

## **VIC Dept of Human Services – Inter Country Adoption Unit**

### **Contract Social Worker Training**

**TOPIC: To look at the impact of cross cultural adoption on sense of self through out the life cycle and**

- **why** cross cultural issues are of significance;
- **how** they are of significance at different stages in the lifecycle of a family and;
- **in what ways** these issues present emotional challenges for adoptive parents / adopted persons.

**Speaker: Lynelle Beveridge** is a Vietnamese adoptee and is founder of the Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network (ICASN) [www.icasn.org/](http://www.icasn.org/).

#### **INFANCY**

##### ***Trust / Security / Safety / Warmth***

I arrived at 6 months old from a war torn country. My adoptive father flew to Vietnam to speed up the process and bring me home. My adoptive parents had tried to adopt domestically a baby from a drug mother. However, just before the papers were signed, it appeared the little girl was sold by the drug mother and it has never been known to the birth grandmother or my parents whether she lived or what happened.

I can't recall a lot about how I felt during this stage but from what my adoptive mum recalls, I was a screaming child who constantly ate to the point of being sick, only to continue eating again. I remember not bonding well with my adoptive parents and I always felt instinctively unsafe.

Looking back 30 plus years and having a child of my own, I can see how I struggled as an infant to trust what had become my primary care givers. I also can see why. I'd been separated from my mother, had been raised for the first 6 months by a primary care giver in Vietnam whom I never saw or heard from again – nor was there any handover of information from this caregiver on what my routine was or what I responded best to. I was removed from all sights, smells, and sounds (especially language) and I was from a war torn country and probably remembered a lot of the sounds - bombs and aeroplanes, etc. Not to mention my birth mother and I probably experienced a lot of war induced stress during pregnancy.

#### **TODDLERHOOD & PRE-SCHOOL AGE**

##### ***Awareness of Physical Differences / Not Fitting In***

I am one of 5 children for my adoptive family (4 being naturally born to my adoptive parents). What I remember of this stage was a keen sense of not looking like my two older siblings or my parents. The physical differences were easy to observe – my brown almond shaped eyes, flatter nose, and brown skin with no freckles. I certainly don't recall the topic of adoption being talked about and my parents certainly didn't know anything about Asia – let alone Vietnam or other cultures, so I grew up with a sense that my past was not to be discussed. My adoptive mum had always told me how she'd waited so long to get me and how special I was to her. I remember feeling strange about this "specialness" because it didn't feel very good to me – being special to me then meant being different from everyone else and feeling weird inside.

At pre-school, I remembered feeling isolated as the only non-Caucasian child growing up in a small rural country town. I was a loner within my adoptive family and within my community. I had no-one who resembled me physically in any way and given we had no TV, was not exposed to much outside this small community. My adoptive family are Seventh-Day Adventist and again,

within this community I was the only non-Caucasian except for the Aboriginal children who were fostered by my family and others in our church. So by this age, I very much felt alone with no-one who understood me or who I felt – I believe this sense of aloneness led to my over developed sense of self-reliance and inner resilience.

## **MIDDLE CHILDHOOD / SCHOOL AGE**

### ***Very Aware of Differences / Dealing with Racism, Stereotypical Questions & Responses***

At this age, I was becoming more aware of the wider world around me and I tried really hard to fit in and please. Within my family, I was struggling to compete with my older sister for our father's affection (years later I found out my adoptive father had not been as keen as my mother to adopt me). Within my community, I was struggling with forming friends being the "different" one. I remember feeling that nobody would like me because I looked so different which was enhanced by being teased for my Asian looks. I don't recall any positive moments where being different became an asset or something that I could be happy about or proud of. I hated my mum cutting my hair in an Egyptian bowl cut as in my eye, it made me look even more Asian! I refused to wear red as it was a color I symbolized with looking Asian. I hated my photos being taken and saw my reflection in the mirror as being "ugly". I had no role models that looked non-Caucasian so I really struggled to feel good about who I looked and was. It also didn't help that when I expressed any of these thoughts, my family would say "but you're one of us" – this colour blindness lasted well into my mid twenties until they finally heard and understood how different I'd felt despite their indifference to my differences.

