

## Non-Adoptee Privilege

by Kelly Reineke

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I thought I was pretty well aware of my privilege as a white American; I long ago became sensitive to and have tried to remain conscious of the issues listed in Peggy McIntosh's well-known essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Backpack."<sup>\*</sup> However, until I became an adoptive parent, I was unaware of the privilege associated with my non-adoptee status. Listening to adoptees give visceral examples of what they are up against that I am not, I began to wonder if a list similar to McIntosh's existed for non-adoptee privilege.

I wanted to know: What are the benefits I receive just by my non-adoptee status? What challenges and disrespectful treatment do many adoptees face day-to-day that I do not? Without this awareness, how can I have empathy for what adoptees are dealing with? How can I be an ally? How can I find tools that will equip and empower my daughter? Taking this further, because privilege is often invisible to those of us who have it, yet visible in neon to those who do not, what am I saying and doing (or not saying and doing) that is disrespectful and ineffective in my relationships with adoptees—especially my daughter? This article is my attempt to begin to answer these questions.

While I know that I can never fully understand what it is like to be an adoptee, I discovered that reflecting on my non-adoptee privilege can help me become a more empathic, respectful and effective parent, friend, and human being. Most encouraging, after sharing what I've learned so far with my daughter and her friend (another adoptee), I've seen the potential for developing more tools that can empower adoptees, especially tweens and teens, to deal with unwelcome questions, comments and slights—building on and enhancing the WISE UP method (Walk away, say It's private, Share something, or Educate).<sup>\*\*</sup>

Below is a partial list of my non-adoptee privileges. My list draws on several sources: two previous lists written by adoptive parents, and a list prepared on the listserv International-Adopt--Talk (IAT).<sup>\*\*\*</sup> The latter was compiled from contributions of adoptive parents and adoptees and as one IAT member described it, "is meant to be a starting point for

<sup>\*</sup> McIntosh, P. (1992). White Privilege, Male Privilege. In M. Anderson & P. H. Collins (Eds.), *Race, Class, and Gender*.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Schoettle, Marilyn, *The W.I.S.E. UP Powerbook*.

<sup>\*\*\*</sup> "Doing Some Unpacking" by Heather S. at <http://www.productionnotreproduction.com/2007/09/doing-some-unpacking.html>; and "White and Biological Privilege in Children and How it Affects Our Internationally Adopted Children" by Marsha Roberts at [www.informedadoptions.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=91&Itemid=31](http://www.informedadoptions.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=91&Itemid=31). IAT is a Yahoo group for members of the international adoption triad; I have found it an invaluable resource.

personal reflections on how [most] non-adoptees benefit in their daily lives by having been raised in their biological families and some of the losses, prejudice and challenges faced by adoptees."

I have tried to focus here on those aspects of non-adoptee privilege that have been harder for me personally to see than those related to race, class, or culture. I am deeply grateful to the friends, family members, and members of the adoption community who have helped me think about this. I have not footnoted every source here, but am happy to share background material with any reader interested in exploring these issues in greater depth.

*As a non-adoptee: I have access to information (related to my birth and early history) and people (my biological family), that for many adoptees is limited or denied.*

- I can get copies of my birth certificate without the key information withheld or blacked out (in my presence!) by the state or agency.
- I don't have to wonder about the date, time, and place of my birth.
- I know my story; I am not tortured by unknowns (is my birth family alive or dead, do I have siblings, did I join my family in an ethical/legal way?).
- I am not constantly "on alert" that new information or people might be dropped on me, adding stress to my mind/body. As Bryan Thao Worra has written, "For transcultural adoptees, our lives are written in pencil... Everything you think you know about yourself can change in an instant." <sup>\*\*\*\*</sup>
- I can easily answer questions about my birth. I can get my chart done.
- I know my family's medical history and can easily fill out forms that request it. I don't have to wonder what health issues may run in my family.
- I don't have to wonder about what the family I was born into looked like, what I looked like as a baby and toddler, what I'll probably look like as an adult, and who I look and act like.
- I do not live with the pain that I may leave this planet without knowing one person who is genetically related to me, without seeing my resemblance or mannerisms in another human being. While growing up I could:
  - answer questions about how tall I'd probably get, where I got my physical traits, who I look like.
  - complete school assignments without pain: tell the story of my name, the story of my birth, draw a family tree, bring in baby photos, etc.

<sup>\*\*\*\*</sup> As quoted by Jae Ran Kim during her illuminating talk on ambiguous loss and adoption at Pact Family Camp, Summer 2008.

