensible to others (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008). Using the term "discursive struggle," Baxter and Braithwaite (2010) maintain that the main premise of relational dialectics theory is that "meaning making is a process that emerges from the struggle of different, often opposing, *discourses*" (p. 50). With the present study, we sought to explicate the discursive struggles that permeate parents' communication.

In their most recent work, Baxter and Braithwaite (2010) argued that the application of relational dialectics theory benefits from a contrapuntal analysis. This method of discourse analysis centers on the interplay and interpenetration of communicated discourses. A contrapuntal analysis allows researchers to explore a variety of questions including "What are the discourses given voice in the text?" and "How do these discourses interanimate to create meanings in-the-moment—do parties elide the discursive struggles or construct discursive mixtures" (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2010, p. 55). To date, most of the research grounded in relational dialectics theory has centered on the first question, the identification of discourses regarding various lived experiences. Among these lived experiences are adoption (e.g., Harrigan, 2009), divorce and remarriage (e.g., Braithwaite & Baxter, 2006), postmarital relationships (e.g., Graham, 2003), premature birth (e.g., Golish & Powell, 2003), and bereavement (e.g., Toller, 2005). Although the identification of discourses involved in discursive struggles is important to consider, Baxter and Braithwaite (2010) argue that this focus "is no longer sufficient" (p. 63). To more completely understand the intricacies of the discursive struggle, researchers should explore the interplay of various discourses. Of particular interest to the researchers is the notion of dialectical unity, a concept that questions how a multitude of discourses central to an individual's meaning making "complete, enhance, or enable one another" (Baxter, 2004, p. 8). A focus on dialectical unity necessitates an eye toward examining the ways that various discourses collaborate in the meaning making process during the discursive struggle, not just identifying their mere copresence. Baxter (2004) argues "to continue to focus on copresent oppositions is to miss half of what is dialogic in centripetal-centrifugal flux" (p. 9). In turn, we pose the following research question to guide our analysis.

RQ: What discourses interpenetrate to reflect dialectical unity as parents communicate about their child's adoption?

## Method

The present study was grounded in the interpretive paradigm (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Our goal was, as best captured by Baxter and Babbie, "to paint a verbal picture so rich that readers of the study feel as if they had walked that mile in the shoes of the group members" (p. 62). Moreover, we sought to understand the similarity of meanings participants share for the phenomenon of interest (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Braithwaite, Toller, Durham, Daas, & Jones, 2008). This goal differs from variable analytic research, where scholars aim to understand the relationship, including differences, between or among variables.

In turn, we employed semistructured interviewing to allow us to maximize the depth of information retrieved from each participant while maintaining a structured interview process (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Fontana & Frey, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2004). Through the process of interviewing, researchers interact with their participants not as authorities but as learners attempting to understand the participants' experiences and realities from their perspectives. An interviewer learns how individuals construct, interpret, and make sense of their own personal experiences (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002). With the consent of the participant, each interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by the first author, yielding 806 pages of double-spaced data. The interview protocol appears as the Appendix.

## Participants

When seeking participants, we used purposive sampling, a method that involved choosing parents who had experiences relevant to visible adoption, our phenomenon of interest (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Spradley, 1979). After receiving approval from our University's Institutional Review Board, we began recruiting participants. We used both network and snowball sampling procedures. Participants met three specific criteria. First, they were of the age of majority in the state in which they resided. Second, they parented a visibly adopted child. Third, they self-identified as heterosexual. It is important to note that we do not deny the need for understanding salient communication processes in same sex families; instead, adding this last criterion allowed us to focus on parents' communication regarding adoption and visible differences rather than same sex parenting. Of the 31 interviews, 9 took place with both parents present, and 22 took place with one parent present. The decision to conduct couple or individual interviews resulted from two factors: (a) whether the adoption was a single parent or dual parent adoption, and (b) the preference of each participant. All interviews took place outside the presence of the children.

Using theoretical saturation as our measure of completeness (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), the first author conducted 31 interviews with 40 parents. Saturation occurs when the researchers find that the information attained in subsequent interviews no longer alters the findings relevant to the theoretical framework. Saturation was reached after approximately 10 interviews. However, the interviewer continued to double-check this process and establish credibility of the data set.

