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ADOPTIVE PARENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT FROM SOCIAL WORKERS AND INFORMAL NETWORKS DURING THE ADOPTION PROCESS

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ABSTRACT

Prospective adoptive parents require a considerable amount of support from social workers as well as from other support systems during the adoption process. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe adoptive families' experiences of formal and informal support during the pre-adoption phase. There is a dearth of empirical research in the South African context on prospective adoptive parents' experiences of support from social workers, family and friends, and the adoption community, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal. Using a qualitative research methodology, this study sought to explore the experiences of sixteen adoptive parents in the eThekweni region with regards to the support they received from social workers and other support systems during the adoption process. Non-probability sampling, more specifically, snowball sampling, was used to recruit the participants through the Durban Adoptive Families group. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Several sub-themes emerged from the data analysis. The study found that the participants had varied experiences of support offered by social workers and organisations along with more positive experiences of informal support from family and friends and the adoption community.

Keywords: Adoption; adoptive parents; adoption process; social workers; support

INTRODUCTION

There is a large gap in South African research that explores the experiences of prospective adoptive parents, the challenges they face at various stages of the adoption process, and structures for pre-adoption support services, particularly in KwaZulu-Natal. The purpose of this study was to explore and describe adoptive families' experiences of formal and informal support during the pre-adoption phase, with particular attention given to the nature and quality of pre-adoption support services.

Adoption occurs when a child is permanently placed with an adult or adults other than his/her biological mother. A child is adopted by a step-parent, an extended family member, a foster parent, an unrelated person, or the father of a child born out of wedlock. One of the main factors in considering adoption is predicated on whether it is in the child's best interests. Through adoption, biological parents' rights are terminated and adoptive parents are legally recognised as the full and legitimate parents of an adoptee (Lee, Kobulsky, Brodzinsky & Barth, 2018; Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2006; Teska, 2018). The adoptee is also considered a full, permanent member of the adoptive family (Pilcher, Hooley & Coffey, 2020; Teska, 2018). This describes a successful adoption, whereas if the process has been stopped or hindered, either from the prospective adoptive parent's side or the legal side, it would be considered an unsuccessful adoption.

Most abandoned babies in South Africa are Black and most adoptable children are Black or Coloured (Doubell, 2014; Mokomane, Rochat & The Directorate, 2012). Most prospective adoptive parents, however, are White (Doubell, 2014; Romanini, 2017; Tanga & Nyasha, 2017). The need for transracial adoption consequently arises because of the "mismatch of supply and demand" (Doubell, 2014:140-141).

With regards to the South African context, there has been a decline in the number of same-race adoptions. In 2010 there were 898 Black adoptive families, whereas in 2018 there were only 54 Black prospective adoptive families (Gerrand & Stevens, 2019). The notion that transracial adoption is harmful and not in "the best interest of the child", however, has gained attention locally, particularly within the Black community (Tanga & Nyasha, 2017:232). Transracial adoption or cross-racial adoption "refers to the adoption of children of one racial background by families of another racial background" (Francis, 2007:262). Same-race adoptions are preferred over transracial adoptions because of the belief that the child's heritage must be preserved (Gerrand & Stevens, 2019). One of the major concerns around adoption is that children who have been abandoned or moved to institutional or foster care exhibit significant developmental setbacks, including insecure future attachments (Baxter, 2001; Doubell, 2014). It has therefore been argued that people wanting to adopt these vulnerable children, be it into an unrelated family or an extended family, need adequate support and preparation on how to raise and support them as they develop (Bryan, Flaherty & Saunders, 2010; Roche, 2019).

Doubell (2014) commented that South African legislation pertaining to support services in South Africa is ambiguous. She added that the

Children's Act 38 of 2005 does not give any indication that post-adoption support services are a necessity. Section 250 and 251 of the Children's Act simply indicate who is allowed to provide adoption services. Due to this lack of legislative guidance, social workers and organisations therefore need to take it upon themselves to formulate comprehensive support programmes if they are to ensure the success of many of the adoptions they manage (Doubell, 2014:90).

However, because social workers and organisations have to develop and use their own types of support services, the nature and extent of these services may challenge new adoptive parents.

There has been a dialogue in the literature regarding the factors which contribute to successful adoptions. The findings from several South African studies (Doubell, 2014; Luyt & Swartz, 2021; Pieterse, 2019) showed that there was a need for adequate preparation and the establishment of realistic expectations in terms of what transracial adoption entails and, more specifically, how to deal with issues of race that may arise. Wyman Battalen, Farr, Brodzinsky and McRoy (2019) found that preparation on how to socialise adoptees for transracial adoptions and same-sex parents culturally was insufficient and varied among agencies. Breshears (2018) argued that if parents are not adequately prepared for what they should be thinking through or what they may face, this could cause anxiety and may impact on the success of the adoption. This makes the need for good quality support services essential for adoptive families to thrive.

