The Experience of Parents in Forming a Relationship with their Older Adopted Children from Russia or Other Former Soviet Union Countries

by

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the experience of parents in forming a relationship with an older child adopted from Russia or other former Soviet Union country. Thirteen parents shared, through in-depth interviews, their experience of developing a parent-child relationship. Analysis of the data revealed several themes in these parents descriptions of the process of developing a relationship: commitment at time of adoption, beliefs and strategies about relationship development, the need for a reciprocal connection, the need for physical intimacy, and the importance of perceived connecting factors. Parents indicated that communication problems presented challenges in their relationship building process. Behaviour problems also represented a particular difficulty, as some of the parents experienced them as distancing and distracting from the process of forming a relationship.

Keywords: Adoptive parents, older child adoption, parent-child relation, adoption process.

DEDICATION

I want to dedicate this work to all the adoptive parents who accepted to be part of this research, and who gratefully shared their relationship story with me. I want to also dedicate this work to my life partner, Steve Clements, and my son William-Dèxy Cournoyer-Clements, who provided support to this work, and inspiration to my own parental relationship story.

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1. INTRODUCTION

I felt a little strange because I didn't really have any strong feelings for this child. Like I wasn't connected with her. I knew I was going to be her parent but she was a stranger. So it was sort of a mixed, weird feeling. Like, I didn't know who she was, or her personality. I just, you know, outside I could see that she was a cute little kid. But I didn't know who she was really. So sort of a weird feeling, knowing that I was going to take this kid home and that I was going to be her mom, but I didn't even know who she was.

A mother of a Russian adopted child

Under "typical" circumstances, parent-child relationship formation begins at, or sometimes even prior to, the child's birth. In adoption, especially in international adoption, this process can take place at a somewhat different time point. Because of usual delays or country regulations, internationally adopted children are often adopted beyond the infancy period (the first year of life). In the context of international adoption, and in the case of older internationally adopted children, children often come into their "forever" families with prior socialization, cultural or emotional experiences, as well as language skills that likely play a role in the building of a relationship with their adoptive parents. These children, in contrast to children who grow with their families from infancy, come to their adoptive families with a considerable amount of life experience acquired independently of the parents they will develop a relationship with. Therefore, individuals who adopt under these conditions will be called upon to develop a parent-child relationship in some unique and extraordinary conditions.

In addition, challenges pertaining to adoptive parenting are increasingly recognized. Adoption agencies progressively acknowledge adoptive parents' struggle in the process of adoption: "Although the public views adoptive children as the vulnerable party in adoption, agencies acknowledge that adoptive parents are also vulnerable" (Farber, Timberlake, Mudd, & Cullen, 2003, p. 176). The present study therefore focuses on parents' experiences of developing a relationship with their older internationally adopted child.

This inquiry aims to contribute towards the construction of a conception of this particular relationship from the adoptive parents' perspective. It focuses on the process of relationship formation between older adopted children and their adoptive parents from the perspective of these parents. In interviewing parents about their developing relationships with their children, definitions for relevant concepts such as bonding, attachment, and emotional connection were not provided by the researcher. Rather, parents used these terms in their own ways. In this study, I attempt to describe the complexity of how the parents perceive the experience of relationship formation with their adoptive children, and how the transition to adoptive parenting is experienced.

1.1. Initiation of the Project

As a result of discomfort with the way adoptive families were represented in the current research literature, and how results from studies on Romanian adoptees were often applied to Russian adopted children, the director of a Russian adoption

organization (The Canadian CIS-Friendship Society) contacted the director of the Romanian Adoption Project (at Simon Fraser University) to initiate consideration of research on Russian adoptees. The director of the organization expressed his apprehension with the notion that Russian adopted children experienced deficits similar to those depicted in current research on children adopted from Romanian institutions. He emphasized his perception that Russian adopted children where faring well and did not present with comparable levels of difficulty. I was invited to participate in a research program aimed at documenting Russian adoptions and design a study consistent with my own interest. This study was therefore initiated to explore the lived experience of families who adopted from Russia.

1.2. Overview of the Thesis

In chapter two, I introduce current trends in adoption, in order to establish the significance of inter-country adoption and older child adoption. An overview of the literature on parent-child relationship formation follows, with a specific focus on parental perspectives of relationship building with children. I additionally present models that have been proposed to understand relationship formation between parents and children (non adopted), as well as look into the current research on relationship formation in older child adoptions. I conclude this chapter with a presentation of the current literature on the transition to parenthood for those who adopt internationally, along with the challenges of parenting post-institutionalized adopted children.

Chapter three is the methodology chapter in which I describe the process of conducting and analysing interviews, using a qualitative framework.. The chapter concludes with reporting the ethical implications of the research process.

In the fourth chapter, I present the results of the analysis, and describe the chronology and themes associated with the parents' relationship building with their children. I conclude this section with a presentation of additional factors involved in building a parental relationship with an older adopted child.

The final chapter highlights some of the implications of the research results. Each major topic introduced in the Results section is revisited in light of current literature. Some findings are further developed and contrasted with relevant literature, and some implications for counselling are suggested.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1. Trends in Adoption

International adoption has been a popular trend in Canada for the last decade. According to Sobol (1998) there are an estimated three international adoptions for every two infant domestic adoptions in Canada. Sobol asserts that international adoption is being pursued primarily because it is considered to be the quickest means of adopting a child. Additionally, for non-traditional applicants such as older couples, gays, singles, and couples with children, international adoptions have fewer constraints than other types of adoption. Typically, difficulties in adopting children domestically are associated with the shortage of healthy infants available for adoption, which in turn can be traced to the smaller number of woman relinquishing babies for adoption, an increase in birth control availability, and an increase in social acceptance of single parenthood.

According to the Adoption Council of Canada (2005), intercountry adoptions to Canada have been stable for nine years, running between 1,800 and 2,200 adoptions a year. From 1993 to 2002, Russia has been the third most popular country from which Canadians chose to adopt (not including former Soviet Union countries and Ukraine). Although between 1993 and 2002 the majority (14, 106) of internationally adopted children in Canada were between zero and four years old at adoption, 5, 446 or 27.8 % were five years old and older.

According to Whiteman (2003), a child who is between the age of 5 and 18 years old at the time of adoption is generally considered an older child (although it varies with states and countries). Whiteman emphasizes that older adoptive children face many issues that might significantly affect their adjustment to their adoptive families. In older child adoptions, the risk of disruption (child returned to the agency prior to legal finalization) and dissolution (severing legal ties after the adoption has been legalized) are considerably increased (Brodzinsky, Lang, and Smith, 1995, Whiteman, 2003). Indeed, the most consistent variable predicting adoption disruption is the age of the child at the time of adoption (Whiteman, 2003). Bird, Peterson, and Miller (2002), in their study of factors associated with distress in adoptive parents, indicated that the parents who reported the greatest distress had older children who were internationally adopted. The two areas that have been most strongly associated with dissolution and disruption include attachment, and behaviour management (Whiteman, 2003). Likewise, according to Johnson and Fein (1991), the inability of children to form an attachment is viewed by adoptive parents as one of the primary reasons for failure in adoption.

Accordingly, one of the most important aspects in family transition at adoption relates to the relationship formation between parents and children. A failure in the attachment process could potentially impact several areas of children's development, as well as compromise the viability of the adoption itself. As a result, one of the main tasks in families of older adoptees is to develop a satisfactory parent-child relationship.

2.2. Parent-Child Relationship Literature: A Focus on the Child Attachment Process

The bulk of the literature on parent-child relationship formation pertains to attachment theory, which has its roots in psychoanalytic and ethological perspectives. This perspective addresses the establishment, the maintenance, and the consequences of the affectionate bond between caregivers and children as a central factor for the healthy development of children. Within this framework, parents' relational experiences are most often discussed in terms of their contribution to the child's developing attachment. Cummings and Cummings (2000) contend that attachment is a particular conceptualisation of the influence of parents' on their children's development in the context of parent-child relationship. Attachment theorists have traditionally focused on the process whereby infants and young children develop confidence in their parents' protection. Its proponents assert that the attachment "system" has evolved to promote survival and reproductive success.

According to Hetherington, Parke, and Schmuckler (2003), the parent-child relationship that meets the child's emotional needs can provide children with incentive, which promotes the process of socialization. In turn, the process of socialization, which implies the development of self-regulatory abilities in children, has implications for social interactions, emotional well-being, and educational attainment. These authors assert that children who develop an healthy attachment to their parents presumably want to maintain their parent's affection and approval, and so are motivated to adopt a standard of behaviours that the parents have set for

them. Attachment therefore is believed to constitute the foundation for later relationships, and is associated with positive views of self.

2.3. The Parents' Experience of the Parent-Child Relationship: Processes in Relationship Formation and Emerging Models

As indicated by the extensive body of research on attachment, the importance ascribed to the attachment process in children is considerable. However, current developments in attachment theory increasingly recognize the significance of understanding the parents' bonding process within the parent-child relationship. Goldberg (2000) describes bonding, in contrast to attachment, as an emotional connection that parents form with their children, and the process by which it occurs.

Contemporary attachment researchers have acknowledged the importance of understanding the parents' experience of the relationship formation with their children:

> ...Focusing on the attachment system alone, the field has missed important insights into the parent-child relationship that emerge only when the perspective of the caregiver system is added. (George & Solomon, 1999, p. 665)

George and Solomon, (1999) emphasize that historically, attachment and developmental theorists have approached the mother as a variable –a set of discrete behavioural or qualitative dimensions-, but claim that in order to understand caregiving, there is a need to understand the "mother" in her own right (as having her own developmental trajectory, and as a separate, autonomous motivational system). Their work points to the importance of understanding the perspectives of parents on

relationship building with their children, to better appreciate the dynamics of the parent-child relationship.

Interactional theories (introduced by Richard Bell with his control system model on mutual influences between parents and children), as cited by Amber (2001), have also highlighted the importance of addressing the parental perspective to better understand parent-child relationships. Amber (2001) acknowledges the importance of children's influence in the lives of their parents. She identifies several areas where parents might be affected by children's presence, behaviours, characteristics, or attitudes. She adds that parents (compared to non-parents) share a special mode of human interactions. More specifically, she contends that children contribute to the "expansion of adults' interactional repertoire as parents and children's interactions encompass a wide range of levels, whether in terms of body languages, facial expressions, behaviour, and verbal communication" (p. 59). In addition, Amber mentions how children can be excellent companions and comments on the close emotional and physical bond that children can provide for their parents. She asserts that children often nurture parents, and that proximity of a small child can have a soothing effect on parents.

Looking into the motivational factors of prospective parents provides an additional window into the potential benefits and meaning parents attribute to this particular type of relationship. It allows the perspective of parents to take the forefront, and to explore how parents perceive the impact of children in their lives. According to Hammer Burns (1999), reasons for wanting children (and theories

about it) range from biological drive, cultural norms, religious mandate, status symbol, attainment of adulthood, affectional ties, economic utility, role fulfilment, ego gratification, or power. Motivation (to become a parent) in infertile couples has also been identified as a desire for happiness and well-being, identity development (for women), and marital completion for men.

Overall, there appears to be an increase in interest into the perspective of parents in their relationships with their children, with an attention to understanding its impact on children development, as well as to better comprehend the parental process as an object of inquiry in and of itself. However, the parents' process in relationship development has not been extensively studied. Sluckin (1998) contends that very little has been written about the time scale or the context for the development of affectionate feelings from the mother's perspective. Nevertheless, Sluckin reports a few studies, which document the variety of experiences of mothers in mother-child relationship formation. The results of these studies indicate that a small number of mothers report feeling affection for their babies at birth, while the others take several months to feel close to their children. Other studies suggest that affectionate feelings typically occur within the first week post-partum. In his report, Sluckin provides no details regarding the parental process of developing an emotional bond with their children.

On a theoretical level, Bowlby (as cited by Cavell, 1969) originally hypothesized that the behaviour of attachment figures (most often parents) would be

organized by a "caregiver behavioural system"[1]. According to Bowlby, the caregiver system is in some degree pre-programmed, and includes a subset of parental behaviours designed to promote security and comfort when the parent perceives that the child is in real or potential danger. Bowlby, using an ethological approach (based on convictions that certain behaviours are expressions of independent, instinctual motivational systems related with adaptation and survival), assumed that parents are motivated by a biological urge to care for, and protect their children.

George and Solomon (1999) proposed one of the first models of a caregiving system, and began to outline an approach to caregiving. Their model describes a behavioural system evolving in parallel but independent of the attachment system. The process of development of the caregiving system (in accordance with Bowlby's initial conceptions of the caregiving system), and its activation –which results from both internal (hormones, cultural beliefs, etc.) and external cues (state of the environment, state of infant, etc.)- is characterized by a "behavioural goal" of protecting the child. This system is thought to be regulated, in the caregiver's mind, by a cognitive model that evaluates, emotionally appraises, and organizes the caregiver's experience. George and Solomon propose that the development of the caregiving system behaviours is the product of a complex interaction of biological and experiential factors having their roots in childhood (play-mothering, child's own experience with receiving care, etc), as well as drawing on adult experiences. The

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[1] Ethologists contend that most human behaviours are organized into behavioural systems. These systems are believed to organize a large repertoire of behaviours in humans and other species, as well as personality development, and social interactions. (Bowlby as cited in George and Solomon, 1999)

caregiving system develops greatly during the transition to parenthood (pregnancy, birth, and months immediately following birth). These authors further speculate that the experience that a "mother" brings to the birth, her representation as a caregiver, her interpretation of the birth experience, and her experience of the birth itself might be factors that together influence the caregiving system. Other factors they contend that might influence the development of the caregiving system are associated with the baby. Physical attributes of the child, and physical contact might be factors that evoke caregiving behaviour, and increase sensitivity to the child. According to these authors, the working model of the caregiver's relationship with her child will have a significant impact on the resulting parent-child relationship: "The mother's perception of her infant, and their relationship appears to be a more important factor than any single quality of the baby" (George and Solomon, 1999, p. 660).

Another model, proposed by Bell and Richard (2000), to explain motivation for and process of caregiving is the "Connection Theoretical Orientation". This model presents an account of caregiving that places emotions (the emotion of caring) at the centre of caregiving. These authors contend that George and Solomon's model of caregiving fails to provide an adequate account of the caregiver's motivation, and suggest a model that involves the concepts of empathy and responsibility as central to the caregiving system. This orientation focuses on the emotion of caring (defined as an enduring dyadic emotion that continues over the long term that is directed toward a specific partner, and that develops over time) and trust.

They propose that initially, the child's responsiveness, as imagined or experienced by the parent, initiates the caregiving bond. They further add that many parents experience the emotion of caring well before the birth of the child. However, they suggest that caring often arises from an experience of the child's responsiveness, as the parent feels the emotion of caring when the parent sees the child as personally responsive to him or her. In the normative experience of parent-child interaction, the parent's experience of the child's responsiveness tends to increase with time. They add that it is the emotion of caring that provides the ongoing emotional motivation for the caregiving process. In sum, this model supplements the "attachment theorists" perspective of the caregiving "system" in providing a description of an emotional motivation for the action of the caregiver.

In models of caregiving such as the one introduced by George and Solomon, the authors have mostly discussed caregiving in terms of mothers' caregiving system. They nevertheless acknowledge the possible existence of a caregiver's system in fathers as well, but speculate that the context in which such a system is activated might differ from mothers. They emphasize that that father's caregiving system remains to be researched.

However, other theorists have recently attempted to understand relationship development that occurs between fathers and children. The "generative fathering theory" introduced by Dollahite, Hawkins, and Brotherson (2005) describes fathering that responds readily and consistently to a child's developmental needs over time. It is more specifically defined as "fathering that meets the needs of children by working

to create and maintain a developing ethical relationship with them" (p. 4). According to Dollahite et al. (2005) "Generative fathering theories" proposes that a vital element in this relationship includes facilitating attachment with children or simply connecting with the child in a supportive, lasting relationship. In their study on the dynamics of connection between fathers and their children, the authors reported that some essential components of father-child connection include a feeling of emotional and psychic connection to the child, a context of meeting the child's developmental needs for care and guidance, personal interaction centered in support or activities together, and the practice of "generative care" by the father towards the child. They additionally speculate that the foundations for connecting with a child develop from birth as parents respond to a child's needs for safety, food, and protection, and form a bond that motivates care for the child. In essence, the care for a child motivates further care (and bonding) for that child. They assert that both fathers and children seem to benefit from the positive development of these "early ties" (p. 5). The authors acknowledge that the patterns of how men care for children "are still being discovered" (p. 2). They call for more in depth qualitative research to understand fathering in context as different then an "adjunct" to maternal caregiving. Still in the process of developing their theory, Dollahite, Hawkins, and Brotherson do not provide a detailed process of relationship development between fathers and children.

These current views of the caregiving system are interesting and plausible attempts to understand the emergence and development of the parental bond to children, but are still largely at the theoretical stage, and require empirical support.

Most lack in providing a comprehensive account of how caregivers build or develop a specific bond with their child.

2.4. Parent-Child Relationship Formation in Older Children's Adoption: Factors Associated with Relationship Building

Developing a bond with an older internationally adopted child has the potential to be experienced differently from the development of a relational bond with an infant (with or without biological ties). From a theoretical point of view, several aspects of parent-child relationship formation could be expected to differ in this circumstance.

In older adoptions the attachment process (with the adoptive parents) occurs at a later time in the child's development (than with infants). The adoptive parents and child do not share the early childhood normative steps in attachment development, and parents also have to presumably negotiate the attachment relationship with the current developmental level of the child at adoption. In other words, the parents and child are building an attachment at a period when the child would typically start to develop his or her autonomy, and independence from the parents (Reitz & Watson, 1992). The expectations that parents might hold with regard to the autonomy of a school age child could be conflicting with the needs of older internationally adopted children:

> According to attachment theory, a child's attachment behaviour becomes organized toward a particular caregiver sometimes between 6 and 12 months of age…when a child is beyond 2 years of age, caregivers may be less responsive to the child's need for close contact… and may expect him or her to display more autonomy…given that attachment theory suggests that sensitive responsiveness predicts the quality of attachment relationship…developing an attachment relationship later might be more difficult (MacLean, 2003).

