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Adopting Heritage: What Influences Adoptive Parents in Heritage Language Decisions for Their Internationally Adopted Children

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Abstract

The purpose of this study has been to discover more about influences on adoptive parents' decisions regarding heritage language maintenance/learning for their older, internationally-adopted children. While there is much literature available on heritage language learning/maintenance (see Geerlings et al., 2015; Hornberger & Wang, 2008; McGinnis, 2008; Mu, 2016) and also on intercultural navigation in transnational adoptive families (see Bebiroglu & Pinderhighes, 2012; Lee, 2003), the blending of the two (heritage language in these adoptive families) does not seem to be as well studied – a gap this present study attempts to address. The population specifically addressed in this study is parents who have adopted a child(ren) internationally from a culture where English is not a native language and where the child(ren) have spent their formative years (approximately birth-5 years) speaking primarily the native language of that culture. Findings from this case study propose that, according to international adoptive parents' self-projected perspectives, their decisions regarding heritage language maintenance for their older, adopted child are more affected by external factors than their own internal motivations or ideologies.

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Introduction

Cultures colliding is a popular topic in our globalized world. We hear about it on the world news. We hear about it on the national news. But do we see it in the child next door?

For families who have adopted children internationally – and specifically older children – this is exactly what occurs. These families are unique cases on many levels – unique, but not rare. According to the U.S. Department of State adoption statistics (2019), Americans adopted a total of 271,833 children internationally from 1999-2017. About 19% of those children were 5 years of age or older when they were adopted, which means that they brought a cultural heritage with them to the United States that had already been formed (or had begun to form) in their birth culture. For the American parents who take these children into their American homes, the question then becomes: how does one respond to this new culture that is now joining the family?

While there is much literature available on intercultural navigation in transnational adoptive families (see Bebiroglu & Pinderhighes, 2012; Lee, 2003), very few studies conducted on this population address arguably one of the most important facets of culture – language. Similarly, much research has been done on heritage language maintenance/learning in general, but not on heritage language in international adoptive situations. The aim of this study is to discover more about what influences adoptive parents as they navigate decisions regarding their adopted child(ren)'s heritage language maintenance/learning.

Literature Review

Heritage Language and Heritage Language Learners

In order to engage with the discussion of Heritage Language (HL) in adoptive families, we must understand who Heritage Language Learners (HLL) are and – even more importantly – if internationally adopted children can truly stand among their ranks. Mu (2016) defines HL as "a language that is associated with one's cultural background but is not the dominant language of the society and, hence, it is used by its speakers with different levels of proficiency in limited contexts" (p. 293). This definition may sound vague, and that is because a HL often evades definitions! Hornberger and Wang (2008) acknowledge this difficulty and the insufficiencies of many previous HL and HLL definitions before proposing one of their own: "…we view HLLs as individuals with familial or ancestral ties to a language other than English who exert their agency in determining if they are HLLs of that language" (p. 6). In other words, Hornberger and Wang (2008) take an individual's view of their identity regarding HL as more important than any external features that could categorize that individual.

Interestingly enough for our discussion, Hornberger and Wang (2008) use the example of children from inter-racial or multi-racial marriages and adoptions to demonstrate how HLL situations can be complex and elusive to define – implying that internationally adopted children are indeed HLLs. Movements such as Families with Children from China (FCC) confirm this categorization. McGinnis (2008) states that the purpose of FCC is "helping these children maintain their cultural/linguistic traditions and in assisting their adopted parents to facilitate the maintenance process (while at the same time enhancing their knowledge of their children's ethnic and cultural roots) …" (p. 239). FCC has been the facilitating agent for various language programs in schools that target not only adopted Chinese Heritage Language Learners (CHLLs),

but also their adoptive parents. Programs such as these confirm the place of internationally adopted children among the ranks of HLLs.

Language and Identity

A foundational principal of our discussion is the concept that language and identity are intrinsically intertwined. The study of identity has become very important in the field of applied linguistics, and research done to investigate this link has taken many forms (Block, 2010). Shin (2014) states that, "language expresses, embodies, and symbolizes cultural reality" (p. 190). Multiple studies pertinent to our discussion affirm this with their results.

For example, Geerlings and Thijs (2015) conducted a study among adolescents from Latin American (Spanish speaking) and Asian (non-Spanish speaking) immigrant families and found a positive correlation between ethnic self-identification and heritage language use – although how exactly this correlation played out differed between the two ethnic groups. The authors stated that, "Heritage language is typically consider(ed) a key aspect of ethnic identity among immigrant families" (Geerlings & Thijs, 2015, p. 501). Mu's (2016) research found that racial Chinese appearance was a significant motivator (through both internal self-perceptions and external expectations) for CHLLs to learn Chinese, and his own survey of previous research found that CHLLs positively correlated ethnic identification with CHL ability – even altering their engagement with CHL to achieve desired identity projections.