Although every parent we interviewed self-identified as White, parents differed in a number of other demographics. Parents resided in both urban and rural areas of the United States. Parents ranged in age from 25 years to 49 years at the time of the adoption and from 34 years to 58 years at the time of the interview. Of the participants, 37 were married and 3 were divorced at the time of the interview. Of the 3 parents who were divorced, 2 adopted postdivorce. While 30 of the participants were female and mothers, 10 were male and fathers. Regarding education, 6 held a high school diploma, 21 held a Bachelor's degree, 7 held a Master's degree, 5 held a PhD, and 1 held a professional degree. There was a total of 42 visibly adopted children among the 31 families, of which 28 were female and 14 were male. Of the 42 children, 6 were African American and adopted through domestic adoption; 36 were adopted through international adoption. The internationally adopted children were adopted from a number of countries: Specifically, 23 were born in Korea, 8 in China, 3 in Vietnam, 1 in Guatemala, and 1 in Russia. It is important to note that the child born in Russia was ethnically Asian; thus, her parents constitute her adoption as a visible adoption. The number of adopted children per family ranged from one child to three children. The children ranged in age from 3 months to 9 years at the time of their adoption and from 4 months to 31 years at the time of the interview.

### ***Data Analysis***

Using relational dialectics theory as a sensitizing framework and Smith's (1995) guidelines for a qualitative thematic analysis, we engaged in a systematic process that began by taking four main steps: thoroughly reviewing a single transcript, inductively analyzing significant themes, categorizing and organizing significant themes, and implementing exemplars to support each theme. Exemplars are specific illustrations of themes taken directly from the transcripts and used by interpretive researchers to illustrate a connection between the data and the findings and to establish an in-depth description. Guided by this conceptual map and master list, the first author analyzed the remaining 30 transcripts in conference with the second author. Importantly though, when new themes emerged as the remaining data were analyzed, we returned to earlier transcripts for re-analysis and adjusted thematic categories and the conceptual map to reflect our new findings (Smith, 1995).

We engaged in two steps appropriate to interpretive work to check the validity or trustworthiness of these findings (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Riessman, 1993). The first author engaged in member-checking, a method that assesses whether the findings resonated as true

to participants (Baxter & Babbie, 2004; Baxter, Hirokawa, Lowe, Nathan, & Pearce, 2004; Creswell, 2007). Specifically, the first author contacted, at random, one fifth of the participants asking for their feedback regarding the findings. Of those contacted, approximately one third responded to the request for feedback. All who responded affirmed that our findings matched their experiences and the experiences of those they know. To further assure the credibility of our findings, we tested this analysis in an extended collaborative data conference with five researchers trained in the interpretive paradigm and relational dialectics theory. In this data conference, we worked together to challenge and refine the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

## Results and Discussion

Guided by current writing on relational dialectics theory (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008, 2010), the researchers addressed the question: What discourses interpenetrate and reflect dialectical unity as parents communicate about their child's adoption? The present study illustrates the utility of relational dialectics theory by illuminating how parents of visibly adopted children experience dialectical unity—the process through which discourses “complete, enhance, and enable one another” (Baxter, 2004, p. 8) in their meaning making regarding adoption. From the present study we begin to expand our knowledge in significant ways regarding this type of discourse-dependent family and, in turn, offer practical applications for educators, social workers, adoption agencies, and members of visibly adoptive families.

Via this analysis, we demonstrate that various discourses interpenetrate and collaborate in parents' communication about their child's birth place and birth parents as well as in talk about their family. The research supports and extends extant adoption-centered research (Docan-Morgan, 2008; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001; Suter, 2008). In previous writing, the first author (Harrigan, 2009), identified 28 discourses that parents voiced as they engage in identity-work processes regarding their personal and familial identities and six dialectical contradictions (i.e., similarity and difference, invisibility and visibility, integration and distance, fortune and loss, openness and closedness, and community and privacy) that emerged from the interpenetration of many of the 28 discourses. The findings detailed in this present report answer Baxter and Braithwaite's (2010) call to move beyond the identification of discourses and contradictions in order to explore the interanimation and interplay of discourses. Specifically, we detail four discursive struggles that parents voice when making sense of adoption as well as how the discourses involved in each struggle demonstrate dialectical unity by contributing to the larger meaning. These discursive struggles involve the interpenetration of the following sets of discourses: (a) pride and imperfection; (b) love, constraint, and sacrifice; (c) difference, pride, and enrichment; and (d) legitimacy, expansion, similarity, and difference. We discuss each of these in turn.

