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## “How Much Did You Pay For Her?”: Decision-Making Criteria Underlying Adoptive Parents’ Responses to Inappropriate Remarks

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Previous research finds that parents in transracial, international adoptive families experience outsider remarks as challenging to family identity. Yet, research also finds that in the face of these identity-disconfirming remarks, parents manage to produce identity-affirming responses. In the current study, we extend these findings by examining the decision-making criteria underlying parental responses and by ascertaining how these criteria change across time. Framed by the concept of discourse dependency, we report on the results from a written survey completed by a volunteer national sample of 245 parents with children adopted from China. Parents were from 38 states, tended to be female (84.1%), White (95.0%), ranging in age from 31 to 65 years. We found that parental decisions about how (and whether) to respond were relationally and interactionally contingent. Decision making criteria changed across time, with experience, and as children developed. Most often, parents made changes to better manage the adopted child’s privacy boundaries. Applying Social Constructionism, we discuss our results in terms of the positionality of the family implied by outsider remarks, and the identity-work accomplished via changes to parental responses. We conclude with practical implications for improving family communication and directions for future research.

For the last two decades, U.S. families have been increasingly built via adoption of a child from China. Adoptions from China in the last decade alone (1998–2008) total 60,893 children (U.S. Department of State, 2008). The year 2005 ranks as the highest year to date, with 7,903 children adopted in just that year (U.S. Department of State, 2008). Chinese children have

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been adopted almost exclusively by White parents, typically mid- to upper-middle class. Adding a family member of another race marks these families as visibly different (Anagnost, 2000), inviting comments and questions from outsiders (Friedlander, 1999). Many of these parents have lived lives relatively untouched by racism in the United States (Dorow, 2006; Rojewski & Rojewski, 2001). Now subject to remarks that are often intrusive, insensitive, and racist, many of these parents more fully confront their white privilege (Rojewski & Rojewski, 2001; Rothman, 2005) and discover the discourse dependent nature of their families (Galvin, 2006a, 2006b).

### DISCOURSE DEPENDENCY

Galvin (2006a, 2006b) conceptualized the notion of discourse dependent families to capture the discursive burdens of less traditionally formed families. Similar to scholarship that unmask the traditional American family as a cultural myth (Coontz, 1999, 2000), Galvin notes that diversity in the family form is not a recent phenomenon. Rather, what Galvin (2006a) argues is that family diversity is on the rise. Stepfamilies, single-parent families, gay and lesbian families, intentional families, and adoptive families are now commonplace. Yet, despite this increasing pluralism, the canonical view of family continues to be based on a biogenetic lens, which restricts the definition of family to members who either share a genetic or reproductive link (Floyd, Mikkelsen, & Judd, 2006). As a consequence, families that define themselves based on their legal recognition as a family or via emotional attachments and patterns of familial interactions (Fitzpatrick & Caughlin, 2002; Floyd et al., 2006) find:

*their definitional processes expand exponentially, rendering their identity highly discourse dependent.* [Italics in original] Family identity depends, in part, on members' communications with outsiders, as well as with each other, regarding their familial connections . . . less traditionally formed families are more discourse dependent, engaging in recurring discursive processes to manage and maintain identity (Galvin, 2006a, p. 3).

Galvin (2006a) identified four external boundary management processes that discourse dependent families utilize when faced with questions and challenges from outsiders. Families label, "identifying the familial tie, titles or positions when introducing or referring to another person" (p. 10). Families explain, "making a labeled family relationship understandable, giving reasons for it, or elaborating on how it works" (p. 10). Families legitimize, "invoke[ing] the sanction of law or custom: It positions relationships as genuine and conforming to recognized standards" (p. 10). Families defend, "shielding oneself or a familial relationship from attack, justifying it, or maintaining its validity against opposition" (p. 11). Galvin (2006a) also identified four internal boundary management practices of naming, discussing, narrating, and ritualizing, which help families "maintain their internal sense of family-ness" (p. 11).

The concept of discourse dependency takes a social constructionist view of the family (Galvin, 2006a; Gubrium & Holstein, 1990; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2006), given that it is through interaction and language that familial identity is constructed, maintained, repaired, and changed (Carey, 1989). Identity claims of discourse dependent families can be subject to questioning, ridicule, or even outright rejection (Cissna & Sieburg, 1986). Particularly important to this study

is how “human agents must be able to show in their actions . . . an awareness of how they are (currently) ‘placed’ or ‘positioned’ in relation to all the other agents around them” (Shotter, 1993, p. 162). While outsider remarks shape all families, transracial, international adoptive families are one family form that experiences such remarks more frequently. Outsider remarks reveal how these families are positioned as well as provide parents opportunities to discursively respond to this positionality, what Tracy (2002) labels identity-work. Thus, an essential part of the maintenance of a family *qua* family is a constant assessment of how others refer to it, how family members respond, and how those responses reposition the family.

Whereas a growing body of literature investigates the interrelationships among discourse, identity, and less traditional families (e.g., Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006; Hicks, 2006; Mallon, 2004; Manning, 2006), to date, the concept of discourse dependency has explicitly framed few studies. Galvin, Turner, Patrick, and West (2007) integrate data from two ongoing interview-based studies, one investigating lesbian parents’ interactions with school systems and the other investigating gay male fathers’ efforts to externally communicate familyhood. Analysis revealed three types of difficult conversations. Complicated conversations arose from heterosexist assumptions that left parents having to decide whether or not to correct misunderstandings, thereby labeling and explaining their families. Annoying/frustrating conversations arose from expectations that the family would conform to normative practices, which compelled parents to explain or legitimize their families. Painful conversations arose from in/direct challenges to the veracity of the family. In response, parents typically defended or legitimated. Taken together, these two studies shed light on the challenging communicative exchanges of lesbian and gay male parents as they discursively negotiate their identity.

