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The Legacy of Exploitation in Intercountry Adoptions from Ethiopia: "We Were under the Impression That Her Birth Parents Had Died"

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ABSTRACT

Ethiopia legally banned intercountry adoption in 2018 following reports of corruption, illegal practices, and child trafficking. While the intercountry adoption program is now closed, the enduring legacy of exploitation continues. Through interviews with adoptive parents, this study explores what and how adoption-related exploitation occurred. It also describes a cyclical and iterative process that adoptive parents, impacted by adoption-related exploitation, undertook to understand whether and how referral, concerning, and emergent adoption narratives fit together.

"We use words like illegal or unethical. We also use the words corrupt and criminal. Oh, and you know, sometimes other words, like cruel or hurtful."

Introduction

Ethiopia banned intercountry adoption in 2018 following reports of corruption, illegal practices, and child trafficking (Bartholet & Smolin, 2012; Bunkers et al., 2012; Hailu, 2017). Though the intercountry adoption program is now closed, the enduring legacy of exploitation continues. This paper investigates the exploitation that occurred from the vantage point of adoptive parents and provides insight into the lived experience and consequences of adoption-related exploitation.

Intercountry adoption rates from Ethiopia rose exponentially in the first decade of the 21st century. Humanitarians understood the increase to be an appropriate response to the human immunodeficiency virus infection and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) crisis in Ethiopia, where the burden of AIDS-related deaths stretched family and community systems beyond their ability to absorb and care for orphaned children (Bodja & Gleason, 2020; Greene, 2006; Hailu, 2017). Attention to the HIV/ AIDS crisis also served to focus attention on other long-standing issues in
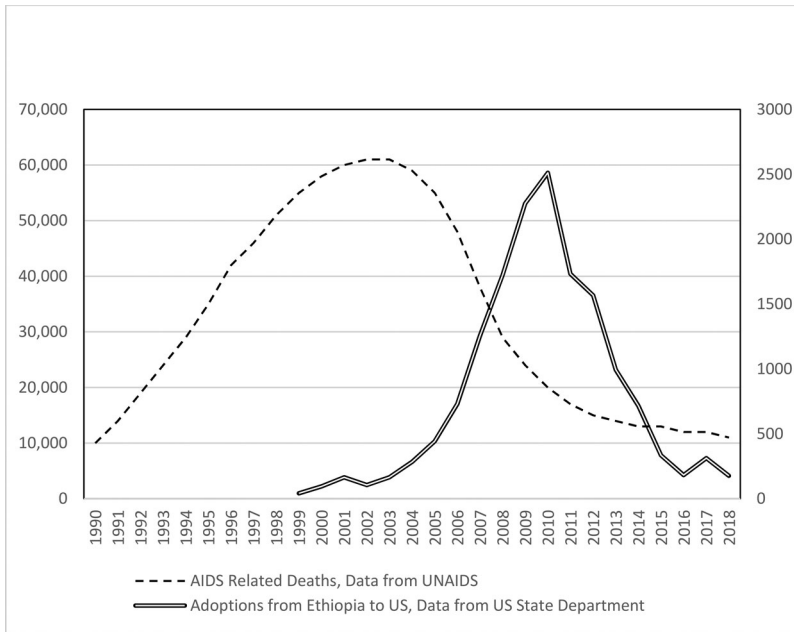

Figure 1. Intercountry adoptions from Ethiopia following AIDS-related deaths.
Note: Data indicate a rise in Ethiopian adoption as a humanitarian response to the increase in AIDS-related deaths. From UNAIDS (2020) and U.S. Department of State (2020).

Ethiopia, such as poverty, maternal mortality, violence, and regional conflict, further galvanizing support for intercountry adoption (Figure 1).

Proponents of intercountry adoption grieve the ban on intercountry adoptions from Ethiopia. While important progress has been made on HIV/AIDS treatment and in poverty reduction, Ethiopian children are disproportionately impacted by systemic inequalities (Ministry of Finance & UNICEF Ethiopia, 2019). Ranked 173 out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index (UNDP, 2019), orphans and vulnerable children are at special risk for exploitation, physical abuse, forced child marriage, female genital mutilation, child labor, and mental health problems (Northcut & Hailu, 2016; Ministry of Finance & UNICEF Ethiopia, 2019).

In contrast, advocates against intercountry adoptions from Ethiopia support the ban. They note that Ethiopian women already live in a patriarchal society with lower rates than their male counterparts on measures of socioeconomic status, literacy, and education (Yailulo et al., 2015; World Economic Forum, 2018). These same women are often revictimized by pressure to relinquish children for adoption because of poverty, incest, terminal illness, rape, large family size, and cultural stigma against single parenting and pregnancy out of wedlock (Demissie, 2013; Kalkidan, 2011; Resnick, 1984; Roby & Matsumura, 2002) that results in the "transfer of children from the least privileged to the most privileged" (Fenton, 2019; Kalkidan, 2011; Perry, 1998, p. 102; Shura, 2010).

Proponents of the ban also highlight a common misunderstanding over the term "orphan" that led to an amplification of the number of orphaned children in Ethiopia. Those in the global north understand the term to reflect a child who has lost both parents to death, while those in the global south use the term in reference to children who have lost one parent to death, severe illness, or abandonment. Advocates in support of the ban also note that not all extended families were ruptured by HIV/AIDS. Consistent with a long-standing tradition of kinship care, and buffeted by appropriate intervention and resources, many extended families were able to successfully integrate and absorb orphaned children to keep them aligned with culture, language, and community (Abebe & Aase, 2007).

Exploitation

Both proponents and opponents of intercountry adoption stand united against corruption, knowing that it works against the protection of orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC). However, definitions vary, and the specific forms can be hard to pin down. Smolin (2004) used the term "child laundering" to describe buying and selling of children for intercountry adoption and compared the practice of child laundering to money laundering whereby criminals procure large amounts of money illegally only to "launder" it through official and legal businesses. Smolin (2004) writes, "Child laundering occurs when children are taken illegally from birth families through child buying or kidnapping, and then 'laundered' through the adoption system as 'orphans' and then 'adoptees'" (p. 115). Over time, the term "child trafficking" replaced "child laundering," although this term has been critiqued by Brown and Roby (2016) as too broad, inaccurate, and lacking in definitional specificity. These same authors also note that according to the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, the definition of "trafficking" requires that victims experience sexual exploitation, slavery, servitude, or organ removal, all exceedingly rare occurrences in intercountry adoption. Brown and Roby (2016) favor the word "exploitive" as an umbrella term that captures the various types of fraudulent, illegal, deceptive, and/or corrupt adoption practices. They provide narrower definitions for specific exploitive practices, including a) the sale of children, b) birth mother trafficking, and c) abuse-of-process. In this lexicon, the sale of children represents the transfer of children for profit or financial awards. Birth mother trafficking includes lies, false promises, and coercive practices against birth mothers. Abuse-of-process describes manipulation of one or more members of the adoption triad, including the provision of false referral information to adoptive parents (Brown & Roby, 2016, pp. 72–73) (Table 1).

Table 1. Mechanisms of exploitation according to Brown and Roby (2016).

