Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute

The Institute's mission is to provide leadership that improves laws, policies and practices – through sound research, education and advocacy – in order to better the lives of everyone touched by adoption.

In order to achieve its goals, the Adoption Institute
- Conducts ground-breaking research
- Provides education to inform public opinion
- Promotes ethical practices and legal reforms
- Works to translate research & policy into action.

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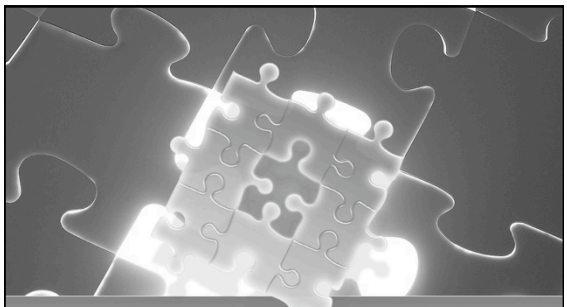
What We Know … About Everyone

"In all of us there is a hunger, marrow deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning; no matter what our attainments in life, there is the most disquieting loneliness."

- Alex Haley in "Roots"



Beyond Culture Camp:
Promoting Healthy Identity Formation in Adoption

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute

The Project

- Largest study to date of adopted adult experiences
- Funded by:
  - W.K. Kellogg Foundation
  - Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute
- Authors:
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- Edited by:
  - Adam Pertman, Executive Director

Research Design

- National internet based survey of adult adopted persons 18 and older
- In-person focus group of adult Asian adoptees and online focus group of service providers asking the question:

  What factors support/encourage/nurture the development of healthy identities for individuals of Asian descent adopted transracially?

Survey Design

- Identity Theories
- Standardized scales
- Focus on two aspects

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  identity: Racial/ethnic and adoption

Demographics: Country of Birth

Sample size: 468 respondents

• South Korea	• Ecuador
• USA	• El Salvador
• Colombia	• England
• India	• Honduras
• Canada	• Iran
• Philippines	• Ireland
• Vietnam	• Japan
• China	• Mexico
• Chile	• Tanzania

Demographics: Gender, Race, Age, Children, Search, Adoption Community

- Women: 80%
- Asian or Asian-American: 47.9%
- White, Caucasian not Hispanic: 37.2%
- Mean age: 36 (Asian mean 31; Non-Asian mean 41)
- Married: 57.9% (Asian married 50%; Non-Asian 68%)
- Divorce/Separated: 9.2%
- Partner race: Caucasian 64.3% (Asian 55%; Non-Asian 72%)
- Partner adopted: 4.5% (Asian 6%; Non-Asian 2%)
- Children: 47.9%
- One child who is adopted: 30%
- Mean age at adoption: Asian 20 mths; Non-Asian 10 mths
- Have Searched: 59.8% (Asian 50%; Non-Asian 80%)
- Involved adult adoptee group: 56.2% (Asian 62%; Non 50%)
- Involved in adoptee list-serv: 70% (Asian 72%; Non 68%)

Research: Literature Review

- Majority of transracial adoptees (70-80 percent) have few serious behavioral and emotional problems and do not differ dramatically from same-race adoptees and non-adoptees on levels of self-esteem and social adjustment
- Recent studies on adolescent TRA adoptees indicate differences within subgroups based on levels of experience with discrimination.
- Cultural socialization outcome studies support that race and discrimination may have serious psychological consequences for some TRA adoptees.

Limitations of Past Research

- Only evaluated adjustment in terms of adaptation to adoption
- Relied on parent reports
- Focused on latency age children
- Ethnic awareness and not ethnic self -identification

Key Findings

- Adoption is an increasingly significant aspect of identity for adopted people as they age, and remains so even when they are adults.
- Race/ethnicity is an increasingly significant aspect of identity for those adopted across color and culture.
- Coping with discrimination is an important part of coming to terms with racial/ethnic identity for adoptees of color.
- Discrimination based on adoption is a reality, but more so for White adoptees – who also report being somewhat less comfortable with their adoptive identity as adults than do their Korean counterparts.

Key Findings (cont.)

- Most transracial adoptees considered themselves White or wanted to be White as children.
- Positive racial/ethnic identity development is most effectively facilitated by "lived" experiences such as travel to native country, attending diverse schools, having role models of own race/ethnicity.
- Contact with birth relatives, according to the White respondents, is the most helpful factor in achieving a positive adoptive identity.
- Different factors predict comfort with adoptive and racial /ethnic identity for Korean and White adoptees.

Interesting insights

- A large majority of White adoptees (86%) reported that they had engaged in a search for birth family, compared to almost half (49%) of Korean respondents.
- Most Korean adoptees (61%) reported that they had visited their birth country, and many (21%) had been there three or more times.
- Most Korean respondents (62%) belonged to an adoptee organization, compared to 49% of White counterparts; almost half the former group had attended an adoption conference, compared to one-fifth of the latter group.

