Infertility, Adoption and Metaphorical Pregnancies

Stacy Lockerbie *University of Calgary*

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Abstract: In this article, I explore the grief some women experience as a result of their inability to have children or, what Linda Layne (1996:132) has called, "a loss of innocence," the loss of the taken-for-granted assumption that being a woman means that you can bear children. This innocence lost is connected to their shattered faith in medical progress, and the disruption of profoundly held beliefs about the nature of womanhood. Here, I elucidate how these women anchor the adoption experience in pregnancy by using pregnancy metaphors to describe the adoption process whereby adopted children are said to grow in a woman's heart instead of her womb.

Keywords: infertility, transnational adoption, kinship

Résumé : Dans cet article, j'interroge le chagrin ressenti par certaines femmes du à leur incapacité à porter des enfants, à l'instar de ce que Linda Layne (1996:132) a nommé « une perte d'innocence », soit la perte de la conviction qu'être femme signifie porter des enfants. Cette perte d'innocence est liée à l'effondrement de leur foi dans les progrès de la médecine et à la rupture de croyances profondément ancrées quant à la nature de la féminité. J'explique comment ces femmes articulent leur expérience d'adoption à la grossesse en usant de métaphores sur la grossesse pour décrire le processus d'adoption. Ainsi, les enfants adoptés grandissent dans le cœur d'une femme plutôt que dans son utérus.

Mots-clés : infertilité, adoption internationale, parenté

> I wanted, all my life, to have children and I discovered in my 30s that I couldn't. I had a surgery [to increase my chances of] getting pregnant. After that I decided I couldn't spend my life without children. It was too cruel to be a teacher with a lot of children around and not having my own. [Violet, August 2, 2009]

A trend toward postponing parenthood is increasing in North America, especially among families with professional women (Schmidt et al. 2012). A clinical research study conducted in Western Canada found that women "normalized childbearing among women over 35 years and did not perceive the phenomenon as out of sync for their generation" (Benzies et al. 2006:631). As a result of this trend toward postponing motherhood, some women experience infertility and turn to adoption, surrogacy, donor eggs or IVF to create a family. Despite the increasing presence and acceptance of non-traditional and non-biological families in Canada, biological connections remain important to Canadian couples. This article explores adoptive mothers and the biological metaphors they use to describe their adoption experiences. What these metaphors highlight is that biology is still an important and preferred way of understanding kinship in North America. This article also underlines how, despite the plethora of non-biological ways to build a family, pregnancy is a very important rite of passage for some women. Many women who are unable to conceive grieve this loss and find that it disrupts their ideas about womanhood and femininity.

It is worth noting that not all women who adopt children are infertile, since there is a broad range of reasons and experiences leading women to adopt children, including religious values, a desire to engage in philanthropy and a family history of adoption. This article focuses on a particular demographic—that is, Canadian women who pursued adoption from China after struggling with infertility and, in most cases, infertility treatments. There is some diversity within my research sample concerning the way in which these women experienced

infertility. Some of the women were not able to get pregnant, while others had no trouble conceiving but were unable to carry a pregnancy to term. I am using the broadest definition of infertility to include all conditions leading these couples to abandon the quest for a biological child, including but not limited to endometriosis, pelvic inflammatory disease, chlamydia, hormonal disorders, genetic anomalies, ovulation problems, pregnancy loss, advanced maternal age and the infertility of male partners (Vissing 2002). Pregnancy loss in the first trimester of a pregnancy is much different than a late-term miscarriage because it does not involve giving birth. While there is a plethora of literature treating infertility and pregnancy loss separately and distinctly (Deluca and Leslie 1996; Layne 1996, 2004), my participants conflate the two conditions because the subjective experience of loss is similar.