Form of Exploitation	Definition
Child trafficking	The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of a child for the purposes of exploitation of that child.
Sale of children	The transfer of children for profit or when financial inducements are used to obtain parental consent.
Birth mother trafficking	The use of deception and coercion against birth mothers including, but not limited to, forced childbearing practices.
Abuse-of-process	Manipulation of one or more members of the adoption triad. For example, giving false referral information to adoptive parents.

Unfortunately, exploitation as defined by Brown and Roby (2016) was predicted and predictable. As early as 2008, Ethiopian and U.S. officials began to investigate reports of exploitation and found evidence of bribes paid to birth families to relinquish their children, falsified documentation and testimony, payments to intermediaries involved in buying and selling children, the use of stash houses to hide children, and bribes paid to police officers to favor select orphanages (Bunn, 2019, p. 703; Graff, 2017). As Bunn (2019) explains:

Many international adoption programs start out as genuine humanitarian efforts involving a handful of adopters. As word of successful adoptions from a specific nation spreads—often accompanied by press depicting the terrible situations of children in that nation waiting to be adopted—interest among Western adoptive parents grows. While the "supply" of children in need of a home decreases, the "demand" of Western families increases, "leading to that obvious two-part capitalist solution: increased prices and increased production." With hopeful adoptive parents ready to pay a significant sum to take home a healthy baby, opportunistic middlemen find ways to "produce" adoptable babies by defrauding and coercing birthparents and buying or even abducting healthy children. Eventually, the adoption-governing entities of the often-under-resourced sending nations reach a point where they can no longer effectively oversee the behavior of everyone involved in the adoption process. It is not until the state of origin and receiving states become aware of the corruption that attempts to stop it begin. Unfortunately, stopping the corruption frequently entails stopping intercountry adoptions altogether for at least a period, eliminating the possibility of a home abroad for children who could actually benefit from one. (p. 703)

To further complicate matters, Ethiopia was a nonsignatory country to the 1993 Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption (HCIA). Therefore, the Ethiopian Intercountry Adoption Program itself and each of the individual adoption agencies operating within the country were largely unregulated.

Studies that look directly at exploitation in intercountry adoptions from Ethiopia are few. One important exception is work done by Hailu (2017), who conducted 54 key informant interviews to compare legal and illegal intercountry adoption processes in Ethiopia. After describing three distinct

phases of the legal adoption process, Hailu (2017) also identified opportunities for illegal practices in each stage.

In Stage One of the legal adoption process, local courts determined whether child protection authorities should assume custody of a child based on documented evidence of abandonment, parental death, or inability to care for a child due to extreme poverty or illness. However, Hailu (2017) found that many illegal practices also occurred during this stage. For example, children were separated from their birth family by theft, abduction, false promises, and bribes. Police officers were incentivized to collude in staged infant abandonments. Birth family, neighbors, community members, or police were also financially induced to provide false testimony and fabricate false documentation to local authorities and judges.

Stage Two of the legal adoption process involved the transfer of guardianship from child protection authorities to local orphanages. At this stage, individual orphanage directors were supposed to explore local alternatives for domestic adoption, although orphanage directors often, if not entirely, failed to explore domestic alternatives of care. As a last resort, directors could deem a child eligible for international adoption and partner with an agency for adoption. Stage Two also required individual orphanage directors to compile documentation in support of international adoption and make an application to the federal court. Hailu found that this stage contained opportunities for illegal practices and that child protection authorities often delivered children to specific orphanages based on reciprocal social or financial incentives.

In the third and final stage of the legal adoption process, the federal court heard witness testimony, reviewed documentation, and assigned legal guardianship to adoptive parents. As in previous stages, Hailu found evidence of exploitation, including bribes for false testimony and documentation.

Purpose

The formal research question of this descriptive study asks, what adoption-related exploitation occurred in Ethiopia? The purposes of this research are many. First, findings will illuminate an important content area that often goes unseen. As Rotabi (2012) notes, "Because adoption fraud relies on unethical and illegal activities, it is very difficult, if not impossible, to conduct an exploratory research study using interviews or other documentation" (p. 68).

Second, this research will give voice to the lived experiences of adoptive parents confronted by unforeseen adoption-related exploitation. It is noteworthy that while knowledge about corruption was widespread within the

adoption industry insiders, prospective adoptive parents were largely unaware of the possibility for adoption-related exploitation.

A third purpose of this study is to locate findings within the existing literature on adoption-related exploitation to inform the discussion of whether adoption-related exploitation was an incidental or structural problem in Ethiopia. If a structural problem, findings will likely identify specific forms of exploitation, as identified by Brown and Roby (2016), and patterns of exploitation, as identified by Hailu (2017). Findings will inform the existing literature base vis-à-vis how adoptive parents respond to adoption-related exploitation.

The final purpose of this research is to inform stakeholders of the adoption community. To this end, findings should be highly relevant to the work of adoption policymakers who will be more able to create systems of ethical and transparent adoptions by understanding what went wrong in intercountry adoptions from Ethiopia. Ideally, adoption-competent practitioners will also find this research helpful when serving clients impacted by adoption-related exploitation.

Methods

Design

Consistent with other studies that examined child abduction in intercountry adoption (Chatham-Carpenter, 2012; Marn & Tan, 2015), qualitative research was deemed most appropriate given the sensitive nature of the topic. Likewise, exploratory and phenomenological studies using interview data often rely on thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Huberman et al., 2014; Padgett, 2017; Saldaña, 2015).

Researcher description

The author comes to this research as a professor of social work, former adoption worker, and adoptive parent of two Ethiopian children. Anecdotal stories of exploitation available in the popular press, across social media, and in small-group discussions inspired this research to systematically understand the phenomenological experience of exploitation in Ethiopian adoptions.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via two closed Facebook groups for adoptive parents of Ethiopian children. Closed Facebook groups allow members to discuss shared topics and interests with other approved members. Ethiopian Adoptive Parent and Adoptee Information and Discussion

Group (EAPAID) has 2,859 members and is limited to adoptive parents and Ethiopian adoptees. Ethiopia Homeland Travel and Birth Family Contact (HTBFC) has 2,168 members and is limited to Ethiopian adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive parents. After I sought permission from each group's moderators, a recruitment flyer was posted on both Facebook sites. In summary, the flyer asked adoptive parents with concerns about falsehoods, corruption, or unethical practices embedded in their adoptions to participate in a 75–90-minute confidential interview with a sensitive and knowledgeable researcher/mental health professional/adoptive parent. The flyer discussed informed consent and institutional review board approval. It also asked potential interviewees to respond via a Gmail account dedicated to the study.

The study utilized purposive, homogeneous sampling. Inclusion criteria were as follows: 1) study participants had one or more children adopted from Ethiopia; 2) study participants were concerned about illegal, unethical, or falsehoods in their adoption from Ethiopia; 3) study participants were 18 years of age or older. Sixteen potential participants responded to the initial flyer. Of those, one participant did not meet the study criteria and was omitted. A second participant dropped out due to scheduling difficulties.