Research done on the experiences and challenges parents face at various stages of the adoption process, including structures for pre-adoption support services, coupled with the recommendations made by parents, will give valuable insight into how adoption agencies and adoption social workers can better support prospective adoptive families throughout the adoption process in KwaZulu-Natal. Furthermore, the findings should also assist the Department of Social Development in knowing what they can do to ensure that children and families are supported for the sake of building up the nation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Globally, there is an abundance of research on adoptees (Zelege, Koester & Lock, 2018). The literature focuses particularly on exploring the experiences and issues related to inter-country adoptions (Finet *et al.*, 2020; Rebollo & González, 2019; Skandrani, Harf & Hussein, 2019; Zelege *et al.*, 2018). Brodzinsky, a renowned author in the field of adoption, has covered issues related to parents' perceptions of adoption preparation, transition to adoptive parenthood, the adjustment in the family, and contact with biological families (Brodzinsky, 1987; Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016; Brodzinsky & Huffman, 1988; Lee *et al.*, 2018; Wyman Battalen *et al.*, 2019). Although most local literature is concerned with transracial adoption (Doubell, 2014; Tanga & Nyasha, 2017), this issue is also frequently the focus in inter-country adoption studies (Lee *et al.*, 2018), which helps contribute to an understanding of the topic in the local context.

The experience of formal support

According to Dhimi, Mandel and Sothmann (2007), successful adoptive family life is ensured by receiving support before, during and after adoption. Parents' experiences of formal support appear to be varied across the literature. Formal support refers to services offered by professionals or specialists, financial aid, support from the social worker and adoption agency, training and workshops for the pre-adoption and post-placement stages, and organised support groups.

In their study of 24 foster and adoptive parents of children with Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder, Petrenko *et al.* (2019) noted that some parents were willing and eager to use any services available to support their child or family's needs. Moyer and Goldberg (2017) found that 13% of their parent participants, who received formal support to address their child's unexpected and special needs, said it helped to diminish their stress levels. On the other hand, even when support was available, access was limited and the quality of the support was

insufficient and inadequate to meet specific needs (Moyer & Goldberg, 2017; Petrenko *et al.*, 2019). These needs included adoptee-related mental, behavioural and developmental difficulties, and the finances to access professionals (Moyer & Goldberg, 2017; Petrenko *et al.*, 2019). Financial support for adoptive families is an area to consider, although it is not addressed in South Africa. Financial grants and subsidies are currently a contentious issue in South Africa, with no clarity on their future implementation. In countries where financial support was offered at different phases of the adoption process, such as in Wales, this was done on a discretionary basis and not implemented consistently (Meakings *et al.*, 2018).

The literature on adoption, both academic and non-academic, suggests that countries such as the United States of America (USA) offer much needed, good quality and a broad network of adoption services and support (Miller *et al.*, 2017). However, this is not entirely accurate, as the study conducted by the Donaldson Adoption Institute (2016) discovered. The research conducted by the Institute found that 17 states have some form of adoption programme, whereas 13 other states have none. Of the 17, each state offered its own types of services and requirements for adoption, which meant that different families received a range of different forms and quality of support. They did, however, find that “half of all the states require 27 hours of pre-adoptive training for prospective parents ... [and] 10 hours of pre-adoptive education for both Hague and non-Hague countries” in cases where adoption has taken place in inter-country adoptions (Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2016:6). The discrepancy between the requirement and reality suggests that inadequate preparation for prospective adoptive parents and families may be a shared problem in other countries. The present article may therefore contribute to a much-needed international conversation.

Support offered by the social worker and adoptive agency

All social workers within South Africa are guided by a code of ethics which “is a list of statements that describes the standards of professional conduct required of social workers when carrying out their daily activities” (South African Council for Social Service Professions [SACSSP], 2006).