Harrigan (2007) and Suter (2008) have both applied the lens of discourse dependency to studies of adoptive families. Harrigan’s (2007) interview-based study investigated 31 families formed through “visible adoption” or “families in which members’ racial characteristics provide visible evidence of a lack of biological ties to both insiders and outsiders” (Galvin, 2003, p. 242). Harrigan’s study identified 15 discourses parents employ as they attempt to communicatively construct familial, parental, and visibly adopted children’s identities. She identified these discourses of validation as legitimacy, expansion, praise, love, constraint, sacrifice, innocence, similarity, destiny, fortune, imperfection, free-will, permanence, invisibility, and misfortune. These findings underscore the dialogic and multivocal processes underlying identities, relationships, and communication (Baxter, 2004, 2006).

In her first published piece from this data set of 245 parents with adopted children from China that we further examine in the current study, Suter (2008) investigated outsider remarks and parental responses. Specifically, she explored the degree to which questions or comments from others either supported or challenged family identity, as well as the degree to which parental response strategies either supported or challenged family identity. Suter found that parents experienced the majority of comments and questions as challenging to their sense of family identity. Yet, Suter also found that in the face of these identity-disconfirming remarks, parents managed to produce identity-affirming responses. For instance, in response to challenging questions (e.g., about the child’s adoption story) and comments (e.g., on how “lucky” the child is or on how “wonderful” the parents are for “saving” the child), parental response strategies (e.g., educate, contradict/challenge, answer directly) interactionally affirmed family identity. Parental responses validated the family as a construct and the relations between members as legitimately familial.

## STUDY OBJECTIVES

### Advancing Scientific Knowledge About Discourse-Dependent Families

Whereas Suter (2008) established that parental response strategies tend to affirm family identity, the decisions parents make that lead to affirmation remain uninvestigated. Our main objective in this current study, then, was to examine these decision-making criteria and ascertain how these criteria change over time.

We first sought to investigate the factors parents consider when formulating their responses. Given that parental responses typically end up affirming family identity, we wondered: What determines how parents respond? What might be the ingredients that lead to success? What are the criteria on which parents base their responses and are they consistent across interactions? Thus, we proposed research question one:

RQ1: What factors do adoptive parents consider when responding to questions and comments about their family?

Next, we sought to identify the questions parents refuse to answer, those they are most proud to receive, and the reasons behind their un/willingness to respond. We reasoned that identifying topics and the reasons why these topics felt particularly transgressive or supportive might shed light on the boundaries parents create. We speculated boundary management processes might be what allow parents to walk away from inappropriate interactions with their identities affirmed. Thus, we proposed research questions two and three:

RQ2: What are the questions and/or comments adoptive parents would never answer and why not?

RQ3: What are the questions and/or comments adoptive parents are the most proud to receive and why?

Finally, we sought to identify both how and why parental response strategies change over time. Assuming that RQ1, RQ2, and RQ3 would illuminate a set of decision-making criteria that shape parental responses, we reasoned that these might shift and alter across time, as children develop and as parents have more interactional experience. Thus, we proposed research question four:

RQ4: How do adoptive parents' approaches to answering questions or comments change over time and why?

### Practical Aims

In addition to advancing scientific knowledge about discourse dependent families, we sought to produce results with practical significance, aimed at improving family communication. Whereas popular/educational writing on communication and adoption frequently addresses the topic of how adoptive parents should talk with their children about adoption (Komar, 1991; Melina, 1998; Watkins & Fisher, 1993), the topic of how adoptive parents should respond to questions and comments from those outside of the immediate family tends to be ignored (for exceptions, see Adoption Learning Partners, n.d., and Coughlin & Abramowitz, 2004). This is surprising, in part, given acknowledgement that inappropriate remarks can have negative impacts (Schoettle, 2000).

Additionally, there seems to be at least some recognition of the dearth in parental skills as well as the importance of parental modeling of constructive responses for the adopted child (Adoption Learning Partners, n.d.). Yet, materials produced to date have several limitations. Insufficient response options are often presented to parents. For instance, Adoption Learning Partners e-course on "Conspicuous Families" offers parents just three types of responses to choose from: informational, humorous, or privacy guarding (Adoption Learning Partners, n.d.). Coughlin and Abramowitz (2004) identify 18 questions that children outside the immediate family might pose (e.g., "Is she my real cousin?"), yet, they provide just two stock answers for each—one for the younger questioner, another for the older questioner. Furthermore, advice for parents in these popular/educational writings is largely based on anecdotal or experiential evidence. Thus, in this study we aimed, in part, to redress such gaps in popular/educational writings in the hopes of improving family communication.

While Galvin (2006a) identified the external boundary management processes (labeling, explaining, legitimizing, and defending) that discourse dependent families employ in the face of challenging comments and questions, the decision-making criteria leading to these response strategies remains unknown. Thus, we aimed to advance scientific knowledge about discourse dependent families by examining the decision-making criteria that underlie parental responses to identity-challenging remarks and assessing any temporal changes to these criteria. We also aimed to produce results with practical significance, aspiring to improve family communication.