This article is based on my doctoral dissertation, which more broadly examines adoption from China, looking at Canadian women's subjective experiences, desires and motivations for adopting children from China. I interviewed 30 Canadian women who adopted one or more children from China. Since infertility emerged as a dominant theme in their adoption narratives, this article examines the metaphors that infertile women use to explain their adoption experiences, in terms that symbolically equate adoption to undergoing a pregnancy. In my research on transnational adoption, women used pregnancy metaphors to anchor their adoption experiences in biological processes. In describing the adoption process using biological metaphors, people believe the relationship will be more legitimate and enduring (Howell 2009; Modell 2002). Pregnancy is a very well understood experience for Canadian women, and biological metaphors attempt to describe the adoption process in a way that is culturally meaningful. What these metaphors highlight, however, is the cultural preference for biologically related kin, leaving adoption as a backup plan when all options for creating biologically related kinship have been exhausted. The use of pregnancy metaphors serves to map adoption onto biological processes, thus highlighting the importance of biology in Canadian ideas about kinship and relatedness.

Pregnancy is a significant life event for many women, and those who cannot carry a pregnancy to term may feel they have missed out on that experience. In her research with infertility patients in IVF clinics, Becker found that "stopping the effort to conceive forces women to scrutinize their gender identity with respect to womanhood, motherhood, family and a range of related issues" (2000:2). In her work on adoption and kinship in Norway, Signe Howell writes that the Euro-American understanding of kinship is predicated on biological connections and that such biocentrism means that "fictive kinship" is always based on a biological model. As such, genetic kinship serves as a model for understanding other non-biological kinship relations. Howell explains that transnational adoption is often characterized as analogous to pregnancy and childbirth in order for the kinship relationships between mother and adoptive child to be culturally understood and legitimized (Howell 2009).

In my interviews with Canadian women who adopted from China, infertility and pregnancy loss emerged as dominant themes. I began each interview by asking the women to tell me about their adoption experiences. Most women began their narratives "from the beginning" and related their experiences about trying to get pregnant or having problematic pregnancies that led to miscarriage or ectopic pregnancies. It is well documented that those struggling to conceive experience hardship and may suffer from depression (Becker 2000; Benzies et al. 2006; Franklin 1997; Layne 1996; Mills et al. 2011; Petropanagos 2010; Schmidt et al. 2012). Sociologist Heather Jacobson suggests that "grief over infertility is seen as a necessary part of forming a non-biological family" (Jacobson 2008:27). Similarly, Gay Becker's research in IVF clinics found that "the majority of women were unable to seriously consider nonmedical options, such as adoption or childless living until they had exhausted the medical possibilities" (Becker 2000:120). She also describes IVF as "a last ditch effort to conceive into which couples invest great emotional energy [because] IVF offered their last hope for a biological child" (Becker 2000:120). Likewise, anthropologist Sarah Franklin (1997) carried out research with IVF clients in England with similar findings. The women in Franklin's research felt that fertility and procreation were natural parts of a woman's life-course. IVF is a risky medical procedure with a plethora of unpleasant side effects and a very small chance of success. Yet the women were willing to go forward with IVF and endure the potential risks and failures for the chance to have biological children (Franklin 1997). The research of Becker (2000) and Franklin (1997) deals with a specific demographic of infertile women that differs slightly from my own since not all of my research participants pursued IVF treatments. Nonetheless, it astutely highlights both the pain associated with infertility and the strong cultural preference for biological children. Becker points to the cultural attachments in replicating one's genetic make-up and the ideology of the continuity of lineage (Becker 2000). Likewise, Franklin argues that for many there is a powerful urge to perpetuate their genes through a new generation (Franklin 1997).

The grief experience, however, is not universal. My research participants experienced this pain in many different ways. Barbara, for example, lost her child from the risks associated with prenatal testing, recommended for all women over the age of 35. She had chorionic villus sampling (CVS) to test for genetic abnormalities, and the procedure led to an accidental termination of that pregnancy. Barbara was unable to conceive again and was left with feelings of guilt and anger over a test that was not absolutely necessary (Barbara, April 14, 2010). Anne had experienced three miscarriages (Anne, May 20, 2009). Rachel, who underwent treatment for infertility, had nightmares induced by the fertility drugs about killing her husband and felt that these fertility treatments put a great deal of strain on her marriage (Rachel, April 3, 2011).