### *A Discursive Struggle between Pride and Imperfection*

The first discursive struggle and illustration of dialectical unity was evident in parents' talk about their child's birth place. The discourse of pride encapsulates parents' positive utterances regarding their child's heritage, whereas the discourse of imperfection renders intelligible parents' negative utterances about their child's heritage. Parents believe their child's heritage has a strong history and shares important values, evident by the discourse of pride. For instance, Thomas<sup>1</sup> tells his son the Vietnamese culture is an "amazing, amazing culture" (26: 383–384<sup>2</sup>). He explained that he stresses to his son that "having been conquered by everyone" (26: 395) the Vietnamese share a "rich history" (26: 394). Thomas also makes sure to note the value the Vietnamese place on family. Specially, he explained "family is so important to them" (26: 386). Likewise, Miranda conveys that "African American people have a very rich and proud history" (22: 20–21). Parents also voiced the discourse of pride as they spoke about the contributions people who share their child's heritage have made to the world. For instance, Erin wants her daughter to know "what good people she comes from" (10: 181). She reported that she makes an effort to talk about China's inventions or "all it contributed to civilization" (10: 182–183).

At the same time, parents spoke about negative factors such as poverty-ridden conditions or questionable cultural mores tied to their child's birth place, rendering the discourse of imperfection audible. It is important to understand that although these two discourses seem to oppose or constrain one another, in actuality, they work in unity in parents' meaning making by creating a particular image of the birth place. Put differently, each discourse contributes to parents' overall definition of their child's birth place.

By invoking the discourse of pride together with the discourse of imperfection, parents discursively attempt to construct a picture of their child's birth place as important, worthy, and valuable, yet imperfect. Parents fear that if they do not voice the discourse of imperfection, their child might develop, as Loraine described, an "idealized version" (17: 364) of their birth place. In turn, parents believe this idealized version may lead their child to have a misconstrued understanding of their birth place. Brooke explained that she does not want her daughter to see China through the eyes of a "Disney movie" (8: 492). Parents argued that there is no "perfect place" (8: 589) and all cultures "have their dirty laundry" (15: 706).

However, without the discourse of pride, and parents' emphasis only on imperfection, parents fear their children might come to make sense of their birth place as flawed and deficient. By extension, because the children may identify themselves with their birth place, parents are concerned that the child may come to develop a sense of self that matches this negative connotation. Therefore, parents' communication exemplifies the integration of pride and imperfection when they argue that one can be proud of a birth place that is not perfect. Brooke explained how she has made sense of her own Irish heritage in a similar way:

I bring up the Irish a lot to her but I don't carry on saying "It was such a great country" but I tell her "It was like a third world country." I certainly know the stories that were told to



me by my grandparents and all the struggles and the potato famine and all that stuff . . . so do I have pride about being Irish, yes I do. But um, are we rabid, ya know, Irish Americans, not at all. So I just want her to have the same thing about her country. There are some fantastic things about it and there are some things that are not great. (8: 620–630)

In these data, the discourses of pride and imperfection work in unity as parents attempt to create meaning of their child's birth place. Voicing each discourse independently would only reflect a fraction of the meaning parents regard and construct in terms of their child's birth place. In the next section, we detail a second discursive struggle. This interplay was heard in parents' communication about their child's birth parents.