Study participants

Ultimately, 14 interviews were conducted with 3 married couples; 5 married women; 2 never-married women; and 1 divorced woman. All interviewees were heterosexual and of Caucasian descent. The mean age of all participants was 49 years and ranged from 38–67 years of age (M = 49.41, SD = 7.94). Two families lived in Canada, while the remainder lived in the United States. Roughly half of the interviewees reported a family income between $51,000–$100,000, with two families earning less and six earning more. Two-thirds of those interviewed report having one child adopted from Ethiopia, while the remaining study participants reported two or more Ethiopian adoptees. The current age range of adoptees is 9–28 years (M = 14.36, SD = 5.32). Motivation for adoption, in descending order, included the desire to build a family, infertility, humanitarianism, concern about overpopulation, and religious calling. Please see Table 2 for additional demographic information on study participants.

Data collection

Interview questions were developed well in advance of the first interview and vetted by content experts for clarity and validity. As interviews

Table 2. Demographic profile of study participants.

No.	Gender	Age	No. ET Adoptions	Child name (pseudonym)	Child Gender	Child Age at Referral
1	F	48	2	Mulugeta	M	4.5 years
				Amara	F	5 months
2	F	48	1	Saba	F	7 months
3	F	43	1	Genet	F	7 months
4	F	48	2	Nuru	F	1.5 months
				Selanet	F	7 months
5/5*	F/M	67/67	1	Emebet	F	4 years**
6	F	55	1	Desta	F	5 months
7	F	43	1	Belayneh	M	6 months
8/8*	F/M	44/46	1	Habibi	M	8 months
9	F	43	1	Selam	M	12 months
10	F	53	2	Yonas	M	4 years**
				Girma	M	2 years**
11/11*	F/M	53/55	3	Desta	F	14 years
				Mateos	M	3.5 years
				Aida	F	1.5 years
12	F	53	2	Getachew	M	6 years**
				Ephrem	M	4 years**
13	F	38	1	Nyala	F	6 months
14	F	41	1	Amari	M	6 months

Note: *Denotes married couples, interviewed together. **Indicates uncertain/wrong age.

progressed, some thoughtful questions were suggested by study participants and added to subsequent interviews.

Interviews began with a review of study purpose, informed consent, and confidentiality. Basic demographic questions were asked to confirm eligibility and to describe the study sample. Thereafter, open-ended questions gently guided the interviews, but participants were permitted to tell their story in their own way. Please see Table 3 for a list of interview questions used in this research.

All interviews were conducted over a web-based platform called GoToMeeting. Although the researcher was willing to travel for local interviews, all participants preferred using GoToMeeting, a web-based communication platform with video, audio, recording, and transcription capabilities. Participants had the choice to show up "in person" using both videocam and voice functions or to turn the camera off and use the voice-only feature. The interviewer utilized both video and voice features to convey appropriate sensitivity to the subject matter through verbal and nonverbal body language. Each interview lasted roughly 1.5 hours. With permission from participants, GoToMeeting recorded and transcribed each interview. Transcripts were then reviewed and corrected, especially the spelling of Ethiopian names, institutions, and geographic locations. A random subset of transcripts (25%) was reviewed by study participants for accuracy of content and meaning (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Thereafter, interview transcripts were scrubbed of identifying information, and pseudonyms were assigned for confidentiality purposes. Data were secured via a web-based platform with encryption and password protections.

Table 3. Interview questions.

Questions
1. What did your adoption agency tell you about your child upon referral?
2. How did this information change before you traveled, if at all?
3. How did this information change upon meeting your child, if at all (i.e., wrong age, special needs, medical issues, other)?
4. Did your agency facilitate a birth family visit?
5. How did the agency describe the purpose of the visit?
6. What was the birth family visit like for you?
7. Did you learn anything new or different about your child's history once he/she learned to speak English?
8. Have you hired one or more in-country searcher?
9. What was your motivation for each search?
10. What, if anything, did you learn through each search?
11. Whom, if anyone, do you hold responsible for discrepancies in your child's history?
12. If you could change the word "discrepancies" in the question above, what word or words would you replace it with?

Methodological integrity and rigor

The Institutional Review Board of Salem State University approved this study on September 5, 2019. Steps were also taken to ensure methodological integrity throughout the study and to establish trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and rigor (Padgett, 2017). Established procedures for trustworthiness were employed (Padgett, 2017), such as the maintenance of a robust and secure auditing trail with raw data, transcripts, annotated codebooks, data analysis plans, and operational documentation. Analytic memos were written on a regular basis to maximize consistency in coding, pattern recognition, and theoretical development.

The potential for bias was minimized via active participation in a research and peer-support group to acquire "fresh perspectives and guard against bias" (Padgett, 2017, p. 216). Participation also allowed the author to conduct negative case analysis and consider alternative explanations and perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The author also engaged in regular and ongoing reflective journaling to carefully interrogate personal assumptions and emotions tied to the subject matter (Ortlipp, 2008).

Analysis

This study used thematic analysis to interpret 504 single-spaced pages of transcribed interview data. As an iterative process, coding and analysis included a first cycle of reading and rereading transcripts to understand each participant's story in its entirety. The second cycle of analysis organized data using open codes. The third cycle of analysis assigned axial codes to identify and categorize related data across transcripts. As a final step, major themes were identified and organized.

As Figure 2 indicates, the first major theme in the sequence is labeled Referral Narrative and is defined by what adoptive parents are told upon referral of a child. This theme is comprised of four categories: why the

Open Codes	Axial Codes	Categories	Theme
ET mom died of HIV/AIDS ET father died HIV/AIDS ET mom died in childbirth ET mom died, unknown Both parents died, unknown	Death		
Surviving parent, poverty Extended family, poverty	Poverty	Why child is eligible for adoption.	
Surviving parent, terminal illness Surviving parent, mental illness	Illness		
Child abandoned Child found wandering	No known parents		Referral Narrative
Child age < 12 months Child age 1 – 2 Child age 2- 3 Older child	Child age		
Child female Child male	Child gender		
Malnourished Stunted Chronic medical condition Special needs Health, other	Child health		

Figure 2. Coding structure: referral narrative.

child is eligible for intercountry adoption (death, poverty, illness, no know parents); child age; child gender; and child health. Figure 2 also provides details on the open and axial codes within each category.

As Figure 3 indicates, the second major theme in the sequence is labeled Narrative of Concern and represents discrepancies in the referral narrative that were identified. This theme is comprised of two categories. The first category embodies concerns that arose while adoptive parents were in Ethiopia (first meeting with child, broken trust with adoption agency staff; court processes, and birth family meetings). The second categories represent concerns once the adopted child and parents were settled back "home" (child-based concerns and concerns from search results). Figure 3 also provides details on the open and axial codes within each category.