Moreover, it appears that in older adoption the child's age at adoption often coincides with the child's increased awareness of adoption issues:

> It is not until children begin to understand the meaning and implication of adoption –around 5 to 7 years of age- that one expects to see the emergence of sensitivity to adoption-related loss and stigma as well as shift toward more ambivalent feelings about being adopted" (Brozinsky, Smith, and Brodzinsky, 1998, p. 19).

Adoptive parents in these circumstances have to possibly contend with developing a relationship with a child who is simultaneously struggling with negotiating the complexity and implications of being adopted, and his or her need for autonomy from the parents.

Brozinsky, Lang and Smith (1995) paint a fairly bleak picture of relationship development with older adopted children. They speculate that even if a child is able to form attachments to new parents, difficulties in interpersonal functioning may persist. They add that older children, when adopted, might enter new families with expectations about relationships that are based on perceptions that the world is dangerous, and unpredictable. They also may adopt behavioural patterns that were

adaptive in previous placements but not optimal in their adoptive family, and may be reluctant to relinquish the behaviours previously acquired.

To describe the mental framework an older adoptee might hold (and that parents might have to contend with), Smith, Howard, and Monroe (2000) reported two models that have been used in the adoption literature to understand attachment issues of adoptees. The two models stem from the work of Bowlby and Ainsworth (as cited in Smith, Howard, and Monroe, 2000, p. 540): the "grief and mourning model", and the "negative working model". Children in the first model are expected to have to mourn the loss of a previous attachment, in order to avoid interfering with their new attachment. In the second model, the children's internal representation of their early interaction with their primary caregivers will develop a working model that will shape future relationships. It is believed that the deprived conditions of orphanages, or the effect of having developed a first attachment within the confines of temporary conditions, will prevent or delay children from forming a necessary attachment with a stable, sensitive attachment figure. Based on quite different assumptions, the first model acknowledges the presence of an attachment figure (real or fantasized) to mourn, while the latter emphasizes the unlikelihood of such a relationship developing. Nonetheless, in the case of post-institutionalised inter-country adoption, MacLean's (2003) admits that very little evidence exists confirming the long held assumption that children would have been unlikely to have developed an attachment relationship in orphanage due to high child caregiver ratios. Hence, we can speculate that the relationship building between parents and child will most

likely be affected by the presence of the child's established working model of attachment. Accordingly, Forbes and Dziegielewski (2003) indicated that adoptive children with a history of trauma might present specific challenges for parents. Parents who adopt these children adopt the children *and* their past histories. It is probable that parents who develop a relationship in this context have to display a high level of sensitivity and awareness of the child's internal framework in order to overcome possible difficulties in establishing a connection with their child.

However, similar to the relative absence of research on the development of the parental relationship in birth families, research on the development of the parental relationship in families with older adopted children is rare. Given the risks associated with older child adoptions and the importance of the parent-child relationship for the viability of these adoptions, and understanding of the formation of this relationship is essential.

2.5. Transition and Adjustment in Intercountry Adoption: Risk Factors and Issues Associated with Adopting Children Internationally

As noted above, the body of literature on relationship formation for parents who adopt older international children is currently very small. However, an emerging literature pertaining to families' and parents' transition and adjustment to adoption will be reviewed here to document the different aspects parents will likely encounter, while developing a relationship with their older internationally adopted children. It is hypothesized that these factors might interact or, in some cases, interfere with the relationship development of parents and children.

Some of the potential challenges for adoptive parents (not including special needs, inter-country, inter-racial, or other special circumstances that might be associated with adoptive families) identified in the literature include stigmatisation, dealing with infertility, negotiating the process of adoption, communicating about and assisting children in resolving issues related to having been placed for adoption, addressing question related with biases, stigma, from others related with being a non-traditional family, and/or helping children develop positive identities that incorporate birth and adoptive families (O'Brien & Zamostny, 2003, Forbes & Dziegielewski, 2003, Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003).

More specific to intercountry adoption, McGuinness and Pallansch (2000) indicated that many children adopted from the former Soviet Union (the country of origin of children in this study) have presented with numerous mental and health difficulties. The difficulties identified ranged from behavioural and emotional challenges to developmental delays. These challenges were in part associated with the possible impact of institutionalisation on children's development. Other factors identified by the authors as having a potential effect on the health of these adoptive children included difficult economic conditions, poor sanitation, and limited and poor quality of health care. It is also important to specify that although most of the adopted children relinquished at birth spent significant portions of their early months or years in orphanages, others were forcibly removed and placed in orphanages due to parental abuse and neglect at a later age. The authors further added that other hazards should be considered to have possibly impacted these children. In one of the

studies they reported on internationally adopted children (86% being from former Soviet Union), low birth weight, exposure to alcohol in utero, as well as medical conditions such as fetal alcohol syndrome, cardiomyopathy, Hepatitis C, seizures, or reactive attachment disorder were some of the conditions observed.

Some of the possible factors identified by Levy-Shiff, Zoran, and Shulman (1997), which could represent challenges to the adjustment of international adoptees and their families include (excluding factors of institutionalisation which will be discussed in the next section): racial, cultural, and religious integration in the adoptive families, possibility of racism in adoptive countries, older age at adoption, and failure or complications in the adoptive process abroad. One of the tasks of families who adopt from another country is to successfully negotiate the cultural transitions of the child with the family. According to Grotevan (2003), "many parents of internationally adopted children feel that their children need to understand and appreciate their culture of origin" (p. 757), promoting a model of racial enculturation over racial assimilation. He goes on further to say that transracial adoptees face the task of constructing a narrative that involves both their adoption and their ethnicity. According to Melina (1998, as cited by Tershakovee Iskalo, 2004), parents who adopt internationally can expect more complicated adjustments and more identity issues than other adoptive families. She asserts that older children adopted from other countries carry vivid memories of a different place, where thoughts and feelings were expressed in a different language.

However, in their study on family adjustment to international adoption of young children, Levy-Shiff, Zoran, and Shulman (1997) asserted that, in spite of the additional difficulties met by families who adopted internationally, no significant differences were observed in all areas in children (emotional, social, psychological, and learning adjustment) including coping with adoption issues (needing to know about biological parents, etc), children's behaviour at home, and interactions with parents than with the domestic adoption group. Parents who adopted internationally evaluated their parenting experiences as more positive and challenging, although they also tended to be more active when coping with parenting issues (more problem-focused, and support-seeking strategies). However, marked differences were identified in parental functioning and family relations between the two groups. Parents of inter-country adoptive children tended to be more involved in caregiving, but also more overprotective, intrusive, and controlling in their interactions with their children. They were less concerned with the differences between biological and adoptive families, and had more positive feelings about adoption.

In sum, inter-country adoption entails adjustments for families that still need to be further documented. A potential source for numerous mental and health difficulties, empirical research reveals that adjustment to adopting internationally can be, in some cases, challenging, and in others, very satisfying to adoptive parents. However, a better understanding of the process of adjustment for parents who adopt children internationally should help assess factors that are likely to interact with relationship formation with their children.

2.6. Parenting Post-Institutionalised Children: Risk Factors and Issues Associated with Adopting Children from Orphanages

It is important to mention that most children adopted from Russia or former Soviet Union countries would have experienced institutionalisation prior to adoption. Considering recent evidence, post-institutionalised children are considered to be at increased risk. As Grotevan (2003) points out, outcome research on post-institutionalised adopted children is showing a "paradox of marked improvement but persistent deficits (p. 755)". There is a body of evidence that associates the length of time spent in institutions with the level of impact on developmental problems or delays in developments. To what extent these problems are lasting or permanent has not yet been ascertained. The quality and level of care in institutions have also been associated with a range of outcomes. The risks associated with institutionalisation of children identified by McGuinness and Pallansch (2000) include (1) increased morbidity from infectious disease, (2) delay in nutrition and growth, (3) impairment in cognitive development, (4) difficulties in socio-affective development, and (5) physical and sexual abuse.

Adoptive parents of post-institutionalised children have been reported as experiencing more stress than parents in comparison groups. In a study on parents' assessment of parental stress and the effects of early institutionalisation, results indicated that children's behaviour problems were highly associated with parenting stress for both mothers and fathers (Judge, 2003). Across studies researchers have consistently found that children with orphanage experience have more behaviour

problems than children without orphanage experience (Maclean, 2003, p. 863). In her review of literature on the impact of institutionalisation on child development, MacLean (2003) stated that post- institutionalised adopted children with lower I.Q.'s and behaviour problems had more difficulty forming attachment relationships with their adoptive parents, most likely because these factors interfere with the parents' ability to be sensitively responsive to their children (p. 876). Forbes and Dziegielewski (2003) reported that adoptive parents often found that "conventional" parenting techniques to control difficult behaviours were ineffective with these children.

Considering the number of challenges associated with post-institutionalised children, children adopted from orphanages might be considered having special needs. Although criteria qualifying children to "special needs" status varies between provinces and countries, some of the criteria of children identified as special needs regarding adoptive placement often include children who: are older, have an emotional, physical or developmental disability, are members of a sibling group, minority heritage, or have history of physical abuse, sexual abuse or neglect (Forbes and Dziegielewski, 2003, Pinderhughes, 1996). In view of the challenges adoptive families of post-institutionalised children often encounter, most are considered as special needs adoptions (Gindis, 2000). Forbes and Dziegielewski (2003) assert that adoptive mothers of children with special needs might undergo their own grieving process related with the reality of living with a special needs child. They further indicated that there has not been a comprehensive study to "explore and identify

these specific issues facing adoptive mothers of special needs children" (p. 303). According to Brodzinsky, Lang, and Smith (1995), one of the most important tasks faced by special needs adoptive families is forming a parent-child attachment, which can be complicated by the impact of disrupted relationships as well as by heightened parental anxiety, or by a mismatch between parental expectations and the child's characteristics and behaviours. Furthermore, Pinderhugues (1996) stated that although special needs adoptions are considered high risk, little is known of the process that occurs during family adjustment following special needs adoption.

Nonetheless, attachment and relationship development occurring subsequent to institutionalisation have not been extensively documented (Brodzinsky, Lang, and Smith, 1995). Livingston Smith, Howard and Monroe (2000) stress that the process by which adoptive children resolve the loss of attachment has seldom been empirically examined, and attachment research seems to have underplayed the role of the adoptive parents and context and its function on attachment.

In sum, parents adopting institutionalised children might be considered as adopting special needs children, and are at risk for challenges pertaining to this type of adoption. Parents are likely to encounter behavioural difficulties with their child, as well as to be facing attachment and relationship issues.

2.7. Adoptive Parent Characteristics

In their review of literature on adoptive families, O'Brien & Zamostny (2003) reported that many adoptive parents might possess resources and characteristics that

act as protection against negative outcomes, such as the ones described in the previous sections. They support their view by mentioning that adoptive parents tend to be older, have greater financial resources, and may have developed a strong cohesive foundation for approaching parenthood due to the many obstacles they have overcome to achieve their desire of becoming parents. They also indicated that overall adoptive families generally report positive outcomes regarding satisfaction with adoption, familial functioning, and parent-child communication. Brodzinsky, Lang, and Smith (1995) add that adoptive parents are likely to have developed more effective coping skills and have been married longer (which they claim may foster greater marital sensitivity and communication). These reported parental characteristics might explain why, in spite of the challenges involved in adoption, a majority of parents report being satisfied with their adoptive relationships (O'Brien & Zamostny, 2003).

2.8. Conclusion

Given the theoretical importance of the parent-child relationship, the role parents play in the development of this relationship, the increasing awareness of the importance of the parents' relational experience in the adoption dyad, and the rising awareness of the issues surrounding inter-country adoption of older children, there appears to be a considerable practical significance to understanding how relationship formation develops in adoptive parent-child relationships. Understanding the perspective of parents on the development of their relationship with their older adoptive child will most likely provide a significant piece of this relational puzzle

within the adoptive constellation. This in turn could provide valuable tools for clinicians, adoption workers, and most of all, for prospective adoptive parents to better understand the process of forming a relationship with their older internationally adopted children.

3. METHOD

3.1. Case Study Methodology

In conducting this study, I made the decision to use a multiple case study design as the participant families all have the common experience of adoption from a similar context (Russian or former Soviet Union countries orphanages). It was one of my assumptions that participants in this study would share some aspects of that experience. The case study approach enabled an in-depth investigation of their experience.

3.2. Sampling Strategy

Initially, a list of potential participants was generated with the assistance of the Canadian CIS-Friendship Society, an adoption facilitator, and the Adoptive Family Association of British-Columbia who had contacted their members through letters or e-mails. These organisations explicitly informed their members about the study. In the case of the Canadian CIS-Friendship Society, the organisation provided a list of members (with the exception of participants who declined to share their contact information for the study). From the generated list, I attempted to contact each family who lived in the Lower Mainland. Three phone calls were made to all listed names, and a search for missing phone numbers, or wrong phone numbers was done through the "White pages". To be included in the study, participants had to fulfil the minimal criteria of having adopted a child of at least five years of age from an

orphanage in Russia or a former Soviet country (including Ukraine), and be available for a face-to- face interview between the 31st of January 2005 and the 30th of April 2005.

As indicated in Table 3.1, a total of eight families (thirteen participants) were interviewed from the list of 54 families living in the Lower Mainland of British Columbia.

Table 3.1: Sampling

Total	Accessible Population: 41		Selected Sample: 13		
Accessible population (Volunteer from Russian organization or other adoptive organization)	Not meeting inclusion criteria	Unreachable and/or did not return call	Refused	Unavailable	Participated
54	30	11	3	2	8

Of these 54 families, 30 did not meet the age criteria for inclusion in the study, and eleven were unreachable or did not return our calls. From the selected sample (that did meet the age criteria), three refused to participate, and two were unavailable at the time of the study.

3.3. Participants

All participants provided demographic information (Appendix A), which is summarized in Table 3.2, using pseudonyms. As illustrated, this sample displayed some diversity in family constellations, as well as in the adoption context.

As indicated in Table 3.2, all participants in this study had adopted a child who was between 5 and 13 years old. Parents had lived with the adopted child in their home from between four weeks to nine years (time since adoption) with the average length being 5 years 8 months. Five participants were first time parents at the time of adoption. In addition, all participants identified themselves as Caucasian, although five participants specifically identified themselves as German or having German origins, one identified herself as being British, and one participant identified herself as Dutch. All participants except one, who had adopted four children of visible minority, had adopted Caucasian children. Six participants had earned graduate degrees or professional degrees, and one participant had earned a college or university education. The other six participants had completed high school or had some college or vocational education. Four of the eight families reported an income of $60, 000 and over, while three of the families had an income ranging from $30, 000 to $60,000. One family did not provide their income level. Below I provide a more detailed portrait of each participant and his or her family.

Les, a 57 year-old retired single father, had adopted a five year-old boy from Russia in 1999. Les's son had spent all his life in an orphanage prior to adoption. Les described his son as having experienced developmental and mental health problems.

Table 3.2: Family constellations

	Number of Years The Adopted Child Lived With Adoptive Family	Age of Child at Adopt-Ion	Age of Parents at Adoption	Parents' Level of Education	Annual Income Level	Parents' Cultural or Racial Background (As Defined By Parents)	Child's Racial Back-Ground	1st Time Parent	Adopted Infant Prior to Russian Adoption	Adopted Other Older Child Prior to Russian Adoption	Had Birth Children Prior to Russian Adoption	Adopted Other Child at Same Time	Adopted Child After Russian Adoption
Les	6	5	51	Vocational or college	30,000-40, 000	German	Caucasian	Yes					
Samantha and Thomas	9	5	34	High school completion	Above 100, 000	Caucasian	Caucasian	No			3		
			34	High school completion		Caucasian	Caucasian	No					
Jacqueline and Rod	4	7	36	Graduate	60, 000	German	Caucasian	Yes				1	1
			36	Graduate	70, 000	Caucasian	Caucasian	Yes					
Rachel and Cliff	9	11	48	Graduate	Above 100, 000	Cauc./British	Caucasian	Yes					
			64	Graduate		Cauc./Americ./ Germ./Scottish	Caucasian	No			4		
Sue and Patrick	6	8	45	Prof. School	70, 000 80, 000	German	Caucasian	No		1		1	
			37	Vocational or college		Caucasian	Caucasian	No					
Jasmine	8	6	46	Graduate	50, 000 60, 000	Cauc./Dutch	Asian	No		2		1	
Joanne	4	5	41	High school completion	40, 000 50,000	German	Caucasian	Yes					
Mary and Miles	4 weeks	13	N/A	College or university graduate	N/A	Caucasian	Caucasian	No	1				
			N/A	Vocational or college		Caucasian	Caucasian	No					

Samantha, a 43 year-old homemaker and Thomas, a 43 year-old superintendent, already had three birth children at the time of adopting their five year-old girl from Russia in1996. Their adopted daughter had spent three years in orphanage before being adopted. Samantha indicated that her daughter presented with "typical institutionalisation delays" and signs of foetal alcohol effects.

Jacqueline, a 41 year-old university assistant professor and Rod, a 41 year-old writer, adopted a five-year-old boy, and seven-year-old girl (siblings) from the Ukraine in 2001. They also adopted a newborn from the USA in December 2004. Both adoptions were performed in the USA through a private agency. The five-year old boy was later diagnosed with Reactive Attachment Disorder, and the adoption was dissolved after three years in the adoptive family. The paternal adoptive grandparents subsequently adopted the child.

Rachel, a 57 year-old college instructor, and Cliff, a 73 year-old retired college instructor, adopted their 11 year-old daughter from Russia in 1996. Cliff had raised four birth children from a previous marriage. Their daughter had spent approximately nine years in an orphanage before being adopted. Rachel mentioned that her daughter had experienced behavioural and attachment difficulties.

