

# The Adoptee Poster Child™

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Image: Margaret Gerhart<sup>1</sup>

A few months ago I was settling down for the evening with my usual evening routine of The Daily Show with Jon Stewart. I was particularly looking forward to his interview with Malala Yousafzai, the teenager who survived an assassination attempt by the Taliban for her advocacy for girl's education.<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of the interview, clearly struck by Yousafzai's courage and wisdom, Stewart leans in to her and says, "I know your father is back stage, and

<sup>1</sup> Image found at <http://koreanamericanstory.org/the-struggle-between-love-and-hate/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/tue-october-8-2013/malala-yousafzai>

he's very proud of you, but would he be mad if I adopted you?" Laughter erupts from the audience and from Yousafzai herself, who somewhat awkwardly re-adjusts her headscarf as Stewart continues, "Because *you sure are swell.*" ©

A few days later I hear this phrase again when in the Battle Oktoberfest episode of Iron Chef America, host Alton Brown exclaims, "Can I adopt you?" when one of the chefs performs a surprising culinary feat.

Apparently, telling someone you want to adopt them has become a new form of high praise.

How did this "compliment" – centered on joking about taking a child away from their parent because you are impressed with their accomplishments – become translated as an honor for Yousafzai? While I am not sure that Yousafzai (or her father) agreed it was a compliment, she was too polite to say otherwise (though in my observation of her body language it did not appear she considered it a compliment). It worked for the audience however because Stewart was, although likely unconsciously, buying in to the Adoptee Poster Child™ trope. The audience laughs, knowing that Stewart does not actually want to legally adopt Yousafzai, he just is impressed with her accomplishments and recovery from being shot in the head by the Taliban. In other words, Stewart is not making jokes about adopting Lindsay Lohan. The "joke" works because the Adoptee Poster Child™ trope is a social construction about adoptees that we are familiar with and have helped to construct.

Social constructionism, in its most simple definition, is the agreement between two or more people to share a common understanding about an idea, concept, feeling, thought, belief, object, relationship, and so on. When two people agree, for example, that a spherical object made of rubber that bounces back up in the air after being dropped to the ground is called a "ball" and is used to "play a game" then these two people have constructed the object "ball" and the activity "game." Depending on how these people construct the rules and object of the "game" the end result may be baseball, basketball, soccer, or volleyball. Social constructions are culturally specific. For example, "football" means two entirely different games depending on whether you are in the United States or the United Kingdom.

The concept of adoption is a social construction. In the Roman Empire, adoption was constructed as a way for a senator who did not have a biological male child to pass down his title and political position – his legacy – through “adopting” an adult male as his heir. Orphaned and abandoned children were not “adopted” during this time; they were absorbed by extended family members if possible, placed as indentured servants for wealthier Romans, sold for their labor, left to be raised as servants of the church, or left to fend for themselves.<sup>3</sup> The current construction of adoption is multifaceted and multidimensional but based on the belief that a child may not have more than one set of parents. . The legal construction of adoption is based upon constructing a child as property, in effect transferring the “title” from one “owner” (set of parents) to another (set of parents).

Layered on top of the legal construction of adoption is the sentimental construction of adoption as “family building.” Adoption as “family building” provides an alternative to biological reproduction for adults who want to parent. It also provides parents for children who have been deemed “adoptable.” How “parent” and “adoptable” are socially constructed concepts also speak to how a culture and society views these concepts. Remember that other cultures have very different socially constructed meanings for “adoption,” “family building,” “parent,” and “adoptable.” In many other cultures and communities, “adoption” is not based on the idea that a child can only have one set of legal or physical parents. And interestingly even in the United States, we don’t apply this standard to biological children of divorced parents. All aspects of adoption are socially constructed. Dr. Kit Meyers provided an excellent example of the construction of “Real Adoption Language” and “Positive Adoption Language” in the January issue.

To go back to Stewart’s off-hand remark and the audience’s acceptance of it points to the social construction of the Adoptee Poster Child™, or adoptee exceptionalism. What do I mean by adoptee exceptionalism? *Adoptee exceptionalism* is the act of highlighting adoptees that publicly “prove” that adoption as a means of rescue and rehabilitation “works.” The more “damaged” or “disabled” the adopted individual was prior to the adoption and the higher they excel after the adoption, the more the adoptee is evidence that adoption rescues

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<sup>3</sup> See Boswell, John (1988). *The Kindness of strangers: The abandonment of children in Western Europe from late antiquity to the Renaissance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

and rehabilitates children who would otherwise fail to thrive. Adoptee exceptionalism is typically demonstrated by creating the publicly highlighting the achievements of adopted individuals who embody the Adoptee Poster Child™.