### *A Discursive Struggle among Love, Constraint, and Sacrifice*

Parents' meaning making regarding their child's birth parents illuminates both the presence and unity of the discourses of love, constraint, and sacrifice. Like Krusiewicz and Wood (2001), we found that participants put great effort into constructing adoption as an act of love. Yet, we expand this finding by arguing that the dialectical unity of this discourse with the discourses of constraint and sacrifice plays an important role in constructing the desired meaning of the child's birth parents. First, although parents express their own love for their children, they also emphasize the love their child's birth parents feel for them. Candice exclaimed that the key point she tries to convey to her daughter is that "she is loved; she has always been loved and wanted and she will always be loved and wanted" (2: 140–141). Second, the discourse of constraint renders intelligible talk about the birth parents' motivation for creating an adoption plan by addressing obstacles that prevented them from parenting the child. Husband and wife, Melissa and Aaron, explained this vividly:

Melissa: These moms do not want to relinquish these kids. It is always because they are in desperate, desperate situations. Um, the mothers do it out of love and not because they are rejecting them. (5: 403–405)

Aaron: And our daughter knows that in most instances in Korea that the reason for relinquishing the child is because the mother was unmarried and the mother or the child have no future in Korea; they are not accepted by anybody anymore, not their families, so their name has to be written in the family book to carry the family name. They cannot go to school. They could not vote. They have no rights anymore once they are rejected from the family because of the blood ties and the cultural importance in Korea and so in most cases it was a young woman who was not married got pregnant and in most cases it really was what was best for the child. (5: 419–427)

Third, the discourse of sacrifice illustrates how parents frame the decision to create an adoption plan as one aimed at ensuring the well-being of the child. Poignantly, Lorraine stated, "I think that this would be the hardest decision to make" (17: 169–170).

Demonstrating dialectical unity, these three discourses do not oppose, contest, or constrain one another. Instead, they work cooperatively to create a particular image of

their child's birth parents. Eliminating any one of these discourses could alter parents' desired meaning. For instance, the discourse of love gives credence to the discourse of sacrifice because sacrifice entails giving up something you care about greatly. Thus, without a discourse of love it is hard to frame adoption as a sacrifice. If the discourse of love were absent, children might come to see the process of creating an adoption plan as a choice rather than a sacrifice, which invokes a very different meanings. Moreover, if the discourse of sacrifice were absent, children might come to interpret adoption as an easy choice for birth parents which could potentially change the way the children make sense of themselves. The discourse of constraint also gives credence to the discourse of sacrifice. If the discourse of constraint were absent, parents could not construct adoption as a sacrificial action for the betterment of their children for it is the discourse of constraint that makes betterment intelligible. Without a discussion of constraint, the notion of betterment, and thus the reason behind the birth parents' sacrifice, is difficult to grasp. Thus, it is in the unity of these discourses that parents create a particular meaning of the birth parents' actions.

Whether expressed literally or metaphorically, parents shared a consistent story about the birth parents' decision to place their child for adoption. Specifically, parents reported telling their child that although their birth parents love them immensely; their ability to parent was constrained by factors outside of their control. The constraints forced the birth parents to make the difficult decision between parenting their child, whom they loved greatly, and creating an adoption plan to ensure the child's well-being. In the end, the birth parents chose to sacrifice their relationship for their child's well-being despite the loss they felt. The unity of these discourses is illustrated well in Jennifer's narrative. Although she did not author the story she described, she explained that she tells it to her sons to help them make sense of their birth parents' decision. Jennifer shared:

There is a wonderful little story . . . It was about this little bird who had this little baby bird and she was by herself and she loved that baby bird so much . . . She loved that baby bird and took care of it and kept it warm but a storm came and blew the nest out of the tree and tore everything apart and this little baby bird, cold, and she worked so hard and she was so tired and she went to get food but she couldn't get food and keep the baby bird warm and she just didn't know what she was going to do. So the wise owl . . . went up to the bird and said "Ya know you love your baby bird, I know you love your baby bird, but you can't take care of it and I know somebody who can and I think you need to think about letting this other couple of birds raise your baby because these people, these birds, are wonderful and they will love your child." And so, so she bundled the baby bird up and kissed it and told her that she loved it and tucked it safely into the warm feather of the owl who flew the baby bird to the new parents . . . It is beautiful story . . . that pretty much encapsulates how I let them know about how they came to us. (12: 131-150)

The interpenetration and unity of the three discourses plays an important role in the adoption stories parents tell their children. Eliminating one discourse could potentially change the meaning of parents' explanations. In what follows, we detail a third discursive

struggle that further points to the complexity of meaning making for parents of visibly adopted children. This struggle was evident in parents' communication about their families.