Specifically in the international adoption context, Bebiroglu and Pinderhighes (2012), examined cultural socialization (CS) practices in families who had adopted daughters from China, with CS being associated with "positive identity development" (p. 123). Consistently and frequently, these authors recorded Chinese language education as a CS practice used by the participant families (Bebiroglu & Pinderhighes, 2012). These few examples grounded

themselves on a well-established body of research that has demonstrated the link between language and identity over the years. Languages are more than alternate forms of communication; they take a deeply rooted place in the human identity.

Before moving on, it must be noted that the current, mainstream view of identity in qualitative research is post-structuralist (Block, 2010). This view asserts that identities are largely subjective and are "socio-culturally constructed ongoing narratives, which develop and evolve across different spatio-temporal scales," and that they "emerge during individuals' engagements in activities with others" (pg. 337). In contrast, the view taken by the author of this study is that, although some aspects of identities are malleable, identities also contain aspects that are objectively determined – whether or not the individual chooses to recognize them as such. Therefore, the word "projected" will replace "constructed" in following discussions on identity.

Our Specific HL Context: International Adoptive Families

We will now look at two key studies regarding HL and international adoptive families. The first study was conducted by Fogle in 2013. Central to her research is the concept of Family Language Policy (FLP) – explicit decisions and implicit processes that "legitimize certain language and literacy practices over others in the home" (Fogle, 2013, p. 83). Her primary assertion is that FLP is defined not merely by parents' views on language, but also by "wider social and cultural belief systems" (Fogle, 2013, p. 84). Fogle (2013) proposes that international adoptive families (especially those who have adopted older children) provide a perfect context to observe this, as monolingual norms of typical American culture and families come to a crossroads with the bilingual reality of their adoptive child. In addition, for these families FLP is

subject to a greater amount of "advice from experts, therapists, and teachers" than is often found in other FLP contexts (Fogle, 2013, p. 85).

What Fogle (2013) found through her study with families who had adopted children 5 years and older from Russia, was that the adoptive parents' FLP was influenced by societal discourses, but that they viewed it as a response to the individual child's needs. Parents utilized labels and descriptors to talk about their adopted children that demonstrated how their FLP was shaped by their own ideologies as well as those of experts and society at large (Fogle, 2013). For example, when parents projected their adopted children as Russian-English bilinguals, some viewed this as a problematic disruption (seeking to maintain family dynamics), whereas others embraced it as an opportunity to develop greater cultural diversity (allowing family dynamics to change) (Fogle, 2013). For parents in the latter category, "the Russian language figured as an important way to maintain cultural ties for their children and further help their children establish an area of expertise that they could draw on for confidence and pride" (Fogle, 2013, p. 97).

Another projection of the adopted children by their parents was that of "adoptee," which often referred to the parents' hesitancy concerning language in their older adopted child, due to fears of triggering a potentially traumatic past or not being mindful of language deficiencies (Fogle, 2013). Fogle (2013) notes that this projection lines up with the common public and expert discourse that views adopted children (especially older ones) as more "at risk" for psychological trauma and language disorders. Through examples such as these, Fogle (2013) has sought to show how – perhaps subconsciously – ideologies and societal influences affect adoptive parents' decisions that they believe are responses to their individual situation.

Another study conducted by Shin (2014) investigates a similar scenario in her research on language learning as culture keeping in internationally adoptive families. The parents in her

study had adopted children from Asian countries before they were two years old, and they were already pursuing HL maintenance for their adopted children (Shin, 2014). Shin (2014) states that, "very little research has examined adoptive parents' perspectives on adoptees' learning of the birth language as a mechanism for engaging with the native culture… investigating parents' language-related decisions can lead to a better understanding of how culture is viewed and practiced by transnational adoptive families" (pg. 190).

   Shin (2014) found three main reasons why adoptive parents chose to pursue HL education for their adopted children. First, their child looked Asian and would be expected to know their native, Asian language (Shin, 2014). Although this reason was largely couched in terms of what society would expect of the child, Shin (2014) deduced that the parents held this position somewhat themselves, associating looks with identity and using language as a means to stay true to that identity. Second, adult adoptees in the adoption community recommended it (Shin, 2014). Many parents referenced the influence of older adoptees who advocated for enculturation of adopted children, with language playing an important role in that (Shin, 2014). Shin (2014) theorizes that this vocal advocacy for enculturation is a reaction against the largely assimilationist attitude that pervaded the adoption world in earlier decades; now, adoption agencies and literature are emphasizing enculturation practices as a positive investment in the adoptee's ethnic/racial identity and the family's new multicultural identity (Shin, 2014). Adoptive parents are eager to avoid the perceived mistakes of past adoptive parents (Shin, 2014). Finally, adoptive parents chose HL education because their adopted child wanted to learn his/her HL (Shin, 2014). Shin (2014) found that some parents initiate and encourage enculturation only when the child shows interest and motivation, for fear of being overbearing towards the child and negatively affecting or being rejected by him/her. Shin (2014), like Fogle, is careful to note that

FLP decisions do not happen in a vacuum; factors from within and without affect parents'

choices regarding HL (Shin, 2014).