Sue, a 52 year-old accountant, and Patrick, a 44 year-old truck operator, adopted an 11 year-old girl from Russia in 1995 four years prior to adopting two Russian siblings, a boy aged seven and a girl aged eight in 1999. Although the focus of interview was on the most recent adoption of their two children, the first adoption was discussed as well. All three children had lived in orphanages for at least two

years at the time of adoption. The older daughter had been identified, at the time of adoption, as having developmental delays.

Jasmine, a 56 year-old teacher and single mother had adopted two older children domestically, before simultaneously adopting a one-year-old girl, and a six-year-old girl (non related) from Kazakhstan in 1997. All Jasmine's adopted children were of visible minorities. Her older internationally adopted child was placed in an orphanage soon after birth. She has been diagnosed with a severe learning disability.

Joanne, a 46 year-old administrator and a single mother had adopted a five-year-old girl from Russia in 2001. Her daughter had lived in an orphanage since birth.

Mary, (age not available) a computer consultant, and Miles, a business manager, had previously adopted a two-year-old child in 1996 from Russia before adopting her older sister in March 2005. The parents searched for siblings of their first daughter, and eventually were able to find and adopt her 13 years old sister, nine years after the first adoption. The older daughter lived nine years in orphanages before being adopted.

3.4. Interview Procedure

Interview questions were designed to explore the adoptive parents' experience of getting to know and forming a relationship with their "older" adoptive child. Questions were formulated with the parents' experience in mind, leaving space for them to express their thoughts and feelings.

I conceived a semi-structured interview schedule to address some topics I thought would be relevant to the parent's experience of adoption. However, the interview questions were relatively flexible, and were modified according to the direction of the conversation. Rubin and Rubin (1995) suggest that in qualitative interviewing, it is important to set up an overall framework for the interview while allowing flexibility for discovering unexplored areas:

> Main questions change during the course of the research, as the researcher learns what to ask and to whom to ask it... conversational guides are not rigid frameworks that prepared once and for all; rather they are customized for each interview and evolve throughout the work (Rubin & Rubin, p.145 and p.161).

The interview protocol was accordingly revised after a number of interviews. The questions were fine tuned to better ensure that relevant themes and concepts (using indications from these preliminary interviews) were fully explored (Appendix B). A focus was determined after a look into the preliminary data collection. I used three themes to provide focus to the interviews: becoming a parent, current parenting relationship, and thoughts or feelings about being a parent. These themes were drawn from the overall purpose of the study, as topics that were to be addressed within each interview. Specific questions were formulated, but were considered as guidelines to address these central themes.

Interviews were approximately 2 hours in length. All were performed at the parents' home except one, which occurred at Simon Fraser University. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Most interviews (except

two) were performed with adopted children within proximity (in a room next to where the interview took place), and in one case, with the child present in the room (the child only spoke Russian). Interviews were performed with both parents present (in two parents families), which did insure that all parents were represented in the study. Daniluk and Hurtig-Mitchell (2003), in their study on infertile couples, highlighted some of the limitations of proceeding this way (power differences, social desirability, and relationship dynamics within each couple that could affect the degree of open and honest disclosure during the interviews), however, they also confirmed the efficiency of using such a method: "advantages of interviewing couples together in that this approach ensured the participation of both members of the couple and allowed them to construct a shared narrative of their experience" (Daniluk & Hurtig-Mitchell, 2003, p. 391).

3.5. Analysis

Van Manen (2001) describes three approaches to uncover themes in interview data: the holistic approach (attend to the text as a whole and express a phrase that captures the fundamental meaning of the text as a whole), the highlighting approach (after reading the text several times, underline statement (s) or phrase (s) that seems essential or revealing about the experience being described), and the detailed or line-by-line approach (look at every single sentence and ask what this sentence reveals about the phenomenon being described).

In my analysis, I used a line-by-line approach to analyse each interview transcript. I first classified all codable responses under one of the three general themes of focus (becoming a parent, current parenting relationship, and thoughts or feelings about being a parent) or under "other themes". Themes I selected through this process were the ones that were recurrent in the transcriptions (if the topic was mentioned once by several participants), or were topics that were brought up, and emphasised by individuals (topic that was mentioned by only one individual, but that seemed significant for this person). This first attempt at coding was useful in providing an initial structure to the coding process. However, as a result of using three predetermined coding categories, the analysis was lacking in breath and depth.

In a second attempt at analysis, I followed a process suggested by members of my supervisory committee. This analysis was performed independently of the original interview themes and previous analysis. As a first step, a statement of the purpose of the study was kept in view and used to focus the coding process. With this statement and the relevant literature in mind, a re-reading of the first interview was performed, during which I examined aspects of the interview that bore directly on the purpose of the study. For each relevant interview response, I asked myself what the statement was about. The answer to this question enabled me to formulate relevant themes. The first interview was then used as a generator of themes. Each subsequent interview was analysed and themes found were integrated to the first list of themes. Each interview was analysed with this method, adding new themes as they occurred. Themes were also created through discussion with committee

members. I made a deliberate decision to use participant's metaphors, and images as much as possible to categorize the themes.

The next step in this analysis process involved moving to a more abstract level of analysis to develop a more conceptual "landscape". I made attempts to uncover the intentional and underlying meaning conveyed by the participants, and to consider the overall (global) message that was conveyed through the whole interview. In addition, I searched for more unifying and interpretive themes (as opposed to the initial themes that were very literal, chronological and descriptive). This process is considered an important step in the process of "making sense" of the data, as Merriam (1998) states: "ethnographers who simply describe what they saw ...fail to do justice to their data...researchers risk misinterpretation. Their results also may be trivialized..."(p. 179). Furthermore, Berg (1989) discusses "manifest versus latent" content analysis, which could be compared to surface and deep structural meaning contained in the text. The importance of considering both aspects is that data analysis that considers solely the textual form and the elements that are "physically present and countable" might overlook the underlying meaning conveyed by the message. One suggestion Berg makes as a way to overcome the dangers of misinterpretation is to document the researcher's interpretation with supportive statements.

A strategy I used to guide the uncovering of underlying meaning in the analysis was to start from the perspective of what a prospective parent would need to know overall about relationship building. The idea was to get a sense across the

interviews of what were the core aspects relevant to relationship building for parents involved in adoption of older internationally adopted children.

The last step involved an immersion in the data and work at finding the underlying connections between the experiences of relationship building through a process of moving back and forth between data, the emerging text, and the relevant literature. This enabled me to triangulate my emerging interpretations of the data with the literature and the words of my participants. I wrestled through all these different perspectives in order to find aspects that were to be reported. A version of the results was produced from themes that were uncovered through this methodological process.

As a result of bringing focus to the study, some themes were eliminated, as they did not fit with the specific focus of the research. However, it might be argued that these still bear some connection with the experience of relationship building. It feels precarious in this research to make the balance between determining a focus and preserving the complexity of the phenomenon. As an example, the theme surrounding the decision process of adoption is not extensively reported here but could still be claimed to relate in some meaningful way to relationship development.

In the analysis of the interviews, I had difficulty categorizing some of the themes in a definite manner. For instance, as the process of getting to know one's child sometimes happened in the child's country of origin, and other times happened in Canada, it could be contended that the two experiences describe a different process of parental adjustment when happening abroad or at home. This example

demonstrates some of the problems I faced in assigning a comprehensible and unambiguous theme to different phenomenon reported in this study.

3.6. Trustworthiness

In designing this study, I made the decision to draw from the constructs used in qualitative research to provide a framework to evaluate the significance of the inquiry. These concepts offer a set of criteria for judging the quality and rigor of the investigation. The notion of trustworthiness, in naturalistic inquiry, has been defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as an intention to persuade the audience of the value and worthiness of the inquiry. Constructs associated with trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility, in qualitative research consists of ascertaining compatibility between the constructed realities in the respondents' narrative to what is reported and attributed to the respondents in the inquiry. It can be established by triangulation (multiple investigators, sources of data, and methods to confirm findings), prolonged engagement, persistent observation, peer debriefing, (consulting with peers about emerging findings) and multi-site design (using multiple site, cases, through purposeful or random sampling). Accordingly, the use of co-researchers in this study (i.e., my supervisory committee) provided an opportunity for checking the credibility of the emerging themes. In other words, the use of multiple investigators allowed for alternative perspectives to be explored. Couples additionally provided a source of triangulation as they brought diverging perspectives, and questioned, argued, and

challenged each other's interpretation of their experience. The design using multiple cases provided additional perspectives into the phenomenon, and allowed other points of view to be represented.

Transferability is the extent to which the findings can be applied in other contexts. Although the ability to ascertain transferability of findings is left to readers, the process of evaluating its application to other contexts could be supported with the help of thick description, and purposive sampling, which would likely maximize the range of specific information that can be obtain about this phenomenon. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003) suggested that the use of thick description typically refers to statements that attempt to re-create a situation and as much of its context as possible. The use of thick description provides the reader "with a depiction in enough detail to show that the author's conclusion 'makes sense" (Merriam, 1998, p.199). Geertz (1973) goes as far as affirming the primacy of thick description in ethnographic research: "but it is not these received procedures that define the enterprise (of ethnographic research)…it is …an elaborate venture in 'thick description" (p. 6). The results of this study are presented with the use of extensive descriptions and quotes that provide readers with the ability to assess, from the evidence, the coherence and relevance of the results, as well as allow readers to determine whether the findings can be transferred to other situations.

Dependability refers to the quality of the integrated processes of data collection, data analysis, and theory generation. It is closely associated with the credibility construct, and arguments have been made that dependability need not to

be demonstrated separately from credibility. It is also sometimes identified as the capacity of research findings to be replicated given similar respondents and contexts. In this study, an account of data collection, as well as the decision processes that occurred throughout the study provide an "audit trail" in order to allow readers to understand the process through which the results were derived. Some samples of this process have been provided in this report. Audiotapes, interview transcripts, journal, interview drafts, decision process log, research proposal can be used as additional evidences of the process of the inquiry.

Confirmability refers to the degree to which the conclusions are the products of the focus of the inquiry and are not dominated by the biases of the researcher. An audit trail can be a useful resource to help an auditor decide if the conclusions can be traced to the source and can be supported by the data. Data that can be reviewed include raw data (audiotapes, field notes, documents), reduced data (working hypothesis, summaries) reconstructed data (themes developed, findings and conclusions, final report), process notes (audit trail notes, methodological notes), material relating to intentions, assumptions and dispositions of the researcher (proposal, personal notes, expectations), and instrument development information (forms and preliminary schedules, surveys). Members' checks (taking the data back to participants) and collaborative methods of research (involving participants in all phases) are useful means to increase the possibility of findings that reflect the respondents' perspective.

In this inquiry, I complemented the interview transcriptions with some field notes, in order to better reflect on my perspective as an interviewer. The field notes were used to triangulate my findings and allowed me to reflect on my individual process, in addition to providing insights on my initial and ongoing assumptions. These initial assumptions were reported in this thesis as the researcher's process. The process of stating my own expectations added to the purpose of providing readers with information to increase their ability to ascertain the trustworthiness of my interpretations. More specifically it allows readers to evaluate the extent to which the perspective of the researcher has possibly interfered with the original intent of representing the respondents' perspective.

Finally, I used a collaborative process (also referred to as member checks) in which a copy of the interviews and themes were provided to participating families for further comments, modifications, or validation. The participants were invited to verify and correct the themes that were assigned to ensure accurate representation of their ideas. Corrections of themes and interviews were subsequently done as needed (although only two participants responded and suggested some corrections).

3.7. Ethical Considerations Pertaining to the Research

In depth investigation in qualitative research carries both risks and benefits. Participants, as Merriam (1998) suggests, might feel that their privacy has been invaded, or may be embarrassed by certain questions. In depth interviewing might even have unanticipated long-term effects as participants might become aware of

painful memories. There is a possibility of affecting participants in different way as Van Manen confirms here:

> The research may have a certain effect on people with whom the research is concerned...They may feel discomfort, anxiety, false hope, superficiality, guilt, self-doubt, irresponsibility-but also hope, increased awareness, moral stimulation, insight, a sense of liberation, a certain thoughtfulness, and so on. The research methods used may have a lingering effect on the actual 'subjects' involved in the study. (Van Manen, 2001, p.162)

Several ethical issues have been considered within this study. The potential impact of the research on parents, identified prior to the investigation, included: the possibility that presenting information through written reports, and discussing personal beliefs or ideas that had not been shared within the family, might have an impact on adoptive family dynamics; the possibility that parents, through research conversations, could re-awaken previous trauma or grieving issues that might not have been resolved; the possibility of getting families to consider ideas or concepts which they might not have considered or wanted to discuss, and in doing so, stimulating or impacting negatively the way they envision their situations.

Although it is difficult to assess at this point the impact of my inquiry on the participants, some measures have been taken to reduce the likelihood of a negative impact on the adoptive families who were involved in this study. Some of the measures involved taking care, within the writing process, to protect the identity of families and individuals. In addition, the interview process was substantially flexible to allow the participants to control the direction and the content they wished to share with the interviewer. Moreover, each participant was given a copy of their interview

transcription and themes, and had the opportunity to make any corrections or changes at any point in the process.

3.8. The Researcher's Process

The thesis process, while researching the subject of adoption, meeting with adoptive parents and families, and getting acquainted with "the world of adoption," took me on a reflective journey.

Looking through my research journal, I can recall my thoughts following the first interview. My original impression was that there seemed to be no "remarkable" findings to be reported from the first meeting with this adoptive parent. At that point in the process, I could not see any threads that could lead me to presume of the significance of studying the parents' relationships with their older adoptive children. Although reassuring in some respects, as I trusted adoptive relationships to be a viable way to form a family, this did not help me to confirm anything worth investigating. What I considered of value at that point was associated with differences in the relational process between adoptive parents and birth parents (or parents who adopted infants).

All through the subsequent interviews, I heard the long, difficult and often similar journey parents described through bureaucratic nightmares in their travel at the other end of the world, which culminated in bringing back their long awaited child. My reaction was one of disappointment as, throughout most of the interviews, I found out that very few parents seemed able to extensively answer questions

directly related with relationship building with their child. My assumption at that point was that most parents (adoptive or not) assumed that building a relationship with one's children as a "natural" or intuitive process.

I also wondered how much of that unsettling and painful personal and cultural journey each parent described in great detail was shared by the children themselves. By acknowledging the parents' journey, I could not help but feel the need to acknowledge the children's as well.

In reflecting on connections and relationships, I started to widen my lens to look at people who were touched by the adoption (siblings, friends, living parents). Although I never doubted the desire of adoptive parents to provide a "better" future to their adopted children, I also questioned the impact of adoption on the people left behind (siblings, friends), and the people of Russia. I wondered how adoptive parents negotiated their adoptive children's previous relationships, as well as how they defined the new constellation within their own families. However, the need to restrict the focus of my thesis prevented me to look at this broader perspective.

A whole set of questions arose around the nature of the parent-child relationship. Through this inquiry, I questioned my, and other's concept of the nature of the relationship between a parent and a child. I wondered at what point a relationship between a parent and a child is considered as such, and what are the factors that allow such perceptions to be met. I questioned the concepts of emotional connection, bonding, parental love, and other related terms commonly

used and implicitly experienced by parents. This became the focus of the subsequent part of my inquiry.

Therefore, the construction of the results was accomplished by selecting statements and quotes, which, I felt, bore some significance to the parents' relationship-formation with their child. This process proved to be challenging, as it required establishing a balance between my own analytical process, and the parents' narrative, in order to best represent their experience.

4. RESULTS

4.1. The Initial Relationship Building Process

It was a challenging task to determine what aspects of the experience of parents who adopted older children were relevant to the relationship building process, or to even clearly establish at which point the relationship was initiated. Many different areas of the parents' experience could provide insight into the way they developed relationships with their adoptive children. I speculated that the commitment to the child, the first meeting with that child, as well as their journey home together would provide relevant information regarding the initial relationship building process. By documenting parents' perspectives on these experiences, I hoped to further understand the genesis of the relationship building process in older child international adoptions. It is important to remember that these parents' narratives of the development of their relationships were recounted after the fact, and were informed by having lived with and, in most cases, having experienced a relationship with the child.

4.1.1. Commitment to the Child at the Time of Adoption

Parents who adopt internationally embark on a journey filled with challenges and uncertainties. From the pre-adoptive home study to the bureaucratic "ordeal" in a foreign country, most parents' narratives were tied by one common factor: the

commitment they made to a child. A commitment in this context could be defined as the dedication to pursue the legal adoption, and to become the parent of a child (to develop a parent-child relationship). Indeed, the commitment to a child seemed to be a central factor in the adoption process. Most parents commented in one way or another about their overall dedication to building a relationship with their prospective child. However, the parents in this study approached the relationship building in adoption with different levels of commitment, and a diversity of attitudes toward adoption.

For some parents, even before meeting their child, there was an inclination to form an emotional connection from the limited elements they could identify as personifying "their" child (e.g., pictures, letters, etc.). Indeed, a number of parents identified the initial step of the relationship building process as the moment they saw the child's picture and committed to that child. It appears from their statements, that for these parents, this commitment was the trigger that set in motion the bonding process. One mother (Samantha) illustrated the intensity of this experience. Her statement reveals a certain amount of incredulity as if she herself was surprised by the existence of feelings even before meeting her child.

> *...Almost a year from the time we had her picture, a little tiny picture on the fridge. And in that time the kids really bonded with this little image, and her bedroom was ready...we were half bonded by the time we got there (in Russia)... You're in love with this child you have never seen...*

Furthermore, for most parents it seemed that once a commitment was made, it was definitive. As illustrated in the following comment from Rod (who felt doubts about adoption), the possibility of reversing a decision to adopt, once it was made, appeared inappropriate, or morally unacceptable: "But yet it doesn't cross your mind...You don't... you couldn't say no, it's just not right." Moreover, the act of committing seemed to be closely related with feelings of entitlement. For several parents, from the moment they committed to the child, they felt that they were now "the parents" of the child. The statement of Rachel, who had committed to her child prior to adoption, and faced some challenges at adoption, illustrates this sense of commitment and entitlement:

> *...there was never even a moment thought of going back, never, never, never, never, never, never. This was my child. This was my child after I had seen her picture for 30 seconds. So, I was simply having to deal with who she was, that was the problem.*

Although the act of pursuing the adoption relationship in spite of difficulties might be construed as an act of duty or responsibility on the part of the parents, the parents' frequent reference to expressions such as "my child" alluded to an underlying sense of entitlement. For Rachel, an initial decision to commit, associated with a sense of entitlement to this particular child persisted in spite of difficulties faced at the onset of the relationship.