### *A Discursive Struggle among Difference, Pride, and Enrichment*

In parents' meaning making, the discourses of difference, pride, and enrichment interpenetrate and enhance one another. First, the discourse of difference is a system of meaning that stresses dissimilarity. Second, the discourse of pride speaks to the strengths or benefits of their child's characteristics. Third, the discourse of enrichment involves talk centered on familial growth. The unification of these three discourses helps parents paint a particular image of their family. Specifically, parents recognize that their child's visible adoption makes their family different from other families in significant ways. For instance, their family reflects a variety of racial and ethnic identities unlike the common homogeneous family. Yet, parents believe their family has been enriched because their child's differences are prideful. Parents want their children to be proud of their differences because they believe they have enriched their family. Therefore, parents talk about their family's differences in a manner that addresses their pride and perception of growth. Loretta argued:

I would also say you don't want to ignore the differences which is one approach to inclusion is just to say well everyone is all the same and well that is not, that is not respectful of some of the differences that there are. Let's make it a good thing to be different and to welcome differences, not just try to erase them any more than focusing on them.  
(27: 515–520)

To further illustrate the interpenetration, Rose explained that in her family they "celebrate diversity and difference" (15: 436–437). Miranda reported that she tells her daughter "God made people of all colors, like flowers. It is more beautiful that way" (22: 161–162). Olivia recalled an instance when someone asked her what she would say to her daughters should someone tease them about their appearances. She noted, "If my child came home and said that 'they called me slant eyes' or 'why do you have black hair?', I said it is beautiful because that is them . . . some of these differences we have to just behold and enjoy" (20: 187–190).

Because parents view their child's differences as a source of pride, they view their family as enriched. For instance, one father, Jamie, explained, "It makes for a richer experience—family experience—when you have these differences" (22: 333–334). Liz echoed Jamie's comments:

It has enriched us so much that I think we would have missed out if we didn't. I would make this choice—make my family this way—over having four biological kids. I would because . . . it has just expanded us in ways that I didn't expect, wouldn't have known if I hadn't done it. (24: 377–381)

The interpenetration of the discourses of difference, pride, and enrichment demonstrates how parents make sense of their children and their families. Each discourse importantly contributes to parents' overall definition of their family. If parents did not view their child's differences as something of which to be proud, the discourse of enrichment would not render intelligible. Likewise, if the discourse of enrichment were absent, parents' attempts to

help their children build pride for their differences might be fruitless. Parents view their child's and family's differences as factors that have made their family special. Next, we discuss a final discursive struggle that reflects dialectical unity. This interplay was also evident in parents' talk about their family.

### *A Discursive Struggle among Legitimacy, Expansion, Similarity, and Difference*

Parents' communication with respect to their family illustrated the important interpenetration of the discourses of legitimacy, expansion, similarity, and difference. First, the discourse of legitimacy is a system of meaning that makes intelligible parents' talk about the authenticity of their adoptive family. Second, the discourse of expansion captures parents' talk about the need to embrace a more inclusive definition of family. Third, the discourse of similarity is a system of meaning that stresses likeness. Fourth, as previously noted, the discourse of difference highlights dissimilarity. Like previous examples, rather than contesting or constraining one another, each discourse contributes to the way parents define their family.

As parents argue for the legitimacy of their adoptive family, they do so in unity with an argument for a broadened definition of family and an assertion about the likeness of their family to other nontraditional, or different, families perceived by these parents to be legitimized such as same sex families and stepfamilies. Each discourse supports or bolsters the others, bringing the four in unity with one another. Take for instance Erin's comment, "I guess we are walking testimony to the fact that families are made in many different ways and um, and that they're still family" (10: 447-448). As Erin asserted her family's legitimacy, the centripetal voice, she centrifugally articulated her family's similarity to others, difference from others, and the expanding definition of family. Thomas' comments also reflected the interpenetration of these four discourses. Thomas explained:

Families come together in lots of different ways. In a way it was better now than when I was a kid because, when I was, the typical nuclear family and now through adoption, through divorce, and through step-this and step-that families come about in lots of different ways. (26: 178-182)

In Thomas's commentary, although the discourse of expansion was centered, the discourses of similarity, difference, and legitimacy were also evident.