Hornberger and Wang (2008) outline some of these influencing factors in their discussion

on how society views HLLs (in all forms) and how HLLs view themselves. Sometimes society

views HLLs as problematic – that they are language deficient, or defiant towards the mainstream

culture (Hornberger & Wang, 2008). This latter assertion comes from the view of "language as a

symbol of allegiance" (Hornberger & Wang, 2008, p. 22). There are also more positive views of

HLLs present in the culture, as some advocate for more HLL accommodation in schools and

view HL as a right (Hornberger & Wang, 2008). HL is also now being viewed as a valuable

resource, with HLLs being encouraged to maintain their HL for "economic competitiveness and

national security" grounds (Hornberger & Wang, 2008). This view, of course, does not equally

apply to all HLs, and Hornberger and Wang (2008) suggest that society's values "have not

recognized immigrant and indigenous languages as intrinsically valuable to our social well-

being" (p. 23).

When it comes to the projections that HLLs have of themselves, one interesting

phenomenon stands out: "language shyness" (Hornberger & Wang, 2008, p. 24). HLLs may have

a level of language skill or a non-standard form of their HL that does not meet the expectations

placed on them as a "native" speaker (Hornberger & Wang, 2008). Add to this that, "a HL

acquired as a child may not develop further once the onset of schooling begins in regular

American schools where English is the only language of instruction," which means that, "HLLs

may not develop necessary sociolinguistic repertoire or cognitive language proficiency," and we

find that HLLs may view their HL as problematic or embarrassing (Hornberger & Wang, 2008).

We see then that, from within and without, internationally adopted families face unique

challenges and develop unique positions associated with HL.

<div align="center">**Methods**</div>

Methodology Background

There were two key influences on how the current study was conducted. The first is the

case study, which Casanave (2010) argues is a research tradition, not a research method. A case

study is characterized by its study of a bounded, particular phenomena in order to discover what

makes it unique (Casanave, 2010). The aim is depth, not breadth (Duff, 2008). Generalization is

not desired, but rather a better understanding of the particular case and how it could be applied to

cases like it (Casanave, 2010). In addition, case studies take into account factors outside the

immediate content of the interview – such as interviewer/interviewee dynamics, the perspective

of the interviewer, etc. (Holliday, 2010). Mann (2010) argues that this more reflective approach

is underused yet very beneficial to qualitative interviews in the applied linguistics field.

In addition, the methodology of the current case study was informed by grounded theory

(GT). GT is a data-centric methodology, where theory emerges from data that is constantly

gathered, analyzed, and refined in relation to the growing body of data (Glaser & Holton, 2004).

Due to time constraints under which this study was being conducted, GT could not be truly

utilized. However, several general principles of GT had an influence on the researcher during the

research process. For example, the main body of data in this study was collected before an

analysis of previous literature – a key requirement of GT (Glaser & Holton, 2004). After an

initial data analysis, concepts and theories had already begun to emerge from that data before

they were compared to the results of other studies, and so this case study bears a few small marks

of a study done in accordance with GT.

Data Collection Methods

In accordance with the tradition of a case study, my group of participants was small and from a select population (Casanave, 2010). My participants consisted of two couples of American, native-English-speaking, adoptive parents, and both couples came to the researcher's attention through personal connections. Pseudonyms have been assigned to protect identities. The first couple ("Peter" and "Sandy") are a middle-aged couple who adopted a girl from China ("Lily") when she was approximately 10 years old. Lily spoke Cantonese Chinese natively, and she had also learned Mandarin Chinese. Her exposure to English was limited to some English media consumption and a little instruction in school. The second couple ("Bernard" and "Vicki") are a younger-middle-aged couple who adopted a girl ("Georgia") and a boy ("Bobby") from Accra, Ghana. Georgia was 7 years old and Bobby was 5 when they came to the States, and their native language was the tribal Ga. Prior to coming to the U.S., the children spent 9 months in a foster home where they were exposed to English, and Georgia had received some English instruction in school. Because all these children (but particularly "Lily" and "Georgia") came to the States at an older age and had spent their formative years speaking a non-English language, and their exposure to English before coming to the States was relatively minor, their adoptive parents qualified as participants in the study.