In this vein, many parents commented on the difficulties they experienced, when faced with an adoption proposal that fell through due to bureaucratic mishandling, or other factors out of their control. Some parents compared the loss

of potential adoption to a miscarriage. Rachel emphasized the absence of social recognition of the challenges of this "failed relationship".

> *...that's one thing that a lot of people don't realize. I've heard of many people who have lost children. And people just think, oh well you know, you get another one. It's, it's just as bad... as a miscarriage. Probably worse because this is a child who you can see, you're just not even imagining it... I mean we both bonded within 30 seconds of looking at that picture.*

The grieving associated with the loss of a prospective child illustrates the extent to which parents can bond with their soon-to-be child. The loss, which occurs with interrupted adoptions, is often reported as lacking recognition from the parents' social network. In sum, a number of parents commented on the act of committing prior to adoption as a powerful bonding process.

In contrast to parents who reported bonding prior to meeting their child, others reported a different process. For instance, one couple who planned to assert some control in the development of their relationship with a child, decided to commit once they were acquainted with a prospective child. Jacqueline and Rod expressed discomfort with being handed a child in a somewhat "bureaucratic", or impersonal manner. They were intrigued by the prospect of meeting with children, and having some say in who they adopted. Rod describes his initial rationale for choosing the Ukrainian system of adoption:

> *...And so we started looking and found that...in the Ukraine, you see, it's the only place where you actually pick the children yourself. You go to Kiev, you go to the national adoption agency in Kiev, and they put a book right in front of you. And you thumb through it, and you decide who you want. You're not held to it, you can go and come back and go and come back... advantage of Ukraine is you can go and have a little bit more say into it. You can see the kids. You can interact with the kids...*

However, the process of selecting a child from a multitude of pictures, and the actual decision of adopting ended up being more complex for these parents than what they had expected. Jacqueline commented on her difficulty in deciding on a child while going through the "adoption" book, and her sense of obligation to consider every child available.

> *I felt that we would have more control. That we wouldn't just be opening up an envelope and seeing a picture and saying yes and no. You know, that would be extremely difficult. And instead for me, looking at those hundreds of pictures was just absolutely gut wrenching, horrifying.... I couldn't stop looking through the books...I feel like it's not right not to acknowledge these kids ... without considering the rest of them...*

It appears that for Jacqueline, the absence of a commitment to one child opened the door to a moral dilemma. Rod also commented on the difficulty of making a decision once having met the children (two in this case).

> *In my mind, once we saw them. Once we saw them...well we went away and then we came back we said yes, like an hour later... And again, you... I did say yes he's going to be my kid, you know, you don't sit there and say, wait a minute, I haven't done anything. I don't really have to take them now, court hasn't ruled, I could say no.*

It appears that the commitment, while relatively late in the process, was again powerful. From the parents' account, their eagerness, intense yearning for a child,

and emotional vulnerability at adoption had inhibited their capacity to make an informed decision about the viability of the adoption. Rod, in this example went on to describe the context in which they made the decision to adopt the two children, one of whom was eventually relinquished due to his attachment difficulties.

> *So again, you're in the position.. There's something wrong with this boy, the girl's great. We don't want to break a family...we are here, we spent three-weeks here. We can't really spend any more time here...You know, so it's, like well, let's just... we'll take him and we'll get back. And you're kind of tired by then too. Because ...we are just tired. And we've been here for three weeks, and just tired and we want to leave.*

In conclusion, the lack of support once abroad, the financial considerations, and the overwhelming circumstances at the time of decision making appear to make it difficult for parents of international adoptees to "break" the commitment to adopting a child. It appears that making a decision on adoption and on the viability of a parent-child relationship based on prior meeting with the child is likely to be filled with numerous challenges.

On the other end of the spectrum of commitment, one of the fathers in the study admitted to having reluctantly agreed to adopt, planning to have a limited involvement with the parenting, and therefore not offering a strong commitment to building the relationship. Cliff explained that he had already experienced raising four children (in a previous marriage) but was subjected to the desire of his new wife to be a parent: "I was totally opposed to it in the beginning. So you have to understand that... the whole context of this. And... but I was talked into it I guess by circumstances and so forth, and went along with it." The decision of this parent,

atypical in this sample, was associated with a lack of a commitment regarding the relationship building with his adoptive child. This illustrates a unique case where a parent did initiate a parent relationship with the least reported commitment. However, it is to be noted that despite this attitude, the initial relationship which developed between the adoptive father and the child was described by both parents as less conflictual and rejecting than that between the child and the mother (who reported to be very committed to the relationship).

These differences in levels of commitment and emotional involvement prior to adoption illustrate the variety and complexity of relationship-building processes. Some of the implications of such attitudes could be diverse and should be further explored.

4.1.2. First Meeting with One's Child: a Peculiar "Arranged Marriage"

The first meeting with a child is thought, in our social context, to represent an important moment in a parent's life. In the case of parents of older internationally adopted children, the circumstance of the first meeting is understandably significantly different than with the ones of birth parents. In some instances, the passage from the child as imagined (from the picture or description) to the actual presence of the child was accompanied with a certain amount of adjustment. In other cases where there was no prior commitment, the first meeting was an important determining moment for the prospective parents (and children).

Even as most parents described their first meeting with eloquence and interest, it is not clear from their perspective if the first meeting played any determining role in the relationship development with their children. It is, however, of interest here to study the process and the first step in initiating contact with one's "forever" child as documentation of this particular form of unique relationship development between a parent and an older adoptive child.

Most parents in this study (with the exception of two fathers who did not travel to Russia) met their child, and began the process of getting to know their child, at the orphanage or in the child's country. Most parents described their first impression of their child in very positive terms. In these descriptions each parent seemed to refer to the emotional state that encapsulated their first overall impression of the initial meeting with their child.

It is important to report that most parents' first encounters with their children involved some intermediary agent, as both parents and child faced communication barriers. A typical parent-child meeting (from the parents' perspective) involved having people speaking in a different language to the child (often explaining what was happening), and having the parent make sense of the process through a translator's interpretation, or through non-verbal behaviours.

Thomas used the metaphor of an arranged marriage to describe his feelings of wonder about the very extraordinary circumstance of meeting with this person who would become his daughter.

> *I don't think there's hardly anything else like it in life…other than maybe somebody, like if somebody… Middle East countries, where some ladies were…you're going to marry so and so, and you go and meet him for a first-time and you're going to be his husband or wife. I mean, that sort of a thing. Like I mean, this is, this is…you don't ever have an experience where you go and this is, a life thing…*

Thomas' use of such a metaphor could be associated with feelings of awkwardness and apprehension at meeting someone who has been designated as one's child. Similar to an arranged marriage, (or at least to what this image evokes for someone who has never been part of either), the partners in the relationship have often been assigned by a third party. Accordingly, Jasmine described her experience as producing "strange mixed feelings" as she described her lack of emotional connection with her daughter at the first meeting. Several parents reported feeling awkward, as they perceived the children to have been "instructed" to either come and sit on their lap, or to adopt other types of "affiliating" behaviours: "And I think she was told that she was supposed to go sit on my lap. Because she came and sat on my lap, but that was after somebody said something…"(Jasmine). Jacqueline also described an instance when the orphanage director awkwardly attempted to direct the child to act in an "appropriate" affiliating manner: "I distinctly remember the… the orphanage director taking the boy's hand and shoving into our hands…". These types of incidents reveal the extent of the pressure both parents and children were subjected to at the first meeting.

As with the prospect of meeting with one's future bride or groom, the first meeting with an older adoptive child could be associated with some asymmetry in

motivation and expectations about the relationship. For some parents, the first meeting with their child was a moment of excitement met with some apprehension or indifference from their child. Rachel described her initial feelings combined with her perception of her daughter's attitude at the first meeting:

> *...And I was just, I don't know I was just totally captivated, and excited, and happy, and she was a little apprehensive... And I have pictures, like the pictures of her first... like arriving literally. Where she first sees me. And you can see the apprehension. And she told me later about how she thought my clothes were so funny, and weird. And I couldn't speak Russian.*

It appears that Rachel's initial rejection was buffered by her positive and enthusiastic attitude. In such circumstances, some parents were sensitive to the child's reaction, while others admitted to have underplay initial signs of incongruity. Rod described his own euphoric state at becoming a father as a factor that prevented him from accurately judging the problematic relationship with his son, and making an enlightened decision about pursuing the adoption: "You are still in this euphoria. Oh, we have a kid now. We have a little boy, and we'll go home and we'll play baseball, and do all of that..."

As in an arranged marriage, both parties share a desire, or have the necessity, to develop some relational framework. Although not limited to the first meeting, getting to know one's child could be thought of as a process of interactions in learning to relate with one another, which might take place over an extended period of time. For these adoptive parents, the process involved trying to understand and become acquainted with who the child was as a person.

In this study, a few of the parents started the relationship by exchanging letters and pictures with their prospective children. For most parents of these older inter-country adopted children, getting to know their child happened in a relatively short amount of time, as they had to quickly integrate the parent-child relationship into their everyday living. They also often had to try to adjust to the developmental level the child was at, without the usual progression most birth parents are afforded.

Thomas expressed his feelings about getting to know a person who had instantaneously become his daughter: "Getting to know… learning what… but this is….this is forever right? So all of a sudden, this is it, forever. So you know, what is this person about?" Parents and children, in most cases in this study, began a shared, intimate life without having previously met. Mary and Miles recalled their first meeting in the middle of the night, at the airport. Mary described the abrupt beginning of their relationship with their new daughter, and the pressure they felt to build a relationship:

> *And you know, I can remember saying: "Oh my God, there she is." And all of us, we're just so stunned to see her. We didn't…You know, coming off the airplane, and seeing her and stuff…So we were immediately in the family … so basically it's almost as if your relations started like… everybody sleeps in the same room, and you're right away in the context of a family…*

Consequently, some of the parents sometimes felt a burden at performing their parenting role adequately, and reported feelings of anxiety and, in the case of Joanne, an initial sense of failure at parenting: "And so that was my first introduction to taking care of her. And I failed miserably…" Joanne described the pressure she

felt from her Russian facilitator to "perform" as a competent parent, which appeared to hinder the full initial enjoyment of her relationship with her new daughter: "...she told my mother that I need to be more motherly, and not so, so militaristic or something retarded like that. And I thought Lady, you have no, you have seen us 20 minutes together." As in a marriage, adoption is a socially constructed institution, punctuated by cultural mores and practices. In this instance, cultural practices might be associated with parenting practices. These parents, who were faced with the challenge of forming a relationship with their adoptive children, might have also been confronted with the differences of parenting norms and expectations prevailing in the child's country.

For two of the parents who met their child for the first time in Canada, the relational process had already been initiated with the other parent who travelled abroad. For these two fathers, reactions to meeting the child were met with some discomfort. In Cliff's case, the challenge was to experience a child that was resistant and rejecting of the mother: "...There was some strange behaviours there, which Rachel, of course, had alerted me to. But it didn't dampen the actuality of the event: rejection, coldness, avoidance...". In the case of Patrick, the first meeting with his daughter was described as distant, for what he perceives was a reaction to him being a male:

> *...at the airport, and the first time I saw her she was, of course, in Sue's arms... Sue talked to her and said okay this is your papa. She kind of bashfully leaned over and gave me a hug. And it was probably the last hug I had for quite a while... she did not deal with males at all...*

For both of these fathers, it is noteworthy that, in addition to specific individual factors that might have affected the initial meeting, the context of the encounter was very distinct from the parents who met a child in Russia or in the child's country. Meeting one's child in Canada might allow for a different perspective, as these fathers were not confronted with bureaucratic uncertainties, and other issues that travelling parents had to contend with. To what extent the nature of the encounter could have inhibited or enhanced the parents' relationship building is not known.

However, in most cases, the metaphor of an arranged marriage seems to provide an interesting framework to best represent a myriad of feelings and thoughts parents have experienced in first meeting their children.

4.1.3. Journey Home: Incidental Event or Foreshadowing the Relationship

Adding to the emotions brought by their first meeting with their child, the other aspect of the initial relationship building process which was brought up by the parents was the trip back to Canada. As some of the families described the journey home in positive terms, most parents described the journey home with their adopted children as riddled with different levels of challenges. For some of the parents, the challenges reported were perceived to be incidental to the development of a relationship with their child. For others, the journey home was identified as a significant event in their initial relationship building.

Three of the parents reported their plane rides home as very difficult experiences. A spectrum of images was used to describe that journey, which foreshadowed the eventual climate of each relationship. Jacqueline reported dealing with a child who was out of control and displayed intense, persistent difficult behaviours, which ended up characterizing the next three years of their relationship with her son.

> *We thought he was this shy, sad kid who just needed love. So then Rod is actually now discovering the child in full... in full glory...As soon as our plane took off from Amsterdam he started to scream at the top of his lungs, and he screamed non-stop, the entire way across the Atlantic Ocean, non-stop. I didn't know a child could scream that long...*

Similarly, Rachel reported travelling with a child that began a process of resistance and rejection (not communicating, keeping at a distance). This behaviour persisted once home, and for the years to come. Both Rachel and Rod expressed doubt as they went through the journey and transition of adopting an older child. Rod described his internal dialogue as increasingly emphasizing doubts over hope for success in adopting his older son:

> *I think what was going on in our head, its like, what have we done? And it started to say, what have we done? Initially you have... you start like... 'what have we done' is quite low on the scale, at the highest: 'oh, we can change it'. And as time goes on 'we can change it' goes down... and 'what have we done' goes up...*

On the other hand, some parents who also faced challenges in the journey home did not always report these behaviours as being linked to the quality of their relationship with their child. Les, as an example, discovered, on his journey home,

that his son displayed intense aggressive behaviours when confronted with changes (which was only displayed at the separation from the orphanage and at the separation from the social worker). Even though Les reported that the behaviour persisted over time, and is still present; he does not consider it as determining the quality his relationship with his son:

> *And I didn't have any negative feelings towards him or he towards me. I could feel that the two of us didn't have any problems with each other or something. So I felt that the fight was just some kind of delay…it's not a serious problem right now besides being a nuisance occasionally, he kicked a whole in the wall. But you know, it's nothing too terribly serious even though it sounds serious. But it isn't anything that I have problems with this at that point.*

Samantha and Thomas, who described a very difficult plane ride (tantrums and screaming) reported a very satisfactory relationship with their child. However, the difficult behaviours reported by these parents persisted for some time after the return to Canada, and seemingly stopped after the parents helped the child adjust to their family life. Another couple's (Mary and Miles) journey home was met with resistance as their child began to apprehend the reality of the adoption. The child's behaviour, which the parents described as somewhat characteristic of her personality, did not, from their recollection, have any negative impact on the development of their relationship with the daughter once in Canada.

In conclusion, the trip back home was a time when parents and children were to experience their relationship with each other in a more intense and exclusive manner than they had at the orphanage. Parents and child were left for the first time to face this linguistic and interpersonal challenge in a context of flux. They had to

simultaneously confront their new relational circumstance, as they experienced the somewhat unsettling experience of travelling back to Canada.

4.2. The Development of the Parents' Relationship with their Child

4.2.1. Beliefs and Strategies About Parent-Child Relationship Development

A number of parents expressed specific beliefs about relationship building with their children. Several parents articulated explicit perceptions and ideas about the child's past and present relational experience.

Some of the thoughts expressed included the conceptualisation of the child's past experience with relationships. Samantha and Thomas expressed the viewpoint that their child had no concept of what a parent was, due to the fact that their child had never had a parent present in her life. They asserted that their child had never had any prior attachment: "...cause she didn't understand what a mom was, right?...because she didn't have any attachments". Les reported similar beliefs: "... well he doesn't know what a parent is. He was born in an orphanage. He has never had a parent".

The notion that children lacked an understanding of the parent-child relationship led to some attitudes about developing an emotional connection. Samantha and Thomas asserted that "attachment" was something they could and had to teach their child. Their concept of attachment consisted of teaching their child to depend on them as parents, and to come to them for soothing: "...We had to teach her, make a big deal about when she, you know, hurt her knee, and make a big deal

about her coming to mama". They expressed the belief that it was important for "bonding" to be a strong influence on the child, and to teach "their ways". Samantha and Thomas felt it was essential to explicitly instruct the child in the parameters of a parent-child relationship, and train the child to relate as a daughter: "She didn't know to look to him (dad) or to look to me for any…we had teach her to depend on us...". The following vignette illustrates how Samantha, with the help of her other birth children, tried to take advantage of "bondable" moments to teach attachment:

> *And the other kids, you know, they were game for that. And you know, playing and running around the house all the kids. And you know how kids naturally come and hid behind mama's skirt, you know. Well I remember the first time she finally realized that. And I made a big deal about it. And, you know, wrap my skirt around her, and stood there and guarded her from her brother that was…you know they were playing tag and running around the house, and made a big deal to make it…enforced that there is safety behind mama's skirt…*

On the other hand, other parents expressed the belief that their child had most likely developed some form of attachment prior to adoption. They reported that their child might have formed a significant relationship with either their 'mama' (Russian caretakers), with friends, or with some of their siblings. Sue described her children's reaction to separation from an older sibling, and her frustration at competing with a "ghost" of the past.