## METHOD

### Participants

A volunteer national sample of 245 parents with children adopted from China participated in our study. Parents represented 38 states, ranged in age from 31 to 65 years ( $M = 44.5$ ,  $SD = 6.7$ ), and tended to be female (84.1%). Of the 84.1% females, 14.3% were single. All males were married, likely due to China's historical disqualification of single male applicants. Household income ranged from \$32,000 to \$600,000 per year ( $M = 109,797$ ,  $SD = 60,145$ ). Nearly all parents were non-Asian (95.0% White, 1.0% Hispanic, and 4.0% Asian). At the time of the survey, the age of children adopted from China ranged from 9 months to 14 years ( $M = 4.7$  years,  $SD = 2.9$ ).

### Design and Procedure

Upon approval of our study by the university's Institutional Review Board, we recruited parents with adopted children from China via the internet to complete a written survey. To qualify for our study, parents had to reside in the United States and to have completed an adoption of at least one child from China. We designated that parents could be single parents, could have biological children, and could have children adopted from other countries.

We chose the internet as the means for recruiting, given that most parents who adopt internationally are well-versed in using the internet to share information (e.g., dossier paperwork compilation), monitor their status (e.g., anticipated wait times for referrals), and share feelings (e.g., from celebrating referrals to discussing concerns over changing governmental policies) (Falvey, 2004). We obtained consent from cooperating boards of directors and/or moderators to

place our study invitation on the Web site of Families with Children from China (FCC) (a national group for parents with adopted children from China), the listservs of local chapters of FCC, and several international listservs for adoptive parents. Our study invitation directed interested parents to our study Web site, which included the background and scope of the project, information about the principal investigator, and instructions on how to request a survey packet. We asked parents to provide their street address, both parents' names (if applicable), and to request two packets if more than one parent wished to participate.

We mailed survey packets via the U.S. mail. Packets included the survey, a consent form, a letter explaining the purpose of the research, directions for returning the survey and consent form, and a postage-paid self-addressed return envelope. Following Dillman (1978), we contacted parents three times. Our first mailing included the survey packet. Two weeks later, we sent reminder letters to parents who had not yet returned a survey. Two weeks after that, we mailed a second survey packet to parents who had still not responded. Overall our response rate was 46.7% out of 535 surveys sent.

Our survey consisted of three sections. In Section I, we solicited background information. In Section II, we asked about receiving and responding to comments and questions from others. We left "others" undefined for parents in order to capture the full range of parental interactional experiences. Thus, others for our study means any adults or children outside the immediate family as defined by the parents who responded to the survey, which could be friends, extended family members, social network members, or strangers. In Section III, we asked parents to provide recommendations for applying the survey findings. In this study we report on the open-ended questions from the second section. Suter (2008) reports on the other four survey questions.

## Data Analysis

We completed the data analysis process in several steps. First, utilizing an inductive process of analytic coding (Lindlof, 1995), we reviewed all survey responses in order to derive our initial coding categories. Second, we verified these categories via investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1970) "the process of analyzing the interview data separately, comparing findings, and discussing discrepancies until a consensus is reached" (Hardesty & Ganong, 2006, p. 550). The use of multiple investigators helps detect and minimize bias or distortion that may result from using only one researcher's perspective (Flick, 1998; Steinke, 2000). Third, based on these revisions and refinements, we created individual code sheets. Fourth, to verify our coding, we assessed agreement via interrater reliability (Meadows & Morse, 2001), calculated using Cohen's kappa (Cohen, 1960).

Working independently, we coded 10% of the surveys. Overall, our inter-rater reliability calculations were high, ranging from .71 to .92. The Cohen's kappa for one survey item for RQ1 was .71 for 80 coding decisions. The Cohen's kappa for the two survey items for RQ2 was .89 for 30 coding decisions and .85 for 37 coding decisions, respectively. The Cohen's kappa for the two survey items for RQ3 was .92 for 40 coding decisions and .78 for 46 coding decisions, respectively. The Cohen's kappa for one survey item for RQ4 was .87 for 67 coding decisions. Once we achieved acceptable levels of Cohen's kappa, we split and coded remaining surveys. To further enhance trustworthiness in our findings, we maintained our surveys, inductive analytic notes, coding sheets, and interrater reliability calculations as an audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1995),

the process whereby researchers retain documentation of their data and its analysis. (The audit trail is available from the first author).

### FINDINGS

Our results illuminate decision-making criteria underlying parental identity-affirming responses. We provide these criteria in Table 1, organized by our findings for each research question.

TABLE 1  
Decision-Making Criteria Underlying Parental Identity-Affirming Responses