During the course of my research in Ontario, Quebec, and Beijing, China, I interviewed 30 women, spanning the ages of 30 to 48 years, who adopted their child/ren from China between 1999 and 2010. The China adoption program has very specific criteria for adopting children in terms of the prospective parents' age, education, income and marital status. As a result, the China program selects for a very specific demographic, represented in my research sample, which includes mostly white, middle-class, educated professionals. Adoption literature is dominated by those inside the adoption triad of birth parent, adoptive parent and adopted child (Balcom 2011). Unlike many scholars who study adoption, I am not an adoptive mother or an adoptee; however, I am invested in this topic on a personal level given that, like most of my peers, I struggle to decide how to balance having children with the pursuit of higher education and a demanding career. Women who cannot carry a pregnancy to term and lose a child during pregnancy are often construed as "failed achievers" especially in the field of reproductive science. This characterization is surprising since they are often such high achievers in other facets of their lives (Layne 2003:150).

Most of the women I interviewed were older parents. The reason these women were older when they were ready to become mothers was often because they had achieved great success in their professional lives. They have lived up to the ideals of their generation that a woman can and should achieve success in her professional life. Nonetheless, my respondents believed that being a mother is an important part of their identity as a successful, fulfilled woman. In turn, these women experienced grief about losing their reproductive capacities in a society that makes it difficult for women to pursue their careers while having young children. Those who do become mothers while pursuing their career goals find that the workplace does not accommodate new mothers and that opportunities for advancement are limited because they have small children (Evans and Grant 2008). These anxieties about pursuing career and family simultaneously have emerged as themes in popular media, thus highlighting how serious and widespread this concern and tension is among middle-aged, high-achieving Canadian women today. Two edited volumes—*Mama PhD: Women Write about Motherhood and Academic Life* (Evans and Grant 2008) and *Between Interruptions: 30[Canadian] Women Tell the Truth about Motherhood* (Howard 2007)—compile stories of successful career women who struggle with the tension of balancing career with family. The two roles are not always compatible because some careers do not afford the flexibility in the workplace that is needed for mothers. Women in dual-income families usually carry a heavier burden of housework and childcare responsibilities than their partners (Crittenden 2001).

Illness narratives are a common trope explored by medical anthropologists (Eisenberg 1977; Garro 2000; Kleinman 1988; Lakoff and Johnson 1980; Martin 1994). Physician and anthropologist Arthur Kleinman (1988) used his experiences in clinical practice to write about the process of creating meaning in periods of illness. According to Kleinman, illness narratives are always culturally shaped, and thus they

> edify us about how life problems are created, controlled, made meaningful. They also tell us about the way cultural values and social relations shape how we perceive and monitor our bodies, label and categorize bodily symptoms, interpret complaints in the particular context of our life situation; we express our distress through bodily idioms that are both peculiar to distinctive cultural worlds and constrained by our shared human condition. [Kleinman 1988:xiii]

Infertility fits into discussions about illness because it is a disruptive life event and it is framed within a specific cultural setting through culturally meaningful metaphors (Garro 2000). Rapp and Ginsburg (2012:247) point out that

> recent research in infertility ... stresses how socially disabling involuntary childlessness and reproductive loss may be, especially although not exclusively, for women. Pregnancy, although not an illness, has been medicalized to the point that it is treated as an illness or disruption of life in cultures dominated by biomedicine. [Davis-Floyd 2003; see also MacDonald 2013]

For example, in her research on midwifery in Canada, anthropologist Margaret MacDonald writes that many

women seek a critical alternative to biomedical or "technocratic" models of pregnancy and childbirth. In contrast, natural birth is understood to "promote women as knowing, capable and strong, their bodies perfectly designed to carry a fetus to give birth successfully without the high-tech surveillance and interventions of physicians in a hospital setting" (MacDonald 2013:367).

Motherhood is a performance of normative gender roles since the family is an expression of social stability and good citizenship (Allison 2011; Berlant 1997; May 1995). Cultural metaphors are used by infertile mothers of adopted children to make infertility seem less pathological. Metaphors that compare adoption to pregnancy also enable these mothers to connect to conventional gender roles. Pregnancy metaphors are used by my research participants to explain the experience of infertility and to anchor their experience of motherhood in biological processes.

This method of anchoring the adoption experience in pregnancy accomplished several important things for my research participants, such as building kinship ties, naturalizing the adoption process as an option for building a family, and explaining grief in terms of socially accepted and understood experiences. Many of the women in my research who adopted children used the quintessential experiences of pregnancy to describe their adoption process in metaphorical terms. These pregnancy metaphors make the adoption process as close as possible to a biological process and signify a deeply rooted preference for biological kin.

