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## **Chapter 2: Intercountry Adoption in Australia: A Natural Evolution or Purposeful Actions**

### **Introduction**

Intercountry adoption (ICA) emerged in Australia as an institutional practice in the 1970s and since that time has been the focus of controversy with diverse and sometimes opposing viewpoints that seek dominance in the public arena. Yet there is little Australian research that helps understand these controversial power struggles in ICA or how to resolve them. This chapter presents some findings from a larger work that addresses gaps in knowledge regarding the broader political, social and economic context in which ICA occurs (Fronek 2009). The approach taken explores South Korea ICA to Australia, specifically Queensland, using an Actor Network Theory framework (Callon 1986; Latour 1987) to guide analysis. I propose that ICA is not a passive or naturally occurring event, rather one that exists as the result of the purposeful actions of particular networks connected across the globe.

ICA is a complex, multilayered and multifocal phenomenon that is not well understood. There are gaps in knowledge relating to the multifaceted and controversial nature of the phenomenon and limited theorizing around current policy and practice. Some voices in the contemporary national adoption debate in Australia appear to have more influence than others. These voices dominate the report *overseas Adoption in Australia* conducted by the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Family and Human Services (HRSCFHS) in 2005. A bias towards perspectives that view ICA as a wholly positive solution to the needs of prospective parents and those of children living in orphanages emerged in the public hearing proceedings of the Inquiry. Partial

understandings, that represent only one perspective, risk politically-driven, rather than evidence-based approaches to policy formation.

The research literature on ICA provides selected understandings from a number of perspectives. These can be broadly categorized into three bodies of work: A focus on psychological and psychosocial adjustment of parents and children, socio-cultural works concerned with society and culture; and the literature concerned with the political, legal and demographic aspects of ICA (Alstein and Simon, 1991; Freundlich and Lieberthal 1999; Hollingsworth and Ruffin 2002; Hubinette 2005; Joe, 1978; Kim, Shin and Carey 1999; Sarri, Baik and Bombyk 1998; Selman 2000, 2006; Triseliotis, Shireman and Hundleby 1997; Volman 2005). Though providing particular insights, ICA research does not provide an overarching multilayered understanding of the phenomenon, which takes account of local and global influences that enable various actors to pursue their particular interests. For example, few studies provide insights into how particular countries open and close as sending countries of children for adoption. Many that rely on one dimensional explanations of ICA such as supply and demand fail to include the actions of actors operating in particular contexts that enable the practice between particular countries. One study conducted by Choy (2007) identified a complex network of social service and independent organizations in Korea and the United States that enables the phenomenon between countries. Likewise, Masson (2001) identified a flow of ideas concerning the practice of adoption between Europe, the United States, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Australia. These suggest that particular actions and the global flow of information are important to contemporary adoption practice.

### **A framework for understanding**

In order to provide a framework for understanding ICA as a multi-layered phenomenon, I employ some key concepts and terminology from Actor Network Theory (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987, 1988) to guide my discussion. It is proposed that Korean ICA did not just evolve; rather, it is the result of the purposeful actions of an influential network. This network is called *proponent* to reflect its goals and functions. It acts to weaken alternative networks and its

discourse dominates contemporary debate in Australia. The *proponent* network is a complex structure of connected actors operating within and outside Australia. It emerged in the 1970s with the common goal of enabling ICA, first from Vietnam then Korea. Such networks tend to multiply along no compulsory path and often emerge in unexpected places despite perceived barriers (Deleuze & Guattari, 1981). Networks engaged in ICA are understood by exploring what is happening underneath, in and around traditional structures using ideas of power-as-performance rather than drawing on established definitions of institutions, states and nations. Controversy surrounding ICA in Australia tends to be described as that which exists between prospective and adoptive parents and Australian and State governments who hold traditional positions of power. My analysis shifts conceptualisations from those that position groups in the debate according to their roles as ‘adoptive parent’, ‘government’, ‘adoptee’, and ‘birth parent’ to networks that are defined by their discourse, the goals they hope to meet, and the actions taken to achieve them. The *proponent* network, as one example, stretches across and through these commonly accepted groups. *Proponent* actors can be found in the ranks of adoptive and prospective parents, governments, adoptees and birth parents. This does not imply, however, that all individual actors in the *proponent* network share the same views in entirety, rather individual perspectives are subsumed during translation, an important concept in Actor Network Theory. Network spokespersons spread particular discourse on behalf of the network regardless of individual variance of some opinions.