When an adoption social worker interacts with prospective adoptive parents, the guiding ethical values and principles should be upheld. The role of the adoption social worker is broadly outlined in Chapter 15 of the Children’s Act 38 of 2005 (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2006), which stipulates the legal and administrative requirements and guidelines. These include determining if a child is adoptable in terms of section 230; conducting an assessment and screening of a prospective adoptive parent in terms of section 231; preparing post-adoption agreements in open adoptions in terms of section 234; preparing an adoption application on behalf of the prospective adoptive parents; and applying for an adoption order with the court in terms of sections 239 and 240 (Child Welfare Durban & District, 2021; RSA, 2006). Further guidelines for inter-country adoptions are outlined in Chapter 16 of the Children’s Act (RSA, 2006). Kausi (2014) added that the adoption social worker’s role involves determining whether a child is adoptable; working with prospective adoptive parents after recruiting and selecting them; providing the necessary information and counsel to both the birth parent and the prospective adoptive parents before consenting to and pursuing the adoption; assisting the

child(ren) and adoptive parents in the placement transition phase; and providing support services after the completion of the adoption to ensure a successful and thriving family is built.

Doubell (2014:88-89) stated that a social worker and the organisation could play a pivotal role in providing support for prospective parents and contributing “to successful transracial adoptions”. Denby, Alford and Ayala (2011), in their interviews with nine families from the USA, observed that many parents had pre-existing expectations of their social workers, including professionalism, empathy, love of their work, constant communication with parents, and explanations of the process and details of every stage. From their findings, it appeared that every parent’s relationship with their social worker was different. Some parents had positive experiences, with the social worker meeting their expectations. This helped them along the process, enhancing the success of the adoption. Conversely, other parents were dissatisfied, feeling unsupported by their social worker, which led to a lack of trust. This led to some discontinuing the adoption process. This finding was similar to that in a study conducted in the United Kingdom (UK) (Lewis, 2018). Other factors that caused parents to stop the process included issues with the adoption agency, logistics and jurisdiction (Teska, 2018). Denby *et al.* (2011:1552) concluded that both the prospective adoption parents who continued as well as those who suspended the adoption process had “similar negative and positive experiences concerning their interactions with the adoption agency, workers, and training program”.

Acting on the belief that adequate support ensures successful adoptions, one third of the social workers interviewed in a South African study mentioned that they provided pre-adoption training, which included workshops and group preparations (Doubell, 2014). Doubell (2014:163) noted a lack of “standard training or preparation programme[s] for transracially adopting parents”, therefore leaving it up to each organisation to manage itself and, even then, some did not achieve this. Doubell (2014) argued, that if parents are not adequately prepared for what they should be thinking through or what they may face, it could cause anxiety and limit the success of the adoption. In cases where pre-adoptive training was offered, social workers felt they lacked knowledge of what adoptive families need because of a lack of training at an undergraduate level (Doubell, 2014). This significantly impacted on the type of appropriate support those parents received before, during and after adoption. In addition to adequate preparation, another factor that can contribute to the success of the adoption is the participation of parents in support groups. This affords parents the opportunity to connect with other parents on a similar journey. It also provides a platform where parents can get answers to questions from those who have experienced similar challenges or setbacks (Doubell, 2014).

The importance of support groups

With challenges such as the complete absence of pre-adoption training or workshops, ill-trained social workers and support that does not cover enough of what adoptive parenting entails, most of the parents were left feeling unsupported by their adoption agency and social worker (McAndrew & Malley-Keighran, 2017; Miller *et al.*, 2017). Furthermore, prospective adoptive parents’ family members either withheld or withdrew their initial support (McAndrew & Malley-Keighran, 2017). The result was that many parents had to seek out and set up their own support networks in order to share stories, ask for advice and be reassured in their parenting (McAndrew & Malley-Keighran, 2017). Support groups, mentoring relationships and online

forums throughout the process, including post-adoption, exist and are helpful to add to the families' support network (Weistra & Luke, 2017). These peer support groups helped combat parents' feelings of isolation and their struggles throughout their adoption journey (Bergsund, Drozd, Hansen & Jacobsen, 2018; Weistra & Luke, 2017).

Bryan *et al.* (2010) conducted a study investigating participants' perceptions of a state-wide peer mentorship and support programme in the USA. These support programmes included adoptive parents being mentored by experienced adoptive parents, attending support group meetings, and contact via telephone or email (Bryan *et al.*, 2010). From their study it was evident that more post-adoption support was necessary, as prospective adoptive parents did not feel prepared for issues that affected children who had been abused or neglected, and had experienced multiple placements (Bryan *et al.*, 2010).

These support groups and sessions were places where prospective adoptive parents could connect and offer much-needed support to each other (Bergsund *et al.*, 2018; Weistra & Luke, 2017). The desire to have people available as a present and future resource to talk to about ideas and information around adoption issues was found throughout the literature (van Delft & van Delft, 2008).