This argument closely connects to the work of anthropologist Judith Modell, who focuses on domestic adoption in the United States (2002). She writes that adoption procedures were established with particular efforts to model biological kinship as much as possible. U.S. legal proceedings made no distinction between biological and adoptive children, and adoption was constructed to resemble genealogical relationships. This goal was achieved through matching children and parents by "intimate traits," such as appearance, intelligence and temperament, in order to replicate signs of biological kinship (Modell 2002:7). Modell writes that it was widely believed in adoption circles that resemblances between the child and adoptive parents would legitimize the ties of kinship, give the impression of an "absolute bond" and ensure that the relationship would be more enduring (2002:6).

In my research on transnational adoption, women used pregnancy metaphors to create fictive kinship ties between themselves and their adopted children. In most instances, it is more difficult when adopting children from overseas than in domestic adoptions to match children and parents by appearance. Therefore, the adoptive mothers I encountered emphasize a spiritual connection rather than a genetic one. Chinese adoption stories are often explained through a narrative describing a red thread pulling from the adoptive mother's heart and connecting to her child in a faraway land. A popular adoption fairy tale published in English, *The Red Thread*, is based on "an ancient Chinese belief that an invisible, unbreakable red thread connects all those who are destined to be together" (Lin 2007:1). Although this red thread is invisible, it is nonetheless depicted in the narrative as "real." Significantly, red, the colour of the thread, is also the colour of blood, so the story symbolically constructs the connection between adoptive mother and child as one of "blood relationship." I maintain that by describing the adoption process in terms of biological links, people believe the relationship will prove to be more legitimate and enduring.

Metaphors of pregnancy were continually used by my participants, so much so that they seemed like scripts. References to pregnancy were so common that I could almost anticipate them in the interviews. Kate stated the pregnancy metaphor very succinctly when relating her adoption story to me. "It's as big and as exciting as if you've got a big belly and in a couple of days you will have a baby. It's the same thing really, just that you got on a plane and travelled for 20 hours instead of 20 hours of labour, you know?" (Kate, May 19, 2009). Examples of pregnancy metaphors in my research include references to the ultrasound photo, metaphorical pregnancy photographs and analogies to a child growing in the heart rather than in the uterus.

Each potential adoptive family, once successfully matched with their child, receives a photo of that child, which is known as the referral photo. The referral photo in the adoption experience is likened to an ultrasound photo and becomes a particularly powerful metaphor for these adoptive parents. Like the ultrasound, the referral photo is carried around in the soon-to-be parents' wallets or taped to the refrigerator. It is the first evidence of the child, and for many women it carries the same significance as an ultrasound photo. My research participant Heather said, "We fell in love right at that moment and I carried her picture with me everywhere" (Heather, August 24, 2009). Barbara echoed Heather's sentiments: "Once you get the pictures it's like, God, you know, you just want it to be that day already" (Barbara, April 14, 2010).

The social and cultural significance of the ultrasound photo, known more colloquially as "baby's first photo,"

has been thoroughly examined in anthropological literature (Adams 1994; Mitchell and Georges 1998). Mitchell and Georges (1998) describe the process of quickening in pregnant women as the moment when a woman first experiences the movement of the fetus and begins to conceptualize the fetus as her child. With the introduction of routine ultrasounds this experience has been transformed into a technological fact. Fetal images display these movements on the screen, and women are now expected to bond with their children at much earlier stages of the pregnancy, long before they actually feel any fetal movement (Mitchell and Georges 1998). Analogously, referral photos sent to adoptive parents when they are matched to their child take on much the same social role as the ultrasound photo. The women with whom I spoke describe these photos as an important benchmark in their adoption experiences, marking the moment when they could see the child's face and imagine this little person in their lives. Many of my participants described receiving the referral photo as the moment when they started to bond with their child: "I guess you sort of attach to a particular child through the photos that they send you" (Cynthia, July 21, 2009).