A network must grow, become durable, and have the capacity to attract new and influential actors if it is to meet particular goals. Actors achieve this by seeking to enrol new actors into the network. As actors weave together and strengthen as individual threads do through the weaving process, so too does their influence and capacity to meet their goals. Actors align their interests, cement their connections and weave together in a process called translation. ‘Translations are the methods by which an actor enrolls others’ (Callon, Law, & Rip, 1986, p. xvii). It is the process of translation where power struggles are enacted and truths are constructed. A new actor adopts the discourse in its

entirety or the discourse is slightly altered in the process of translation. As a result of these power struggles actors, for a while, travel the same path to achieve particular goals and a particular idea, discourse or practice is adopted and spread. When attempts at translation are rejected by actors, controversy is highlighted and perspectives are polarised.

The phenomenon of ICA, understood in an Actor Network context (Brey, 1997), has no aims or predetermined properties. Aims are imposed on it depending on the interpretation of those engaged in some aspect of it (Brey, 1997). In this way, opposing viewpoints and arenas of controversy, each appearing equally valid can emerge. It is therefore open to interpretation by those with particular interests and facts are constructed by the relevant actor networks rather than by any inherent properties located within the phenomenon. In this way opposing viewpoints and arenas of controversy, each appearing equally valid can emerge. For example, ICA can be perceived as a phenomenon that serves the interests of children, one that weakens the social and family structures of a particular country, or one that serves the interests of childless couples in the west. These discourses in seeming contradiction do not originate from properties inherent within the phenomenon rather they are constructed informed from particular positions. The most powerful networks are those whose discourse dominates over others. Understanding how actors build strong and durable networks by attracting new and influential actors has the potential to develop more comprehensive understandings of more than thirty years of Korean ICA into Australia.

ICA has flourished in a global context utilising advancement in technologies to the fullest extent. Non human actors are as necessary as human actors in networks that influenced the emergence and longevity of Korean ICA to Australia. The presence of the internet and the media in networks allows discourse to be spread more rapidly to others whom networks hope to attract. These non human actors ensure the replication of tactics used in translation and are essential to the longevity and influence of networks. ICA is not a stagnant entity. Actor Network Theory allows for the study of such complexity. It

provides a theoretical framework that captures the changing nature of influences over time and at particular points in time, and permits the exploration of alternative solutions not embedded within the controversy itself.

### **The diffusion of Korean intercountry adoption to Queensland**

The first Korean child was adopted into Australia in 1969 (Hubinette, 2005) while Korean adoption as an institutional practice diffused to Australia in the 1970s and to Queensland in 1983. Korean children represented 206 of the 297 children adopted into Australia between July 1975 and January 1986, 32 in Queensland. It diffused at a time when Korea was espousing plans to cease its ICA program by 1981 in response to international criticism (Hubinette, 2005). Despite international and Korean opposition to the practice of ICA and the promotion of Korean domestic adoption as an alternative, Korean ICA continued to increase reaching a peak in the 1980s. In the same period, Australia abolished the White Australia Policy; embraced multiculturalism at a policy level; saw medical innovations such as the contraceptive pill; introduced welfare reforms such as income support for single mothers; and saw the subsequent decline in the number of Australian children available for adoption (ABS, 2001; De Vaus, 2002; Jupp, 1995; Lopez, 2000). These local Australian conditions created a climate not simply characterised by passive acceptance of the adoption of children from overseas but rather one that created opportunities for *proponent* actors to demand it.

My research reveals that networks began forming in these early days. The *proponent* network, a network that promotes ICA as wholly positive, emerged and continued as one efficient in spreading its discourse. Intensive activity that sought to meet the goal of international child adoption ran parallel to the dramatic decline in the availability of local children. During the diffusion period, *proponent* discourse through the transforming process of translation aligned actor interests and merged three *proponent* views (economic, self-interested and humanitarian) evident in the data into one altruistic view, altered through the translation process. It is the resultant altruistic view promoted by network spokespersons which has dominated *proponent* network discourse and

media representations since the 1970s (Larkin, 1999; West, 1991). Tensions existed between the *proponent* network, those who opposed it (*opponent* network) and those with less polarised views (*nonpartisan* network) evident in newspaper articles, minutes of meetings between the state governments and representatives of parent support groups, memorandums and other Queensland Department of Children's Services records.

Contemporary controversies are grounded in these early struggles where the dominant discourse of the altruistic rescue of children held popular appeal. Tactics were used to exclude alternate discourse that presented a more complex picture of ICA. One such tactic that began in the diffusion period sought to discredit alternate discourse as 'anti adoption' and is documented in early *proponent* statements and, more recently, is evident in public hearings and submissions to the *Overseas Adoption in Australia* inquiry (HRSCFH 2005). These tactics continue to be used strategically at present and may even be directed against those adults adopted internationally as children who have, in some cases raised concerns about ICA.