It was during early school aged years that I remember vivid dreams of my birth mother and family driving off without me. I'd wake up crying and look up at the stars in the night wondering if they remembered me. I also recall and can still sense the dreams that sounded like rolling tanks about to smother me. I had major problems at home as I continued to wet my bed until quite late and my adoptive father scared me by stripping me off in the dairy yard and starting up the big pressure water hose he used to strip down the cow manure. I felt no sense of empathy or understanding from anyone in my adoptive family of the struggles I felt nor was there anyone I trusted enough to talk to.

I recall the most common enquiry from strangers or people outside my family as "and where do you come from dear?" Once I answered Vietnam, their response was always "oh, you are so lucky and your family must be wonderful people". I certainly grew to hate this shallow minded type of question/response as the years progressed and I never spoke up out of the socially infused sense of gratefulness that I absorbed. Why was it that people always assumed you're life was so lucky/special to be adopted – why didn't they see the loss, confusion, aloneness, and sadness?

For Other Adoptees: Struggling with family breakups or death of adoptive parent

## **ADOLESCENCE**

### ***Questioning Your Identity / Questioning Family / Confusing Feelings***

I recall this being a very confusing stage. Due to my "missing adoption papers" and hence, no birth certificate or adoption / naturalization papers, the time had come when the Aust Govt finally allowed me an "identity". For years, in my family it had always been their "joke" – however a cruel reminder to me of being an "unknown" – that I would make the perfect criminal because I did not exist on paper in any country anywhere. So I finally got given the choice by my adoptive family to chose whether I wanted to continue to have the name they'd given me "Lynelle" as my first name, or whether I wanted to retain my original Vietnamese name Ung Thanh – of which they couldn't pronounce and their attempt made me cringe with embarrassment as it sounded so terrible and out of place. Given I wanted to remove any signs of myself being Asian or having that heritage, I

immediately chose to keep the name they'd given me – so my real name became my middle–to embarrassed to say it–name.

I never even contemplated “adoption” to being core to my personal struggles and issues. I saw “being different” as something intrinsic to how I felt but I somehow didn't relate this to “being adopted”. If someone had asked me what my problems were during my teenage years, I certainly wouldn't have said “being adopted”. I hadn't met anyone else adopted who I could recall and I wasn't exposed to any information on adoption or its impacts to be able to put the two together. I felt totally alone and thought I was the “only one” who felt like this. I didn't recognize my loss issues but I remember frequently feeling deep sadness; I had no comprehension or words to describe feeling like I was in between worlds / cultures but I just felt I didn't fit in anywhere; I had no desire to search for birth family because I thought that would show ingratitude for being “saved” and I had no ability to do so on my own; I had no idea being adopted meant I I would struggle to form my identity; and I certainly couldn't resolve the “family fantasy” everyone had of my “so lucky life”.

For Other Adoptees: Returning to Birth Country with Adoptive Family

## **YOUNG ADULTHOOD**

### ***Establishing Identity / Intimate Relationships & Struggling with Connection / Returning to Birth Country***

Now there's a word I was really familiar with – isolation! I had no idea how to connect with others on a sustainable level. I was always too scared to be close to anyone for very long. I felt I'd had no real true friendships with someone I could really trust. Hence, when my first love relationship started, it was terrifying, insanely intense, and a continual push-pull dance.

I would constantly swing between wanting to have intimacy and a close connection versus pushing away my loved one for fear of being rejected, abandoned, disliked, and unwanted. I wanted what I'd never had – safety, security, trust, a sense of belonging, feeling that someone understood and truly cared for me. I never really began to see who the real me was outside of my idea of being “the adoptee I was to fit in with my family” until I was in my first intimate relationship that lasted from 18 – 24 years old. Then I began to see there was a more authentic me who was more than just my adopted self.

I didn't feel the need to return to Vietnam or search for my birth family until my mid 20s. I'd spent the earlier 20s years in various counseling rooms dealing with what I thought was my biggest issue – and it wasn't until I'd dealt with this that I came to see I had another big issue still to go – being adopted. One of the most successful methods I had learnt to heal from was via the power of group therapy which I did with Mercy Family Life. It was in meeting other people who'd experienced similar things, and shockingly, learning that others suffered worse – that I was able to feel somewhat normal and connected with others for one of the first times in my life. This experience led me to search for a group of adoptees – however, none existed at this time and subsequently led to me forming the Inter-Country Adoptee Support Network (ICASN) in 1998.