How does race and adoption affect adoptee's satisfaction with life and ability to achieve?

Comfort with identity

	Distribution (Percentages) N=468	
Comfort with identity	**Adoption**	**Race/Ethnicity**
extremely uncomfortable	5.9	4.5
very uncomfortable	7.0	4.1
somewhat uncomfortable	5.1	6.0
somewhat comfortable	17.4	18.8
very comfortable	28.2	32.3
extremely comfortable	36.3	34.3

Community Characteristics

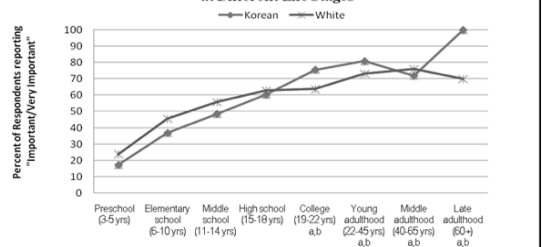
Experiences of Teasing/Bias

Sources of Discrimination

How do race, ethnicity and adoptive identities change over time and at different developmental stages?

Importance of Adoptive Identity at Different Life Stages

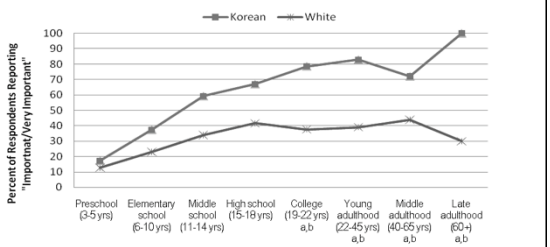
Fig. 1. Importance of Identity as an Adopted Person at Different Life Stages



[a] Use of valid percents. Whites: College (*N*=154); Young adulthood (*N*=153); Middle adulthood (*N*=100); Late adulthood (*N*=10).
[b] Use of valid percents. Koreans: College (*N* =173); Young adulthood (*N*=146); Middle adulthood (*N*=25); Late adulthood (*N*=1).

Importance of Racial/Ethnic Identity at Different Life Stages

Fig. 2. Importance of Racial/Ethnic Identity at Different Life Stages



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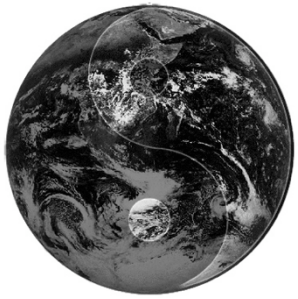
What can be done to help transnational adoptees achieve a healthy identity?



Experiences and Services Utilized, Perceived as Helpful in Forming Identity

In their own voices

I think there was a time when it frustrated and angered me that people were mean because I was a different race from my parents. I am not sure that I wanted to be their race as much as I wanted to have control over whether to disclose that I was adopted. It was also difficult especially in adolescence when fitting in is so important that I did not look like the standard of beauty in magazines and on television (White blonde blue-eyed). As I grew older and more secure with who I am and as media has increasingly included people that look like me I no longer felt a desire to be White.

I don't think I really considered myself to be white (although I joked often that I was Scottish) but I did wish that I were my parents biological daughter. I wanted to know what I would look like if I was born to my parents.

Never having my family acknowledge that I was different made it difficult to come to terms with understanding and accepting that I really was NOT white. Getting older and wanting to finally acknowledge myself that I am Korean American and that's how I'm seen.

I felt like a banana most of my life. In other words, racially Chinese due to my skin. But in terms of my inner values and cultural identity I felt very much Caucasian due to my upbringing within my adoptive family. I still feel this way.

This is a continual struggle for me. As I have grown older I appreciate being different…but I still struggle with my cultural identity. It is a strange perception since despite my appearance I am completely American though other people don't see me as American.

Recommendations

- Expand parental preparation and post-placement support for those adopting across race and culture.
- Develop empirically based practices, resources to prepare transracial/cultural adopted youth to cope with racial bias.
- Promote laws, policies and practices that facilitate access to information for adopted individuals.
- Educate parents, teachers, practitioners, media, etc. about adoption realities to erase stigmas & stereotypes, minimize bias and increase opportunities for positive development.
- Increase research on the risk and protective factors that shape the adjustment of adoptees, especially those adopted transracially/culturally in the U.S. or from abroad.

Conclusions

- Overall, findings support research indicating people ad o p ted transracially have similar outcomes to same-race adoptions.
- Caveat: transracial adoptee accomplishments are not without significant effort to reconcile their complex identities. Race remains salient in most aspects of life for the s e adoptees, whereas adoption is most salient for White adoptees.
- Our findings support:
  - Need for post-adoption services for