	%
<i>Factors Parents Consider when Responding to Questions and Comments</i>	
Commenter or questioner (Character of commenter/questioner, Relationship with commenter/questioner, Others interest/experience in adoption)	43.7
The question itself (Content of question/comment, How question is asked, Perceived undertone)	17.2
Factors related to child (Presence of child, Child’s level of understanding)	14.0
Timing/setting of interaction (Timing, Setting)	12.7
Disposition of parent (Positive disposition, Adaptable disposition, Negative disposition)	12.4
Total for factors (n = 670)	100.0
<i>Questions and Comments Parents Would Never Answer</i>	
Comments or questions about cost (Cost of adoption/child)	28.4
Comments or questions about child’s China story (Child’s origin story, Abandonment, Birth parents, Birth family)	26.4
Comments or questions about adoption decision (Negative about China, Why China?, Reasons for adopting, Infertility, Marital status)	19.7
Don’t know or not certain	17.8
Visibility (Racial, Health/special needs)	4.3
Other (Harmful/cruel, Expect me to answer for my child, Failure to raise with birth culture/values)	3.4
Total for the one comment or question adoptive parents would never answer (n = 208)	100.0
<i>Reasons Why Parents Would Never Answer Identified Questions and Comments</i>	
Violates right to privacy (Too private/too personal, Child should decide to share, Parent wants to tell story to child)	30.8
Inappropriate valuing of child (Children not commodities, Should be judged on character/behavior, Should not be judged on racial/physical characteristics or health)	19.8
I don’t answer (Rude/insulting comment, No point in responding, Don’t know the answer, Deserves no response)	19.0
It depends if I answer (Depends on who’s asking, Depends on if child is present, Depends on how phrased/asked)	17.8
I always answer (Opportunity to educate/advocate, I always respond, Believe in openness/dialogue)	12.6
Total for reasons why adoptive parents would never answer (n = 247)	100.0
<i>Questions and Comments Parents are Most Proud to Receive</i>	
Compliments about child (Behavior, Beauty, Intellect, General compliments, Development, How lucky the child is, No mention of adoption)	59.1
Affirmation of familial relations (Recognition of family as valid, Generic praise of family, Compliments on siblings)	18.0
Questions about or related to adoption (China related, Adoption in general, Parents are lucky/blessed, Choice to adopt)	14.8
Similarity between parent and child (Visual similarity, Social and behavioral similarities)	4.6

(Continued)

TABLE 1  
(Continued)

	%
Compliments about parenting (Skills/abilities, Being a good single parent, Making a difference, Time spent with children)	2.7
Total for the one comment or question adoptive parents are proud to receive (n = 357)	100.0
<i>Why Parents are Proud to Receive Identified Questions and Comments</i>	
Parental affirmation (Feels good to hear/inspiring, Abilities, Values and priorities, Fulfilling destiny)	30.1
Positive reflection of child (General compliments, "Because it's true," Child seen as a person, Affirms child)	26.6
Family affirmation (Family not seen as different, Affirms sibling relationships, General praise)	20.9
Adoption related (Affirms adoption, Promotes adoption, "Saved" the child)	16.9
Commenter/questioner related (Recognizes adoption is communal, Positive reflection of commenter or questioner)	4.8
No questions or comments I'm proud of (There are no questions I'm proud of receiving)	0.7
	100.0
<i>Changes to Parental Response Strategies over Time</i>	
More public - more competent response (More mindful response, More natural response, More directed response)	39.8
More private - say less (Less willing to share, Educate less)	31.9
More public - say more (Educate/advocate more, More willing to share)	17.1
More private - avoid/deflect/redirect (Avoid more, Deflect/redirect more)	11.2
Total for how approach has changed (n = 251)	100.0
<i>Reasons Why Parental Response Strategies Have Changed over Time</i>	
Better boundary management (Adopted child's boundary management, General boundary management)	44.6
Time, experience, knowledge (Cognitive knowledge, Experience, Efficacy of response (increased/decreased))	28.1
More insightful (More comfortable in interaction, More proficient at assessing interactant)	18.7
Increased self-assurance as an adoptive family	8.6
Total for why approach has changed (n = 327)	100.0

### Factors Parents Consider when Responding to Questions and Comments

The factors parents reported considering when responding to questions and comments about their family were: the identity of the commenter or questioner (43.7%), the question itself (17.2%), factors related to the child (14.0%), timing/setting of interaction (12.7%), and the disposition of the parent (12.4%).

When compared to the other four categories, the commenter or questioner factor disproportionately (43.7%) influenced how the studied parents responded to questions and comments. As one parent explained:

I feel there are 3 types of questioners. Those truly interested in your story, motivated by either a desire to learn or a genuine interest in your family. Those who are just making conversation. Those with an agenda. I will answer the first two honestly and sincerely, providing appropriate info. based on my determination of their intentions. Nothing too private but if these people are prospective adoptive parents, I want to provide accurate info. to help them. The third group, I usually ask, "Why do you want to know?" That usually ends the conversation.

Our findings complicate advice that parental responses should be formulated, foremost, if not exclusively, on the content of the other's remark (Coughlin & Abramowitz, 2004). The

substance of the message is indeed a factor; however, the importance of the identity of the commenter or questioner indicates that these parents’ responses are highly relational, contingent on the perceived character of the other, the relationship between parent and other, and the others’ interest in or experience with adoption.

Our findings suggest that parental responses are not only relationally dependent, but are also interactionally dependent. Judgments of the others’ character are made on the fly, in the interaction. As one parent wrote, [I rely on] “my innate sense to be able to tell if a person is sincere, clueless, ignorant or just plain nasty.” Yet, for all the importance parents placed on the relationship, interest in or experience with adoption seemingly trumps relational history, and parents reported a willingness to openly share information with prospective or fellow adoptive parents. As one parent pointed out on the survey, “If someone lets me know up front that they have/or will be adopting from China—I am very open to them.”

Looking holistically at these factors, we find a strong situational influence on how parents responded, whether based on the perceived character of the other, on the presence or absence of the child (e.g., “I tend to be more guarded when my children are present”), on the timing/setting of the interaction (e.g., “If I’m in a good mood and just waiting in line somewhere, I’m more than happy to talk about my daughter. However, if I’m in a bad mood or trying to eat a nice meal at a restaurant, I’m annoyed”), or on an adaptable disposition by the parent (e.g., “I pay attention to the feeling I get when asked”).