Preparation for adoption

To help them prepare for the adoption process, parents mentioned accessing various resources such as workshops and conferences, and some conducted their own research on adoption independently of the adoption agency (Lee *et al.*, 2018). Many parents sourced external information and resources, such as books, online sources, joining support groups and securing counselling to help them think through their general questions, parenting questions and specific questions related to adopting and raising a child categorised as having special needs and developmental setbacks (Denby *et al.*, 2011; Meakings *et al.*, 2018; Petrenko *et al.*, 2019).

A study by Lee *et al.* (2018) that sought to explore parents' views of preparation for adoption in the USA was significant. Eight themes emerged from this study with 917 adoptive parent participants. Five themes highlighted what parents saw as helpful in the training (general information, specialist information, connection with others familiar with adoption, access to services, and parenting tools and strategies), and three themes linked to areas of dissatisfaction with the training (needing more information, difficulties with the adoption agency or worker, and a lack of support and services). Regarding the information given in the preparation, parents reported receiving general information on logistics and procedures, what to expect in the process and with the child, general parenting, and 'special needs' parenting sometimes explicitly related to their prospective child. The researchers also noticed that information and support on openness and contact with birth families was also provided. This was not the case in India, where open adoptions are uncommon, and policies and practice do not afford parents the necessary support for adoption disclosure (Mohanty, Ahn & Chokkanathan, 2017). Some parents were disappointed with the outdated and irrelevant information given in their preparation phase (Lee *et al.*, 2018). They felt the information was often basic, too general and did not focus on long-term parenting and adoption-related issues (Lee *et al.*, 2018). They felt more prepared for the worst-case scenarios but not for daily life (Denby *et al.*, 2011). Others

felt that preparation or adoption agencies focused more on the child than on the parents' emotional and psychological challenges. Some parents felt that information and support for same-sex couples and their families, and transracial families were lacking (Lee *et al.*, 2018). A few parents were not always aware of available and appropriate access to specialised services to deal with anticipated behavioural and emotional challenges (Denby *et al.*, 2011).

In training sessions held in the UK in group format the parents had positive experiences, even though they felt the preparation was material-heavy and emotionally draining (Dance & Farmer, 2014). The parents appreciated hearing from other adoptive parents about the realities of the preparation process and the subsequent adoption phases. They also found it beneficial to have others on the same journey for moral support and friendship, which arose from being together in the group preparation meetings (Dance & Farmer, 2014). According to Lee *et al.* (2018), many parents reported that hearing information from other adoptive families and adoptees was helpful. Spending time with others and going through the adoption stages together was also beneficial. South African authors Gerrand and Stevens (2019:45-46, 51) stated that "most of the adoptive participants and social workers highlighted the benefits of attending adoption orientation in groups" as journeying with others offered encouragement and emotional support and combated feelings of isolation.

There were similar experiences shared between parents preparing for domestic adoption and those for inter-country adoption. Prospective adoptive parents applying for inter-country adoption had mandatory pre-adoptive counselling and assessments (Hague Conference on Private International Law, 2008). In one training programme presented in Norway, an advantage of the training was that it provided them with a chance to meet and connect with other prospective adoptive families, which for some turned into long-term friendships and support networks. The parents benefited from trainers or facilitators familiar with adoption (Bergsund *et al.*, 2018). However, as revealed in the studies discussed above, several disadvantages of the training were also mentioned. These included that the size of the group was too big; there was a long waiting period between the training and the placement or adoption; sometimes information was either outdated or missing, especially regarding practicalities and logistics; there were no links to additional support for both post-placement and post-adoption follow-ups; and some felt that the content was too heavily focused on worst-case scenarios and adoption problems (Bergsund *et al.*, 2018). Although these disadvantages led some to feel uncomfortable and scared to enter the adoption process, certain aspects were beneficial to others (Bergsund *et al.*, 2018).

Informal support

Depending on their familiarity with the topic of adoption, family and friends varied in their responses upon hearing a person's decision to adopt. In van Delft and van Delft's (2008) study, most of the parents' family and friends knew of their decision to adopt and had a positive attitude towards the decision, with only a few couples receiving negative feedback. Nevertheless, other family and friends did not clearly express their feelings, which left parents uncertain about how they really felt about their decision. Parents who experienced a lack of support from their family and friends about their desire to adopt often experienced increased anxiety and resentment towards them (Brodzinsky, 1987; Miller, Montclos & Sorge, 2016).

Friends were described as “generally supportive but lack adequate understanding” (Firmin *et al.*, 2017:61), leading parents to seek out other adoptive families to add to their support network (Weistra & Luke, 2017). For adoptive families, whose extended family were far away, friends and the church community offered the most support (Weistra & Luke, 2017).