After the two couples had signed an informed consent form, the researcher sent each couple an email with a few basic questions regarding their child(ren)'s background – to create a base of knowledge coming into the interview phase as well as to confirm that the participants were eligible for the study. Next, the researcher conducted one semi-structured, approximately 30 minute interview with each couple, with both father and mother present and responding to questions (see Appendix A). The interviews were recorded (with participant consent), and the

researcher used transcription conventions from Holmes and Schnurr (2006). The researcher had

not consulted any previous literature on the topic beyond a cursory level, in accordance with

Grounded Theory (Glaser & Holton, 2004). However, due to time constraints, the researcher

then engaged with previous literature at this point. With that information as background, the

researcher examined the interview data, then formulated a follow-up, Likert-scale survey via

Google Forms (see Appendix B) for each participant to fill out separately (a total of 4 forms).

This ended the data collection phase.[1]

Results

Heritage Language Efforts Made by Adoptive Parents

Both of the participant couples mentioned making efforts at heritage language

maintenance for their adopted child(ren). Peter and Sandy talked about buying Cantonese and

Mandarin DVDs of children's movies while in China, taking Lily to a Chinese restaurant and a

Chinatown visit where Cantonese was spoken, and providing her with a semester of lessons

taught by a native Mandarin speaker (some language as well as cultural activities). Bernard and

Vicki mentioned taking their children to meet with a local group of Ghanaians (although the

language spoken there differed from the children's tribal language), finding a few YouTube

videos in Ga, asking their children about different Ga words at the dinner table, and making an

effort to find books and other resources in Ga. In this way, both the participant couples were

similar in that they initially made forays into heritage language maintenance.

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[1] Before data collection began, all research was approved by the Cedarville University
Institutional Review Board, and the participants signed forms of informed consent.

Internal Motivations and Ideologies of the Adoptive Parents

One of the most striking results that emerged during the interviews with the adoptive couples, was that they expressed very different views on their adopted child(ren)'s identity in regards to being adopted. In the interview with Peter and Sandy, Peter expressed his view in this way:

> We would have liked for them to continue their native language [……] not so much to be, you know, politically correct or to say 'Oh, we're helping them maintain their culture [……] they're assuming a new culture [……] they've come to be Americans.

Peter than elaborates to explain why heritage language maintenance for Lily would be of value in his view:

> The reason for them to maintain their native language is really [……] for them maybe to be translators. You know, maybe to be able to read things. I mean if they [……] want to go into foreign studies [……] they could read periodicals and things like that from over there and be able to understand it as a native would as opposed to as an American that learned Chinese. Because we would never, ever know the nuances of the language or what was being said.

According to the Peter, adopted children assume the cultural identity of their adoptive country, and heritage language is mostly beneficial as a practical tool.

Vicki, however, expressed almost the verbatim opposite view in the interview with her and her husband Bernard. When asked why they saw heritage language maintenance as positive and had made efforts at maintenance for their adopted children, Vicki responded:

> Because it's who they are [……] they're not Americans. They're Africans who've been brought to America and so they're going to learn English because that's where they're

living now and that's where they need to cope, but their identity is still part African and

so I wouldn't want to lose that part of their identity. And I want them to be able to go

back at some point to their country and to be able to communicate with the people there.

So it would be that much easier if they had maintained their language.

According to Vicki, adopted children always carry their cultural identity from their birth

country, and heritage language is a way to keep them connected to that identity. In these

interviews then, two competing parental ideologies presented themselves.

Influential External Factors for Adoptive Parents' Heritage Language Decisions

Despite the fact that each participant couple made heritage language maintenance efforts

coming from seemingly contrastive motivations and ideologies, in both cases their child(ren) did

not keep their heritage language. When asked if Lily still spoke any Cantonese, Sandy answered

that it was "very rare" for her and later stated that Lily had "lost her Cantonese." Vicki made a

similar statement regarding Georgia and Bobby's use of Ga: "there are a couple of like childhood

rhymes that they remember that they will sort of recite, but as far as actually speaking the

language they've lost most of whatever they had." In the interviews, the parents gave several

reasons for why they believed their efforts had not achieved results.

Support from outside sources.

Both couples said that they received minimal (if any) heritage language maintenance

support or education from outside sources, such as the adoption agency. According to Vicki:

The adoption agency didn't really push maintaining their language [……] somewhere

along the line in my reading or whatever I thought that it was a good idea to try to

maintain some sort of tie with their culture and their language [……] so we definitely did

try to do that at first

Later in the interview, Bernard affirmed this view:

> With adoption and adoption agencies, you know, there's tons of information out there on
>
> [……] coping and adapting and latching on physically, mentally [……] how to survive
>
> day to day and, you know, differences (in) expectations [……] (But) sort of reflecting
>
> back upon it, I don't think that language and maintaining connection with the culture is
>
> something that is discussed or supported, you know, very much. It seems to be more
>
> about how to survive.