> *And once they were away from her (adult sibling), I mean, you know, she very quickly became elevated to sainthood. And especially if they got disciplined for anything, that it was always:" (adult sibling), I want (adult sibling), I want (adult sibling)." It was like, you know, she was as perfect angel that would have never done anything bad, or would have never harmed them. You know.*

This quote reveals that not only did these adopted children provide their parents with evidence of previous attachments, but it also indicated that these previous attachments were perceived as interfering with the mothers' attempts at forming a relationship with her children.

Rachel accordingly described the difficulties with her daughter's reaction to visiting her Russian brother who was now adopted in Canada (by a different family): "And it was very hard for her to go back and forth (to the brother's house). Boundaries are very hard. And she would always be kind of rejecting when she was coming back". Cliff also expressed his perception that the rejection experienced by his wife came from the loyalty the child felt towards her orphanage caregiver: "But a strong reaction, against…as she did towards Rachel maybe because she was replacing her nurse, which she loved".

This other set of beliefs about the child's mental framework sometimes led parents to focus on strategies that were different from those who believed that their child did not have a significant attachment prior to adoption. Rachel's strategies to build a relationship appeared to focus on empathy, as she studied and tried to understand her child's "world". Although it is probable that a host of strategies are used in any given relationship, the belief that her daughter had a previous attachment to contend with and negotiate led to a more "empathy based" approach in her relationship with her daughter.

> *I put in about a 40 hours a day. From the time... even before she came, trying to figure out...so much energy into trying to figure out who this child is, who this person is, what does she need... and I mean, all the wits that I ever had, or could ever draw...and I have learned so much. And I have had to draw everything I could possibly think of, and friends, and professionals, and books, and...and myself.*

Paradoxically, this strategy served as a powerful coping mechanism for the mother, with the added benefit of providing some rationale for the difficulties of forming a relationship. Rachel often referred to her daughter's past relational experiences to explain rejecting behaviours from her daughter.

To what extent the beliefs and strategies reported by parents were based on their prior beliefs about relationship building, or if they were influenced by the compelling evidence of the child's prior relationships is not clear at this point. However, the different strategies reported here, one that emphasized establishment and teaching of the nature of a parent-child relationship, and another that emphasized empathy at negotiating the connection, were some of the main strategies reported by parents in their relationship-building.

In addition, some parents reported the children's unrealistic expectations or idealization of their past, which they felt interfered with their relationship building. Some parents, as an example, felt that older children had formed unrealistic expectations about what a family is like. Rachel perceived that children's naive expectations about family made it difficult to feel like an "adequate" parent:

> *Because kids in orphanages in Russia have one thing in mind, they would like a family. And their idea of a family... and they've talked about this. Kids in orphanages will say: oh it will be so wonderful; I'll be able to do whatever I want, whenever I want. And so they have this Disneyland idea of what a family will be like, and what it will be like. So of course you can never live up to it.*

Sue and Patrick reported a transitional cycle where the children appeared to idealize their past. This created uncertainties for the parents about their capacity to form a parent-child relationship.

> *...we found out that there seems to be a cycle the kids go through, the older kids will go through. Once they get here, and they settle down, they go through everything that is better in Russia...And when they're thinking about their background, or family... like (adoptive daughter) used to use Zeena, the princess warrior:" well that's my mom, she looks like her." You know and describe her in that manner to us. And once you get through that whole time process it takes to go that... you realize, OK the situation she is in now... is she going to adapt, you know? Handle this as we...being her parents now?*

Experience and education (from other adoptive parents) about the adjustment process of adoptive children allowed these parents to "normalize" and to better comprehend their child's behaviour. Education pertaining to the "developmental" cycle experienced by adoptive families allowed these parents to better understand their children's behaviours, and reduce the anxiety at their abilities to develop a relationship with their children.

4.2.2. Feeling Like the Parent: the Experience of Emotional Connection

For some parents, feeling like the parent of the adopted child came fairly early in the relationship with their child. The process of feeling like "the parents" was often reported as "taking on the role" of the parents. An initial sense of feeling like

parents happened in most cases from the moment parents were in the home stay, home setting, or at the moment they left the orphanage. Being and feeling like "a parent" involved, for some parents, taking on the role of a parent, doing parental things, and caring for the child's everyday needs. The legal process of adoption was also experienced by some parents as a formality that gave a sense of finality to the bureaucratic process. In the words of Samantha, : "Well the commitment is way before, and then you going (to Russia) there is just a formality in a sense..."

For some other parents, "feeling like the parent of the child" was sometimes interchangeably used to describe a feeling of emotional closeness. Connecting or feeling an emotional connection with the child was experienced as a milestone by some of the parents, and was a gradual process for others. Some parents described the process of connecting in very specific terms. Some of the parents could pinpoint exactly the moment they started feeling an emotional connection with the child. Samantha described her process of developing an emotional bond with her daughter at a moment where she herself felt safe at home: "I really feel we didn't bond until we came home...my moment of bonding was that night... That night when I wrapped her in my own house where I was safe ...there was no moment at meeting her and bonding with her in Russia". Interestingly, the process of bonding for this parent involved a sense of her own safety, which in turn could be communicated to the child.

Other parents felt that the process of emotional connection happened as a gradual progression. Thomas identified the process of bonding as somewhat elusive and ongoing:

> *... I would say that I don't know if there was really a time that you could actually pin it off. It was a gradual time...for me...like when you say bonding, and that's a difficult thing to see, because you cannot sit...we can bring all of our kids in right here now and say we're gonna have quality time. It doesn't work...that situation happens and it only happens when you're spending time with your kids...*

Les stressed his difficulty in identifying the initial presence of an emotional connection: "I guess emotional bonds are kind of hard to know where they start, when they end about...". It is not clear, from these comments, if all these parents were in fact referring to the same phenomenon. It could be hypothesized, from these narratives, that the experience of an emotional closeness, and of an emotional bonding with a child are two different aspects of relationship development. As illustrated here, Thomas expressed the perception that emotional closeness fluctuated over the development of his relationships (and were not specific to adoption). This next statement refers to his perception that emotional bonds underlie a series of states of emotional closeness.

> *I mean there's times when I'm still bonding with (adoptive daughter), if you want to use that word...our kids. You're still having experiences that are just those ones that just bring you together a little bit more... All of a sudden, something, something special happens, and that's all of a sudden, oh, that was really cool.*

Nonetheless, the experience of "emotionally connecting" with the child seemed to be a necessary condition to experience the relationship as "meaningful",

over merely taking on the role of "parents". The exact nature of the "connection" was, however, harder to uncover. Although this was not explicitly stated, it became obvious that all parents had specific expectations as to how the child was to relate with them as parents (as illustrated in the next section). This emotional process was seemingly associated with the parent's sense of their child "wanting" a "special parent/child relationship" with their adoptive parents. What defined a "special parent/child relationship" between child and parents was not necessarily explicit, nor universal. In some cases, it was not enough to perceive a desire for a connection from the child, but the connection had to happen in an area that was considered as meaningful for the parent. The sole notion of what was important for each parent in their "connection" with their children varied from person to person. In other words, the development of the relationship, and the perception from the parent that one had established a satisfactory relationship was associated with the fact that the child accepted the parent in some respect, and expressed this desire to connect in a satisfactory manner to the parent.

A Need for Validation of the Parent-Child Relationship

Parents perceived different aspects of the relationship as confirmation that a relationship with their child had been formed. As part of a continuum, the parents' affirmation of the existence of a "special" relationship between them and their children went from the child's demonstration of interest in the relationship, to a formal confirmation of the child's agreement to be adopted.

The nature of the validation was sometimes very implicit as with Les, for whom connecting was to be simply accepted as "the" parent. Getting along with each other was an ostensible evidence of the child's acceptance of the relationship. The connection was seemingly experienced through positive everyday interactions:

> *...And he seemed to feel that, you know, obviously, he accepted me as a dad...It's very rare though, very seldom that we have any major disagreements past a few minutes. So it's a positive experience, I think they're all around, all the time pretty well.*

Mary also reported that her child's dedication to learn English and her help with different aspects of family life demonstrated a desire from the daughter to be part of the relationship: "And she tried, so I figured that she was, she wanted to be there, she wanted to be learning English".

Similarly, Jacqueline and Rod who had adopted an older child and a newborn felt that both children responded immediately with attachment-like behaviours such as smiling. They attributed their attachment with the older daughter to her desire to reach for them, making them feel that she wanted to be with them: "(adoptive daughter) like a baby was reciprocal. You know she looked at us, she was happy, she was active, she wanted to please us".

For Jasmine, evidence of connection was to feel an initial longing from the child. In this instance, the child wanted to come with Jasmine as she left the orphanage at the end of the day (before the legalization process was completed).

> *(Question: The first time you felt emotionally close to your daughter?) I think that was the day she got her coat and hat on (at the orphanage), and cried.... Because I remember crying at the time too... She didn't want me to leave without her. I didn't really want to leave without her either. So that, you know I think, that was when I first started feeling like, yeah this is my child. And they are keeping her from me. (Laughs).*

The intensity of the child's desire to follow the mother was most likely experienced by her mother as an expression of her "special" connection with the child. This testimonial indicates that the child's reaction to her mother's departure triggered an emotional reaction for the mother.

For two of the mothers, the connection occurred, as they perceived evidence that the child, after they invested time and energy at building a connection, came to them for soothing, or accepted them as a source of comfort. In this example, Rachel, after years of dedication to building a relationship with her daughter, describes the changes in her daughter's acceptance of her mother's affection:

> *But things changed over the years, and then she would hug back and then there were times when she would come and ask for, for solace... And she listened and, you know we have had a lot of... a lot of close times like that. But I mean it took a lot of work on my part, a lot of investment of time and energy...And I had to do everything, or wanted to do everything I possibly could do to help her.*

Some other parents described the significance of their child valuing their relationship. In one instance, the child's request for redemption when conflicts arose served as an indication of how the child valued the relationship:

> *...the thing with (her adoptive daughter) is that after she goes through that, she's always very sorry. And she's very quick to say mom I'm sorry. I didn't mean to say those bad things. So there's a really good heart in there. A really kind and loving heart... (Jasmine)*

Similarly, Miles reported his perception of the importance of his relationship with his daughter from seeing her working at repairing the relationship:

> *...if she lied to me (adoptive daughter), then she'd find it harder to get my forgiving...on the scale... if you lied, then you just dropped down that scale. And the scale meant more to her, being up there, than being down here. So she'd worked herself to get back up here.*

These examples demonstrate how parents' positive interpretation of the child's motivation (as valuing the parental relationship) contributed to a sense of satisfaction and closeness.

Further along the spectrum, Joanne expressed her understanding that her daughter had to want the relationship in order for it to be successful. For this parent, some of the connection might have been experienced through the explicit expression of her daughter's acceptance:

> *I'll always remember that day, exactly 7 months since we'd been home. I was just leaving her bedroom one night, (adoptive daughter) said to me, you are a nice girl. So that's how she was speaking to me right? I said pardon me? And I walked back to her bed... And she said:" I'm glad I picked you for my mama." And I said:" You know what? I'm sure glad you picked me too."(Laughs)...I think she had to have been open to it too. You know, she had to have wanted it as well.*

In two instances, the parents sought a formal statement from their children confirming that they wanted to be adopted. Mary and Miles admitted to having asked the question many times to their thirteen-year-old child:

Now about four weeks ago, yeah four weeks ago we were asking that same question. I mean that was before we went to court. Now they asked her three times in court, and, you know she could have said no at any point.

Beyond formality, both parents expressed the need for a confirmation from the child. It appears that some parents needed explicit evidence of the child's desire to form an alliance.

These different statements were reported to illustrate the diversity of the experience of connection, as well as the intensity of the needs for acceptation or confirmation the parents required to experience an emotional connection. These examples seem to indicate that the child's acceptance of being soothed, expressing a desire to be adopted, and valuing the relationship provided the parents with the elements that allowed an emotional connection to be established.

Feeling Competent to Care for the Child

Feeling competent to care for a child was an important aspect of feeling like a parent for several participants. Jacqueline described the connection with her older adoptive daughter in terms of understanding the needs of her daughter, and feeling as though she was the one who could fulfill these needs. In this next instance, not only is the parent wanted by the child, but it also appears that her sense of parental competence enhanced and affirmed her role as a parent, and heightened her sense of connection.

> *...but I've felt that with (adoptive daughter), right away. Just because I could... the second I saw her, I could see in her face that she was...and that... I mean we didn't know this before. You know we believe, I believed that there's got to be this reciprocal needing and loving. And (adoptive daughter) from the second I saw her, I could see the needing, and I knew that I could be that person.*

Jacqueline further emphasizes the special role she has in this relationship through stating her sense of being "that person" that can fulfill that "particular" task.

Conversely, Jacqueline, who also experienced a lack of connection with her other adopted child, reported feeling undermined in her effort to connect with her adoptive son. In this statement she alludes to her difficulties in performing her parental role, as she understood it, which might have resulted in feelings of helplessness in her role as a parent.

> *We tried at first (feeling like a mother) and it's like...and whenever you do, someone hit you on the head ... first I tried to reach out to him and do all the things that I thought I was supposed to be doing and nurturing him... and it was just... getting hit on the head...*

In another example, the clinginess of her "special needs" adopted child created a sense of bonding for Sue. A similar sense of being sought after and a sense of competency might have also been associated with the connecting bond she experienced: "I had a very close relationship with (adoptive daughter) for quite some time. But it was as, like with a very young child where she was very needy, and I basically did everything for her." In essence, these parents' sense of emotional connection was also associated to feelings of competence at caring for their children. The confirmation of the parents' competence at fulfilling their parental role might have contributed to strengthening their emerging connection with their child.

Parents who did not Experience Connection

Parents who did not experience feeling an emotional connection with their child (either because the lack of connection preceded the bonding process, or because they never got to experience emotional closeness with their child) used a non-parental relationship to describe the relationship they had with their child. Some of them used the word foster parents, caregivers, or uncles to describe the relationship. Rod, who experienced the dissolution of his relationship with his son, described his process of moving from feeling like a father to feeling like a caregiver:

> *...You quickly don't become a parent anymore. You ask how it feels. You're not a parent, you become like a babysitter. You're just dealing with it. You're always dealing with things. There's just... you don't feel like they're your children, you feel like you're a caregiver. ...About the child, it wasn't my child. He was a child. .... It was like I was a foster parent. Foster parents do it (dissolution). I was a foster parent for two and a half years to him, and we found him a family. That's exactly how I feel...*

This statement seems to indicate that the process of going from parent to caregiver likely involves an emotional distancing between the parent and the child.

Rod described his adoptive son as "not caring" about anyone, and only wanting the best "deal" for himself. The lack of reciprocity experienced by Rod might have inhibited his capacity to pursue a relationship with his son: "...he didn't care. He didn't care where he is. He'll go wherever he will get the best deal. I always felt that. He was just... yeah, it was quite good here but somewhere else, I'll go there..." Jacqueline (wife) described leaving her son at the dissolution of the adoption: "... I'm just sobbing my heart at him (at dissolution) and he's like

whatever… you know… who's going to take care of me next. He just didn't care one bit." In this example, Jacqueline also alludes to an absence of affiliating response from the child. She experienced her son's disinterest in her as a specific caregiver. From her perception of her son's reaction, anyone could have filled the role of the parent.

Cliff, who experienced some distance in his connection with his daughter, expressed the perception that his daughter "closed the door on him": "…she doesn't share a lot of her life…she doesn't share any information with me at all about anything… She's not concerned with any persons that she sees." This reflection suggests Cliff's perception that his child lacked an interest in developing a relationship with him. It is possible that a child's difficulty to interact with the parent might be experienced as a lack of trust from the child, and lack of desire for a connection with the parent.

One paradoxical case was the instance of Patrick who expressed difficulty in connecting with his adoptive son, in spite of the fact that his son "tried" to reach out for him (as being the first child to welcome the father after a day of work). It seemed that for this father, the son's difficulties with boundaries, and the lack of common interests inhibited an initial sense of connection. It also appeared that Patrick's essential and specific quality of relationship connections were not met by the child. Patrick described a need to get a child's trust (through direct communication and honest sharing of the child's feelings) in order for him to feel connected:

> *You can sit down with the kids and get an honest answer, or communicate back and forth in any manner...No matter how good of a parent you think you are, give them all the toys, or whatever they want. You will never break through the barrier; you've got to break through the barrier to gain their trust, confidence and have them able to tell you what's on their minds... So once she got some life experiences, and then actually sit down and talk to you without rambling on about nothing. Then you can... then you start forming a better bond as an adult.*

Jasmine alluded to the importance of knowing the child in the process of connecting. She also spoke of her unconditional acceptance of the child in the process of building an emotional bond:

> *I know I don't think she has to hide who she is from me. I think I made that clear that I know who she is, and that I appreciate what she is...Also it helps build a relationship when she knows that I know her, and I'm not fooling that she's somebody that she's not. And that's OK with me that she's who she is.*

In sum, cases where parents reported an absence of feeling "like the parent" of an adopted child appeared to be associated with emotional distance, and the perception of an absence of desire for intimate connection on the part of the child.

Overall, the parents' sense of connectedness was closely associated with a sense of being chosen or accepted by the child, having the opportunity to feel competent in their role of caring for the child, and generally experiencing their child's valuing of the relationship.

One important aspect that parents reported regarding relationship building in older adoptive children was the notion that children have to accept the parent (and could possibly reject the parent). It is a "two-way street", as expressed by the statement of Jacqueline: "I think that's one of the important things about adopting

older kids is that you've got to make sure you like who that person is, and they have to like you."

4.2.3. Physical Closeness as a Way to Connect

For many of the parents, physical closeness was perceived as an important relational aspect that needed to be established. Interestingly, for Samantha and Thomas, getting to know their child implied to inspect the child's physicality.