The focus of *proponents* shifted from Vietnamese children - the first large group of children to arrive in Australia - to Korea in the mid to late 1970s when Vietnam ceased adoption of its children to Australia in 1975. Adoption of Vietnamese children was characterised by westerners adopting from orphanages where many children were placed only temporarily and culminated in the well publicized Operation Babylift in 1975 when children were airlifted out of Saigon as the city fell (Cook, 1988 /89). Operation Babylift has been criticised as an ill considered and knee jerk response fuelled by heart rendering media images with little attempt at determining orphan status or facilitating family reunion (Zigler, 1976). It is not the removal of children from danger that is problematic, rather the subsequent adoption of children without attempts at confirming orphan status or family reunions prior to the instigation of adoption processes. Harvey (1983) reported a dramatic increase in inquiries regarding the adoption of Vietnamese children once the evacuation became known, counting 4,000 telephone applications in New South Wales alone. When adoptions from

Vietnam to Australia ceased in 1975, the discourse of child rescue from war altered. Discourse shifted the focus on rescue from war to the rescue from cultural rejection and institutionalization which would otherwise await children born to unmarried mothers.

At its onset, Australia had no legislative or policy framework regarding ICA that could safeguard the interests of all parties involved. The first people to adopt children from overseas were parents who negotiated adoptions outside these frameworks without the involvement of government authorities (Calder, 1979). The first parent support groups were formed in the 1970s as a tactic of *proponents* with the purpose of enabling and promoting ICA as a practice in Australia (Calder, 1979). Those that formed them were *proponent* actors so, in fact, they began as *proponent* organisations with specific goals and beliefs relating to the diffusion of the phenomenon. This explains the predominance of many parent groups found in the *proponent* network. Other groups involved in ICA, in contrast, did not begin with specific goals to promote or inhibit ICA. In contrast, adult adoptee groups in Australia, for example, were formed primarily to provide emotional and cultural support for adoptees. It is therefore more difficult for these groups to be identified as actors aligned with a particular network as the group goal is not linked to a specific network goal. Individual group members, however, are found to be aligned across networks.

The actions of *proponents* that assisted prospective parents to negotiate adoptions outside legislative and policy frameworks created pressure on governments to respond. The Department of Foreign Affairs expressed concerns about the potential and actual abuse inherent in these practices (Bowers, 1983; Calder, 1979; Joint Committee on ICA, 1986 September). This polarisation between *proponents* and governments, despite claims that each were acting in the best interest of the child was intense, immediate and highly emotive as documented in the Department of Child Safety records. The *proponent* network, in order to meet their goals, enrolled new and powerful actors such as government officials, the media and politicians to promote the humanitarian rescue of children. Many actors in government departments

became enrolled *proponents*, at least for a period of time, in the diffusion period, consistent with the actions of Masson's (2001) *pragmatists*.

*Opponent* discourse, however, was evident in the 1970s and did not support ICA under any circumstances. These voices were weak and unsuccessful in attracting new and powerful actors to support their goals and failed to develop into networks of influence. Two *opponent* discourses are identified in media representations and government records. The first, evident in the 1970s, were racist, violent and unpalatable such as those expressed by the Australian Nazi Party directly to Australian politicians and the Korean government contributing to strained diplomatic relations and in the media (Sunday Sun, 1977). This network bears no relationship with other *opponent* views identified and very different to the *opponent* network that operates in the 2000s. The second, emerging later, represented the views of some Australian mothers whose children were removed from their care due to social stigma and lack of income support. These mothers expressed concern that this would reflect the practices in other countries and affect other disempowered mothers. Their voices, however, emerged retrospectively when they too began to form support groups. As with adult adoptees, these groups, however, were not formed with goals relating to inhibiting ICA and therefore cannot be called *opponents*, rather some individuals within them held *opponent* views. Their voices continue to exert little influence.

*Proponent* voices inclusive of many parent groups, some politicians and the media, however, dominated and their actions enabled the establishment of adoption programs between Korea and Australian states. This network was made up of connected actors, individuals such as politicians and organisations in Korea and Australia, taking systematic and purposeful action to meet the common goal of child adoption. *Proponent* spokespersons spoke on behalf of those who could not speak for themselves, that is, birth mothers and families and the children to be adopted. The needs of children to be adopted and adoptive parents became indistinguishable in this discourse.