Bernard later affirmed this lack of cultural maintenance help by using the metaphor of the

fine arts in school – subjects that are important but are often pushed aside by what is viewed as

the necessities (for example, math, etc). He concluded by saying that cultural matters (language

included) are "underserved in the adoption circle." Peter and Sandy also downplayed the role of

outside support in the area of heritage language maintenance, although Sandy commented that

the adoption agency looked at "would you be preserving the culture would you be, uh, doing

anything (reminding them of their) people etc. etc."

The child – motivation, personality, and past.

This factor was most prominent in Peter and Sandy's interview. They talked about how

Lily had shown excitement to speak Cantonese with other Cantonese speakers (such as during a

visit to Chinatown a few short months after Lily had been in the States), but that, in the words of

Sandy, "I think [……] what she went through in the early years and then speaking English

exclusively could have just made her more, you know, unwilling to respond when people

(spoke)[2] to her in Chinese." They described her unwillingness to speak to a Cantonese-speaking

waitress at a Chinese restaurant they had taken her to.

---

[2] Parenthesis indicates the transcriber's guess for an unclear utterance (Holmes & Schnurr, 2006)

Recounting this episode prompted Peter to explain what he called his "guess" on why

Lily acted this way:

> As they grow up, [......] they add more and more vocabulary like we do. But there's so
>
> much [......] involved in their language that if it's been arrested at any point in time?
>
> when they try and talk to somebody? They are speaking as if they are babies. [......] they
>
> do not have the language skill [......] the amount of characters that [......] they should
>
> know at the age [......] Lily acts almost embarrassed whenever we were trying to get her
>
> to talk to people in Cantonese. And my take on it is because [......] she speaks as a child
>
> instead of a young adult.

Sandy expressed her doubts about this theory, saying that external factors (such as the

waitress talking too fast) should be considered. However, she did find it puzzling that Lily would

simply not communicate in a language that she had grown up speaking, and she commented,

"Maybe it was an age thing? [......] Maybe she didn't want to communicate."

In the end, no matter Lily's motivation for HL hesistancy, Peter asserted that in regards to

HL maintenance:

> You can't [......] strong arm them to do that. You have to suggest it and say "You know
>
> it would be really neat if you could do this." And, you know if there's a lot of pushback –
>
> I mean a little pushback you might be able to kind of work with – but, you know, a lot of
>
> pushback or "I just don't care" [......] OK (then let's) work on English.

In addition to this concern over not wanting to force HL maintenance on the child, Peter

and Sandy expressed reservations about how Lily's personality and past might interact with

maintenance efforts. From their perspective, Lily has not demonstrated the driven personality

necessary to excel in language skills. When asked if they thought Lily's language shift over to

English was an attempt to forget the past, Peter and Sandy answered that they could not be certain. Peter said that "she, at this point in time, may not want to remember her life in China," although Sandy commented that Lily still has expressed positive memories with her native country. In general, however, they have not been able to get a clear reading from Lily herself on how her past has affected her.

Bernard also touched on the issue of past. When talking about how maintaining adopted children's cultural and linguistic ties is not something that is well supported, he said:

> You just don't know what you're going to get, what kind of issues they come with or you
>
> have to deal with […...] We were fairly blessed in the kids that we got. Haven't had any
>
> real issues.

Resources.

This factor was more or less exclusively mentioned by Vicki and Bernard. Vicki stated that although learning English was the main focus they had for Georgia and Bobby, "I believe that if we'd had better resources we would have somehow tried to maintain what she [Georgia] did have. But because we couldn't really find anything, it just sort of naturally died out." Later, Vicki added:

> I think, though, like if she had been Chinese or even Ethiopian where the language seems
>
> to be a little more prevalent – where we had the resources – I think we definitely would
>
> have made an effort to maintain it. It was mainly just a lack of resource that allowed us to
>
> let it drop.

She recounted a story about going to a convention and finding a company that sold resources in many different languages. When she told the salesman that her children spoke Ga, he replied, "Well everybody speaks Ga when they're born," thinking she was referring to baby

talk! Humorous though the story may be, Vicki used it to show how difficult it was for them to find resources to help with their children's HL maintenance.

Bernard affirmed Vicki's view:

If there was some sort of convenient resource [……] we probably would have put a little more effort into at least trying to maintain familiarity with the language. I don't think learning English really detracted from that. It was really more of a lack of convenient resource.

Bernard also mentioned YouTube resources and online, long-distance language conversation services as something he wished existed in his children's HL.