Metaphorical adoption pregnancy or maternity photographs have become a kind of popular standard in the adoption process. Photos of couples with a beach ball or globe to symbolize their expectant adopted child are used by some couples in place of pregnancy photos.[1] Pregnancy metaphors were also used by my research participants to describe other experiences in their paths to motherhood. For Jane, who had a "failed adoption," receiving the referral photo of a boy she would never bring home was highly detrimental to her well-being. After being matched with her child, she took his documents and medical documentation to her pediatrician. It turned out that this child was "too sick to be adopted." She likened the experience to a late-term miscarriage: "I had no other link to make to lose a child that I never held, was never in my hands but was in our lives in such a significant way, you know?" (Jane, May 5, 2009). Jane emphasized the role of the referral photo in creating a situation in which she felt she had "conceived" and lost a child: "Here we had this picture, this *photo*, then we had a massive shower and we named him" (Jane, May 5, 2009).

The ultrasound metaphor has added significance for those of my participants who had experienced miscarriages in their quest to become mothers and eventually chose to adopt. According to Layne (2003), the role of fetal ultrasounds in creating closer connections between a mother and her child deeply affects mothers who then lose the child, who has already been constructed as "real." She identifies the use of the technology so early in pregnancy as problematic because mothers become emotionally invested in their child. Perhaps, Layne writes, "it would be better psychologically not to determine their pregnancies so early, not to start the construction of fetal personhood until a later date, when the chances of ending up with a take-home baby are significantly greater" (2003:101). For Jane, it seems the metaphor of the ultrasound photo was a way of legitimizing her grief over losing a child, by enabling her to use the language of miscarriage to describe the experience of deciding to abandon the adoption.

For others, constructing their adoption experiences as a metaphorical pregnancy resonates in different ways. A number of my research participants have experienced multiple miscarriages. Liz (2009) was pregnant four times and had lost all four children. Anne (2009) told me she had miscarried three times before coming to the decision to adopt. For these women who had lost several babies, it is easy to imagine how the referral photo was equated to the ultrasound photos they had received several times in pregnancies that had been interrupted. The referral photo allowed these women, in a sense, to pick up where they had left off in their pregnancies, but with the guarantee of actually receiving a child in the end.

Some adoptive mothers tailor their adoption experience to mimic pregnancy as closely as possible. For example, when given the option to choose the sex of the child they plan to adopt, they must choose between three options: 1) boy, 2) girl or 3) boy or girl. Several women selected the third option, stating that "Mother Nature does not dictate whether you get a boy or a girl, so we won't dictate either. So we chose boy *or* girl" (Liz, February 8, 2009). Similarly, Pamela said, "It's almost like giving birth, you can't choose" (Pamela, June 14, 2010).

Another prevalent pregnancy metaphor used widely in the adoption community is the idea of growing a child in one's heart rather than in one's uterus. The notion of "conception in the heart" is also employed by mothers who have children through surrogacy (Ragone 1994). According to this metaphor, a child is still conceived and grown within a woman's body, thus validating her as a mother just like any other. The metaphor of "growing in the heart" was ubiquitous among adoptive mothers in interviews and at adoption events and also appears frequently in adoption memoirs (Canfield et al. 2008; Kitze 2003; Lewis 2000, 2007).

These metaphors of maternity used by my respondents were also used at adoption events and seminars by speakers, organizers and parents alike. Metaphors comparing adoption to pregnancy also make numerous

appearances in North American culture and not only by adoptive mothers. These pregnancy adoption narratives are reinforced in the popular literature on adoption. For example, in children's literature, Carrie Kitze's (2003) book, *I Don't Have Your Eyes*, describes a child who looks different from her mother. Her eyes look different, her skin tone is different and yet they share the same heart. Adoption memoirs are also littered with maternal metaphors. *Chicken Soup for the Adopted Soul* (Canfield et al. 2008) is a collection of heart-felt stories from adoptive parents, which express sentiments such as, "though never connected by an umbilical cord, in the space of a heartbeat, mutual cords of love joined this child and me" (Williams 2008:22). "The love we felt for her was instantaneous, just like parents seeing their newborn baby. The difference was our baby weighed twenty-five pounds and could walk" (23).