As Figure 4 indicates, the third major theme in the sequence is labeled Emergent Narrative and represents more accurate and truthful adoption narratives discovered through investigation and searches. This theme is
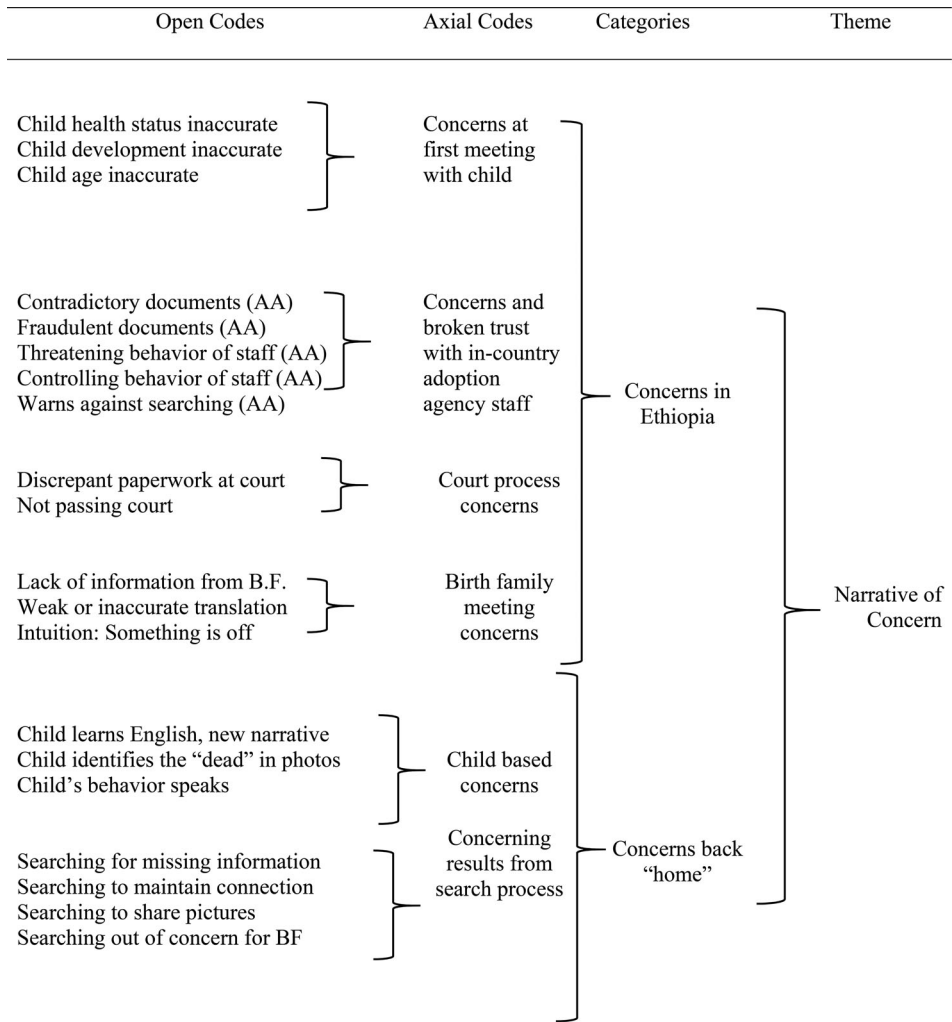
Open Codes	Axial Codes	Categories	Theme

Child health status inaccurate
Child development inaccurate
Child age inaccurate → Concerns at first meeting with child

Contradictory documents (AA)
Fraudulent documents (AA)
Threatening behavior of staff (AA)
Controlling behavior of staff (AA)
Warns against searching (AA) → Concerns and broken trust with in-country adoption agency staff

Discrepant paperwork at court
Not passing court → Court process concerns

Lack of information from B.F.
Weak or inaccurate translation
Intuition: Something is off → Birth family meeting concerns

Concerns in Ethiopia

Child learns English, new narrative
Child identifies the "dead" in photos
Child's behavior speaks → Child based concerns

Searching for missing information
Searching to maintain connection
Searching to share pictures
Searching out of concern for BF → Concerning results from search process

Concerns back "home"

Narrative of Concern

Figure 3. Coding structure: narrative of concern.

comprised of seven categories: death; abandonment; poverty; illness; stigma; exploitive adoption practices; and patriarchy/culture). Figure 4 also provides details on open and axial codes within each category.

Findings

Referral narrative

Prospective adoptive parents took part in extensive vetting before being approved for intercountry adoption. Following home studies, preadoption education, and approvals from both governments, prospective adoptive parents waited for highly anticipated "referral calls" from adoption agencies. These calls and subsequent referral packets and pictures were a major milestone in the adoption process and provided the first bit of information
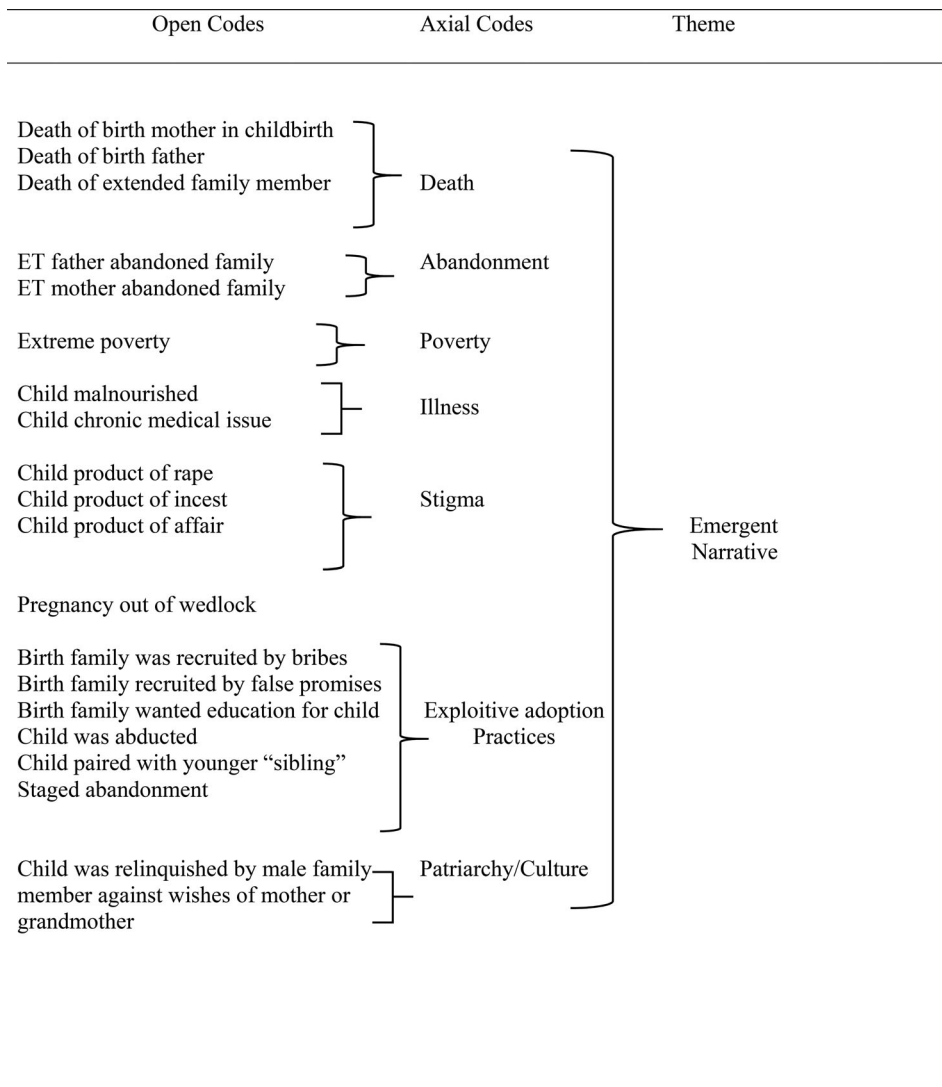
Open Codes	Axial Codes	Theme

Death of birth mother in childbirth
Death of birth father
Death of extended family member — Death

ET father abandoned family
ET mother abandoned family — Abandonment

Extreme poverty — Poverty

Child malnourished
Child chronic medical issue — Illness

Child product of rape
Child product of incest
Child product of affair — Stigma

Pregnancy out of wedlock

Birth family was recruited by bribes
Birth family recruited by false promises
Birth family wanted education for child
Child was abducted
Child paired with younger "sibling"
Staged abandonment — Exploitive adoption Practices

Child was relinquished by male family member against wishes of mother or grandmother — Patriarchy/Culture

Emergent Narrative

Figure 4. Coding structure: emergent narrative.

prospective adoptive parents received about children they were matched with. In general, referral information was sparse, often including only a child's name, age, gender, health status, and circumstances by which they became eligible for intercountry adoption. These circumstances included abandonment, parental death or terminal illness, and/or extreme poverty. As one adoptive parent shared, "Um … we were told the name of a woman that had found her and the area in which she was found. And then, that's pretty much all the information that we were given." Moreover, this study found that referral narratives often told of cascading losses for referred children, including their abandonment and/or parental death, extreme poverty, and/or terminal illness.