The first children arrived under a formal program to New South Wales in 1977, the result of purposeful *proponent* actions and a range of enabling conditions. Other states followed with Queensland commencing a program in 1983, thirty years after the commencement of the international adoption of Korean children during the Korean War. A formal bilateral agreement between the Australian and Korean governments has never been signed, rather formal working arrangements between the Eastern Child Welfare Society, the sole Korean adoption agency that deals with Australia, and Australian states, facilitating ICA. The Korean government, from the outset, has insisted that the program would cease if adverse publicity were to eventuate<sup>1</sup> and distanced itself from the phenomenon by establishing a private adoption agency as the obligatory path of all communications.

### **The contemporary climate**

Currently, there are particular groups engaged in Korean ICA. These include adoptive parents, Korean adoption agencies, Australian and Korean governments, and those adopted as children from Korea who are now adults. Members from each of these groups can be found in three contemporary networks, named *proponent*, *nonpartisan* and *opponent*. Each network is made up of connected actors across the globe enabled and strengthened by non human actors such as the internet. Networks are connected to other networks within and external to Australia while some actors are networks themselves. Actors are engaged in a constant process of attracting and attempting to enrol new actors.

An understanding of contemporary public debate can be gained by examining the dominant discourse, that is, that of *proponents*. The *proponent* network has continued to expand from the 1970s. The network maintains close liaison with government departments concerned with adoption and attempts to enrol others such as politicians who can influence the direction of the practice in Australia. The network is assured of new actors as prospective parents are continually introduced for pre and post adoption support and initiated into *proponent* discourse. Though individual variance of opinion is identifiable in the

*proponent* network, enrolled actors are represented by spokespersons who promote wholly positive discourse such as the need for the altruistic rescue of children. This representation is accepted as it helps many their meet their own goals such as lobbying for the baby bonus, achieve a speedier adoption or establishing post adoption services.

It is notable that *proponents* concerned with ICA from Korea merge at key junctures with *proponents* concerned with adoption from other countries and adoption generally, adopting one overarching discourse concerning ICA. Two key junctures in ICA in Australia are the diffusion of the practice into Australia in the 1970s and the inquiry *Overseas Adoption in Australia* (HRSCFHS 2005). These two events are the nexus of the diverse range of viewpoints concerning ICA in Australia and provide opportunities to understand how networks expand and interact with each other.

Two major findings emerge from my analysis of data relating to the second of these key junctures - *Overseas Adoption in Australia* (HRSCFHS 2005). Firstly, *proponent* actors seek new ways of reaching their goals if the path to their goal is blocked. These detours concern finding new sources of children to adopt, a goal subsumed in the discourse that claims there are potentially thousands to millions of children in the world who should be adopted into Australian families. These claims are perpetuated in parallel to other claims that say many children in orphanages are not adoptable, in that they have families or represent children not sought by many *proponents*, that is, children who are disabled or older. This detour translates to pressure on governments to take the lead with new overseas countries to make their children available for adoption. Some *proponents* also support the pursuit of countries who are not signatories to the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (Hague Conference on Private International Law 1993) as they too have children in need, as also identified by Selman (2006). Local Australian actors cannot enable the opening of adoption from other countries alone. It requires the presence of *proponent* actors in sending countries and the presence of other conditions such as poverty or war.

Particular conditions, likewise, cannot enable ICA without the actions of *proponents* in both sending and receiving countries. It is evident in this research that the *proponent* network is a global one with increasing influence, yet other networks such as *opponents*, using the Korean example, are also extending their influence through the enrolment of many actors from all groups engaged in ICA, including adoptive parents.

Secondly, *proponent* discourse was altered with the enrolment of politician actors such as senior parliamentarian in the Liberal Coalition government led by John Howard, namely Bronwyn Bishop, who chaired the Inquiry in 2005. Members of the Inquiry Committee are identified as enrolled *proponent* actors who adopted *proponent* discourse and used a range of tactics to silence other views. *Proponent* discourse, however, was altered in translation to include the detour of Australian domestic adoption shifting debate back to outmoded notions of ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ parents rather than on appropriate services for disadvantaged families, social and health issues. The debate changes from the goal of expediting easier, faster and more ICAs to expediting faster, cheaper and more adoptions through local sources in Australia, a goal not originally intended by *proponents*.

The application of Actor Network Theory suggests *proponent*, *opponent*, and *nonpartisan* networks do not increase or decrease in power and influence by accident. The development or demise of particular networks depends on the network’s ability to survive the trials of strength inherent in successful translations. The *proponent* network is proficient at attracting new actors. The dominant discourse of child rescue by adoption promoted by this network is one dimensional, wholly positive, and not amenable to the consideration of complexities of social circumstances, politics, welfare conditions and the impact of their own actions on the practice of ICA in Australia and sending countries. Current power struggles are identified in the analysis where *proponents* seek significant and increasing input into ICA in Australia transforming the adoption of children into a *political* phenomenon to ensure

*proponents* meet their goals, and in many ways cementing perspectives already polarised.