> *You look at her, because you just… this is suddenly your daughter, you have to look at her and see what she looks like…I remember that (Thomas)…he's just holding her and he's just kind of touching her. And I'm looking at her, and I'd be touching her hair… and your just exploring her as you're meeting her, is just is not like an adult…you meet, shake hands, okay, whatever… but this is your child.*

The behaviour described in this example seems to involve more than the act of looking at the child's body, but, as Jacqueline expressed, represents another way to "meet" and get to know her child. Additionally, physical play was sometimes used to develop this intimate relationship with the child, while preserving the boundaries the child needed most. Rachel described her strategy at developing a physical connection through play:

> *…she could be anything. She could be a tiny baby and she would be bonding with us, and a lot of that physical play was to get the physical… the physical attachment you know, in there so she can hug, but it wasn't… connected to the dangerous part being vulnerable.*

Rachel also described the "dance" she would perform with her daughter to deepen, during the adolescent years, the physical intimacy she felt was needed in a parent-child relationship:

> *...she was leaving to go somewhere. And I said can I have a hug? No. And then she would go downstairs and then I'd say: may be just a little one. And she would say: well maybe. And then I would come downstairs and then she would say: oh OK. And then and...it would take... it would be this sort of ritual.*

Joanne described a spontaneous strategy, which evolved from a game of tracing the face, and eventually developed into more physical closeness:

> *So then at night-time, I don't know when we actually started this, but... I would just trace her face...and then, in a little short while, I do not know how long it took, she would do the same to me. Right? It was just a touchy feely thing, and you know, and it felt good...and then...and then she was more cuddly. Then she would put her arms around, and we would just lay there together. Because we didn't have a lot to say...*

Joanne acknowledged the fact that, while developing a relationship with a child who does not share the same language, physical connection might provide a useful tool to build a rapport. She also reported another strategy in building a physical relationship with her daughter:

> *And then we would do something called three minutes in the rocking chair... And we would go and sit at this rocking chair, and she would just curl up like a little baby. I would just sit there and rock, we wouldn't talk, we would do anything... because then a little while later, she says, OK not three minutes, we'll do five minutes, or 10 minutes... And now I have to, I say:"...Let's do three minutes in the rocking chair". And she's always so busy doing something... I say: no, you just take the time...I want it, right? Because that time goes so quickly. You know? And so you know, you didn't get that baby stage. But I get a little sampling of it.*

Although the three minutes in the rocking chair was thought, from the mother's account, to enable the child to experience the nurturing that had not been provided at earlier stages of her development, it appeared that the game also played a

significant role for her need for caring (for the child) as she herself started to request her time in the rocking chair.

Including the child in the aspect of physical expression seemed to be important for many families. Mary and Miles both described how it was natural for them to include their adoptive daughter into their physical demonstration of affection from the beginning.

> *...all we are, we are a pretty physical, demonstrative family and...well it is and, I think (adoptive daughter) kind of saw that from the get-go...Because we didn't change our attitude or behaviour towards (other daughter) because she was there. We just kept on going, and included her in the situation...she would in the morning, crawl into bed, kind of give me a big hug and sometimes it would be the two kids in the middle, between us. And then we just lied there and we talked. And she would just kind of look back and forth... but listening to their words, not understanding very much of it, but just us being there...*

Physical connection, for some of the parents in this study, was reported as a way to get to know the child, to develop an intimate relationship, and possibly to express nurturance towards the child. It was also stated as a means to communicate affection when spoken language was not yet available.

4.2.4. Finding Similarities as Strengthening the Relationship Building Process

Most parents interviewed reported wanting to adopt from Russia or former Soviet countries in part because of the physical similarity they would share with their adoptive children. Although most parents wanted to decrease the possibility of the child's stigmatization by being a visible minority, for some parents, finding similarity

to one's adoptive child seemed to be associated with looking for some connecting factors.

Rachel reported making a list of her physical, emotional, and intellectual similarities with her adoptive daughter, as it felt important for her to define points of connection. She described some of the physical similarities in mystical terms, as if to refer to some fatalistic dimension of their relationship.

> *I mean, this child is my child just the same as if she was born in my body. In fact, we have at one point, after about two years, I made a list of all the things, have it somewhere, that are similar to me. That (adoptive daughter) has physical, emotional, intellectual, mental, and the same with (adoptive father). And there's like at least a page single space for each of us… "I mean if we didn't have, if we had absolutely no point of connection it would be really hard. We have a lot of points of connection… it's almost; it's almost… a mystical thing in my mind.*

This mother acknowledged the challenge of connecting with a child who would not be perceived as sharing common features. Her references to fatalistic or deterministic beliefs were reported by other parents. Sue, who reported similar "fatalistic" beliefs, asserted how she thought her daughter was "meant" to be hers: "We really felt like she was meant for us, or that it was meant to be". Samantha reported being very similar in personality with her daughter, and having a stronger connection than with her birth daughter: "I see myself in her…because her and my personalities are meshed… And I'm actually emotionally closer to her than I am actually with my daughter (birth)". Patrick similarly described with wonder the similarities with one of his adoptive daughters:

> *...me and (adoptive daughter) are so alike, it's amazing. In the way we handle... people don't realize that we are... she's adopted. The way I feel is like, she has a lot, she looks a lot like my family background... yeah we have the same attitudes.*

In many instances, parents described how they felt connected with their children. These connections were reported as necessary, mystical, deterministic, and promoting closeness.

4.3. Other Factors Associated with Relationship Development

4.3.1. Personality Development: a Part of the Relationship Building

In older child adoptions, parents have the task of building a relationship with children who have, to a great extent, already developed their personality and skills. It became apparent that one of the differences in relationship-building in older adoptions was the parents' limited participation and shared experience in the development of a child's personality.

Jacqueline and Rod contrasted the process of developing their relationship with their older adopted child, and compared it with the relationship formation with their recently adopted newborn. They described the process as unique in that their older child already had a world of her own; she had already established a personality:

> *She was already who she was (older adopted daughter). We haven't really changed that... you can see the baby looking at you, learning from you. You feel the baby's... you're that baby... you're the mom, you're the dad. She's learning from you... Is different in that (older adopted daughter), she immediately was dressing herself, and feeding herself, and her own world, went off to school. And so... she immediately has a world. Whereas for the baby, we are her world... with the baby, we know that 100% of her good or bad behaviour with respect to the nurturing aspect is our... falls on our shoulders...*

With the newborn, it appears that Jacqueline and Rod felt in part responsible for the development of her personality, where as with their older child, they watch a personality unfold that they had no authorship on, and no shared experience. Parents in this case did not have the opportunity to experience the impact of their parenting on their child's personality formation.

Samantha and Thomas, who adopted one child after giving birth to three children, reported sharing more similarities with their birth children, having a certain capacity to foresee what their taste or personality would be like, and having the ability to connect these characteristics to their own family. With their older adoptive daughter, they felt they had nothing to base their expectations on, as they felt that there were a lot of unknowns. However, this family reported excitement and curiosity at discovering their adoptive child, which the mother compared to a flower opening.

> *...and even the way she reacts to things, it's like, it's (adoptive daughter), it's unique to her because it's not like uncle Joe, it's not like anybody else that you could say well you...just like so and so or you have anything as a base or anything for it. It's like this is (adoptive daughter), and...still learning about this girl. And as she grows, we learn more and as she matures, how she's gonna deal with situations, her feelings on things, her emotions toward things, we're still learning. She's still unfolding before our eyes and she's an unknown....the difference that we've really discovered, you know, with our birth children, we know the gene pool. And we can kind of get a feel of what they're gonna think, and what their taste is gonna be, and just their personalities because you know the gene pool, he's just like my brother...*

Biological similarities allowed the parent to feel a degree of connection as the children confirmed with their behaviour or characteristics a sense of belonging to the family. It is no surprise to report the relative limitations in the adoptive parents' participation in their older adoptive child's personality development. The process of discovery that some parents depicted in older child adoptions might constitute a difference in process in this type of relationship development. Nonetheless, what could be of interest is the relative importance and impact such processes might have on the adoptive parents' conception of their relationship with their children. To what degree the parents' sense of connection is enhanced or inhibited by factors such as personality development should be explored further.

4.3.2. Language as Relationship Facilitator and a Relational Mediator

In this study, communication with their child through spoken language was not readily available to the parents. Several parents were surprised at the linguistic requirements an older child would create. Joanne, who had learned some Russian prior to traveling to Russia, recalled her limitations in communicating with her child at her first meeting: "I tried to talk to her a little bit. You can't have a conversation. This is not working conversation here." Jasmine described the challenge over several months in understanding her child's needs: "But she couldn't really tell me what she was feeling or thinking, because I couldn't understand her...language was a big barrier for many, many months. Maybe even up to a year I would say." She recalled the sadness at seeing her daughter's loneliness at being unable to communicate.

> *I felt really bad for her. It made me sad because sometimes, she would just stand, she would stand in that hallway there, with her thumb in her mouth, and would twirl around and around, and just, you know, just a sort of a calming thing for herself. Because...she's feeling lonesome and yeah...it was a hard time then...(adoptive daughter), I remember her coming home, she was pretty lost and lonely for quite a while.*

For Jasmine, seeing her child struggle with the difficulties of communicating was painful and difficult to witness. However, each family discovered creative ways to deal with the language barrier with their children, in order to communicate and develop their initial relationship. Interestingly, six mothers out of seven (but none of the six fathers) interviewed reported having gone through the steps of learning some Russian or Ukrainian. On the other hand, Thomas, who had not learned Russian, described non-verbal communications strategies as a way to communicate while abroad:

> *When we were in Russia, I didn't know any Russian. But I mean, it's amazing when two people...you don't...just the eye contact. You look at something down there and you laugh at it, and you both know what you're laughing at. You know there's a common thing.*

Some of the other strategies parents reported to overcome the language barrier consisted of selecting people in Vancouver who could provide support to the child in their language; getting Russian speaking friends to translate a tape for the child; using a computer translating program; playing games (cards was often mentioned); drawing; using hand signals; and hiring a translator.

More than a linguistic challenge, the absence of a common language led to relational difficulties for some of the parents. Several parents also reported, in

different terms, how language was associated with relationship building, and how it helped regulate the child's behaviour and emotions. Thomas expressed his perception that some behaviour management required the help of more sophisticated language skills:

> *...When it's fun, you could pretty much get the gist of when you're having fun. But when it's something that is a little more than that, that's when the language...I think it was really good for her, for her to have that (a mother that could speak Russian). Because...there was a time where we could settle her down by talking to her.*

Some parents described how a lack of language skills sometimes led to relational misgivings. Jasmine described her difficulties in explaining to her daughter the reasons she had to leave the orphanage, and how her daughter's distress was alleviated with the help of a translator:

> *...and I felt bad that I couldn't take her because she obviously didn't understand, and I hadn't had enough (Russian) to understand it. It was at that point we hired a translator to come with us to explain to her what was going on. Because I felt like, I didn't want her to think I didn't want her. And that's why I wasn't taking her.*

In this example, not only did the parent experience the difficulties in communicating with her adoptive child, but linguistic misunderstanding had led to potentially compromising the relationship the mother was trying to develop.

In addition, regardless of her prior experience with adopting an older child from Canada, Jasmine experienced some difficulties in establishing her relationship with her internationally adopted daughter:

> *And so, well I had a couple of books in the house, and, which I couldn't read to (adoptive daughter from Russia) because she couldn't understand. But they're about the fact that adoption is forever, and those I would read with (domestically adopted daughter)...And I could say to her too, I could say:" (domestically adopted daughter) adoption is forever. You're never going away. But with (adoptive daughter from Russia), I couldn't say that...*

In this instance, the tools that were available to her domestically adopted child were inadequate in the context of international adoption.

Rachel described her daughter's refusal to try to understand the mother's Russian as a mean of resistance to developing a relationship: "her other friends, they didn't care, they did the negotiation ... they did the negotiating that you do around trying to get meaning across. But she wouldn't do that". In this instance, the mother perceived language as a way for the child to keep a distance in the relationship. Conversely, Jasmine also acknowledged that language was essential to first establish the relational structure they could function within:

> *Yeah I think it was (difficult to not speak the language). Because there were so many things I should have been able to say. Because those were the... the... those first few weeks, the first few months that you are with somebody and you're sort of setting up the boundaries... not the boundaries but the whole, of how things should be between you, and you can't. You can't say the things you need to say.*

From this statement, it appears that relationship development might have been delayed or compromised by the language requirements associated with an older child adoption. Furthermore, Patrick described how the relationship with his daughter improved once she could describe her past experience in Russia:

> *But as for becoming her dad in any sense, it was quite a while before that happened. Like, since she's had her English down by this time, and would feel more about what her background was. Once we realized her situation, and where... her surroundings, and what had happened to her, maybe and started talking to us. And for me, that time made me more becoming her dad.*

The degree of empathy triggered by the child's narrative had the effect of enhancing a sense of connection with the father towards his daughter.

On the other hand, learning the child's language was sometimes perceived as a demonstration of respect for the child. Samantha mentioned that learning the child's language was a way to validate her daughter's existence:

> *I also feel that it, in the long run, it's a respect to her (to speak her language)...we must value her... that she's from Russia...because we're validating her existence... I feel that that was something that I could do for my daughter, just showing interest in her language, and bothering with it, and learning the language.*

In some ways, her desire to learn her daughter's language was her way to reach out, and to demonstrate her desire to connect with her child.

For Jacqueline, language became a means to give her daughter some power. As the mother acknowledged the adjustment challenges her daughter faced in Canada, she used language as a way to re-establish a sense of balance and control. Rod and Jacqueline allowed their child to teach them Russian as a way to redistribute the power: "And then I was trying to think of ways where we could give her power. And so at the dinner table, we would have her teach us how to say things in Russian". Giving power to her child through language was a way to recognize or empathize with her child's struggle. This mother had found a way, through the use of language,

to show empathy, leaving the child to experience a sense of being in control and being understood.

In the circumstances of an international adoption, language is a tool that can be used (when available) as a relational facilitator and as a relational mediator. In other words, for these families, language skills were described as tools that could be potentially used as a relationship facilitator supporting understanding and communication with each other, and also had the additional function of mediating the interactions between parents and children. However, in many cases, the language barrier hindered the initial relationship formation between parents and children.

4.3.3. Behaviour Problems

Interestingly, several parents reported being surprised at having to deal with behavioural difficulties with their adopted children. Thomas, who had raised three birth children prior to adopting, reported his surprise at his adoptive daughter's behavioural display: "…The concept of having a kid that was out of control was out of our… it was just beyond what we could've even thought…". Some parents reported what they considered as serious, persistent difficulties (aggressive, violent behaviours), where others mentioned transitional difficulties. Not all parents associated behavioural difficulties with relational problems. The way in which behaviour problems affected parents' perceptions of their relationships with children is not clear, as some parents felt overwhelmed and hopeless while dealing with the

difficulties, and others took it in stride: "Well it was just like: our birth children didn't get away with this and neither are you…" (Samantha).

In most cases where behaviour was a problem, parents attributed the difficult behaviours to the child's past experiences (orphanage, abuse), and to the child's personality ("need for attention", "stubborn", etc.). Rod expressed the belief that his child had learned prior behaviours in the orphanage which led him to establish dominance and adopt an aggressive behaviour toward others: "…Because in the orphanage that's the way… that's what they did as soon as the caregivers turned their back… They were doing it to set in their hierarchy". Samantha attributed her daughter's behaviour difficulties to catching up on having missed some training in the early years: "From just gradual training until all of a sudden, you have a kid that's almost six… There's no training, no family environment, training in the orphanage."

It appears that continuous, persistent, intense behaviour problems might have prevented some parents from experiencing enough of positive interactions to form an emotional bond with the child: "It was still hard getting a lot of attachment if you just… they drive you crazy, and they're fighting all the time, and they are competing with each other non-stop"(Rod). The nature of the behaviours themselves might also have affected the relationship in a particular manner. For Rod, behaviours that affected his sense of trust had a compromising effect on his relationship with his son:

> *…The boy lied consistently. He would never tell the truth. Nothing he said was true, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing was the truth. So you couldn't even talk, you didn't know what was going on cause you couldn't ask him. Because what ever he said you could just assume it was a lie…you could try all you want, you could punish him, you could reward him, it didn't matter. If you going into a situation where he thought he could lie…he could get away.*

Other kinds of behavioural difficulties (refusing to eat new food, resistance to sleeping arrangements) that were perceived as power struggles were not reported to impact the relationship in a significant way: "A test of wills… whose wills were stronger. Well once I realized, you know, you have to be a little bit more flexible. Right?" (Joanne).

In sum, as most parents reported some level of behavioural difficulties, it is not clear how these behaviours impacted the relationship with their child.

4.4. Conclusion

Parents, in this study, developed a relationship with their older internationally adopted children within very exceptional circumstances. The initial steps in forming a relationship were singular and unique. The parents' beliefs about their child's relational framework were diverse, and possibly associated with the strategies they used to form a parent-child relationship. The parents' need for a special connection was an essential part of the parent-child relationship. Additionally, the need for physical intimacy and perceived connecting factors with their children were significant in the process of relationship development. In this study, some parents identified that participation in the personality development process of their children had been missing. However, the process of discovering the child as a person might have been just as significant and binding for some of the adoptive parents. In addition, language was an issue for parents that will need to be explored within the

process of developing a relationship with older, internationally- adopted children. Behaviour problems also represented a particular difficulty, as some of the parents experienced these behaviours as distancing, and distracting from the process of forming a relationship.

From these results, it is possible to begin drawing a picture of the parents' experience of the relationship development with their children. The focus of the analysis pertains to the development of a parent-child relationship and the nature, or essence, of its phenomenon. In other words, we can now begin to understand how parents develop a relationship with an older internationally adopted child, but most importantly, we can start to appreciate what it means for adoptive parents to feel they have developed a significant relationship with their child in the form of a "parent-child" relationship. I would assert that parents, in this particular context, demonstrated a need for a "special" position with their children in their relationship. This need might relate with a social or cultural concept of a parental relationship where the parents occupy a particular "emotional" status for the child. The presence of factors such as seeing the child valuing the relationship with the parents, perceiving a child as demonstrating positive behaviours for the parent, experiencing a child's acceptance to be held or soothed by a parent, or any other action from the child that confirms the special relation with the parent acts as an indication that the parent has fulfilled certain aspects that meets the requirement of the notion of a parent-child relationship. However, beyond the confirmation of their role, most parents who developed a relationship with their child admit to a sense of emotional

connection. The emotional feelings emanating from such a connection might be triggered by this very notion that a parent-child relationship has been established. The perceived confirmation from the child, by the parent, which enables the "distinctive" relationship of the parent to begin, in turn could activate the feelings of caring for their children.