Abandonment

Some adoptive parents received referrals of abandoned infants. These referrals contained very little detail other than estimated age, location found, and name of finder. One set of adoptive parents noted:

Yeah, we received a package of papers at the time of the referral or the adoption proposal. So basically, it gave us her name, two photographs that had been taken recently, and the child study form and the child proposal, and the basic information was that she was an abandoned orphan with no living relatives.

At the time, these same adopted parents felt some relief over being referred children with no known history or family. This sentiment goes to the idea that international adoptions are "closed" while domestic adoptions are "open." Seymore (2014) notes that some adoptive parents prefer international adoption because they are closed. In the words of one adoptive parent, "When I first considered adoption, I was so terrified of knowing the child's Ethiopian family. I wasn't really open to an open adoption. I'm like, if they're my kid, I want them to be my kid."

Parental death

Eleven interviewees received referral narratives stating that one or both Ethiopian parents were deceased. Some of these referrals were for children whose mothers had died in childbirth. For example:

Her mom died in childbirth. Her dad, her dad walked for like 2 or 3 days looking for someone that was breastfeeding that could possibly feed her. They didn't have any livestock. They had no means of getting milk. And by the time he came back with her, she was obviously not in good shape. And so, he says that a neighbor knew about this satellite orphanage …

Other adoptive parents shared that their referral narratives reported that the surviving or extended family had stepped in after one or both parents' deaths, but that extended family were ultimately unable to provide ongoing kinship care. One adoptive parent reported a referral narrative thus: "We were told the mama had died of HIV/AIDS and that he was an only child and there were no other relatives. Grandma had tried to take care of him, but then she died as well."

Poverty

Extreme poverty was also central to the referral narrative that many adoptive parents received. One set of adoptive parents shared: "We were told that both of her parents had been deceased. And that the grandfather was taking care of her. But the grandfather had other young children, and he

couldn't take care of her too." Another single mother stated, "We were told that her mother died in childbirth and her father couldn't afford to keep her."

Although long-awaited referral calls marked a new and exciting stage of the adoption process, the referral narratives of children from Ethiopia also required compassion for the circumstances that led to a child being referred for adoption and required self-awareness on the part of the adoptive parent. As one adoptive mother demonstrated, complicated emotions often coexist:

After I received the referral for my daughter [whose parents had passed], I put the following quote on my refrigerator, just to remind myself that this adoption probably isn't a happy thing for my daughter or the other people that loved her: "A child born to another woman calls me mommy. The magnitude of that tragedy and the depth of that privilege are not lost on me."

With few exceptions, the adoptive parents in this study did not question the referral narrative they were provided. Many had done advance research to find a reputable adoption agency and trusted that their child's information had been verified at multiple levels. One adoptive mom stated, "I think this is so naive of me now, but I really believed in our agency. I guess I thought, in my white privilege self, that I'd done my homework properly." However, two sets of adoptive parents did identify and raise discrepancies with adoption agencies. For example, one adoptive parent noted that her referral identified a paternal uncle as the relinquishing family member with a family name different from either of the deceased parents. "This was an automatic red flag … I understood, you know, that if they were brothers, the father's first name would be his last name also [Ethiopian naming convention]. It made me wonder, who is this child really related to?" Another set of parents shared the following story about their referral:

We almost immediately got on the phone to the adoption agency and said, you know, this is weird information. The referral says: Father, dead. Mother, dead. Names, unknown. So we asked, how do you know they are dead if you don't know their names? "Hmm," the adoption worker said, "that's a good question." Moreover, we said that "age is clearly wrong because it gave a height and weight that are impossible for her age." And then the worker said, "That's all you get. It's a third world country." We had been told through the home study social worker that accepting a referral is a big decision and "to take our time and think about it." So we were taking time to think about it, and then they [the adoption agency] started putting pressure on us. They said, "We need to know right now, because if you don't take her, somebody else will."

Narrative of concern

One hundred percent of interviewees reported finding major discrepancies between referral and subsequent adoption narratives. Some "imperfect information" (Hansen, 2020) resulting from differences across cultures, especially language, is expected in international adoption. For example, many adoptive parents were educated by adoption agencies on the issue of "uncertain age" (Miller, 2005). In Ethiopia, uncertain age occurs because the government of Ethiopia does not have a comprehensive birth registration system; the Ethiopian calendar is 13 months long and seven to eight years behind the Gregorian calendar; many women have home births; birthdays are not typically celebrated. Also, birthdays are generally assigned by orphanages when they assume custody, knowing that younger children are often considered more desirable by adoptive parents. So, while many adoptive parents were prepped in advance for some children to look and behave older than stated in their referrals, they were not prepared for other irregularities. Some discrepancies between narratives emerged while adoptive parents were in Ethiopia for formal adoption processes. Other concerns came to life once adoptive parents and children were settled back in the United States or Canada.

In country

First meetings

Most study participants recalled a wide array of emotions upon meeting their adoptive child for the first time. In contrast to expectations of a "magic moment," Harf et al. (2013, p. 6), characterized "first meeting" reactions as often "grim and difficult experiences for adoptive parents" including significant stress and anxiety resulting from shocking images of the child's living conditions; lack of preparation and information about the child's health status; aggressive reaction by the child; and worry about rejection. Participants in the Harf study spoke most frequently about poor health. Similarly, one adoptive parent in this study also felt "blindsided" by the medical conditions of her adoptive child.

So, I went to Ethiopia … expecting a normal, four-month-old baby. When we got there, we found out she was, she weighed, about 5 lbs. She had not really eaten since birth. She had no affect. She had not smiled. She hadn't met any developmental milestone … I didn't know how to feel.

Adoptive parents unprepared for the reality of extremely sick children wondered what other information may have been withheld from them by adoption agencies. One adoptive mother stated "Trust with my agency began to breakdown when I first got to Ethiopia and Belayneh was sick. I felt like nobody told me the truth about that." Another seasoned adoptive

mom of 5 of older children reported being "completely shocked and over-whelmed" that her adoptive child was acutely ill.

He was 24 pounds at referral, and when we picked him up, he was 11 pounds. He had lost 13 pounds. He had his two-year-old molars and was just 11 pounds! And he had a huge, golf-ball-size lump on his neck with a hole in it that I could slide my finger in… When we finally get back home, we went right to the emergency room where he was admitted and stayed for two weeks… the doctor said he only had a day or two before he would have died.