Tactics represent overlapping strategies that work together to ensure enrolment of others through the spread of discourse and the continuation of controversy. A number of tactics identified in this research are used by *proponents*. These include *emotional connectivity*, *simplification*, *enemy creation*, and *importunate action*. Two of these tactics, *simplification* and *importunate action* are described in this chapter to highlight the political nature of contemporary ICA in Australia.

*Simplification* used by *proponents* is defined as the purposeful simplification of the discourse to be embraced. A ‘simple’ or one dimensional message such as child rescue by adoption as a win-win-win situation, can be more easily accepted or rejected as it leaves little room for blurring of messages or alternate discourse to be generated within the space between actors where translations occur. Discourse, for example, that includes understandings of relinquishing conditions such as poverty risks the development of alternatives to adoption such as addressing the needs of birth families. Parents relinquishing children for adoption as a result of poverty is clearly not as simple as some *proponents* of adoption would suggest (see for example Deborra-Lee Furness’ *Orphan Angels (2008) campaign*). A new actor is either for or against – *pro-adoption* or *anti-adoption*. *Simplification*, as a tactic, has developed during the historical course of ICA in Australia. It is now a common power play for *proponents* to label *nonpartisans* as *anti-adoption* as a form of controlling alternate and more complex discourse. This is a powerful strategy in network building.

*Importunate action* is defined as repeated and persistent efforts to gain the attention of those they seek to enrol. The *proponent* network evident in Australia has engaged for many years in locating and targeting particular sympathetic or connected actors such as celebrities and politicians best placed to exert influence and who are amenable to enrolment in the network. The tactic of *importunate action* includes intense lobbying of politicians and media and

ensures the engagement of new actors with enrolment providing personal benefit. One example of *proponent* proficiency is the enrolment of ‘celebrity’. The *proponent* network has been successful at potentially important new actors such as Deborra-Lee Furness, wife of Hugh Jackman, to promote particular beliefs through tactics designed to meet the goals of faster, cheaper and less regulated adoption practices (Connelly, 2005, 2007). The recruitment of celebrities was a purposeful course of action by *proponents* where lists of potential celebrities and other influential people with some personal connection to adoption were circulated via computer mediated communications seeking *proponents* with whom they can make contact. Furness was the first ‘celebrity’ in the Australian context to be successfully enrolled by Australian *proponents*.

### **Implications**

The actions of the *proponent* network, some that are highlighted in this chapter, have influenced the diffusion into Australia of Korean/ Australian adoption and its continuance for over thirty years. The predominance of Korean adoption, overtaken by adoptions from China since 2003-4 (AIHW, 2004), has influenced the expectations of Australian *proponent* actors, that is, a reliable flow of adoptable children. *Proponents* currently wield significant influence on the directions and scope of Australian adoption practice. The *proponent* network seeks a more direct, speedier, less regulated and cheaper route to the goal of child adoption. The dominant discourse, however, fails to include the complexities inherent in ICA practice. *Simplification* carries risks that not all issues will be considered and standards of practice will be affected. All voices are important in this phenomenon, not simply dominant discourse that serves the interests and goals of one network.

The practice of contemporary ICA in Australia is a political one. Its practice, to protect all concerned, particularly those that cannot speak for themselves, adoption policy must place emphasis on best practice and evidence. This governments to invest in research and long term planning rather than short term, politically driven, expedient solutions as a way of dealing with the constant pressure of *importunate actions* and other tactics. Transparency and a

recognition of the interplay between actors networks is essential for practices which are not diverted from their true purpose, that is, a service for children as supported by the subsidiarity principle of the 1986 United Nations Declaration (The Declaration on Social and Legal Principles Relating to the Protection and Welfare of Children with Special Reference to Foster Placement and Adoption Nationally and Internationally) (cited in Masson, 2001).

The theoretical framework used in this analysis helps highlight how discourse is constructed and reflects the perspectives of those engaged in a phenomenon such as ICA. Too much attention in the Australian context has been placed on where actors are situated in the adoption debate, that is, for or against, and on adoption as the preferred welfare solution. Adoption is an appropriate and positive option for many children. Australian governments, however, should be cautious of approaches and services that are adoption driven. This shifts attention away from appropriately funded strategies that seek to understand and address the range of issues that make children available for adoption in the first instance, whether these children are born in Australia or overseas. This will require significantly more investment in research than we have yet seen in the Australian context.

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