An intriguing aspect of these findings relates to the notion of conditionality within the parent-child relationship. The social construct associated with the notion that the parents' role is to love their children unconditionally is challenged by the concept of the parents' need for a child's confirmation of their social role as parents. For biological parents or adoptive parents of infants, the need for confirmation of their role might somewhat be diminished as no infants have the capacity to question the nature of the relationship, and therefore are assumed to accept unconditionally their parents from the onset of the relationship. In older adoption, both parties start their relationship with the premise of conditionality, which could or could not result in a deep and enduring filial connection.

5. DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to further our understanding of the experience of parents in forming a relationship with their older internationally adopted children. It is my hope that the findings will provide professionals and prospective parents with information that might guide their practice, and support them in this process.

In this final section, I revisit some of the results presented in the last chapter, and emphasize the link with relevant literature, as well as draw implications to professional practices in the domain of counselling. The major categories from the result section are re-employed to organize this section, and a limited number of concepts introduced in the results section are further explored.

5.1. The Initial Relationship Building Process

5.1.1. Commitment, Bonding, and Entitlement

For the parents in this study, the different levels of commitment to a child was one of the initial aspects identified as pertaining to relationship building with their adopted children. In the context of this study, several parents described how their commitment to a prospective child prior to the adoption developed into an initial bond to this child.

With birth parents, it is not unusual to see parents start the bonding process with their unborn child. Bell and Richard (2000) asserted that for some parents, the experience of the emotion of caring happens (to which they relate with the parental connection with their children) well before the birth of the child, while for other parents, it arises from the child's responsiveness. This statement seems to support the finding of this inquiry that some of the parents experienced some bonding before they met with their adopted child, as other parents reported feeling connected when they experienced their child as responsive and signifying an interest in the relationship.

To what extent a commitment, and the act of bonding, to a child prior to adoption is a useful or necessary process for the parents' development of a relationship with their child (or for the child) is not clear. In adoption, it might constitute a protective factor for the relationship, as commitment, in some of the cases, seemed to bear a link with the notion of entitlement. In this study, parents who committed to a child, and initiated a bond with that child, also reported a sense of entitlement towards this child. Entitlement, as defined by Reitz and Watson (1992) is the parents' sense of legal and emotional right to be the parents of their child. Not limited to adoptive relationships, the notion of entitlement is, however, a very important step in the process of developing a parent-child relationship for adoptive parents. It could be hypothesized that this entitlement could act as a safeguard to the parents' emerging emotional bond, which could be easily threatened during the early phase of the process of adoption. Parents who had committed to the

child prior to the adoption indicated that the feeling of being the parents of the child prevented them from considering reversing the decision of the adoption when problems arose at the onset of the relationship.

However, to what extent commitment, bonding and entitlement intersect as concepts needs to be clarified. As Reitz and Watson (1992) further stated, legal parental rights are usually conferred in court, as emotional entitlement in adoption is thought to be growing out of the parents' increasing comfort with their role as mothers and fathers to the child. However, in this sample, some of the parents' feeling of entitlement occurred prior to taking the role of the parents, a concept that does not match the current notion of entitlement.

Nonetheless, the importance of entitlement in adoptive relationships could be associated with potential difficulties specific to older adoption. Some of the problems Reitz and Watson (1992) reported as a consequence of failing to develop a sense of entitlement include, among others, feeling unsuccessful in disciplining the child, feeling that the child is not part of the family, being sensitive to rejection by the child, and needing the child's reassurance.

Considering the need for parents to feel confident in dealing with behaviour problems, often present in older internationally adopted children, it appears essential to further understand factors related with entitlement within the process of relationship building in adoptive parents. However, the notion of entitlement should be explored with respect to the notion of commitment and bonding, and should possibly be expanded to include the concept of entitlement prior to adoption.

5.1.2. Initial Adjustments to the Reality of the Child

Parallel to the process of committing and bonding to a prospective child was the notion of building a relationship with a child based on a fantasized notion of the child (often established on limited elements such as pictures or a child's description). The very idea of bonding with a child from a picture indicated that at least part of the relationship building of these parents might have reflected a somewhat fantasized process of an emotional connection. In these circumstances, parents were actually bonding with, at best, an ill-defined or very limited conceptualization of their child. Although the prior commitment and emotional bond some parents had formed with their child (before meeting the child) could constitute protective factors to the relationship, it also raised the question as to what extent the prior bonding of parents, and eagerness to build a relationship, might impact (and put risks) on their capacity to respond sensibly to the child's readiness to develop an affiliation.

Indeed, several parents in this study reported an initial discrepancy in their expectations at the first meeting at adoption compared to how they perceived their older adopted child appraised this first meeting. As an example, some parents recounted feeling excited, while their child displayed some apprehension. Other parents described their dismay, as the child made unexpected and unrelenting requests, accompanied with tantrums and misbehaviour. The same kind of discrepancy of expectations experienced by adoptive parents at meeting their children in this sample is, according to Reitz and Watson (1992), one of the key issues in adoption. The term "unmatched expectations" refers to the fact that families and

children beyond infancy enter into adoption with excitement and high expectations. However, these expectations (between parents and children) are often unrealistic and do not have much in common. Even if the possibility that "unmatched expectations" may not be limited to parents who developed a bond prior to meeting their adoptive child, parents who decided to develop a relationship at or after meeting with their prospective children might have assumed a different process to relationship building. This process could be envisioned as one that was based on relating according to factors that were more closely linked to a more "realistic appraisal of the person", as opposed to a more fantasized perspective. How this strategy impacted relationship building in this study is still uncertain. However, Brodzinsky, Lang, and Smith (1995) supported the idea of a late commitment in adoption indicating that adoption is more likely to remain intact (as opposed to disrupt) if adoptive parents get to know the child prior to beginning the adoption process. They also add that an important factor in the successful parenting of adopted children is the capacity to develop and maintain realistic expectations towards the child's potential. It should be acknowledged that even some of the parents who committed to their child after meeting with them experienced difficulties in making an informed decision on the suitability of the adoption, and seemed to have developed expectations for the future relationship with their children. Committing later in the process of adoption is therefore not a guarantee that expectations will be absent from the process.

In essence, in spite of the nature of the parents' commitment and bonding, successful relationship building in adoption seems closely related with the parents'

capacity to maintain realistic expectations and sensitively appraise their relationship with their child.

5.1.3. The Transition to Parenthood

For most of the parents in this study who met their child abroad, the experience was described as akin to an arranged marriage. Bird, Peterson, and Miller (2002) acknowledged that some of the challenges of adoptive parents involve taking on "an instant parenting role" (p. 217) and developing a safe and comfortable relationship with their children as soon as possible.

Furthermore, the pressure reported by some of the parents to be effective parents at the onset of a relationship with an older child might have added an extra burden to the parents' sense of confidence in their new relationship with their child. The expectation experienced by first-time parents, and possibly by experienced parents as well, to adapt to the child's developmental and emotional level (often different than the level of non institutionalised children), in the context of an unusual cultural environment, could likely add challenges to the process of developing a relationship with their children.

From the narratives in this study, adoptive parents in the context of international adoption appear to sustain very little support in terms of relationship building. As the adoptive dyads (parents-children) often spoke different languages, came from a considerably different cultural background and might have held

different perspectives about adoption, they may have benefited from having someone help them bridge their worlds.

Some parents in this study reported that non-family members had been instrumental in the building of a relationship with their child. Individuals who were familiar with both "worlds" sometimes facilitated a connection between the child's and the parents' worlds. Adoption facilitators, homestays, and "orphanage mammas" acted as "relational facilitators" in that they, at times, translated and informed parents of the child's desire to be adopted, helped one of the children to get acquainted to "family life", and facilitated the bonding, communicating to the child the way she should behave with her parents to create a filial connection.

Counsellors could play a significant role in helping support adoptive parents and children during this transition. Accordingly, Reitz and Watson (1992) offered suggestions to build a common ground prior to adoption. They suggest doing so by asking both parents and the child to make a list of expectations for the way they envision their relationship or the adoption, and try to have something upon which to build, in order to diffuse potential conflicts.

In international adoption, these suggestions would be interesting ways to potentially link the parents and children to better support their adjustments. This would, however, necessitate the help of facilitators who would be able to support the communication process and would possibly be fluent in both cultural, and linguistic worlds. In sum, more work is needed to understand how to support parents and older internationally adopted children in their transition to adoptive relationship.

5.2. The Development of the Parents' Relationship with their Child

5.2.1. Beliefs and Strategies About Parent-Child Relationship Development

Parents in this study appeared to have formed a number of ideas about the way to relate with their child, and about the child's past relational experiences. These "beliefs" appeared to bear some influence on the development of their relationship as it might direct the focus of their interventions with their children. For example, some parents believed that their child had no prior attachment before adoption, others believed that their child had difficulties "bonding" due to prior attachments. These different interpretations led some of the parents to a different focus in relationship building with their children. For instance, one set of parents emphasized the establishment and teaching of the nature of a parent-child relationship, while another emphasized empathy in negotiating the connection.

How these ideas were developed with the parents of this study is not clear, but some of these beliefs closely resembled some of the concepts found in the broader literature on adoption. These ideas about the child's relational framework are not that far from the two models (the "grief and mourning model", and the "negative working model" introduced in the literature review) that have been used in the adoption literature to explain the attachment issues of adoptees.

However, contrary to what some of the current literature on parental transmission of attachment would suggest, ideas adoptive parents reported implied that these parents' relational framework might reflect a focus on the child's past experience, rather than focus on the adoptive parents' own relational experience.

Indeed, Steele, Hodges, Kaniuk, Hillman, and Henderson (2003) reported an association between an adoptive parents' attachment state of mind, and their child's attachment patterns, which supported the notions of intergenerational transmission for attachment patterns. There was no clear evidence, from the parents' narratives, that an intergenerational transmission of relational process was the main relational framework in this study.

However, it is important to point out that this study focused essentially on the parents' perception and understanding of their relationship building. As a result, it is not possible to make the distinction between the parents' relational framework based on the parents' experience of attachment, from a parents' relational framework based on the child's past experiences.

On the other hand, some of the parents reported a limited knowledge of the child's attachment process, and ignorance of potential difficulties with attachment at the time of adoption. None of the parents in this study provided any evidence of having been formally informed on strategies related with developing an emotional bond or an attachment with their older adoptive children. Most parents' strategies appeared to have been developed from informal knowledge and practical experience with their children. In fact, some of the parents considered the information on attachment and potential attachment disorder as a flaw in their preparation to adopt that should be communicated to other prospective adoptive parents.

As an illustration (previously cited in the result section), some of the parents recalled their frustration at the child's idealization of their homeland or former

relationships (which increased their uncertainty at parenting), which was alleviated by exchanging information with more experienced adoptive parents.

Brodzinsky, Land, and Smith, (1995) reported that for many adoptive parents, the existence of previous attachment figures is experienced as a threat to the integrity and stability of the family. The authors added that parents tend to minimize the importance of these figures in the child's life, and provide little opportunity for the child to discuss his or her feelings about these important individuals.

Interestingly, as most parents in this study were aware of their own feelings of satisfaction, or discomfort with the initial moments of adoption, most (with the exception of two cases) failed to discuss or elaborate on the feelings their children might have experienced. Far from assuming that parents were insensitive, the reasons for such a result might lie in the nature of the questions of the interview (which focused mainly on the parent's experience). However, it would be of interest to further explore the parent's perception of the child's experience of adoption, in light of its impact on the parents' sense of comfort in their relationship building with the child.

Nonetheless, Whiteman (2003), in her study of parents who adopted older children, observed " a lack of understanding of the basic attachment process, and a denial of the child's pre-adoptive experiences"(P. iii). According to Bird, Peterson, and Miller (2002) assisting parents in understanding and anticipating the issues parents face after adoption might help them prepare and implement problem solving strategies, and seek support to alleviate distress.

Proponents of the loss and grief model perspective suggested that adoptive parents, in order to help their children express their own sadness about the loss they experienced leaving their birth parents, or other significant attachment figures of their past, share their own grieving process (e.g., sadness at not being able to be the birth parents) (Reitz & Watson, 1992, Whiteman, 2003).

A similar process is reported in Kirk's (1964) work on adoptive relationships, where he described the strategies of some adoptive parents who achieved a degree of empathy with their children through recalling their own pain at the experience of childlessness. However, he inscribes this process within the parents' method of integrating the child into the family "mutualism". He asserts that sentiments of belonging are strengthened when members are engaged in mutual aide arising from mutual needs. For adoptive families, conditions of mutual need would be emphasized through the experience of the losses of parents and children.

The nature, origin, and usefulness of parental beliefs and cognitions within the process of building a relationship with their adoptive child still need to be further investigated. A better appreciation of the ways in which parents experience and perceive their child's relational framework should provide insights into parents' attitudes and strategies toward their relationship building; it should also increase our understanding of how parents' mental frameworks contribute to the overall development of the relationship with their children. In addition, although there is still a lack of empirical data on the process of attachment in older child adoption, more education and support regarding identified potential issues in attachment in

older adoption should help adoptive parents foresee potential obstacles to relationship building, and seek appropriate help to face presenting challenges.

5.2.2. Feeling Like the Parent: the Experience of Emotional Connection

In this study, the parents' need for a special relationship was an essential part of the emotional connection with their children. One of the important findings relates to the need of parents to experience reciprocity within a relationship with their children. In this sample, the parents referred, in different ways, to the importance of feeling accepted by the child, having opportunities to feel competent at caring for their child, and having a sense that the child valued the relationship with them. Supporting these findings, Nelson (1985, as reported by Whiteman, 2003) indicated that adoptive parents were least satisfied when their child was unable to engage in a personal way at the level the parents desired. Bell and Richard (2000) have acknowledged the importance of the child's responsiveness to elicit a caring emotion in parents: "the child's responsiveness, as imagined or experienced by the parent, initiates the caregiving bond" (p. 75). The "infant active signalling is crucial to the process of forming and maintaining attachments from birth onwards" (Goldberg, 2000, p. 9). Martin and Grove (1998) go on further and affirm that: "perhaps the most important reason why these adoptions work at all...is this very involvement of the older child" (as cited in Whiteman, 2003, p. 63).

Whiteman (2003) additionally asserted that parents "anticipate a reciprocity of caring, sharing, and growing that will eventually lead to a closeness of a family..." (p.

57). She hypothesizes that within the process of forming a relationship with the parents, older adoptive children might resent adults due to difficult past experience, and make new adoptive parents the scapegoat for the shortcomings of former relationships. She emphasizes the importance for adoptive parents to recognize this, and to focus less on assuming that their affection will be returned in a normal way, or that the child will demonstrate love from the start.

The importance for parents to get a sense of a connection with their child is such that it could lead, in its absence, to a great sense of failure and shame. An important aspect of adoptive relationship for parents that emerged from the study was the possibility of not experiencing an emotional bond with a child. The possibility of not feeling like the parent of one's child might imply that the parent is not feeling regarded by the child in a significant way. In this study, some parents talked about difficulty or even absence of feeling "connected' or "bonding" with their children. In one instance, the father's use of a non-parental role (caregiver and foster parent) seemed to imply an emotional distance with his child, and perhaps allowed him to feel entitled to end a relationship that was hurtful and confusing. By using this analogy, the father additionally exposed a social stigma surrounding the parental relationship with a child. The father's use of a non-parental role to define his relationship allowed him to express the distance that was experienced between him and his adoptive son, and perhaps permitted him to reveal a social taboo pertaining to the absence of a parent's emotional bond towards a child.

The possibility that a parent could experience an absence of connection with their child should be acknowledged and explored further in the process of adoption. Sluckin (1998) in his work on bonding failure in birth mothers acknowledges the "idealized image of the mother-infant relationship" (p. 13), and asserts that health care professionals should be willing to provide a context in which parents can "speak the unspeakable". He reports the story of parents whose deep feelings of shame about their lack of emotional connection with their child had prevented them from discussing this experience with anyone. A better understanding of the process of emotional connections in older adoption could assist parents who experience an absence of emotional bonds with their children. It might help parents and adoption professionals to better appreciate the "normative" process of relationship formation for adoptive parents (as the absence of an emotional connection was identified by some parents as an initial step in their process of building a relationship). It could possibly identify how the absence of connection interacts in relationship building, or how it can be resolved.

5.2.3. Physical Closeness as a Way to Connect

Some of the parents in this study reported the importance of developing a physical connection with their child. Not only did parents acknowledge the importance of providing their child with physical nurturance, but some of them recognized the importance of this type of contact for their own fulfillment. Some of the parents (mothers) in this study reported much persistence in their desire to

develop a physical relationship with their child. It appears that, for some parents, the concept of parenting was closely associated with physical nurturance.

Perhaps some of the parents saw the physical aspect in their relationship similarly to other types of relational behaviour, and used it as further evidence that the child had accepted them, or displayed a sense of trust toward them. In the case of parents for whom it appeared important to inspect the child's physique, the act might involve integrating, at a different level, the reality of becoming a parent of the child, and possibly supported the process of claiming (the process by which the adoptive parents come to accept the adopted child as their own). In inspecting the child in such an intimate fashion, the parent might, as hypothesized, increase their sense of knowing the child, and enhance a sense of belonging.