In-country adoption agency workers

Before arriving in Ethiopia, study participants had only worked with United States or Canadian adoption workers. When in-country, adoptive parents sought guidance from adoption workers on the Ethiopian side, especially if inconsistencies in referral narratives were identified. In the words of one adoptive father:

While we were in Ethiopia, we saw some adoption records that showed Emebet [who was abandoned, according to referral narrative] did have a family name … suddenly there was a last name associated with her, and a different birth date. So we asked the ET agency coordinator, where did this name come from? We realized that we really wanted more information about her family background and asked to see her file. And then, you know, we kept bugging her, but then she said, we're not going to get them before you leave, but we'll send them to you. Of course, they never came, and we did pursue it over several years. It seemed like they were hiding something from us.

The issue of broken trust between adoptive parents and adoption agencies was frequently raised by study participants. One adoptive mother noted that her agency had solicited money from adoptive parents to purchase a washer and dryer set for their in-country facility. Yet when she arrived, they were non-existent.

All these clotheslines were everywhere, and I got a translator and I asked a worker, "Where is the washer and dryer?" And she didn't know what I was talking about. So I asked, "How do you do the laundry?" and she went and got one of those old metal washboards to show me. I asked if she's "Ever had a machine?" and she said "no." I trust her answers, because she wasn't a head lady.

Another adoptive parent witnessed in-country caregivers sorting through donations and pocketing them for personal gain: "It just made me wonder, like about their ethics, you know? Like, if they steal from orphans, what else is going on here?"

Attending court

"Passing court" is a significant milestone in the adoption process signifying that the adoption has been legally acknowledged by the government of Ethiopia. Most study respondents passed court without complication. Yet, some court-related instances raised concerns regarding the legitimacy of the original referral narrative.

When we had our court date, we were told, we're passing you [adoptive parents] but we can't pass her [child] because she hasn't gotten her approval letter from MOWYAC [the Ministry of Women, Youth, and Children] affirming her status as an abandoned orphan, which is required to pass court. Then we got a call from the Ethiopian adoption agency attorney saying that there's a good chance that she's never going to be approved by MOWYAC as an orphan and we should leave Ethiopia right away. So we decided let's stay until her first birthday, which was coming up, and then say goodbye. Packing up and getting ready to go to the orphanage to say goodbye was awful. I mean, we were in love with her. Then we get a phone call from the agency attorney. And he says, "Congratulations, you've passed court, you can go pick her up." We were elated but … what? Is she an orphan or not? Months later we learned that the first orphanage—the one she was taken to after she was "found"—had been closed for child trafficking. We also learned that the in-country attorney had bribed the court so she would pass.

Another set of adoptive parents noted that court documents themselves raised serious concerns:

We got the actual court order creating the adoption, which is necessary in order to make her legally our child. Then we got these two strange documents that were affidavits signed by people claiming to have known her family. They stated the names of her parents and affirmed that they were dead. But they were clearly bogus documents. The date was long after she had been relinquished and were signed by people who either didn't know the family or for whatever reason had been induced to sign. We don't really know what role those documents played in the adoption, but they were very concerning to us.

Meeting birth family or child finders

Following court, in-country workers accompanied adoptive parents to see the region their child is from and meet with stakeholders from the child's life, including birth family, extended family, or neighbors. In the case of children who were found wandering or were abandoned, adoptive parents sometimes met with individuals who found the child. Adoption agencies advised families to take pictures and ask questions in order to share this information with adopted children as developmentally appropriate.

Paradoxically, these very visits often raised more questions about the referral narrative than provided answers:

When we went to the village, I immediately began to sense that there was more going on, like culturally … or a subtext … something there that I felt like we weren't being really told. And the orphanage director was translating for us … . A man we were introduced to as Selam's uncle was very bereft and extremely emotional. He was, um, running after the van as we left the village, crying and touching his heart. I could tell he was speaking from his heart. When I asked [the orphanage director/translator] what he was saying, I was told: "Oh, he wishes you a safe journey." In my mind I was like, "Oh, this feels like there's a lot more happening here than just that."

At another birth family visit, an adoptive mom attempted to better understand the detail of her adoptive daughter's referral narrative, wanting to be able to speak confidently about the facts with her child in the future.

Supposedly both parents had died. I met with her father's brother, his wife, and three or four kids … Her uncle didn't seem to know a lot, and I asked pretty pointed questions. Like, "What happened to her parents?" Honestly, I don't even remember what his answers were, but they were generic. At the time I thought, "Well this is odd, something's not right here." I found out on a return trip that her birth father was not dead and had been in the crowd that day. He told me himself, "I was there the day that you came." That really gave me the chills.

A third adoptive parent shared the following experience.

I was told that mom was about thirty years old, that the father was unknown, and that I was adopting her only child. But when I met with her [birth mother], she was young, like 17-years old, and she had a little girl with her that she said was her daughter. She also didn't want to answer any questions or talk about Amari [the adopted child]. It was like she didn't know who I was talking about … I have a picture of her and her little girl in Amari's room. He thinks they are his mom and his sister. I stare at her picture all the time and wonder: Is that really his mother? Is that really his sister?

Coming "home"

Several bodies of literature inform the processes by which parents and children of newly formed adoptive families respond to their new roles and relationships. Santos-Nunes et al. (2020) write, "Adoptive parents, in particular, can experience stress, as their adoptive children often present unique emotional and social difficulties, challenging behaviors, insecure attachment patterns, and health problems" (p. 407). It is reasonable to

assume that "typical" stress is amplified when questions about an adoptive child's family of origin and relinquishment history appear to be different than originally told. For example, in their work, Marn and Tan (2015) found that adoptive parents experienced sadness, frustration/helplessness, complicity/guilt, anger, fear/worry, and hypervigilance when they suspected child abduction in their adoptions from China. Children also experience stress, especially those old enough to retain memories from their Ethiopian families.

English language development

Five study participants explained that upon learning English, older adoptees spoke openly about their pasts.

When Emebet started speaking English, she told us, "I was living with my family." A few things were unclear, but we learned that she had been living with an intact family made up of her grandfather, grandmother, an aunt, and a cousin. She described in detail the experience [of going to an orphanage], which was highly traumatic to her. She was at school, she lived right next to a kindergarten. Her cousin, a teenage boy, came over and got her and said, "Get changed, you are going to go with these people." Then two women with a van came to take her away. The grandfather was yelling and saying, "No, no you can't take her!" It was a terrifying moment for her, and then she was in the van and gone. That moment is still in her mind as a moment of fear … She also remembers that the van stopped and picked up two other children … We found out later that her aunt had been recruited through an evangelical church imported from the United States to Ethiopia. The grandfather was opposed but her aunt and grandmother had sort of reluctantly agreed to it, thinking it best for the child. They were very poor and struggling with a convergence of bad things … She says that when she was in the care center, she was forbidden to talk about her family. She was told, "Forget them, they're gone."