***I do not share the same level of narrative burden, (as described within the adoption context by Dr. Robert Ballard), as adoptees.\*\*\*\*\****

- I'm not regularly placed in situations where I have to decide whether or not to tell people how I joined my family, to people who may feel I'm obligated to explain who I am.
- When people learn of my non-adoptee status, I am not pitied and/or do not get asked an exhausting array of questions adoptees face including:
  - Have you met your parents?
  - How does it feel to be adopted?
  - What happened?
- I am not "pushed" (verbally and non-verbally) to tell the story of my birth and childhood history to people who feel entitled to have their questions answered.

***I can usually assume:***

- I'm in the company of other non-adoptees.
- other family members see me as a rightful member, one of their own.
- I'll see my resemblance in my family, others will comment on it, and I'll be affirmed for it.
- when I'm experiencing strong emotions, struggling in relationships, or don't know why I'm "off," I don't have to wonder if this is related to my non-adoptee status.
- people will not attribute my emotions and behavior, especially as a child/teen, to my non-adoptee status.
- people will not have negative/low expectations about my behavior or potential based on my non-adoptee status.
- people won't make negative comments about the mother that gave birth to me.
- people won't praise or condemn how I entered my family based on moral or political grounds.
- people will not tell me how I ended up being part of my family and how I should feel about the experience.
- people will not ask my parents how much I cost. I am not expected by some people to:
  - have certain positions on adoption and abortion.
  - speak for all non-adoptees.
  - reassure future adoptive parents.
  - speak only positively about adoption.

For me, the worst part of the invisibility of non-adoptee privilege is that when some adoptees have tried to make the issues above visible, they have been labeled as "angry adoptees" or told "you should be grateful...you could have been aborted.... you could have been left to languish in an orphanage."

When I shared these reflections with my eleven-year-old daughter, an Indian adoptee, and her friend, a Russian adoptee, what really resonated for them is that one of the toughest things about being an adoptee is repeatedly having to decide if and when to disclose their adoptee status, and, if they do, all the questions, comments and "pushing" for the story they experience. Three personal examples from the past year:

*At an orientation for a summer day camp for multi-heritage andtransracially adopted kids:* I was talking with some parents

while across the room a counselor spoke with my daughter. Then the director gave a talk about how the camp would be a safe space—no-one putting labels on you, asking annoying questions about who you are, etc. Afterwards in the car my daughter was angry. She told me the counselor had said to her "So, your dad is Indian." (I later learned the new counselor had an Indian father and white mother.) "When I said 'no' she looked all confused. She just kept staring at me so I had to say, 'no, I'm adopted.'"

*While I was cleaning up after a school event (without my daughter):* A parent I hadn't met before began asking questions. Her level of frustration kept going up when my responses to her questions (using the WISE UP approach) didn't give her what she wanted (the adoption story). For me, the energy was intense: her tone, facial expressions, the way she shifted her body into my personal space. I thought, "I'm an adult, a nonadoptee, and this parent is a peer...think about how this must feel for my daughter when there are also differences in power and status."

*My daughter's conversation with a teacher during a visit to a middle school:* After the visit, my daughter was angry. She described the meeting with the teacher, "She looked at my name and said, 'Oh, so one of your parents is Indian.' I said 'no.' She looked confused, then she said, 'So both of your parents are Indian.' And I said 'no.' Then she just stared at me. So I had to say, 'I'm adopted.' And then she smiled and said, 'Oh, that's great. I adopted my children.'"

The girls shared many more examples, and their feelings of frustration, sadness, anger and exhaustion. When I shared some of the adult adoptee stories in Ballard's study, they appreciated learning they were not alone. I told them that what Ballard found was that many adult adoptees perceived this as a narrative burden. It got quiet. All these different experiences had a name. They both nodded their heads: it seemed to be validating for them.

I am trying to be more respectful of privacy—especially as a non-adoptee. After my experience at the school, I remembered a time that I regretted asking a question that offended someone. Since then, I've been trying to "sit" more with my not knowing, versus asking questions (even when my intentions are good and I'm trying to connect). I am trying to wait and let others decide if and when to share with me.

I hope to increase my awareness of my non-adoptee privilege so that I can be a more empathic, respectful and effective adoptive parent, friend, and ally. This is a daily, lifelong practice—I know I will keep making mistakes, but hope to learn from them. I also hope to work with others to develop more tools to empower transracially and internationally adopted tweens and teens (building on WISE UP and the wealth of material adoptees have produced, ranging from academic articles to films to blog posts). Finally, I hope my efforts lead to more conversations with the many well-intentioned, caring people in my daughter's life (teachers, coaches, counselors, friends, extended family members) so that they can become even better allies to our family.

\*\*\*\*\* Ballard, R. L. (2006). *Identity Formation in Vietnamese Adoptees of Operation Babylift: An Exploratory Study in Intercultural Communication*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western States Communication Association, Palm Springs, CA.