The creation of the “poster child” began with organizations such as the March of Dimes in which children with disabilities are featured on posters and billboards, raising awareness and encouraging people to donate to the cause. For example, in the 1980s a boy named Ryan White contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion for his hemophilia. White’s advocacy for AIDS research funding and his innocence in contracting AIDS during a time when it was associated with gay men and drug users, helped provide an empathetic lens toward the disease.

Adoption agencies, adoptive parents, the media, and adoptees themselves promote the concept of the Adoptee Poster Child™ through showcasing adult adoptees that personify their successes. The intention of the Adoptee Poster Child™ is to put an empathetic and positive lens on adoption. Adult adoptees featured as Adoptee Poster Child™ in the media, at conferences or invited to adoption agency panels perform a contemporary version of Horatio Alger (Nelson, 2003), the literal or social orphan that has risen above his or her damaged origins and pulled themselves up by their bootstraps to become successful. In the original stories written by Alger, the poor but determined young man had the potential but needed the assistance of a benefactor or mentor to help guide the way. Adoption inserts a twist to the Horatio Alger/American Dream narrative in that the “plucky orphan” must be first adopted in order to realize their potential. Without adoption, a child’s skills are wasted, pre-determined by either biological destiny or social environmental deprivation to a life trajectory of poor outcomes. In other words, one cannot pull themselves up by their bootstraps until the adoptive parent provides him with the boots.

The construction of the Adoptee Poster Child™ and adoptee exceptionalism is dependent upon what psychologist Dan McAdams (2005)<sup>4</sup> might call the “redemption narrative” or the “progressive narrative.” In essence, the progressive narrative is when one sees their life as an upward arc from a negative baseline toward one of success or achievement. Americans in particular, according to McAdams, love the redemption narrative.

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<sup>4</sup> McAdams, Dan (2005). *The Redemptive Self*. New York: Oxford.

There was a time in my life when I fully believed in the Adoptee Poster Child™ narrative. To some degree I still do. Many of us feel good about transformation stories – our news feeds are full of them. We use words eliciting themes of war to describe our narratives; “mastered,” “vanquished,” “conquered,” “battled,” “thwarted,” “triumph” and “prevailed.” All these suggest that we believe in progressive and redemption narrative. We want to see that out of pain and difficulty can come achievement. These stories are used to motivate us. The underlying message: *if they can do it, given all the obstacles, why can't I?*

Many of us have at one point in our lives identified with the redemption/Adoptee Poster Child™ narrative. Consider the story of Tatyana McFadden, accomplished Paralympian. Tatyana was born with spina bifida, resulting in paralysis. Although Tatyana did not have access to a wheelchair, she was strong and determined and used her arms to move around the orphanage. Tatyana was adopted in 1994 by Debbie McFadden. Less than a decade later the little girl with spina bifida was an athletic superstar, winning several medals in both the 2004 and 2008 Paralympics. On her website, McFadden attributes her success to the opportunities she gained through adoption.<sup>5</sup>

"I understand where these kids are coming from, having a disability, living in an orphanage for six years," McFadden told a USA Today reporter in 2012.<sup>6</sup> "No one wanted a disabled child besides an American family." McFadden and fellow Russian Adoptee and Paralympics gold medalist Jessica Long, embody adoptee exceptionalism. They were literally rescued through adoption and their athletic accomplishments are considered exceptional given their descriptions of the bleak and desolate foreign orphanages where they lived before being adopted and the assumption that both would have likely died or lived a life of despair as a result of both their disability and their orphan status.<sup>7</sup>

The redemption/Adoptee Poster Child™ narrative does not only apply to adoptees born with physical disabilities such as McFadden and Long. Consider the story of Michael Oher,

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.tatyanamcfadden.com/biography.html>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.usatoday.com/story/sports/olympics/2013/01/05/usa-paralympic-athletes-saddened-russian-adoption-ban/1811167/tat>