Our finding that parental responses are situational correlates with the notion of contextual space in the larger space component of Stamp’s (2004) model of family life. Contextual space, in part, draws attention to how the situation influences family interactions. Thus, our study contributes, in part, by identifying salient aspects of the situation that seem to be influencing parental responses.

### Questions and Comments Parents Would Never Answer and Why

The questions or comments parents reported they would never answer were: about cost (28.4%), about the child’s China story (26.4%), about the adoption decision (19.7%), related to visibility (4.3%), or other topics (3.4%). Approximately 18% of parents reported they did not know or were not certain (17.8%) of a comment or question they would not answer.

The reasons parents supplied as to why they would not answer a particular comment or question were: that it violates rights to privacy (30.8%) or that it inappropriately values the child (19.8%). Others indicated they simply do not respond or answer based on a variety of explanations (19.0%) and others described the contingent nature of their responses or answers based on a range of contextual factors (17.8%). The remaining parents indicated they always respond (12.6%).

Our findings suggest interesting themes and patterns. The top two comments or questions that parents would never answer under any circumstances, cost (e.g., “How much did you pay for her?”) and the child’s China story (e.g., “Where was your daughter found? Left?”) together make up over half (54.8%) of the responses. Parents experienced these kinds of comments and questions as problematic, in part, because others’ language violated their rights to privacy via queries about very private or personal topics (e.g., personal finances) or via queries about the child’s history—information that the parent felt was owned and thus should be controlled by the

child, not the parent (e.g., “There are intimate parts of her story that I feel are hers to share when, if, and with whom she chooses”).

Additionally, language used in the interaction inappropriately valued children, particularly when words constructed children as commodities (e.g., “[Such a comment] puts forth the notion that the girls are nothing more than purchased objects”). These reasons underscore that language is not merely about words and symbols, but that language indicates positionality through the ways in which others refer to the family. As Stamp (2004) demonstrates, language can create a hostile and degrading context, which, in turn, can disconfirm particular family identities (Cissna & Seiburg, 1986).

The third most frequent type of question or comment parents refused to answer were about the decisions of whether and how to adopt (19.7%). For instance, parents were unresponsive to remarks that assumed adoption was an inferior way to form a family, (e.g., “Do you love them as much as if you had *your own*?”), that negatively characterized the Chinese (e.g., “[Comments] about Chinese people throwing away or killing ‘all the girl babies’”), and/or to inappropriate queries about infertility (e.g., “You could not conceive, that’s why you adopted, right?”). Likely, the too private, too personal reason explains why parents refused to answer such queries and comments.

The third, fourth, and fifth reasons parents would not answer certain comments or questions reveal a continuum of grounds for answering or not answering. Nineteen percent of parents indicated they just do not answer, most often because they perceive the comment as rude (e.g., “It is invasive, personal, and insulting, particularly to my daughter”), or because they don’t feel there is a point in responding (e.g., “It is a really tactless question that displays such ignorance it doesn’t deserve to be answered”). Another 17.8% of parents indicated that if they answer, it is contingent, depending largely on who’s asking (e.g., “I am selective with whom I share certain information”). This finding correlates with our results from RQ1 that parental responses are highly relational. Finally, 12.6% of parents reported always answering questions and comments, some seeing them as opportunities to educate or advocate. For instance, one parent wrote, “I truly believe that we as adoptive parents have an obligation to our children to educate as many people as possible regarding our children’s backgrounds and our own adoption experiences.” Others provided no justification for why they always respond, and still others always respond, based on a belief in openness and dialogue.

Our findings underscore the range of parental perspectives captured in this study. Our findings also indicate that parental responses to hostile or invasive language ranged from education to non response, and varied according to interactant and to the situation. For some families, privacy and privacy decisions are important aspects to consider. For others, contingency and an assessment of how they are perceived by others was their primary concern. And, for other families, a desire to educate and engage in dialogue guided how they responded.

Interestingly, questions and comments related to visible differences, either racial or health/special needs, were not reported frequently (only 4.3% of the survey responses). This might be explained by the don’t know or not certain category, as some parents (17.8%) reportedly did not know or were not certain of any comments or questions they would not answer under any circumstances. It also remains possible that this low reporting occurred because, in many cases, visible difference is the trigger for questions and comments, rather than the subject of such remarks.

## Questions and Comments Parents Are Most Proud to Receive and Why

The questions and comments parents reported that they were most proud to receive were: compliments about their child (59.1%), affirmation of familial relations (18.0%), questions about or related to adoption (14.8%), comments on similarities between parent and child (4.6%), and compliments about parenting (2.7%).

The reasons parents gave as to why they were proud to receive particular comments or questions were: parental affirmation (30.1%), positive reflection of the child (26.6%), family affirmation (20.9%), adoption related (16.9%), commenter/questioner related (4.8%), and no questions or comments I'm proud of (0.7%).

Our findings might suggest that the types of questions and comments these 245 adoptive parents are proud to receive are no different than outsider remarks that would make most non-adoptive parents proud. In particular, compliments about one's child comprised 59.1% of the responses, which, at least intuitively, would make any parent, adoptive or non-adoptive, proud. Compliments include the behavior and happiness of the child (e.g., "I am most proud to get comments on my children's good behavior"), beauty of child (e.g., "I am proud when people comment on their beauty"), and intellectual performance or abilities (e.g., "When people comment on how intelligent my daughter is").