One adoptive parent of Ethiopian half-brothers had been led to believe that her boys were full brothers of deceased parents, relinquished for adoption by an older brother. However, as the adoptees began to speak English, she described the following scenario:

We had met some family members and taken pictures of them while we were still in Ethiopia and made life books for our kids. But as soon as they [the adopted children] learned English words, they identified the oldest brother as their birth dad … We immediately called the adoption agency and said: "Hey, we're pretty confident that our kids know who their father is, and, by the way, he's not dead …"

Behavioral challenges

Smaller adopted children and those without English language skills communicated their distress behaviorally. Some study participants discussed child behavior that led them to wonder about the accuracy of referral narratives. For example, one couple shared that their daughter was "Throwing tantrums and hitting us and crying and calling out Ethiopian family names … For adoptive parents, it's very hard because the child is dependent on you, but they are also mad about what happened, and you become the target." Another adoptive mother had a similar experience:

Nuru went through a very intense period of grieving. She wanted to go back to see her birth father. You know, asking daily: "When can we go? I need to see my dad." She was very upset. She went through a period where she was really angry with me anytime I would spend any money. She would be like "Why aren't you saving that to go back to Ethiopia?" And this started happening more and more in public and at school where she was just crying and crying. One day she was having a major meltdown on the front lawn, and I said, "Honey, I don't know how to help you," and she just sat up, looked me in the eye, and said, "Take me to Ethiopia to see my dad." So, I did.

Searching and investigations

All the adoptive parents in this study hired in-country investigators or searchers. Searches were motivated by a variety of reasons. Some adoptive parents used searchers to find out information that would be useful in years to come. For example, one adoptive mother stated that she wanted to round out the referral narrative with more personal information. "Initially we just had questions. We realized that any information we could find for them about their Ethiopian mom would be helpful later in life. Like, what did she liked to cook? What songs did she sing to them? Things like that." Similarly, another set of adoptive parents also recognized the importance of gathering family history about her adoptive son's deceased birth parents:

We wanted to find out more about his parents, that was our initial goal. To, like, help him understand his background and his identity as he was growing up. Oh yeah, and did he have any siblings? We were interested in all that. After a few months the searcher gets back to us and said, "I've found Selam's father." He sent a photo, and it was the man I had met who was crying and running after the van. A little while later he got back to us and said, "I found X's mother and she is alive as well." We were stunned.

Another adoptive parent stated that she hired a searcher as a regular liaison between adoptive and birth families. She wanted to share pictures and notes with the birth family and maintain a permanent and open connection.

We were originally told that Genet's birth parents had died "in their sleep" and a grandfather had tried to take her in, but, with other young children, he couldn't feed her too … So about six months after the adoption, we asked a searcher to deliver pictures and a little update to the grandfather. We also wanted to know how the grandfather was. So, when the searcher sent us a picture labeled "Genet's mom and grandfather," I emailed him and said, "We were under the impression that her parents had died." And he said, "Nope, she's alive!" So that was, you know, pretty darn surprising.

One adoptive mother shared that she used a searcher to maintain an ongoing connection for her daughter and an uncle, who was thought to be her last surviving relative:

And then two months later, I get picture of my daughter's mother. She is clearly alive. And I literally dropped the phone because it was like looking at a picture of my child at 18, you know? And it's like more than you can handle … I mean, how are you supposed to handle something like this?

Most frequently, searches were initiated when adopted parents began to suspect referral narratives were inaccurate or deceptive, although adoptive parents reported that they were warned by adoption agency workers not to contact the birth family directly or through searchers. For example, an adoptive parent shared: "The adoption agency really frowned upon searching and said, 'Don't go searching for anybody on your own.' They [the adoption agency] were controlling the narrative, and I felt really pretty [expletive] about it!" Some adoptive parents stated that their adoption agencies indicated that birth families would face serious consequences from the Ethiopian government if they were identified by searchers.

We told our caseworker at the agency, who we felt like we had a great relationship with, that we hired somebody to go out and deliver some photos, and they found out that Emebet's father is alive. Her [caseworker's] immediate response was to cut off all contact. She said, "This is a dangerous thing to do. His family will be thrown in prison. They will be punished by the government. If it's discovered that they lied, they'll be punished." So, then we were like "Oh my gosh, what did we do?" but our searches said, "No, no, no, no. They [birth family] are happy to know about their son!"

Adoptive parents, who had once eagerly followed the instructions of their adoption agencies, became much less inclined to do so once trust had eroded between them. "We were told [by the adoption agency] that we couldn't have contact [with the birth family]. But we already knew we weren't going to pay attention to that. We dismissed it immediately."

Emergent narratives

A study participant reported that based on the results of searches, their original referral narratives contained untrue or contradictory information, leaving adoptive parents with an emergent narrative to internalize and navigate, often with radically different information from referral narratives.

I found out that my "abandoned" daughter's "finder" was actually her grandmother. Birth dad had impregnated a very young girl. Birth mom couldn't take care of the baby, and, you know, it's totally customary to ask for help from the father's family, so she brought the child to grandma. After caring for the baby for a few months, grandmother took her to an orphanage for temporary care … When she [grandmother] went back a couple of weeks later, they told her she wasn't there anymore. Grandmother left totally crushed and heart-broken, thinking she was gone. That wasn't even true. She [the baby] was still there, but they hid her. They [the orphanage] changed all the baby's paperwork to falsely state that she was abandoned.

Table 4 provides comparisons between referral and emergent narratives from all study participants.

Discussion

This study sought to give voice to adoptive parents' experiences of exploitation in Ethiopian adoptions while shedding light on a content area that can be difficult to research. Although many adoption stakeholders were aware of exploitative practices in Ethiopia as early as 2008 (Bunn, 2019; Graff, 2017), many prospective adoptive parents were not. Given the well-documented HIV/AIDS crisis and long-standing economic and social problems in Ethiopia, referral narratives claiming that death, abandonment, or extreme poverty prevented Ethiopian families from caring for their offspring initially appeared logical. Yet, contradictions and untruths were later exposed, often by adoptive children themselves, or through private investigations and searches. To this end, adoptive parents described an iterative and cyclical process to understand whether and how referral, concerning, and emergent narratives fit together (Figure 5).

A second purpose of this study was to inform the discussion over whether adoption-related exploitation in Ethiopia was incidental or structural. By locating the findings of this study within the context of existing research, data suggest that adoption-related exploitation in Ethiopia was indeed structural in nature. The forms of exploitation reported by the adoptive parents in this study were consistent with those identified by Brown and Roby (2016). Additionally, patterns of exploitation also align

Table 4. Comparison of referral and emergent adoption narratives by adoptee(s).