<sup>7</sup> In the USA Today article, Long's father described the orphanage as “dimly lit” with “broken windows. McFadden describes her orphanage on her website biography page as “a place so poor they could not buy crayons for the kids to color with let alone a wheelchair.”

whose story was featured in the book and film *The Blind Side*. In the Tuohy's version of the narrative represented in the film and the book by Michael Lewis, Oher was destined to a future of failure and poverty due to the abuse and neglect he received from his birth parents and the toxic social environment in which he lived. Oher's own memoir, *I Beat The Odds: From Homelessness to the Blind Side, and Beyond*, follows the redemption narrative script completely; the description of his book states,

"With his adoptive family, the Touhys, and other influential people in mind, he describes the absolute necessity of seeking out positive role models and good friends who share the same values to achieve one's dreams. Sharing untold stories of heartache, determination, courage, and love, *I Beat the Odds* is an incredibly rousing tale of one young man's quest to achieve the American dream."<sup>8</sup>

To fit the adoptee exceptionalism frame the adopted individual must be seen as having no other opportunities for success without being adopted. Opportunity deficits are not only constructed for those with physical disabilities. How the lives of parentless children are constructed as a "crisis childhood" are, as Abebe (2012) states, "largely orchestrated by the rhetoric of [social] disability...which, in it's own turn, undermines the complex ways in which orphans muster the resources and develop the capabilities they need to cope with their marginalization" (p. 158) and "ignores their agency and resilience" (p. 173).<sup>9</sup>

McFadden, Long and Oher are examples of adoptee exceptionalism and represent the Adoptee Poster Child™ because of the assumption, whether correct or not, that their successes would not have been achievable had they not been adopted. Left in their pre-adoptive situations, they – as well as the public – believe they may have been left to die or wither away. That each of these individuals showed incredible resilience and abilities prior to their adoptions that may have led to exceptional outcomes without adoption and that their immense pre-adoption survival skills may have contributed to their post-adoption accomplishments is never explored or acknowledged.

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<sup>8</sup> Oher, Michael (2011). *I Beat The Odds: From Homelessness, to The Blind Side, and Beyond*. New York: Gotham.

<sup>9</sup> Abebe, Tatek. (2012). Orphanhood, poverty and the challenges for care: Review of global policy trends. In J. Daugherty Bailey (Ed.) *Orphan care: A comparative view*. Sterling, VA: Kimarian Press.

Transracial and intercountry adoptees are particularly impacted by the construction of the Adoptee Poster Child. Race, country of origin and pre-adoption placement histories influence how transracial and intercountry adoptees are categorized for adoption. For example, racial minority and sending country communities are often described in colonialist terms as: uneducated, undeveloped, poor, politically unjust, oppressive, or abusive. The extent to which a child's place in a community of origin is perceived as a predetermined trajectory of despair and dependence in contrast to the adoptee's current level of achievement or excellence, the more the adoptee fits the adoption exceptionalism frame. In a review of articles about international and transracial adoptions published in the New York Times between 1993 and 2010, I found that the framing of the articles for children adopted internationally are centered around the rescue of a child from a devastated "Third World" country, while adopting children of color – namely African American children – in the U.S. centered around rescuing a child from an abusive or drug-addicted parent. How do we see a Michael Oher in this scenario? A rags-to-riches story is always enticing since as McAdams points out, we love a good redemption story. The difference when adoption is part of the narrative is that without the adoption, the riches aspect of the story is unachievable. In constructing adoption as the means to rescue and rehabilitate children from a trajectory of poverty, despair and death, we have also constructed a framework that does not allow for an adoptee's redemption narrative to be wholly their own.

The use of the Adoptee Poster Child™ trope is similar to other quasi-liberal constructs such as "colorblindness" and "model minority." The quasi-compliment is actually an act of erasure, although it looks on the surface like a form of praise. It places the person awarded the compliment in a position where they are expected to know their place: they are given pseudo-honorary status as long as they reinforce the agenda of those in power of giving the compliment. "Colorblindness" is a philosophy of erasing difference by those who live in the default (whiteness) because acknowledging difference and disparity is uncomfortable and difficult for those who have the most to gain from the erasure. "Model minority" is used by those in power to split communities of color in order to prevent them from collectively working together to rise against the dominant group; by giving Asian Americans "model minority" status over other communities the dominant group is not assigning Asian Americans honorary whiteness but setting them up to be targeted by others who assume they've been given special privileges. In similar ways, the use of the Adoptee Poster Child™

serves to give some adoptees a special status and privileges – as long as the adoptee credits adoption for their success.