Yet, our further analysis revealed qualities in this category distinctive to transracial, international adoptive families. We found that for some parents, the reason they felt proud was that such compliments constructed their child as a person (i.e., and not as a commodity or as someone to be saved). Further, we found that a few parents found interactions in which there was no mention of adoption complimentary. As one parent remarked, "When I meet someone and they never mention adoption, China, [or] our family, [that is a compliment]." We highlight this finding as important, as it points toward how some families value the lack of being marked as different. It seems as though sometimes what is not said is as important as what is said.

The next two categories of questions and comments that parents were proud to receive draw explicit attention to adoption—affirmation of familial relations (18.0%) and questions about or related to adoption (14.8%). Remarks affirmed familial relations principally by recognizing the adoptive family form as valid (e.g., "When people immediately 'get' that we are a family"). Similarly, familial affirmation was the third most reported reason *why* participants felt proud (20.9%). Stated one parent, "This comment puts us in the same category as any other family, and that is exactly where we belong." Compliments about the quality of the relationship between adoptive and biologically related siblings also affirmed familial relations: "That my 2 girls can love each other as sisters regardless of their genetics [is affirming to me]."

For 14.8% of parents, questions about or related to adoption (specifically related to China, about adoption in general, how adoptive parents are lucky or blessed, or about the choice to adopt) were complimentary. By marked contrast, a similar set of questions about or related to adoption comprised 19.7% of remarks that parents would *never* answer under any circumstances. Our analysis of the reasons the same set of questions and comments left some parents feeling proud and others unwilling to respond provides insight into these contrasting findings. For parents who found such remarks complimentary, these types of observations validated adoption as an authentic way to form a family, promoted adoption in general, and/or reaffirmed that they "saved" a child.

For parents who found these remarks as unworthy of being responded to under any circumstances, such language violated their privacy or devalued their child in some way. Our discrepant findings both underscore important divergences in opinion across the studied parents and emphasize key differences in how adoptive parents receive comments. In sum, our findings provide further evidence to the situational nature of parental response strategies, which challenges advice that does not consider the context of the interaction (Coughlin & Abramowitz, 2004).

### Changes to and Reasons Why Parental Response Strategies Change over Time

Parents reported that their approach to answering questions and comments had changed over time in terms of: developing a more public, more competent response (39.8%), developing a more private response that disclosed less information (31.9%), developing a more public response that shares more about the family (17.1%), and finally developing a more private response by avoiding, deflecting, or redirecting the remarks (11.2%).

The reasons parents provided as to why their approach to answering questions and comments changed over time were: better boundary management (44.6%), time/experience/knowledge (28.1%), being more insightful (18.7%), and increased self-assurance as an adoptive family (8.6%).

In considering the types of remarks that parents reportedly would never answer under any circumstances (e.g., questions about their child's origin story, abandonment, and/or birth parents), it might seem surprising at first that the majority of parents reported growing more public over time (39.8%) in their response strategy. However, becoming more public over time, for most, did not mean sharing more information; rather, it meant developing a more competent response strategy. For some, this meant becoming mindful of a listening child and carefully choosing words in either an attempt to affirm the child's identity during the interaction or in an attempt to model for the child how to deal with these interactions on his/her own. As one parent described this change:

Now I usually answer knowing my daughter is listening. What does she think of the question? What does she think of my answer? What language, attitude, etc. is she learning from me that will equip her for dealing with this herself?

For others, it meant developing a more natural response (e.g., "I am now more smooth, natural in my response") or by learning to provide a more directed response (e.g., "I can pause and find out a bit more about why the question is being asked before I choose to answer, or not answer, for that matter"). For both of these strategies, the more competent response was coupled with the sharing of less informational content.

In contrast, 17.1% of parents *did* become more public in a traditional sense, disclosing more across time (Petronio, 2002), motivated by a continued need to educate and/or advocate for adoption (e.g., "I feel that I can advocate for both my agency and for children waiting in orphanages"). For others, increased self disclosure was motivated by a growing desire to share more. "I am more open," stated one parent.

Other parents became more private, some in the sense of being less willing to share (31.9%) (e.g., "I find myself telling people less and less as time goes by"), others did so by using avoidance tactics (e.g., not making eye contact), or by deflecting/redirecting remarks. According to one parent, "Now I just more or less glance over people to not make eye contact or start any conversation."

Better boundary management (44.6%) largely explains why parents changed, particularly a yearning to protect the adopted child's right to privacy, granting him/her the right to own, control, and to choose what (or what not) to share later about his/her story. Says one parent:

[My children's privacy] has become much more important to me than my previous needs of sharing the most wonderful event in my life . . . None of this is as important as insuring my daughters know I will treat them with dignity and respect.

Time, experience, and knowledge (28.1%) ranked as the second reason, with parents feeling a sense of greater cognitive knowledge (e.g., gained from adult international adoptee advice or from reading) and experiential knowledge (e.g., gained from practice). One parent wrote:

I had an epiphany moment. The first time I brought my daughter to meet my dad's extended family, I was nervous. They are a BIG group from small farm communities where adoption is rare and there are literally no Chinese individuals. Everyone was surprisingly very kind and warm towards us. Then, one of my dad's second- or third-cousins came up to me and said, "Is she yellow or multicolored?" I just stared at her, completely stunned and unaware of how to respond. With my gaping pause, she said, "I made her a pair of knitted socks and want to know which would be her favorite." God – I thought it was a racial comment and she was offering a gift. I gracefully accepted the yellow socks and learned a big lesson.