Denby *et al.* (2011:1548) found that, during the “waiting and wondering” part of the process, most of their nine participants had the emotional support of their extended family and friends. This waiting period included waiting to be matched with and meet a prospective adoptee as well as waiting for the adoption to be finalised. The parents also stated that the support of family and friends during the difficult times encouraged them to continue with the adoption process (Denby *et al.*, 2011). This support was only mentioned and not researched in detail, but it speaks to the importance placed on it by the parents.

Parents who intentionally sought “support from families with similar experiences” (Petrenko *et al.*, 2019:12) did so to strengthen their family unit. Particularly in cases with families of children with special needs, this support helped them to cope. Despite the large number of parents reporting the benefit of connecting with other adoptive parents during formal training and support groups, South African parents in van Delft and van Delft’s (2008:342) study said they did not feel a need for contact with other adoptive families, and for those who did have contact, it was not intentional. The reason given for not pursuing contact with other adoptive families was that parents did not want to be continuously reminded of their adoptive status. However, they did say that if they needed that support, they would reach out to the social worker and ask for other families’ contact information. In summary, “social support is an important protective factor” for prospective adoptive parents during the adoption journey, especially during the transition to parenthood (Weistra & Luke, 2017:230).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research approach

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe adoptive families’ experiences of formal and informal support during the pre-adoption phase. A qualitative research approach with an exploratory descriptive design was used to guide this study.

Research population and sampling

Participants formed part of the Durban Adoptive Families groups on social media (Facebook and WhatsApp groups) and resided in the eThekweni region. The participants included single, married and cohabiting parents, same-sex and heterosexual couples, and White and Indian parents. All but one of their adoptions were transracial. Those excluded from participating were parents who adopted before 2014.

Gatekeeper permission was obtained from the Durban Adoptive Families social media group administrators to access participants from their network. Non-probability methods, namely purposive and snowballing sampling, were used to recruit the study’s participants until saturation was reached. A message was posted on the group’s network inviting parents to participate. Those who expressed interest and were interviewed were used to identify other participants. At the onset of the interview process, participants were given a letter of

information, the interview schedule and the letter of consent to read and sign before the interview.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted both in person and through video conferencing using an interview schedule as a guide to collect data. Interviews lasted between one and two hours. The research objectives and questions were used to develop the interview questions.

Prior to the interview, contact was made with each participant and a brief description of the research study was provided. Those who volunteered to participate received a letter of information which included the aim and objectives of the study. It provided details of the interview process, issues of confidentiality, and explained that participants could withdraw from the study at any time without repercussions.

The interview schedule began with questions about their family life. The questions focused on their experiences, emotions, fears and anxieties through the different stages of adoption. The schedule began with questions around their contact with an organisation to begin the adoption process, leading to questions around meeting the child and then questions related to life as new parent(s) living with the child while waiting for the adoption to be legalised. Other questions focused on exploring their experience of the orientation and pre-adoption services, their experience of support from formal and informal sources, and recommendations related to improving the adoption process.

Participants were asked to sign a consent form which provided permission for the interviews to be recorded. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the researcher used thematic analysis to systematically analyse and interpret the data and develop themes (Braun & Clark, 2006; Lapadat, 2012).

Ethical clearance and consideration

The study followed the ethical guidelines stipulated by the Durban University of Technology. Ethical clearance was obtained on 5 October 2020 from the Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC number: 093/20). These included informed consent, voluntary participation, ensuring no harm would come to the participant, anonymity and confidentiality, and safekeeping of data collected.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants who were recruited were from one adoption support group, namely Durban Adoptive Families. There could be many other adoptive families who were not part of this group. The limitation, therefore, is that there may be additional challenges or support needs that may have been excluded.
- The type of adoption was limited to only stranger/unrelated adoptions. There were no participants who had a biological, family or step-parent types of adoption. This limits the findings because there may be unique challenges inherent in other types of adoption that have not been explored.

- Most of the adoptions (15 out of 16) were transracial, where the adoptee was a Black child. There were no adoptees of another race group except the one same-race adoption of a White child. Even though the support throughout the administration process of the adoption may have been similar, the emotional and social support needed for the complexities of raising a Black child in a White or Indian family was different. The difference cannot be fully appreciated as the percentage of varying race parents was unbalanced.

FINDINGS

Theme 1: Experiences of formal support from the social worker

Some of the participants experienced the social worker as being very supportive. They found the social worker to be accessible and competent which helped ease their anxieties about the process. They said:

She [social worker] had time to answer any question ... so it was really easy with her ... so I was very grateful for her being on top of everything.