I was 26 when I finally made the choice to go back to my birth country. It ended up being such a turnaround to me personally in how I felt about physically looking and identifying with being Asian. I explored the history of the country and enjoyed meeting the people who were so friendly, curious and open. It was this trip that opened my eyes to just how resilient and strong these people were – something that I connected to being an adopted person and having lived the life I'd had. I suddenly became aware that my strength and resilience were ingrained within me and that I had everything to be proud of to be “one of them”. I realised being raised by a family in another culture and country had not removed parts of me that were innately Asian!

The most significant experience I had was a conversation with a Vietnamese lady I met whilst cycling around the Mekong Delta region. She asked me where I was from and I explained to her about being adopted as a baby to an Australian family and how this was my first trip back. In her broken English she said something that nobody had ever voiced to me before – but which I'd felt all my life. She said, "You've missed out on so much?" And it was so true. This lady had summed up much of what is so frustrating to an adopted person from a third world country.

Since the return trip, I had tried a few times via contacts in Vietnam to conduct a search for birth family however, given my lack of adoption papers and facts I have come to a dead end fairly quickly.

For Other Adoptees: Search & Reunion and the ongoing Consequences

## **MIDDLE ADULTHOOD**

### ***Long Term Relationships & Families of our Own / The Adopted Self in a New Context***

Until this stage, I hadn't thought I'd be sorted enough to have a lasting and positive relationship – but after years of perseverance and hard work, I finally got to a point where my adoption instincts no longer controlled my life. With this came the possibility and then the eventuality of getting married and having a child of my own.

Having a stable relationship has been a blessing and a powerful healer. To be in a place where I no longer feared the person I was with would leave me, was amazingly freeing. The instinct for this fear had previously been overpowering. I had learnt via a terrific counselor to sit through the fear and see what it told me. When I was brave enough to physically do this, I finally grieved for my mother that I never got to know and came to understand that she lived on within me.

I can't begin to describe how amazing it has been to have a child of my own – my first experience to be biologically related to someone. So many emotions and thoughts but of these, the strongest has been an overwhelming sense of connection that never stops – unlike my experience of relationships previously. I interpret this never ending connection as what I had once with my birth mother and for which as an adoptee I was constantly seeking and had never found.

One could possibly describe me as an overly devoted mum. I watch my child grow every day and I thank whatever God exists above for bringing him into my life. I feel like I'm the luckiest woman in the world to have such a wonderful blessing. I live my life giving him all the nurturing and security I never had. I look at his growth and development and I cannot deny the huge bond between mother and child and how any severance of this would result in both of us being emotionally crippled. How can anyone in this world not understand the significance of the mother-child bond that begins in utero! When my son was born, he responded immediately to my voice and body – he knew me and would not be quieted by anyone else other than his father's voice which he also recognized. I'm sure as we grow older, I will have more moments to reflect and see afresh how the bonds of birth connect people in a way that cannot be replaced by any other surrogate form.

For Other Adoptees: Not having Long Term Relationships & dealing with the aloneness and isolation; Struggling to Connect; Working & Researching in the Adoption Arena;

## **LATE ADULTHOOD**

### ***Reflecting on How the Adopted Self impacts Generations***

To be lived ...

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### Suggestions for the Discussion Segment:

- When engaging prospective adoptive parents in discussion about culture at the time of assessment:
  - Have they traveled to different parts of the world before and can they talk about the different places and cultures? How do they talk about these? Is it positive or does it show they only value their own country/culture/values and beliefs?
  - Do they show an interest in the world's affairs? How do they talk about the under privileged in society? Is it with pity/ charity or does it reflect an ability to see societies inequalities and injustices?
  
- When assessing their capacity to support a child's positive engagement with birth heritage / culture / country:
  - What does the family currently do to celebrate their current heritage / culture?
  - What have they done to learn about the country / culture of their prospective child and how do they intend to remain connected to it? Why?
  - Why/how are they choosing the country to adopt from? Is it because it has the shortest queue?
  - Why are they adopting? How emotionally capable are they to support a child who has lost everything he/she knows / senses?  
i.e., Have they experienced loss issues themselves? How have they handled this? Do they believe in self development? What means do they use for self development? Eg. Are they positive towards counseling and reading?
  - How will they cope if the child still has extended family alive? What are their expectations?
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