Time, experience, and knowledge also impacted parents' sense of the efficacy of their responses. It should be noted that while some parents sensed that the efficacy of their responses had increased over time (e.g., more educational), others sensed that the efficacy of their responses had decreased over time. The following is an exemplar of decreased efficacy:

I used to feel that perhaps I could educate those asking the questions. Now I realize those with a nosy nature or negative feelings have their preconceived ideas and there is not much I can say to change their minds or enhance their knowledge.

More insightful (18.7%) was the third ranking reason, which meant either that parents felt more comfortable in the interaction (e.g., "I no longer feel a need to explain ourselves or our choices") or felt more proficient at assessing the intentions of their interactant (e.g., "Now I have a better 'radar'").

## DISCUSSION

As compared to their more traditionally formed counterparts, less traditional families' (e.g., stepfamilies, gay and lesbian families, single-parent families) identities are more discourse dependent, relying more heavily on communication to manage and maintain identity (Galvin, 2006a). Given that members are not bound by genetics, race, or national origin, transracial, international adoptive families are a particularly useful family form through which to examine the concept of discourse dependency. Ambiguity of member ties invites comments and questions from outsiders (Friedlander, 1999). Sometimes racist, other times just insensitive, or simply too invasive, outsider remarks are experienced as challenging to family identity (Suter, 2008). Yet, in the face of these identity-disconfirming remarks, parents still manage to respond in ways that affirm their sense of family identity (Suter, 2008).

The current study sought to advance scientific knowledge about discourse dependent families by determining the decision-making criteria that underlie parental identity-supportive responses and how these criteria change across time. In addition, we sought to make these findings practically significant. Toward that aim, we discuss our results in terms of ways to improve family communication.

Taken together, our findings suggest fundamental decision-making criteria that influence how (and whether) parents respond to identity-challenging remarks. These parents decided how to respond by evaluating and assessing factors such as the character of the other, their relationship with him or her, as well as the other's adoptive status. These judgments are made in the moment and seemingly without *a priori*, conscious standards that might otherwise lead parents to employ rehearsed responses. This study reveals that responses ranging from dismissal to modeling to disclosure are most often selected based on a variety of contextual influences (e.g., situation, presence or absence of child, age of child, quality of relationship with the commenter/questioner). Furthermore, these findings indicate that parental responses are not static, but rather change over time. The parents in this study reported that how they respond has changed with time, with experience, and with their child's increasing level of understanding. Some parents realized they had disclosed too much of their child's adoption story when the child was younger and modified their responses by becoming more private. Change was most often driven by becoming more proficient at managing both the adopted child's and the overall family's boundaries.

The social constructionist nature of the concept of discourse dependency (Galvin, 2006a) helped us to unpack how outsider remarks often expose the cultural positionality of transracial, international adoptive families (Shotter, 1993; Tracy, 2002). Visible dissimilarities between family members seem to leave outsiders feeling they have a right to comment or even question these families. Unlike same-race domestically adoptive families, transracial, international adoptive families embody their differences. Brown versus white skin, almond versus round eyes, jet-black straight hair versus kinky red-headed curls reveal differences in race, national origin, and DNA, thus provoking outsider remarks (Anagnost, 2000; Rojewski & Rojewski, 2001; Tessler, Gamache, & Liu, 1999). Born of a myriad of motivations, ranging from idle curiosity to negative sanction, outsider comments and questions suggest a rather negative positionality.

This negative positionality is suggested by a number of remarks, such as questions about the costs associated with adoption (or in the most inappropriate form, "How much did you pay for her?"). These questions commodify the adopted child and the adoption process. Indeed, adoptive families are formed "across uneven borders of nation and wealth" (Dorow, 2006, p. 5). Adoptive parents are, on the whole, White and mid- to upper-middle class. By contrast, Chinese children available for adoption are reportedly born to poor families (Rojewski & Rojewski, 2001). Given these classed disparities of privilege and poverty, outsiders may see the parent and child as partners in an economic exchange, with the parent purchasing the child from the Chinese state.

Furthermore, while compliments about the child tended to make studied parents proud, these compliments often objectified the child. Outsider remarks sometimes likened Chinese girls to playthings (e.g., "What a China doll"). Additionally, parents are told they are "lucky" or "blessed." Such comments position the child as special, as a gift (Yngvesson, 2002), as a trophy (Rothman, 2005), or as sacred (Dorow, 2006). These compliments place the child as an object of desire and consumption, undermining his or her humanity. Similarly, questions about the child's

adoption story (e.g., explicit questions about abandonment or orphanage care) not only reveal a seeming lack of cultural understanding of the adopted child's rights to privacy (Petronio, 2002), but also place her as an object whose personal history is open to public discussion.

Questions about parental decision-making (e.g., "Why did you adopt?" or "Why China?") suggest that the decision to adopt warrants an explanation and the choice of China requires a defense. Such queries are often laced with assumptions about infertility, implying that adoption is seen as a second choice (Miall, 1987). Queries about parental decisions are often compounded by questions insinuating that the child is not really the parent's (e.g., "Who is the *real* mother?"). Such remarks reveal outsider uncertainty about the family form and sometimes a lack of recognition of the family as valid. Together, such remarks suggest adoptive family relations are culturally positioned as inferior to biological family relations (Bochner & Ellis, 1997; Grotevant, Fravel, Gorall, & Piper, 1999; Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001).