Results from Follow-Up Survey

After completing and analyzing the interviews, the researcher sent both participant couples a follow-up survey to fill out individually (a total of 4 responses). The 4 questions on this survey asked the parents how their efforts at heritage language maintenance/learning would change if some of the external factors they had mentioned were different. They were provided with a Likert scale from 0-4 for each question, with "I would not make more effort" as 0 and "I would make every effort possible!" as 4. There was also a place for comments or clarifications provided at the end of the survey.

Surprisingly, the four parents answered exactly the same for 2 questions, and only one parent answered differently on the other 2, showing a general unity in their independent responses.

Figure 1: survey question one, all responses the same

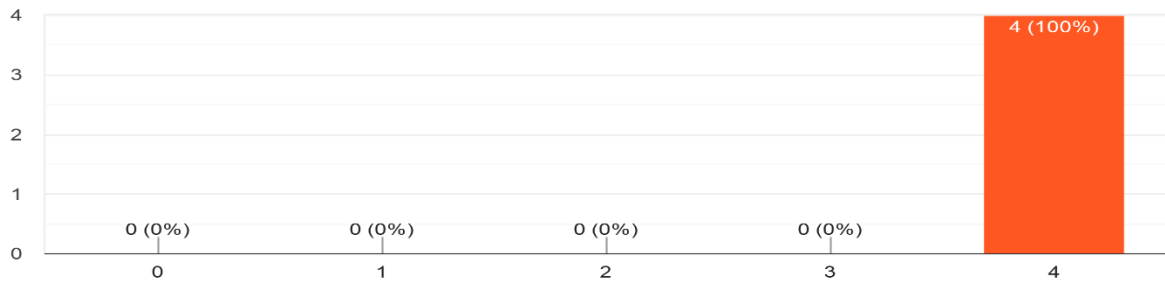...your child communicated a desire to know his/her birth language?
4 responses

Figure 2: survey question two, differing response by Peter

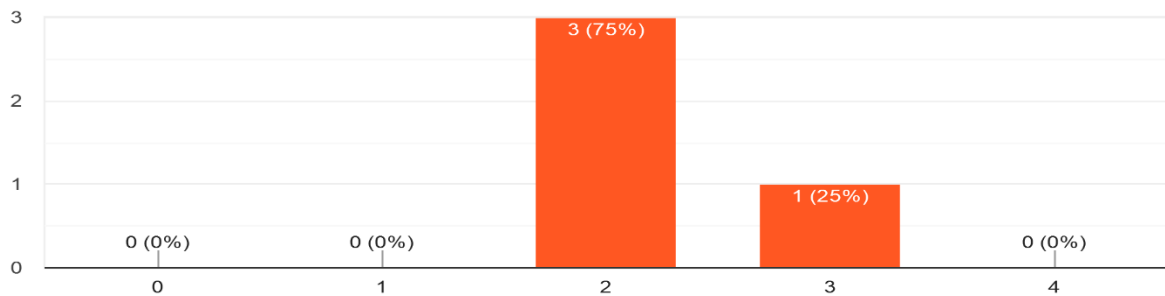...your child was less resistant to maintaining/reviving the birth language?
4 responses

Figure 3: survey question three, differing response by Sandy

...you were part of a support group of other adoptive parents who were making efforts to maintain their child's birth language?
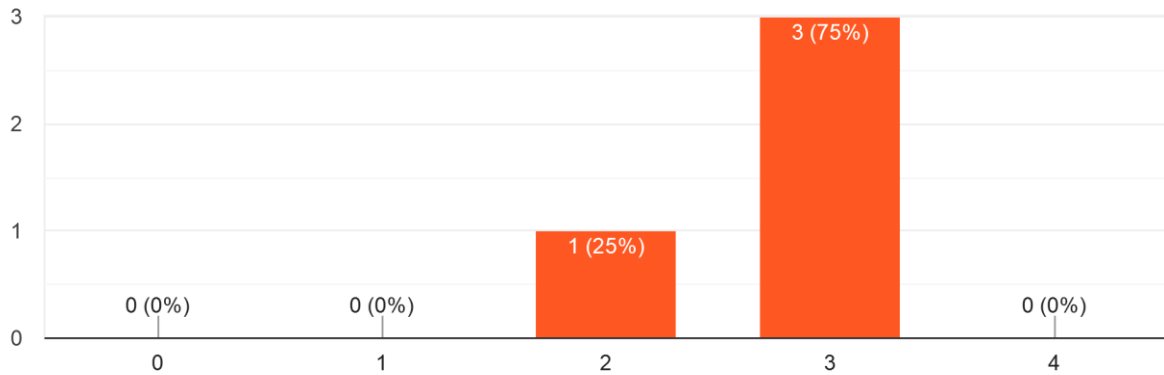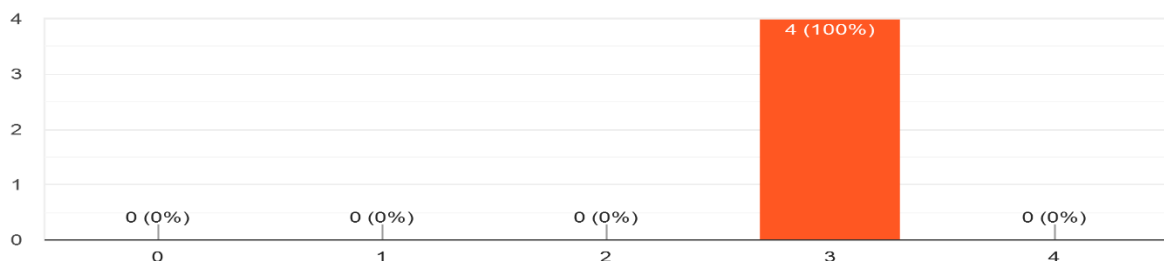
4 responses