No	Referral Narrative	Emerging Narrative
1	EF left wife and 2 children. EM did not have means to care for children.	EM and 1 child are biological siblings.
2	EM died in childbirth. EF unable to provide for child.	EF wanted U.S. education for child.
3	Child abandoned. Found by a local woman.	Child was the product of incest. EGM temporarily placed child in orphanage. When EGM returned, child was gone.
4	EM died in childbirth. EF could not find milk to feed child. EF learned of orphanage from neighbor and relinquished child.	AP not told that child was seriously malnourished and underweight.
	EM had been in love with EF and assumed they would marry. He left when EM became pregnant.	Child was the product of incest.
5/5*	Child abandoned with no surviving relatives.	Recruiter convinced EA & EGM to relinquish child against wishes of EGF. Child much older than stated age with strong memories of being taken from home.
6	Both parents deceased. EU unable to provide kinship care.	EM & EF both living. EM left family. EF unable to provide for child. Pretended to be uncle at relinquishment.
7	Both parents deceased.	Child was product of assault. EF arranged to have child abducted from EM and relinquished.
8/8*	Both parents deceased. EU relinquished child, unable to provide kinship care.	Both parents living. Child was the product of an affair between EF and niece. EF posed as uncle at relinquishment.
9	Both parents deceased. EU relinquished child, unable to provide kinship care.	Child had been living with EM and was abducted by a relative who was also a child recruiter.
10	Both parents deceased. Children relinquished by older sibling unable to provide kinship care.	EF posed as older sibling to relinquished 4-year-old son from first wife (deceased) and 2-year-old from second wife (living). Both children presented as biological siblings of father and first wife. Relinquishment opposed by second wife.
11/11*	Both parents deceased. Child living in orphanage.	Child was not living in an orphanage but with aunt and uncle (possibly parents) in middle-class home. EU wanted child to receive education in the U.S.
	EU relinquished children. Mother unable to care for children due to mental illness.	EGF was child recruiter. Paid for relinquishment of grandchildren and other unrelated children.
12	EM deceased. EF unable to care for children.	EF was recruited. Children had been living with EGM who went to court to stop relinquishment. Judge refused to hear the case.
13	Both parents deceased. EG unable to provide kinship care.	Both parents alive. EM lived with EGF who made decision to relinquish child for ICA.
14	EM age 30(ish). Relinquished only child.	EM very young 15(ish), has an older child in addition to child who was relinquished.

Note: The following abbreviations are used in the table above: EM/EF – Ethiopian mother/Ethiopian father; EGM/EGF – Ethiopian grandmother/Ethiopian grandfather.
EA/EU – Ethiopian aunt/Ethiopian uncle; * Indicates married couples, interviewed together.
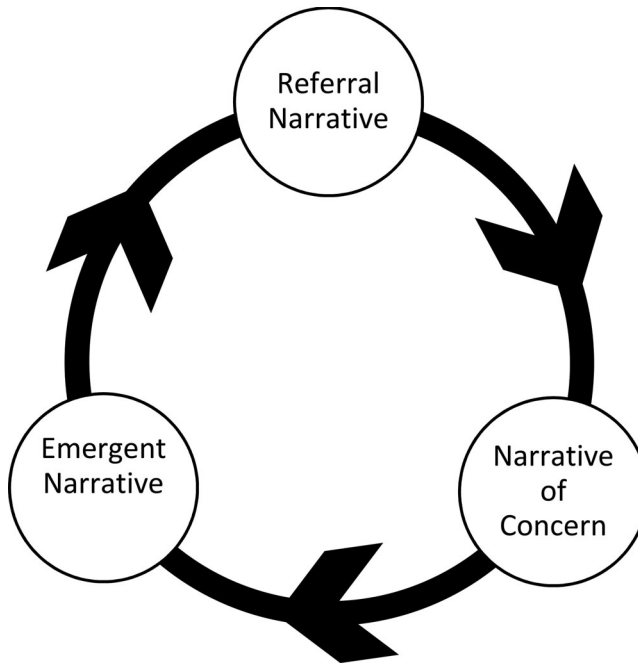
Figure 5. Evolution of adoption narratives.

with Hailu's (2017) stage-wise typography of illegal adoption practices in Ethiopia.

This research not only supports previous work by Hailu (2017) and Brown and Roby (2016), but it also advances the knowledge base vis-à-vis how, when challenged by questions or suspicions of adoption-related exploitation in Ethiopia, adoptive parents reacted. This study suggests that rather than deny evidence of adoption-related exploitation, adoptive parents demonstrated substantial fortitude and personal agency. Knowing how important truthful adoption narratives are for the emotional health of adoptive children, the parents in this study navigated different geographies, cultures, languages, and time-zones—often at considerable financial expense—to secure accurate adoption-related information. This is no small accomplishment, given the context of intercountry adoption, multiple stakeholders, and differing interests. Because adoption agencies—once perceived as ethical intermediaries in the intercountry adoption process—were now viewed with suspicion, adoptive parents relied on their own resources, relationships in Ethiopia, and social media.

The findings of this study also align with those of Marn and Tan (2015), who investigated how adoptive parents coped with the suspicion that their adopted children from China were abducted for intercountry adoption. Marn and Tan (2015) found that a subset (12%) of adopted parents felt compelled to learn all that they could about their child's past so that they could eventually use it to find the birth family and/or to share with

adopted children. In a contrasting study, Chatham-Carpenter (2012) found that when faced with concerns over child trafficking in adoptions from China, adoptive parents tended to deemphasize the possibility of exploitation in narratives constructed for adopted children. However, it's important to note that a very small proportion of Chatham-Carpenter (2012) study population suspected trafficking in their adoptions.

Not surprisingly, social media has played a large role in connecting adoptive parents and increasing awareness of adoption-related exploitation. Currently, no less than 30 Facebook groups are devoted to the topic of Ethiopian adoption. Some groups have open membership and are devoted to connection and support, while others are private online communities where members share experiences and seek answers related to adoption-related exploitation. In another study of adoptive parents, Fenton (2019) wrote of the power social media holds to raise awareness of adoption-related exploitation.

While many parents I spoke with uncovered direct evidence of problems with their children's adoption stories, even the parents I interviewed whose individual adoption processes did not come under direct scrutiny had been forced to confront emerging evidence of corruption in their children's countries of birth as well as in international adoption more generally. (p. 117)

The findings of this study should energize policymakers in work to prevent adoption-related exploitation and support ethical, transparent adoptions. Of import is consideration of whether exploitation may have been more effectively addressed had Ethiopia signed onto and implemented the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption. As one author wrote in 2012, "Ethiopia's accession to the HCIA is fundamental … to construct a stronger legal framework that protects birth families, adoptive families, and most importantly, children" (Bunkers et al., 2020, p. 142). Social workers and clinicians should also attend to these findings as they will inevitably be called upon to help families understand and heal from the impact of adoption-related exploitation.

Limitations

This research was limited by several factors. First, adoptive parents represent only one vantage point of the adoption triad. However, due to geographic and language barriers, it was impractical to include Ethiopian parents in this research. It was also impossible to include Ethiopian adoptees since only a small number are old enough to give consent. As Ethiopian adoptees come of age, it is vital to add their experience and perspective on this topic. A second limitation includes the fact that the data

were coded and analyzed by a single researcher. To advance subsequent research on this topic, it will be useful to increase the sample size and integrate additional researchers to establish intercoder reliability. A final limitation concerns the possibility of selection bias in that only adoptive parents with the most egregious examples of exploitation agreed to be interviewed.

Conclusion

Though the intercountry adoption program in Ethiopia is now closed, the enduring legacy of exploitation continues. Adoptive parents are left with ethically complex, emotionally laden questions: How do I tell my child that their Ethiopian parents, previously thought to be deceased, are living? How do I explain to my child that they were part of an adoption process with abduction and/or financial transactions? Who do I hold responsible for the exploitation that has occurred? Where is my culpability? Perhaps most importantly, how do I repair broken bonds between my child and their birth family, country, and culture? The answers to these questions are also key areas for future research.

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