Other remarks frame parents as having rescued a child (e.g., via remarks on how wonderful or selfless the parent is for taking in a poor, "orphaned" child). Such remarks position the parent as a savior and the child as in need of rescue (Dorow, 2006). Cultural critics complicate the notion of saving and the assumed unfettered positionality of the adopted child by highlighting the problematics inherent in removing a child from her birthcountry and attaching her to a new nation and a new family. In her analysis of roots trips in which adoptees travel to their birth country, Yngvesson (2003) writes that:

Such moments interrupt the myth that the legal transformation to an "other" was free—that the child simply came home to a site of love where he or she always belonged—revealing instead the cost of belonging (and of love), its inseparability from the birth mother, the orphanage, the courthouse, the agency, and the histories linking nations that give children to those that receive them" (p. 9).

The social constructionist nature of the concept of discourse dependency also helped us to unpack how parents discursively respond to the positionality that outsider remarks make transparent (Shotter, 1993). Our findings suggest parents altered their response strategies in order to accomplish identity-work (Tracy, 2002) on behalf of themselves and on behalf of their children. Nearly 40% of parents described their changes in terms of becoming more public over time—not in the sense of disclosing more information, but rather in the sense of developing a more competent response. Parents described their increased competence in terms of developing responses that were more mindful, more natural, or more directed. Additionally, nearly 40% of parents described their changes in terms of better boundary management, particularly in terms of improved regulation of the adopted child's boundaries.

Outsiders' curiosity about less traditionally formed families continues, despite increased plurality of U.S. families (Coontz, 1999, 2000) and inclusive definitions of family (Floyd et al., 2006). This curiosity, in part, fuels comments and questions creating difficulties in knowing how (and whether) to respond for various forms of discourse dependent families (Galvin, 2006a). While our study focused on transracial, international adoptive families, our results are likely applicable to other family forms. Specifically, application of the decision making criteria we uncovered in this study may also lead to identity-affirming response strategies for alternate forms of discourse dependent families. For instance, gay/lesbian parents can benefit from understanding the decision-making criteria as they are visibly dissimilar with two same-sex parents rather than the canonical one male/one female parenting structure.

## CONCLUSION

### Practical Implications of Findings

Based on the findings from the current study, we offer two practical implications, designed to enhance family communication. Our first suggestion aims to improve parental external boundary management processes by redressing gaps in popular/educational writing. These findings could provide the basis for research-based training materials made available to prospective adoptive parents during pre-adoption preparation courses and to newly adoptive parents during heritage camps. We envision the trainer would first present the results of this study. Then, in small groups, parents would evaluate and critique available popular/educational materials (i.e., Adoption Learning Partners, n.d.; Coughlin & Abramowitz, 2004) in terms of the findings of our study. It is our hope that such training would help parents develop their own decision-making criteria before they are faced with outsider remarks or early in their experiences as a transracial, international adoptive parent. The training would provide an opportunity for learning from the diversity of responses provided by the surveyed parents that might, for instance, increase prospective or newly adoptive parents' awareness that there is not one response strategy that is most effective.

Our second suggestion aims to improve families' internal boundary management processes. Our findings, particularly for RQ4, suggest that the discursive practices families use to build family identity in interactions with outsiders as well as with family members (external and internal boundary management processes, Galvin, 2006a) are actually interconnected. Our findings suggest that families with slightly older children should be encouraged to use how they respond to external comments or questions as starting points for conversation. Following a response, parents and children could have a conversation to consider how the response impacts each as an individual as well as how the response impacts the family as a whole.

Families might talk about how the response made them feel both as individuals and as a family unit, whether or not the response was appropriate, and how it could be changed if the same situation arose in the future. These conversations might facilitate the successful development of parent-child negotiated rules regarding managing co-owned information as well as respectfully integrate the child's developing privacy boundaries into the family's boundary management system (Petronio, 2002).

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Suter (2008) found that comments and questions from outsiders typically challenge family identity and that parental response strategies oftentimes redress these challenges and affirm family identity. While the current study extended these findings by revealing decision-making criteria underlying parental identity-affirming responses, the relationship is still unclear between identity and internal discursive boundary management processes (e.g., naming, discussing, narrating, and ritualizing) (Galvin, 2006). Even though our study points to a link between external and internal boundary management practices, we call for future research that would clarify more specifically how and in what ways these different communication practices are related to each other.

Additionally, the scope of our study was confined to the perspective of adoptive parents. Clearly parental views are vitally important, and the data from our study is rich with insight. As such, we present a second call for future research from the perspective of additional family

members, particularly the children in the family, both adopted and nonadopted. Our study demonstrates that often the child’s presence and age directly impact parental response strategies. Yet, future research is needed on how children feel about, and how their identities are impacted by (both positively and negatively) the parent’s response. Further, how are children’s interpretations of parental interactions with others both similar and different from what parents intend to communicate?

Furthermore, while our use of retrospective narratives on a written survey led to important findings, these narratives are distant from the actual communicative exchanges. Thus, we present a third call for future research that would utilize other ways of capturing reports on these interactions. For instance, we suggest scholars consider the use of diary studies as an alternate or additional methodological approach to attain reports on these interactions closer to the actual communicative event.

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