So where does this leave us, the adoptee? The desire to be successful while acknowledging the struggles is to be squeezed between two common stereotypes about adoptees. To argue against the framework of the Adoptee Poster Child™ or as an exceptional adoptee is, to some, to argue against our very own achievements, successes and basic human need and desire for self-determination, particularly for those for whom this was difficult. Yet we rail against the pathologization of adoptees as well. Considering that so many of us came with diagnoses of being “hard to place” as a result of our pre-adoption histories with multiple placements, living in orphanages or foster care, with abusive and neglectful first/birth parents, from impoverished communities, or dealing with the “primal wound”<sup>10</sup> of being separated from our birth/first mothers, it cannot be surprising that many adoptees are as quick to insert distance from these beginnings as adoptive parents.

What are other concerning aspects of the Adoptee Poster Child™ trope? In addition to the conditional requirements adoptees must accept, there are a couple other downfalls. One of the most frustrating byproducts of the Adoptee Poster Child™ discourse for me concerns empathy, or rather the lack of empathy. When an Adoptee Poster Child™ is put on the pedestal as a role model it leads the pathologization of adoptees who do not achieve that same level of success. After all, adoption provided the boots for them to pull themselves up so others wonder why all adoptees are unable to do the same. I see this type of comment in online forums all the time. The use of the Adoptee Poster Child™ as a way to shame adoptees whose experiences were less than perfect or adoptees who do not have the veneer of exceptionalism is unfortunately all too common. Used in this way, all roads lead to calling an adoptee ungrateful. Those promoted as an Adoptee Poster Child™ are often expected or required to publicly state or express 1) how much they love their parents, and 2) their gratitude for being adopted.

For adoptees who are considered role models, navigating the expectations of adoptive parents can be emotionally exhausting. I had an adoptive parent co-worker at one agency

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<sup>10</sup> See Verrier, Nancy Newton (1993). *The primal wound: Understanding the adopted child*. Lafayette, CA: Gateway Press.

where I worked who often told me she hoped her daughter would turn out to be “as well-adjusted” as me. While I understood what was behind her comments, it always made me sad that this parent feared her daughter was not going to live up to the narrative of the Adoptee Poster Child™. The trope of adoption as rescue and rehabilitation is so strong that adoptive parents often are disappointed that their adopted children have not, or may not, live up to their expectations. Secondly, my colleague’s comments could not begin to take into account the work it took to get to that place and the continued work it takes to maintain well-being.

Many adoptees, even those who are incredibly successful and accomplished (however that is defined) still struggle with aspects of their adoption experience. Dr. Oh Myo Kim pointed out in her feature for Gazillion Voices that what appears on the surface as markers of success may mask negative or harmful coping behaviors. When adoptive parents put certain Adoptee Poster Children™ up on pedestals, it leaves very little room for the Adoptee Poster Child™ to grow over time. Other adoptees may feel self-doubt or worry if they don’t know that it’s normal and developmentally appropriate to have questions and concerns about their adoption experience. Perhaps it’s time to redefine and re-construct what “successful adoptee” means. Recently, in an interview with Katie Couric, actor Laverne Cox was asked about being a role model for transgendered persons.<sup>11</sup> Cox responded that rather than be a role model, she sees herself as a “possibility model.” That phrase really resonated with me. “Possibility model” conjures an image of looking out of a window and seeing broad possibilities instead of narrow requirements.

I began this article with the story of Jon Stewart using the trope of the Adoptee Poster Child™ to compliment a remarkable woman, Malala Yousafzai. In addition to this exchange highlighting Stewart’s paternalistic and gendered approach to the interview (would he ever ask to adopt a male or white guest?) I was disappointed that he considered an act of family disruption in which a young woman of color has no agency or control to be the most complimentary thing he could say. But I can hardly blame Stewart for acting on his understanding of problematic tropes about adoption. Only through re-constructing the idea of the Adoptee Poster Child™ and adoptee exceptionalism will the adopted person be seen more fully as a complex person; one who does not have to represent a singular ideal but can show that there are many possibilities of being.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://katiecouric.com/videos/orange-is-the-new-black-laverne-cox/>