Melissa's description of the books she reads her young daughter further illustrates the unity of these four discourses. In Melissa's explanation, difference is dominant and the discourses of expansion, similarity, and legitimacy are centrifugal:

There is one [book] that is called *Families are Different* that is highly recommended and it doesn't just say families are different because they are of a different culture, some families have only a mom or some might have a mom, a stepfather, and a dad, and a stepmom. There are many way that families are different. There is no one family that is normal. (5: 286-291)

In the present data, parents' communication exemplifies the interpenetration of the discourses of legitimacy, expansion, similarity, and difference as they discursively attempt

to construct their familial identity. Although not always with equal force, the discourses work in unity and enhance one another as parents make sense of their family. Parents describe their family as different. Yet, they argue that the definition of a legitimate family has grown to include other nontraditional, or different, families like stepfamilies and same sex families. Thus, like stepfamilies and same sex families, parents argue that their family is legitimate.

The findings discussed in previous pages illustrate four discursive struggles that are active in parents' communication about adoption. Each struggle illuminates the process of dialectical unity or the collaborative working of discourses to create particular meanings. Each instance of dialectical unity is enacted and managed by parents as they communicate about the adoption experience. We now turn to discuss the practical significance of these findings.

### **Practical Application**

The present study illustrates the intricate nature of communication for parents of visibly adopted children. Specifically, it demonstrates that their communication is a multi-vocal process that involves the weaving of numerous significant meaning systems—or discourses. It is our belief that this finding will provide valuable insight to members of families formed through visible adoption as well as to individuals who interact with these families such as adoption agencies, social workers, school teachers, and members of the general public. We contend, however, that this information obtained from parents be combined with literature from therapists (e.g., Gray, 2002) and adopted children (e.g., Eldridge, 2009) in order to secure a more complete understanding of the adoption experience.

First, at a practical level, a multitude of people may benefit from knowledge regarding the range of discourses parents voice when talking about adoption. Parents should be prepared for the discursive struggles they may face, which on the surface may feel uncomfortable for them as they seek to make sense of the experience of visible adoption and as they negotiate personal and familial identities, both within and outside the family system. Adoption agencies and social workers interacting with parents can help better prepare them. For example, seminars designed to educate preparing and newly adoptive parents should integrate first-hand narratives that illustrate the multiplicity of discourses and topic-areas discussed by adoptive parents such as those described in this manuscript. Likewise, integrating role-playing exercises into seminars may serve as a fruitful means of exposing parents to the variety of discourses that may find themselves articulating in adoption-related talk and give them the opportunity to ease any discomfort they may have. Moreover, adoption agencies might consider initiating mentorship opportunities where established parents could share with newly adoptive parents information regarding their personal experiences with talking with their children about birth parents, birth place, culture, and other topics relevant to visible adoption. These seminars or personal relationships may encourage new adoptive parents to expand their original repertoire of topics to address in adoption-related talk.

In these seminars, emphasis should be placed on discourses that may be overlooked by new parents as well as the role dialectical unity serves in constructing a desirable meaning. For instance, new parents may hesitate to voice the *discourse of imperfection* or what they may perceive as negative aspects of their child's birth place. Yet, as the parents in the present study explained, such a discourse is perceived to validate the child's removal from that location as well as the birth parents' decision to place the child for adoption. Put differently, this discourse neutralizes the discourse of pride parents voice as they discuss the valuable aspects of the child's birth place in order not to create fantasy-like images of their birth place. Although it is certainly important for parents to voice the pride they have for their child's birth place, the discourse of imperfection reminds their child that there was an important reason for their removal from that location. Likewise and equally valuable for new parents is the *discourse of constraint* when talking with their child about their birth parents. Although this topic may be daunting to both the parent and child, parents find its unity with the *discourses of love* and *sacrifice* essential. Failure to include all dimensions may result in a skewed understanding by the children because the discourse of constraint provides the justification for the adoption plan, whereas the discourses of love and sacrifice provide the emotional grounding. In line with these suggestions, the first author has volunteered to present these findings during preparation seminars for new parents at a local adoption agency.