Figure 4: survey question four, all responses the same

...you had easier access to relevant birth language resources?

4 responses

In the comments section provided, both Bernard and Vicki explained that their children had not really shown resistance to maintaining or learning their HL, but that they had just not shown interest. Sandy took the opportunity to elaborate more on her daughter's motivation in HLL. She said:

Motivation on her behalf is key. If she is not motivated, it is difficult to spend the time, energy and resources in this area. I can see huge benefits and would love for her to

relearn her original language. Perhaps when she is little older, she will also see the benefits. In her defense, she would rather learn Cantonese than Mandarin. The native speakers we know as well as the instructors in the area are all Mandarin. She may have some psychological reasons for not wanting to pursue this as well. I think her case is more complex than we currently know. (My belief is that there are -at least-physical, psychological, intellectual, as well as emotional memories and processes that factor into her lack of motivation at this time.)

Discussion

The most striking feature of the participant interviews was their contrasting views on their adoptive child's identity as an adopted child, which then influenced their view on the role and purpose of heritage language learning. Peter took a pragmatic view, stating that his adopted daughter had come to be an American, and therefore maintaining her HL was not so much a matter of trying to maintain her own culture. However, he affirmed the value of maintaining/learning her HL as a unique skill that would open up job opportunities for her. In contrast, Vicki stated that her adopted children would never be fully American, but rather that they are still part African. Maintaining heritage language was, for her, valuable because it was helping her children maintain ties to their birth culture. It must be noted, that these views were explicitly expressed by only one parent out of the couple; however, the other parent did not contradict his or her partner in their view and, in the opinion of the researcher, affirmed the view implicitly in their statements that followed.

Despite these strong differences in motivation and ideology, the HL maintenance efforts of both couples met with the same, unsuccessful results. They attributed this outcome to various external factors. For Peter and Sandy, the predominat factor was the child herself – her possible

"language shyness" (Hornberger and Wang, 2008, p. 24), lack of motivation, and potential past

trauma that made them hesitant to push HL maintenance. For Bernard and Vicki, the

predominant factor was lack of resources in their children's HL.

The goal of the follow-up survey was to determine just how important these factors were

for the parents' HL decisions. In other words, if they were presented with "ideal circumstances,"

how would their internal ideologies come through and still affect their decisions? The researcher

guessed that Bernard and Vicki would answer with higher numbers (indicating greater internal

motivation for HL maintenance when not inhibited by external factors), because their internal

motivations were more deeply rooted emotionally – as opposed to the seemingly more pragmatic

view expressed by Peter and Sandy.

Surprisingly, however, all the individual answers to the survey were very similar, if not

the same. All the parents agreed that they would make every effort possible (4 on the Likert

scale) to pursue HL maintenance/revival for their adopted child if the child communicated a

desire to know his/her birth language. This seems to indicate that all the parents put a strong

emphasis on their child's desires, no matter their own ideological views. This was particularly

emphasized by Sandy in her comment following the survey, expressing her sensitivity to her

daughter's motivation as well as perceived traumas from her daughter's past. All the parents also

agreed that they would make much more of an effort (3 on the Likert scale) if they had easier

access to relevant birth language resources. While the researcher expected Vicki and Bernard to

respond with a high value for this question, the fact that Peter and Sandy responded with the

same value was surprising; the latter couple had not mentioned lack of resources as an influential

factor in their interview. Perhaps they do not feel that their HL needs are met by the resources

they have. Sandy's comment that the Chinese language instruction in their area is mostly

Mandarin and not Cantonese could be a part of this.