She kept in contact ... I probably was a pain and phoned her a lot, but ... she was good [supportive].

Social workers who were able to spend time preparing participants for parenthood helped make the transition to parenthood less stressful for prospective adoptive parents. Henwood (2016) said that those who felt supported by the social worker gave the parents confidence to face the challenges that come with adoption.

Participants who felt supported by the social worker said that it was because they kept in contact with the participants and communicated what was going on. This support was valued and appreciated by the participants who received it.

Parents in the UK expressed that they had experienced good communication, respect, honesty, kindness and non-judgemental attitudes from social workers (Gupta & Featherstone, 2020). An American study found that parents who received the much-needed tools and skills during the pre-adoption preparation period found these very helpful (Lee *et al.*, 2018).

Theme 2: Pre-adoption induction and preparedness

When starting the adoption process, the participants who attended orientation sessions with the social worker or adoption organisation found them very beneficial. According to Gerrand and Stevens (2019), the orientation or induction part of the adoption process involved approaching an adoption organisation which then informed the participants, either in a group setting or individually, about the adoption process and assessment. Their study noticed that prospective adoptive parents who attended reported that group orientations helped foster the much-needed support. This was echoed by the participants in the current study. Even though the parents in the study conducted by Gerrand and Stevens (2019) were Black South African prospective adoptive parents, the findings from international studies (Lee *et al.*, 2018; Sampaio, Magalhães & Machado, 2020) revealed that group orientation provides support regardless of the participants' race. The parents felt that the group orientation was a helpful bonding experience,

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one that provided comfort and reassurance as well as encouragement and hope. This helped lessen the parents' feelings of loneliness and uncertainty throughout the process (Gerrand & Stevens, 2019). Bergsund *et al.* (2018) concluded that support groups foster relationships which can be developed and sustained throughout the adoption process and long into the future when post-adoption challenges arise.

Once the participants had been informed of the adoption process and assessment, and wished to proceed with it, they were assigned a social worker to begin the screening process. Some of these roles are captured in the excerpts that follow:

She was counselling and telling us what to watch out for ... We had a very good social worker ... [She gave] very practical advice about 'telling' [the child their story] ... child-rearing advice ... and discipline.

The parent participants in the study conducted by Gerrand and Stevens (2019) stressed that the experience of the adoption process was significantly impacted on by the quality of the relationship between the prospective adoptive parents and the social worker handling their case. Some participants had negative experiences with their social worker:

I think that's the only thing, is just the person that's dealing with us at the moment and the lack of communication or lack of urgency is what's making it so horrific.

Some participants felt that their social worker did not communicate empathically. Gerrand and Stevens (2019) were concerned about the capability of the social workers, especially those who did not specialise in adoptions, in facilitating the adoption assessment and process. When there are tensions between social workers' personal views and beliefs on adoption versus the ethical and legal claims, the assessment of prospective adoptive parents can be negatively impacted, causing additional stress (Gerrand & Stevens, 2019). This was also true for the participants in the current study.

Many prospective adoptive parents felt that professionals involved in the adoption assessment phase (social workers, medical practitioners, psychologists) were unprofessional, disrespectful and disregarded the parents' feelings and state of vulnerability in the process and throughout the various tests (Gerrand & Stevens, 2019; Rogers, 2018). Parents felt especially concerned and anxious when the social worker involved with their case either did not specialise in adoption or did not agree with unrelated or stranger adoptions, these often being transracial adoptions in South Africa (Doubell, 2014; Gerrand & Stevens, 2019; Tanga & Nyasha, 2017).

Theme 3: Importance of support from a social worker

Certain social workers were seen as unsupportive and lacking in empathy. The participants felt frustrated that their social workers could not answer their questions. They also experienced periods of silence, with no feedback being provided on the progress of their application. Other participants felt that, even when social workers did keep in contact, the information given was inadequate, or that explanations of what to expect during this new process and what was happening were not forthcoming. This was similarly established in Gupta and Featherstone's (2020) UK study, where adoptive parents reported a lack of honest communication and information from the social worker.

It would've been nice if she was more supportive ... [with our] anxiety and confusion and just been more clear about everything before we adopted him and then throughout the process, just helped us by understanding that we're new parents.

Rochat, Mokomane, Mitchell and The Directorate (2016) reiterate that the participants who experienced their social workers as unempathetic, unavailable and as lacking competence found them to be problematic. Social workers should bear in mind that:

As the adoption process involves a number of stages that have to be adequately dealt with before the successful adoption of a child can take place, the process can be physically and emotionally taxing for prospective parents (Romanini, 2017:16).