Second, although it is imperative to work with parents in the preparation and early stages of the visible adoption experience, it is clear from our study that the process of managing the discursive struggles is an ongoing need for parents. For example, when children enter school, they may face new challenges. We argue that school teachers need to be aware of the *discourse of expansion* and its relationship to legitimacy. Although parents may choose to educate their child's teachers about the experiences of adoptive families, we feel the expanding presence of such families necessitates the education process begin in the teacher training programs and thus, should be implemented into college curriculum. Specifically, we suggest broadening undergraduate programs in both Elementary and Adolescent Education by including workshops on adoptive families, specifically those formed through visible adoption. These workshops could be conducted by adoption researchers, social workers, adoption agency personnel, and members of adoptive families. These workshops could expose teachers in training to challenges that visibly adopted children may face in the classroom and when doing class assignments. In addition, since education majors are often required to take courses in Intercultural Communication, professors of these courses could include a segment on family diversity. Or, Directors of Education Programs might consider incorporating a course on Family Communication where emphasis on visibly adoptive families is often commonplace in the curriculum. Taking any of the aforementioned steps would allow teachers in training the opportunity to learn about the experiences of adopted children and potentially increase their sensitivity to adoption-related issues. In light of the importance of this suggestion, the first author has collaborated with the Director of the Center for Multicultural Teacher Education at their University to present these findings to undergraduate education majors.

Established teachers could also benefit from learning about the discursive experiences of adoptive families. Adoption researchers, social workers, adoption agency personnel, and members of adoptive families could work collaboratively to create school-wide and county-wide professional development opportunities centered specifically on adoptive families. Professional development opportunities are established practice in most school districts and often focus on issues tied to diversity such as various learning styles. It seems a natural fit to use this established program as an opportunity to educate teachers about inclusive and creative ways to accomplish their learning outcomes.

Specifically, education majors and established teachers should be made aware of adoption resources such as the Adoption and School link available at <http://www.adoptive-families.com> (*Adoptive Families Magazine*, 2009) or the Adoption Educator for Educators link available at <http://www.adopting.org/uni/search.php> (Adopting.org, 2009). Although these websites were not designed exclusively for educators, the information provided may encourage teachers to and educate teachers how to redesign some of their traditional assignments such as those that require children to learn about their family's origins or family members' genetic links. We are not suggesting that teachers eliminate such activities for we believe there is great value in learning about our foundation. However, we believe teachers need to understand the challenges such assignments may have for a visibly adopted child (as well for children from other types of nontraditional families) and provide a range of opportunities that would allow all children to explore significant family processes without feeling excluded or atypical due to their inability to access relevant information.

As we have discussed, the findings presented here suggest numerous practical applications to better the experiences of families formed through visible adoption. Of course, adoptive families also interact with those outside the family household, including extended family and strangers who notice the visible differences among family members (Docan-Morgan, 2008; Suter, 2008). Our third application targets those external to the adoptive family. In order to expand the general public's knowledge regarding and sensitivity to families formed through visible adoption, information about these discourses must move beyond academic journals to widely circulated media such as popular magazines and televised news programs and talk shows where exposure to other family forms including stepfamilies, single-parent families, same sex families, and families with multiples seems prevalent. In response to this need, the first author has submitted a press release to local media regarding the research findings and volunteered to serve as a subject matter expert with an emphasis on adoption for the National Communication Association. This position involves serving as a liaison between academics and the media.

### **Limitations and Avenues for Future Researchers**

Despite the contribution of the present study, reflective scholars consider potential limitations of their research and suggest avenues for future researchers to investigate. The present study offers insight into parent's communication about adoption, but it is equally important to explore the discourses that visibly adopted children voice as they talk about

adoption and their family. Such information is integral to understanding messages they receive and how visibly adopted children come to make sense of their adoptive identities.