Cullen and Barlow (2002), in their study that explored the experiences and meaning of touch between parents and children with autism, suggested that parents felt hurt when children prevented parents (as in the case of children with autism) to give their child a spontaneous "cuddle". They added that through "touch therapy" (a method to enhance physical contact through massage), parents felt "closer" to their children, and had opened a communication channel between themselves and their children. While not directly relevant to the objective of the current study, the parents' reaction to being able to touch their children is of interest. Parents of autistic children who experienced enhanced closeness following touch therapy reported feeling acknowledged, happier, and positive (Cullen and Barlow, 2002, P. 178).

In sum, the experience of physical closeness could be associated with feelings of connection, identified as a mode of communication, and could be regarded as an attempt to integrate physical characteristics of one's new adopted child. Each of these assumptions needs to be further investigated.

5.2.4. Finding Similarities as Strengthening the Relationship Building Process

Parents of the study perceived similarities between them and their children, and reported them as important characteristics in the process of relationship development. These similarities were often cited as surprising, mystical or were thought as "meant to happen" by the parents. In the absence of blood ties, it could be hypothesized that spiritual ties or other deterministic assertions made by adoptive parents could contribute to enhance a sense of legitimacy of the relationship with their child. According to some authors, claiming begins with the adoptive parent's capacity to find and identify similarities between the child and themselves or other family members (Whiteman, 2003, Melina, 1998, Reitz & Watson, 1992). Whiteman (2003) further empathizes that while family should not deny differences, identifying similarities between themselves and the adoptive child "facilitates the same kind of acceptance and status within the family than any other member…" (p. 62). Additionally, according to Phillips (2003), adoptive parents who saw their children more as themselves saw their children as less problematic with regard to externalizing behaviours, including aggressive behaviours and attention problems. Finding similarities in adoptive children can also be perceived as a strategy to facilitate integration into the adoptive family: "integration can also be assisted through

identifying similarities between the child and family members…" (Brodzinsky, Lang, & Smith, 1995, p. 222).

In sum, the process of discovering similarities between adoptive parents and adoptive children could be considered as facilitating the relationship building. However some authors substantiate this proposition to the extent that it does not promote the denial of differences that adoption has conferred to their relationship.

5.3. Other Factors Associated with Relationship Development

5.3.1. Personality Development as Part of the Relationship Building

In this study, some parents reported having missed participating in the personality development process of their children. However, the process of discovering the child as an individual was reported as significant for some of the adoptive parents.

Whiteman (2003) acknowledges that older child adoption is different from infant adoption in terms of personality factors. She asserts that, as some of the parents in this research mentioned, the child's personality is fully developed and evident immediately. Similar to this research, she asserts that the child has attachment, skills, preferences, and memories that adoptive parents do not share, and have no part in forming.

In this study, some of the parents acknowledged a difference between developing a relationship with an older adopted child, where the task is to discover

and appraise the individuality of the child, and participating in the process of personality formation of infants.

In fact, in both adoptive and non-adoptive parenting relationships, parents have to expect a certain degree of uncertainty associated with personality development. No parents can predict with accuracy to what extent children will take on parental characteristics, and to what extent they will develop into singular, unique individuals. However, for the parents who could compare their experience between their birth children or their adopted infant with the experience with their older adopted child, there were notable differences in the process associated with personality development. These differences revealed the complexity of the process of bonding with an older child with whom the individuation process had already been initiated. The differences reported seemed to involve the adoptive parents' absence in participation in the personality development of the child, and the possible loss associated with it. In contrast, the process of discovering the adoptive child's personality was described as a fascinating and surprising process.

Again, more needs to be done in regard to understanding the adoptive parents' perception of their role in their child's personality development, and how these processes relate to the relationship development between parents and children.

5.3.2. Language as a Relationship Facilitator and a Relational Mediator

Language and communication issues in adoption literature often pertain to issues related with disclosure of adoption or other aspects related with adoption

within the development over the life span. As an example, parents have to make decisions regarding the best time to disclose the child's adoption, and to decide how to communicate with the child at different point in his or her development, the notion of being adopted. Some authors have also reported the presence of language delays in post-institutionalised adopted children (Judge, 2004, Gindis, 2000). In this study, the communication problem was an important issue for parents, as most parents could not communicate in a significant way with their child, and some did not speak their child's language. While this issue had not been identified in the literature surveyed, several parents were reportedly surprised at the linguistic requirements an older child would create with respect to forming a relationship. Even parents who had learned some of the child's language were surprised to discover extensive linguistic needs, which often surpassed their abilities.

Whiteman (2003) accordingly states that "bonding between child and adults involves an intimate, continuous, and constant interplay of communication …communication is a building block of successful older child adoption." (p. 64). In this study, parents and children could not access the communication tools essential to build an initial bond with their older child. In this sample, the absence of a common language seemed to result in relational misunderstandings between some parents and children, and interfered with the initial development of the relationship between them.

In addition, for some of the parents, language skills were identified as a way to demonstrate interest in the parent-child relationship. Either from the perspective of

a parents' desire to learn the child's language, or from the parents' witnessing a child's interest in learning the parent's language, the relational message seemed to be that learning a language had an impact on the parents' relationship building with their child.

Surprisingly, very few parents reported language issues unless they were prompted during the interview. However, most parents reported difficulties with their children as directly related with the language barrier. The recognition of the language issues in inter-country adoption can bring awareness to an underlying problem that was not identified through past adoption literature, but that could have a substantial impact for the relationship building. Consequently, an exploration of communication issues is likely warranted in the study of older child international adoption.

5.3.3. Behaviour Problems

Behaviour problems also represent a particular difficulty for parents who adopt older children internationally. According to Brodzinsky, Lang, and Smith (1995), behaviour problems are the single largest source of stress for families who adopt older and special needs children. Some of the parents who experienced behaviour problems with their children in this research often appeared to have experienced these behaviours as distancing, and distracting from the process of forming a relationship. According to Cohen, Coyne, and Duvall (1996), parents who feel they cannot control their child's behaviour reject or feel rejected by their child,

and generally feel inadequate in their parenting role. It therefore becomes clear that behaviour problems could become a potential challenge to relationship building in parents who adopt older children. Katz (1986) accordingly emphasized the absence of mutuality at the onset of the relationship building with older adoptive children, as well as the challenge for parents of the absence of a gratifying cycle with their children:

> Most children placed in middle childhood are neither gratifying to care for nor do they know how to enter into the intense mutuality that come naturally to the newborn. Instead of a cycle of gratifying the child and feeling gratified themselves, the parents suffer...of seeing the child's pain and being unable to be the one who can relieve it. (Katz, 1986, as cited in Brodzinsky, Lang, & Smith, 1995, P. 572)

In light of this, Whiteman asserted that older adoptive children usually go through three stages as they move towards attachment: the initial "honeymoon stage" (where the child is eager to please) is often short-lived or absent in some families; the testing, acting out period; and the incorporation stage that is characterized by short bursts, intermingled with regressions, before the next demonstration of attachment behaviour. In this proposition, one can readily see the association between behaviour and relationship building between adoptive parents and children. It is easy to foresee how parents can be impacted in a relational way by their child's misbehaviour.

Of interest for intervention in counselling, Whiteman indicates that it is important for the parent to learn to distinguish between behaviours designed to push

the parent away, and attempts to bring the parent closer. She acknowledges that sometimes parents might have a hard time to distinguish between the two, mostly when the behaviours are displayed both at once. They, as with some parents described in this study, might have to respond to their child as a much younger child. She also invites parents to see these testing behaviours as symbolic of the beginning of attachment of the child to the family. She indicates that the parent's experience of rejection from their child might reach intolerable level at times, but indicates that parents' knowledge and anticipation of attachment stages might prepare them to handle these situations that would promote integration into the family.

Brodzinsky, Lang, and Smith (1995) acknowledge that parenting a child with such "survival behaviours" requires special skills. Some of the characteristics they cite as contributing to successful placement include tolerance to ambivalent and negative feelings, a sense of entitlement to care for the child, ability to find happiness in small increment, flexible expectations, good coping skills, tolerance for rejection, and an ability to delay parental gratification. Groza, Ryan, and Cash (2003) suggested that the ability of post-institutionalised adoptive families to adequately respond to children's behaviour relates, in part, to their understanding of the risk that early experiences have on children's development at placement and over time, and to their understanding behaviours that can be changed versus the ones that can be managed, as well as identifying aspects of the interactions that contribute to the maintenance of the behaviours.

Reitz and Watson (1992) point out that parents have to be aware of the new roles children have to contend with when they join a new family system. They affirm that an adopted child comes in their adopted families with roles that have been adaptive in other contexts sometimes as a means of protection and control. They further emphasize that if adoptive members are aware of their own dynamics and of the role their child has played in other contexts before adoption, the integration of the child in the family will be easier.

In sum, facing the behavioural difficulties some older internationally adopted children bring is a challenge that requires adoptive parents to acquire exceptional skills and have prior knowledge of their occurrence. These difficulties are thought to trigger reactions in parents that might have a detrimental effect on the building of a relationship, and could possibly be mediated through adequate parental training and education.

5.4. Implications of Findings for Counselling

Brodzinsky, Lang, and Smith (1995) indicate that the key to parenting success (in adoption) is good preparation, realistic expectations, effective parenting skills, and adequate support. All of these could be accomplished through better understanding of the parents' experience of adoption, including the "typical" aspects that most adoptive parents are likely to encounter. Zamosnty et al. (2003) reported a lack of research attention in the field of psychology and counselling on adoption issues, and

a need to contribute to knowledge especially in regard to adoptive families, a population they attest has been neglected.

The aspects or elements that support a parents' sense of connection with their child might allow adoptive parents to feel an emotional bond with their child and prevent possible disruption, or dissolution. Indeed, findings related with the parents subjective experience of non-responsiveness from their children has been implicated in cases of child abuse (Gelles & Straus, 1986).

Understanding the parental perspectives in relationship formation with their children allows adoptive parents (and professionals who are involved with adoption) to better acknowledge their needs in their relationship development with their adoptive children, and are important factors that are also known to impact the viability of adoption relationships.

5.5. Limitations of the Study

In appraising the findings of this research, it is important to consider that the methodology in this inquiry presents some limitations. The study was exploratory and based on a sample of parents who had adopted older children from Russia or former Soviet Union countries. One of the first limitations involves the small number of participants (13) in the project and the sampling procedure, which substantially restricts the capacity to draw inferences to other populations.

An additional limitation involves the retrospective nature of the interviews. Parents in this multiple case study had to re-construct their relationship building

experience from memory, which in some cases happened as long as nine years ago. It is possible that such a time lapse between the interview and the actual experience increased the likelihood that parents' initial impressions were coloured by their current relationships, or other factors that might be less relevant to the present purpose.

Qualitative traditions typically acknowledge the dialectical nature of the relationship between the researcher and participants. Such work recognizes the character of the encounter between the inquirers and participants, at the point in time and in the context in which they met. In the context of this study, pressed by the circumstances of the study framework, some parents might have felt the need to present their ideas in a way that corresponded to normative and societal expectations related to parenting or adoptions.

Social idealization and stigma associated with "mother-child" relationships or adoptive relationships have been reported by several authors (Leon, 2002, Sluckin, 1998). Leon (2002) identified that parenthood and kinship are psychosocial constructs often seen as identical to the process of procreation. The biology of reproduction, he cites, is often equated with "natural" love between offspring and progenitors. Accordingly, the adoptive parents' possible internalization of "normative" aspects of "biological" parenting might influence the way they believe their relationship ought to be represented.

Furthermore, considering the limited time available to build a trusting relationship with participants, and in view of the purpose of the meetings (qualitative

research involving descriptive data that would be made public), the information that was shared by parents could have been limited in some areas they considered "sensitive".

Parents of adopted children might be concerned to preserve the attachment relationship that they might have contributed to develop, and could understandably be cautious to discuss aspects of their relationship that could compromise their relationship with their child. Consequently, adoptive parents might be less willing to express internal and personal conflicts they might have experienced with the adoptive process.

5.6. Conclusion

The narrative of parents who adopted older children revealed that parents seemed to have a very specific idea of what it felt like to have formed (or not) a parent-child relationship. It seems that parents who traveled to the other side of the world to adopt a child had a common goal, the one of becoming the parent of a child (as it is assumed that these parents -- as expressed by one of the parents in this study -- were not seeking a fostering relationship, or a guardianship with these children). As this process is most often taken for granted in parents' relationships with their birth children, this was not necessarily the case for parents who adopted older children from abroad.

While attributes associated with the nature of parents' relationships with children are often unspoken, these appear to be specific and real in the minds of adoptive parents, as every parent could assess if they indeed achieved a sense of affiliation toward their child. It appeared that factors that allowed these parents to feel they had achieved a satisfactory parental relationship, while inconspicuous, were fundamental in their experience of adoption.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Demographic Questionnaire

Background information

Parents' name: Mother____

Date of birth:______________________________________

Age at adoption of child/ children: _____________________

Father: ____

Date of birth:______________________________________

Age at adoption of child/children: ______________________

Phone number: ____

Address: ____

Parent's current marital status (specify mother and father with M and F)

Never married or never common-law_____
Married or Common-law____Since when?_________________
Separated_______ Since when?_________________
Divorced_______ Since when?_________________
Re-married or common-law_______ Since when?_________________

Mother's highest level of education

_______Elementary school
_______Some high school
_______High school completion
_______Vocational or some college/university
_______College or university graduate
_______Graduate or professional school

Mother's ethnicity/race: _______________________

Is mother employed outside the home: Yes No

Mother's occupation_______________________________

Is mother employed: full-time________part-time________ not employed_______

Father's highest level of education

________Elementary school
________Some high school
________High school completion
________Vocational or some college/university
________College or university graduate
________Graduate or professional school

Father's ethnicity/race: __________________________

Is father employed outside the home: Yes No

Father's occupation_______________________________

Is father employed: full-time ________part-time________ not employed_______

Please estimate your gross annual family income

_______less than $20, 000	_______50 - 60,000	_______90 –100,000
_______20- 30, 000	_______60 –70,000	_______above $100,000
_______30- 40,000	_______70 –80,000	
_______40- 50,000	_______80 –90, 000	

Was the adoption of your child your first experience as a parent? Yes_____
No_____

Names of children	age
1.______________________	_____
2.______________________	_____
3.______________________	_____
4.______________________	_____

Please indicate if any of the children (give the names) are from a previous relationship:____

Have there been any changes in your family composition since your child was adopted (adoption, birth, divorce)? if yes, please explain the change.

____

When did this change occur? ________month________year

Please enter information for each adopted child:

Child's name: ____________________ ____________________

Sex: ____________________ ____________________

Date of birth: ____________________ ____________________

Date of adoption: ____________________ ____________________

Age at adoption: ____________________ ____________________

Location of adoption (be as specific as possible. Country, state, city, institution):

____

Did your child/children live in an orphanage or institution prior to adoption?

____

How long did your child/children live in an orphanage or institution prior to adoption?

____

How old was your child/children when he/she/they entered the institution? Please provide circumstances of institutionalization if known:

____

____

____

Briefly describe any developmental irregularities you have noticed since you've adopted your child/children?

____

Where does your child/children attend school ?_________________________

What grade each of your child is in ? ____________________________________

Please list your child/children's interests/hobbies/extra-curricular activities____
____

How did you find out about the research project?
____
____
____
____

Which organization facilitated your adoption (consultant in Canada)?
____
____

E-mail:
____

Would you like to receive (via e-mail) a final report on the research?:_________________

Appendix B: Interview Protocol

A. Becoming a parent

1. Tell me about your experience of becoming a parent (decision process, adoption experience, anything you deem relevant and significant in becoming a parent)

2. Could you talk about when you started feeling like you were the mom, or the dad of _______? Could you talk about when you started feeling some love, some closeness, or felt special feelings for ______? What happened that contributed to make you feel you this way?

B. Current parenting relationship

3. How is it to be a parent of____ nowadays? Tell me about your current experience as a parent of ______________. Can you think of four or five adjectives that reflect your current relationship with ____________?

4. Why do you think you have a ___________ (adjective) relationship with ________?
What do you believe have contributed to that?

5. To help me understand your life with_______, can you describe a typical interaction with ____________?

6. Describe any experiences (if any) that which you feel has been particularly significant in your relationship with ________?

7. Do you see yourself in your child? How important is that to you?
If your child is more like your spouse or other, how does that make you feel?

C. Thoughts or feelings about being a parent

8. Tell me about yourself as a parent. (e.g. What aspects of the parenting experience you find the most rewarding? challenging?)

9. How would you describe your family?

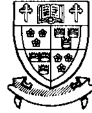
10. What can we learn from your experiences?

11. Is there anything you wish to share about your experience with ________ and that I have not asked you?

Appendix C: Letter to Parents

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF EDUCATION



BURNABY, BRITISH
COLUMBIA
V5A 1S6 CANADA
Telephone: (604) 291-3395

Dear Parents,

Hello, our names are Robyn Combres and Louise Cournoyer and we are Master's students in Counselling Psychology at Simon Fraser University. Under the supervision of Dr. Lucy LeMare, we are conducting a research project that will document the experiences of families who have adopted from Russia and their children.

Within this project, we hope to be able to find out more about different aspects of the adoption process, from the point of view of parents, as well as of children. We are looking for families with diverse experiences who are interested in sharing their stories with us including both the joys and the challenges involved in adopting a child from Russia. We need to hear many stories to understand the process.

Many people stand to benefit from this project. The knowledge we gain form this project will be used to educate prospective adoptive parents, inform schools of the needs of internationally adopted children and their families, and to guide the practice of people working in adoptive services.

This research project will consist of individual interviews with both parents and children. During the interviews, we will ask you, the parents, to describe your overall experiences surrounding the adoption process. We will ask questions that will pertain to pre and post adoption and your relationship with your child. In the children's interview, your child will be asked to talk about his/her family and his/her peer relationships.

Please note that the responses of all participants in this project are confidential and will only be used for research purposes. You and your child's participation in this research are entirely voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time.

If you are interested in participating or if you have any questions about the research project, please do not hesitate to contact Robyn Combres at 604-939-0663 or Dr. Lucy Le Mare at 604-291-3272.

Thank you,

Robyn Combres, Louise Cournoyer

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