Intercountry Adoption: The Need for a Comprehensive and Holistic Approach

A review of

Intercountry Adoption: Policies, Practices, and Outcomes

by Judith L. Gibbons and Karen Smith Rotabi (Eds.)


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Intercountry Adoption: Policies, Practices, and Outcomes edited by Judith Gibbons and Karen Smith Rotabi is part of the Contemporary Social Work Studies series. This is a timely and relevant volume, not only for social workers but also for a range of other adoption professionals and scholars, including psychologists and other mental health professionals. Issues covered include race and culture, adoption policy, fraud and illicit practices, international child welfare, medical and psychosocial outcomes, and pragmatic recommendations for improving the adoption process.

As this compilation illustrates, international adoption is an exceedingly complex process, and in our clinical practice we have noticed an increased need for comprehensive...
services for both adoptive families and adopted children. This volume’s content mirrors the type of collaboration now required between professionals and scholars holding doctoral, medical, social work, and law degrees and brings intercountry adoption into focus for professionals in the social work arena with its insightful and critical thought by some of the field’s most talented minds.

This book would be especially useful for social workers working directly with adopted children and families. The range of topics covered—from policy and regulations to the different perspectives of “sending countries”—is exceedingly helpful to remind the practitioner that international adoption is not standardized. We particularly like how this volume covers the differences from diverse countries of origin, including “rural” China, Ethiopia, and South Africa.

In addition, students new to intercountry adoption will be well served by the section about the medically relevant outcomes of adoption (see chapters by Miller and by Juffer and van IJzendoorn). Miller’s chapter in particular touches on several of the points laid out in the recent article “Comprehensive Health Evaluation of the Newly Adopted Child” (Jones & Committee on Early Childhood, Adoption, and Dependent Care, 2012) in the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics. This is an area in which little research has been done, and few medical providers have the training or experience of adoption-focused medicine.

Furthermore, many of the issues that are relevant in a medical context, such as fetal substance exposure, uncertain chronological age, orphanage-related developmental delays, and HIV exposure, have implications for mental health in educational success later in life. This is one reason why all providers who serve adoption families—including psychologists, social workers, and legal and medical personnel—must collaborate to provide comprehensive and holistic care for these children and families.

One strength of the collection is that it covers the areas of policy, globalization, and outcomes, allowing the reader to examine the ways in which these issues are tightly interrelated and affect one another. Adoption practice can be improved only if adoption lawyers read beyond the section on policy, if psychologists and social workers consider sending country perspectives, and if medical professionals understand the legal and social implications of the adoption process. This collection brings these vast areas of expertise together and is a step in the right direction toward the creation of holistic intercountry adoptive care that operates from a biopsychosocial perspective, taking into account adoption policy, international relations, and postadoption outcomes with a view to continually improving the process of intercountry adoption.

Part of what makes this volume unique is Part IV, a debate on international adoption between Elizabeth Bartholet and David Smolin, two law professors specializing in adoption. Bartholet and Smolin negotiate the tense ethical paradox of improving adoption: Long-term goals would include targeting the conditions that lead to orphaned children in the first place (a focus on family preservation), an effort that would greatly reduce the need for adoption. One can easily begin to imagine how this debate could be extended to adoption
professionals—mental health specialists, social workers, and health care professionals, for example—and the interesting changes such discussions would provoke.

One area missing from this volume concerns the effect of traumatic experiences often seen in international adoption as a result of risk factors such as prolonged institutional care, substandard prenatal care, and possible exposure to abuse and neglect as unprotected orphans. What are the early adverse brain experiences of these children, many of whom spend years in substandard institutional care or don’t have parents to protect them? What implications do these risk factors have for the postadoption growth and development of these children? An overview of current brain development and neurological research on this population would provide a valuable addition to the chapters in this volume.

Despite this limitation, this collection is an excellent start to a collaborative focus on intercountry adoption. An experienced or new student to the world of intercountry adoption will be reminded or introduced to the complexity and diverse range of issues facing practitioners and families in intercountry adoption.

This volume provides a variety of perspectives and understandings for working with international adoptive families and children. As it shows, intercountry adoption presents a broad spectrum of issues: Professional and scholarly interest and collaboration must not stop here. Further research and collaboration are needed to expand our knowledge of the different facets of adoption and ultimately to help us provide more holistic services to these families.

Reference