In addition, while our analysis illuminates the experiences of White parents we interviewed, it does not capture the experiences of members of other ethnic groups. We believe that it is important to acknowledge that differing cultural systems of meaning have the potential to impact communication processes depending on the degree to which the individuals being studied identify with that cultural group (Gudykunst & Lee, 2001). Although not common, parents who identify with other cultural backgrounds yet share the experience of parenting a child who is visibly different from them could potentially offer new and important insight about the process of communicating about adoption.

Moreover, this study focused exclusively on heterogeneous visibly adoptive families as a whole. Future researchers might explore similarities and differences that exist among various forms of visibly adoptive families (e.g., families with children from Guatemala versus families with children from China; heterosexual families versus same sex families). Although it is expected that all adoptive families share similar communicative experiences, various factors such as specific cultural mores and experiences with discrimination may impact the intricacies of unique family contexts. These additional perspectives will add to our understanding of the communicative experiences of families formed through visible adoption.

## Notes

[1] All names reflect pseudonyms.

[2] Parenthetical citations include interview and line numbers.

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## Appendix: Interview Protocol

1. Describe your family. Who do you consider to be members of your family?
2. When you describe your family to others what do you say?
3. A creation story is a story that describes how a family came to be. For our purposes, the creation story of your family includes the story of you [and if married or cohabitating, your spouse or partner] to the time you adopted your child/ren. Tell me your family's creation story from the beginning. Include how you came to adopt and the story of the adoption.
4. Next, I would like you to tell me your family's creation story as you tell it to your adopted child/ren. Please tell me the story as if you were talking to your child/ren.
  - (a) How, if at all, is the creation story that you told to me different from the creation story you tell your adopted child/ren?
  - (b) What specific information do you make sure to include when you tell the family's creation story to your adopted child/ren? Please explain.
  - (c) What specific information do you leave out, if anything, when you tell the family's creation story to your adopted child/ren? Please explain. Is there a time when you plan to tell the story to your adopted child/ren and leave this information in the story? Please explain.
  - (d) What, if anything, is the moral or lesson you want your child/ren to take from the family's creation story?
  - (e) How, if at all, has your family's creation story changed as your child/ren has/have gotten older?
5. Since you and your child/ren look different from one another, what if anything have you told your child/ren about the differences in your looks?
  - (a) [If there are siblings that look different from the adopted child/ren] What if anything have you told your adopted child/ren about the differences in the children's looks?
  - (b) During the adoption process, what advice did you receive, if any, from your agency or social workers about how to discuss ethnicity, race, and/or nationality with your child/ren? What were you told?
  - (c) How, if at all, have you followed this advice? Please explain.
  - (d) What information, if any, do you wish you had received from your agency or social workers that would have helped you handle talking about the visible differences in your family?
  - (e) How would you like your child/ren to describe himself/herself/themselves to others?

6. What do you think is unique about parenting a visibly adopted child/ren?
  - (a) [If there are other children who are visibly similar to the parents] What, if anything is different about parenting your visibly different children than your visibly similar child/ren?
7. Ideally, how do you want your child/ren to talk with others about your family?
  - (a) What have you told your child/ren, if anything, about discussing your adoptive family?
8. What, if anything, do you want your child/ren to know about where they were born?
  - (a) What information, if anything, have you shared with your child/ren about where they were born?
  - (b) Is there anything to do with your child/ren's birth place that you have incorporated into their life with you? Please explain.
  - (c) Describe any sorts of items from your child/ren's birth place that you have in the home, if anything. Please describe these item(s) and what you do with them.
9. Since you adopted your child/ren, have you added any new routines or traditions to your family? These could be things you do on a regular basis or at certain times of the year. Please describe as many of these routines and traditions as you can in as much detail as you can. [For each routine and tradition]
  - (a) Why did you add this routine or tradition?
  - (b) How important is this routine or tradition to your family? How important is this routine or tradition to your child?
  - (c) Why is this routine or tradition important?
10. Describe what, if any challenging issues you have faced or expect to face when talking with your adopted child/ren about your family or their adoption.
11. What, if anything, do you want other people to know about your child/ren's adoption?
12. What, if anything, do you want others to know about you as a parent?
13. What, if anything, do you want others to know about your family?
14. Are there other important things that you think I should know about the process of communicating with your child/ren about the visible differences in your family in order to fully understand your experience?