The parents experienced a lack of communication from the social workers and felt that they were always too busy; this made the parents feel as though they were a burden (Lee *et al.*, 2018). Poor communication by social workers in general and related administrative and procedural errors consequently heightened the levels of frustration and anxiety for the parents (Meakings *et al.*, 2018). Administrative and procedural errors can include delays, or lead to lost paperwork and paperwork not being filled out by social workers and court officials (Anthony, Paine & Shelton, 2019; Meakings *et al.*, 2018). These problems occurred both before the application for the adoption order had been submitted and even after submission, causing adoption hearings to be delayed (Meakings *et al.*, 2018). Parents commented that these delays made them feel emotionally exhausted (Meakings *et al.*, 2018).

Some participants in the current study expressed empathy toward the social workers, saying that because there are too few social workers available, they cannot cope with the extensive amount of work required of them. This view was supported by South African researchers, such as Mokomane *et al.* (2012:355), who stated that “[as] a consequence of this chronic understaffing, the adoption process in South Africa is notoriously viewed, by both service providers and adoptive parents, as ‘long’, ‘painful’ and ‘complicated’”. The lack of social workers, especially those qualified or specialised in adoptions, means that the few competent ones have heavy caseloads. As a result, they spend most of their time completing administrative tasks and less time providing adequate services in their specialised field (Rochat *et al.*, 2016). Consequently, they are unable to support prospective adoptive parents and prospective adoptees in their adoption journey.

A few participants also indicated that they expected the social worker to guide them as they transitioned into parenthood. However, they did not receive the desired support. In contrast, the social workers in Kausi's (2014) study, which was conducted in East London, reported having assisted adoptive parents and adoptees in placement transitions and offered post-adoption support, as they believed this was especially necessary when the adoptions were transracial. Participants in the current study would have benefitted greatly from such support.

Several participants had to interact with more than one social worker. The first one was the social worker who facilitated the participants' screening and application. Participants were then handed over to the second social worker after being matched with a prospective adoptee. This second social worker was primarily responsible for facilitating and completing the child's profile, including facilitating the finalisation of the adoption. In cases where participants were

dealing with two social workers, some parents expressed negative interactions with the second social worker. This is reflected in the following excerpt:

I think it was the once finding out [being matched with prospective adoptee] and then having to deal with her lady [child's social worker, that it got challenging] ...[it] just made me feel like she [child's social worker] could have made the process faster.

Featherstone, Gupta and Mills (2018) also found that in the UK different social workers get assigned to birth and adoptive families at specific stages during the adoption process. Multiple social workers involved in different parts of the process meant that the process was fragmented and led social workers to take sides, depending on whether the client was the child or the prospective adoptive parent, which led to disparities when they were matched and needed to be considered as one client. Participants who had built a relationship with the social worker who had done their screening felt it challenging to engage later with the social worker handling the child's case. Having not worked with the prospective adoptive parents, this social worker would not have known how to assist and support the participants with the child they were matched with.

Theme 4: Experiences of informal support from family and friends

Most of the participants received the much-needed support from their family and friends. They said:

I'd immediately spoken to my parents who said, yes, you must [adopt the child] ... I checked because I realised that I'd need the support of the whole family ... especially as this is ... cross-racial ... I'd also imagined that I would not be alone ... I hadn't ever intended to adopt on my own ... I really felt that I needed the support of a partner.

Many expressed receiving a significant amount of support from their family, especially their parents. This was also noticed among adoptive mothers in a study conducted by Behari-Ram (2016). In the UK social workers advised parents to avoid contact with extended family and friends during the child's initial placement (Lewis, 2018; Meakings *et al.*, 2018). Meakings *et al.* (2018) suggested that the social workers' reasons for this were to encourage healthy attachment and promote the development of family cohesion in the initial stages. However, the parents felt that this period necessitated support from their family and friends. Some parents said they ignored or disregarded the social worker's advice as they had a deep need for support from those closest to them during this stressful time, as many recounted emerging post-placement depression (Lee *et al.*, 2018; Lewis, 2018; Meakings *et al.*, 2018).

Not only was there a need for support with a new child in the family, but one of the only other pre-adoptive stressors for parents, concerning the child, was that of transracial adoption. At the onset of the process, the parents who knew that they would be adopting a child of a different race or culture had a growing concern for their child's potential encounters with society regarding their different race as they grow older and understand contextual race issues (Breshears, 2018).

Some participants experienced family and friends disconnecting from them because of their choice to adopt. A few participants expected their family to be supportive, yet were met with

negative attitudes. Shelton (2018:110) also found that “extended family support experiences ranged from high levels of connection and dedication to separation from extended family as a result of difficult interactions related to the adoption or adoption process”.

The main obstacle was with our extended family, so they had lots of reservations around the adoption and specifically cross-cultural adoption ... a lot of their racial prejudice was surfacing ... it actually turned out to be a bigger issue than we expected, especially with my husband's father ... it didn't deter us at all, we did expect difficulty with our family.

Some participants’ informal support networks, specifically family members, were hesitant and opposed the adoption, especially when it came to adopting a child of a different race. Jackson (2018) also found that even though parents sought approval and support from family, they would have continued pursuing the adoption even if they did not gain that approval. However, they did report the importance of support from close relatives.

There is evidence that the family members who were initially hesitant had a change of heart once they met the prospective adoptee and willingly accepted the child as a legitimate family member. This was confirmed in Jackson's (2018) study conducted in the Western Cape, where she observed that most of the participants’ family members took a while to get used to the idea of transracial adoption, but once they had adjusted to the idea, they were very supportive of the adoption. The legacy of apartheid, which had “legalised a hierarchy of apparently distinct races in South Africa by formally and systematically segregating people from one another”, contributed to racism and racial segregation becoming the norm (Luyt & Swartz, 2021:7). Family members who lived through the apartheid era and who still had entrenched views of race were undeniably hesitant about the adoption. Jackson (2018:106) added that what accounted for the hesitancy of parents’ family members was that they were confronted with and forced to alter their views and ways of thinking about race and transracial adoption.

Theme 5: Support from the adoption community

This sub-theme was concerned with the participants’ experiences of support from various people within the adoption community. The participants felt supported by attending adoption information workshops, where they heard stories from people who had already adopted, as well as from adoptees. This is reflected in the following excerpt:

I went to adoption-101 [workshop] ... you listen to people talk, parents, or like a single mom talk or a transracial family talk or a family adopted an older child ... it was very nice from all aspects.

The participants found that talking to other adoptive parents was helpful, since friends, who had not adopted did not have the same understanding of and empathy in relation to their challenges, and therefore did not know how to support them. Overall, the participants felt the need for ‘specialised’ support in their adoptive parenting as well as support in dealing with adoption-related issues which could arise. Jackson (2018) similarly argued that some parents also desired the opportunity to meet and interact with other adoptive parents. This was confirmed in Shelton’s (2018) study, where parents indicated the importance of building

relationships with those who are going through the process and those who have been through similar adoption or foster experiences. There is a sense of relief when parents who have shared experiences are connected with one another (Shelton, 2018).

A further support structure in the adoption setting was that of informal support groups.

I think that's why we [are] so grateful for this Durban adoption group because that's where we've gotten most of our support from ... We realise that these people all have the same issues that we have, which was awesome.

Many of the participants realised that being part of an adoption support group on social media was very helpful in supporting them through the adoption process and adoptive parenting. Shelton (2018) established that even when parents did not regularly engage with social media support groups, seeing the various interactions allowed them to feel connected with others and thus the participants felt liberated that they were not alone in their challenges and experiences.

Doubell (2014:178) commented that:

[attending] such groups will provide the adoptive parents with a platform to network with other parents who have adopted transracially, to ask questions related to transracial adoption, and to allow their child to meet other children who have also been transracially adopted.

This was also evidenced in the current study, as those who were part of support groups felt the benefit of the support throughout their process and parenting. In hearing from adoptees, Featherstone *et al.* (2018:26) established that “[t]he provision of safe spaces, such as support groups, where adopted people could explore their emotions, and have these validated, was considered very important”.

CONCLUSION

Support plays an important role in reducing anxiety for prospective adoptive parents. This support could come from both formal and informal networks. The main source of formal support mentioned was that of the social worker and the pre-adoptive preparation during the process. The informal support network included assistance from family, friends and the adoption community, including support groups.

This study reflected on the myriad of experiences related to the support received during the adoption process. In addition to documenting the salience of the need for support from the social worker, the need for inductions as well as support from family, friends and the adoption community was also discussed. Even though many participants felt unprepared, support from these sources eased their journey towards adoption.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the insights of this study, the following recommendations are made for further research:

- The nature of the support services offered by social workers employed by the state as opposed to those in private practice should be explored further to shed light on the quality and scope of support services offered within both these sectors;
- A comparison of the experiences of same-race and transracial adoptive families with a view to understanding what support is necessary to meet their respective challenges is needed;
- An exploration of the experiences of adoptees – both during their adoption process as well as their transition into their new family – will provide insight into how they and their adoptive parents need to be supported.

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