Pregnancy metaphors are so prevalent in making sense of the adoption experience that they come up in the everyday language of Canadians who observe adoption in their community but have no personal connection to it. For example, a respondent described a scene at the Toronto International Airport, where she witnessed a group arriving from China with their newly adopted children. She compared the airport full of family members waiting in anticipation for their new niece/nephew/grandchild/cousin to arrive from China and the excitement that ensued around "a bunch of women giving birth at the same time and showing off their new baby for the first time to family members in the waiting room" (Janet, July 5, 2010).

Finally, the concept of adoption as a metaphorical pregnancy is used in the adoption industry to normalize the practice of adoption into mainstream culture. Anchoring adoption in the familiar biological process of pregnancy makes sense as a means to draw more couples to explore adoption as a reproductive option. For example, in *The Complete Book of International Adoption*, a step-by-step guide to international adoption, the author and adoption professional Dawn Davenport (2006) uses pregnancy imagery throughout. In the chapter "Our Version of Labour," written to guide prospective adopters through the paperwork, Davenport compares the difficult process of preparing the appropriate documents needed to adopt a child to "labour." She cautions that the bureaucratic adoption paperwork is arduous and, like labour, "is not for the faint hearted" and "requires a strong constitution" (2006:131). Since adoption referrals can be slow even once all the paperwork is submitted, this book also devotes a chapter to suggesting ways for prospective parents to survive "the wait," which Davenport calls the "pregnancy without the stretch marks" (2006:155).

Transnational adoption has been heavily critiqued in the literature as a practice that both emerges from and reinforces the social and political inequities between the Global North and South.[2] In my research on transnational adoption from China, the metaphorical pregnancy constructed by western adoptive mothers serves to legitimize their status as mothers, but what these pregnancy narratives obscure is just as important as what they highlight. When adoptive mothers metaphorically embody the birth of their adoptive children, this process erases the actual pregnancy experience of a woman in China who carried and gave birth to that child.

In spite of all the ways to build kinship in contemporary society, through remarriage and stepfamilies, surrogacy, fertility treatments, gay and lesbian parenthood and adoption, it seems that biology still remains a privileged way of understanding the family. This finding is consistent with other research on new reproductive technologies and other non-traditional kinship practices. In her research on surrogacy, Helena Ragone (1994) found that women use the embodied metaphor of conceiving a child in one's heart. Another example is Charis Thompson's (2001) ethnography of infertility clinics. She found that there is some flexibility in terms of biological relationships in that specific forms of biology are strategically emphasized, while others are downplayed to solidify the tenuous or strained relationships created in laboratory settings. In these clinics, biological connections are broken down into two parts, the sharing of genes and the sharing of bodily substances, which are selectively accentuated based on "procreative intent" (2001:178). Thompson explains how kinship, in this context, becomes an achieved status. Instead of "being a particular and fixed kind of kin," we must instead "do kinship" and carefully choreograph a set of relations in particular ways (2001:176). These conclusions closely align with the work of Marilyn Strathern (1992) and Judith Modell (2002), who both argue that there is still a strong cultural preference for biologically related kinship. This preference explains why the adoptive mothers I encountered relate their experiences as closely as possible to the biological process of pregnancy in their attempts to create meaningful kinship ties.

My research also highlights how motherhood retains a continued significance in women's identity in contemporary Canada. While many women actively decide not to have children, for those who struggle with infertility, becoming a mother is central to feelings about being a woman. The inability to conceive or give birth to biological children results in a perceived loss of femininity by these women. Therefore, they seek to model

other modes of creating a family, such as adoption, as closely as possible to biological kinship.

Stacy Lockerbie, Department of Community Health Science, Faculty of Medicine, University of Calgary, 3280 Hospital Drive NW, Calgary, Alberta, T2N 4Z6, Canada. E-mail: sllocker@ucalgary.ca.

Notes

1 See JeJune 2010.

2 See Anagnost (2000, 2004), Briggs (2003, 2012), Brookfield (2012), Cartwright (2002), Dorow (2002, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2010), Dubinsky (2008, 2010), Eng (2003), Fonseca et al. (2003), Howell (2006, 2009), Hubinette (2006), Johnson (2002, 2004, 2005), Kim (2003), Klein (2000), Leinaweaver (2007), Modell (1999, 2002), Solinger (2001), Strong-Boag (2006) and Volkman et al. (2003a, 2003b).

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