       The parents responded more or less the same for the other two questions. When asked if

they would change their HL pursuits if their child showed less resistance to it, all the parents

answered with a neutral value (2 on the Likert scale) with the exception of Peter who answered

with a 3. This indicated that perhaps he would be more motivated to make an HL effort without

his daughter being active in asking for it. When asked about how being a part of a support group

of other adoptive parents making HLL efforts would affect their own efforts, all the parents

answered with a high value (3 on the Likert scale), with the exception of Sandy, who answered

neutrally (2 on the Likert scale) and did not seem to desire this type of support as much.

       In general, all the parents responded similarly to the hypothetical changes in external

factors, despite their contrasting internal ideologies and motivations for HL maintenance. This

indicates that, according to these international adoptive parents' self-projected perspectives, their

decisions regarding heritage language maintenance for their older adopted child were more

affected by external factors than their own internal ideologies and motivations.

Conclusion

       The international adoptive family presents us with a unique case on many levels –

language dynamics included. Although individual adoptive parents may have differing views on

who their adoptive children are and how language relates to that identity, their HL decisions for

their adopted child are affected by many powerful influences outside themselves. This study has

given us just a glimpse into some of the complexities involved.

       It was this deeply rooted complexity that presented the most significant limitation to this

study. The researcher was not aware of what the HL maintenance efforts looked like for each

participant couple until she began data collection. Therefore, when the parents expressed that their efforts had largely ceased in recent years, the researcher found it difficult to probe into the "why" without treading into the sensitive areas of identity, parenting practices, and frustrations with the past. There was also the danger that the parents would feel "guilty" for not maintaining their adoptive child(ren)'s HL, because they perceived the researcher as advocating for that practice. The researcher was aware of this possible dilemma and did her best to remain neutral in her questioning and phraseology, trying to keep the focus on what the parents chose and not acting from the assumption that HL maintenance is something that ought to be maintained – a pressure that could influence and skew the parents' answers. Although the researcher made these efforts, there is always the possibility that the participant parents couched their honest answers in terms more favorable to what they believed she wanted to hear.

However, the question of whether or not it would be beneficial for adoptive parents to maintain their adopted child's HL would be an excellent topic for more extensive research. Particularly, we should endeavor to understand how HL maintenance affects adopted children with a traumatic past in their birth country – whether HLL would be healing, triggering, or of minimal psychological impact. Understanding the adopted child's own perspective towards HL maintenance is also a key and yet seemingly understudied aspect of the adoptive context. Understanding the child's perspective will shed light on the parental perspective, and the two angles can join together to create a more holistic picture of heritage language in the international adoptive context, especially with older children.

When we make efforts to explore this international adoptive context, we are not simply helping adoptive families understand and engage with their situation in a healthier way; we give

the communities and individuals surrounding adoptive families the knowledge necessary to

support them in their cross-cultural journey.

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Appendix A

Sample Interview Protocol

(Interview questions were influenced by those listed in Fogle, 2013)

This protocol provides a general framework for the interviews. Questions may be omitted, and

additional/follow-up questions may be pursued as appropriate to the purpose of the study.

Interview 1 (conducted via email in order to briefly obtain some foundational information)

1. What is your adoptive child's birth country and birth language?

2. How old was your child when she came to the U.S? Has she spent a significant amount of time

in any other country besides her birth country and the U.S?

3. How much exposure did your child have to English before coming to the U.S? What did that

exposure look like?

Interview 2 (conducted via telephone or Skype)

1. As you were investigating adopting a child, what role did language play in your

considerations?

2. Throughout the adoption process and life with your adopted child, what advice did you receive

about language dynamics – and specifically heritage language maintenance? From what sources?

3. How often does your child speak her heritage language? Any specific mediums (reading,

writing, etc.) and/or times (with friends, only at home, etc.)?

4. What efforts (if any) towards heritage language maintenance have you made with your child?

Have those efforts changed over time?

5. If you had to do it over again, is there anything you would do differently in dealing with your

child's heritage language?

Appendix B

Follow-Up Survey Questions

Please give your first and last name (anonymous to everyone but researcher!):

Would you be more likely to pursue heritage language maintenance/revival for your adopted

child if…

Please place your answer on the following scales. 0 implies you would not change your current efforts with HL and your adopted

child and 4 implies you would definitely change your efforts.

*If you feel that a question does not apply to your situation, put 0. But then, please explain why the question is non-applicable in

the comments!*

(1) …your child communicated a desire to know his/her birth language?

(2) …your child was less resistant to maintaining/reviving the birth language?

(3) …you were part of a support group of other adoptive parents who were making efforts to

maintain their child's birth language?

(4) …you had easier access to birth language resources?

If you have comments on the questions or elaboration for your answers, please write them here: