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Adoption and Identity Experiences Among Adult Transnational Adoptees: A Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

To establish more comprehensive ways to assess transnational adoption adjustment, we need to better understand the adoptive identity experiences of transnational adoptees. We explored adoption identity by describing sociopsychosocial aspects and self experiences related to transnational adoption adjustment in a purposive sample of 16 adult Korean-American adoptees. A qualitative, descriptive analysis resulted in three themes: biological parents, birthdays, and adoption history, with three subthemes of adoptive family, pride, and difficulties. The study is a first to qualitatively examine adoption identity and the themes may be used to develop a survey of adoption identity for adult transnational adoptees.

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Transnational adoption; adult adoptees; adoption identity

We need better ways to stimulate the self-esteem of adult adoptees and thus need more knowledge about what constitutes *adoptive identity* among adult adoptees (Wilson, 2004). Ethnic identity, an aspect of one's self-concept including categorization within and attachment toward groups (Phinney & Ong, 2007), may be affirmed to maintain self-esteem, but it is only relevant for adoptees facing ethnic discrimination (Yngvesson, 2002). Adoption is still a marginalized family model (Cristensen, 1999; Friedlander, 2003) and a stigmatized condition (Fisher, 2003), and because some struggle with the social stigma of being adopted they are unlikely to merely blend into American communities. To obtain knowledge of adoption identity, researchers must explore the matter by using qualitative methods where the analysis stays close to the data but presents rich, straight descriptions of the experiences (Neergaard, Olesen, Andersen, & Sondergaard, 2009) in the case of everyday language (Sandelowski, 2000).

Ethnic and adoptive identities are concepts of group identification, defined as including cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions (Henry, Arrow, & Carini, 1999). The view that a firm sense of group identification is important to maintain well-being comes from social identity theory (Tajfel, 1981), which emphasizes belonging in particular group memberships and the consequences of belonging to particular groups. Ethnic

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identity has been linked to subjective well-being and psychological adjustment among adoptees (Alipuria & Phinney, 1996; Blaine, Broadnax, Crocker, & Luhtanen, 1994; Fuligni & Yip, 2002), but the concept is a limited presentation of adoptees' potential group membership. Adoption adjustment describes the ways adoptees are impacted developmentally by the process (Basow, Bookwala, DeLisi, & Lilley, 2008), believing to delay development. Meta-analytic reviews suggest adopted children likely play a major catch-up of delays showing some deficits in physical growth and attachment, but no differences between non-, domestically-, and internationally-adopted children academic performance (van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006). Nonetheless, many transnational adoptees face difficulties (Garber & Grotevant, 2015) that may instill in them a need to identify with being adopted in order to properly heal (Reader, 1996). Most aspects of adoption concern opportunities the adoptees have not chosen themselves, making the task of identity development one of coming to terms with oneself in the context of the family and culture into which one was adopted (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Lash Esau, 2000). Although most adoptive parents are mindful of their child's need to feel included, parents may downplay their child's need for individuation out of fear of alienating them (Holtzman & Randolph, 2010), thereby discouraging identity exploration as a result. Adoptees and their adoptive parents engage in a variety of cultural socialization strategies (Hall & Steinberg, 2000) to manage the complexities of their situations, and identity exploration is thus mediated by these relationships (Shiao & Tuan, 2008). There are important benefits to being fully adopted, as opposed to remaining in "foster care," implying potentially important mechanisms concerning group identification through an adoption identity (Zill & Bramlett, 2014). Nonetheless, there is little research on adoption adjustment (Levy-Shiff, 2001) and no study to date has explored the potential of adoptees coming to develop a sense of group identification based on their adoption experiences, as opposed to belonging to an ethnic group. This leaves a gap in the adoption identity literature of potential importance to further the mental health of transnational adoptees, including comprehensive ways to assess healthy adoption adjustment including "adoption group identification," going beyond simply measuring adjustment (Basow et al., 2008). To better understand adoption identity, therefore, one must consider the adoption identity experiences of adult transnational adoptees within a social context and describe the range of experiences in order to produce a construct with predictive properties. To achieve this, we interviewed adoptees from a cross-sectional perspective, and the interviews were analyzed using the descriptive method to understand common experiences involved with adoption identification.

Methods

Participants

Our approach consists of a phenomenological descriptive qualitative analysis (Sandelowski, 2000) that aimed to assess the meaning and lived experiences

(Creswell, 1998) of the adoptees. This method allows both thorough and abstracted descriptions of the empirical materials and is based within a hermeneutic-phenomenological tradition. This assumes a continuous understanding of the participants' subjective experiences, both in a descriptive and analytic context (Rønn, 2006).

We recruited a purposive sample of 16 adult Korean-American transnational adoptees (2 men, 14 women). Ten respondents were recruited via the Internet from the special interest group of the Korean American Adoptive Family Network newsletter, five were from a Yahoo! adoption group Listserv of Washington, DC, and one was obtained through snowball sampling. The median age at the time of adoption was 10 months, all were adopted into families where at least one parent was Caucasian, and the participants were aged 20 to 47, with a median age of 30 years. All participants lived in the various parts of the United States, and six were married. The majority (14) had at least one sibling. Nine had siblings who were the biological children of their adoptive parents, while the remaining eight had adopted siblings.

Data collection and procedure

Recruitment, data collection, and analysis were completed between June 2005 and August 2006, but a reanalysis by a second coder was completed in 2013. Among the participants, 6 were interviewed face-to-face, and 10 were interviewed over the telephone. With permission of the participants, all interviews were tape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interviews

Per recommendations for the qualitative descriptive method (Neergaard et al., 2009), we used semi-structured interviews with a total of eight open-ended questions that targeted the experiences of being ethnic and adopted from the participants' perspectives. Three questions concerned the adoption experience, including their adoption story, awareness, and affectedness of being adopted, and as an adult, how their sense of self-awareness or identity had changed. Three questions concerned ethnic or racial identity, including the first time that being Korean affected them while they were growing up, the extent to which their adoptive parents played a role in their cultural/Korean identity, and the extent to which they stayed in touch with their ethnic/Korean culture. In addition, participants were asked to describe the connection between being Korean and being adopted, as they saw it. Finally, participants were asked to speak toward their feelings on international adoption in general. Probing typically concerned maintenance of their identity based on cultural cues, such as language attainment and food interests, peer and personal relations, relations with their immediate and extended family, and ties to their community or the community organizations they may belong to that may have helped shape their identity.

Ethical considerations

The study was approved by the Human Investigation Committee at Wayne State University, and participants provided written informed consent. Personal identifying information was removed from the data prior to analyzing them. No compensation was given to participants.

Data analysis

After acquiring the first few interviews, the narratives were organized into categories, which allowed in vivo sorting of narratives and sentences as well as constant comparison of data during the continued process of data collection. We used thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to define themes between and within the interviews. To ensure the quality of the analysis, we followed the six steps as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), including (a) obtaining a thorough overview of the material, (b) coding small segments of text, (c) creating overarching themes, (d) revising, (e) redefining the themes, and (f) reporting the results, presented in this article. The coding was conducted by the first and fourth authors and discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Results

Three themes and three subthemes emerged from this study: biological parents, adoption history (with subthemes of adoptive families, pride, and difficulties), and birthdays.

Biological parents

Biological parents were an integral part of each adoptee's adoption story, but many knew their story only as their adoptive parents told it. Like most adoptees, this participant wondered about her biological ties and their history. This participant wondered about the "what if's" of staying with her biological family and spoke of a desire to return to let their family know she is doing well:

In terms of my past, I wonder if my parents were ever married, if I have other siblings or half-siblings, if my birth parents think of me, if they would be proud of what I have achieved in my life, if they would try to take credit for me being who I am today.

One male adoptee accentuated the loss of his birth mother. He knew her on and off for the first six and a half years of his life but was eventually adopted by an American family. Returning from a trip to Korea as an adult, he went through a transition of understanding who he was and where he came from and in the process realized that his birth mother sacrificed so he could have a better life. He stated, "... my mom actually sacrificed a lot, and I started recalling the fact that she was a dearly loving parent and pretty much gave me everything."

Adoption history

Adoptive families

Based on the attachment adoptees had toward their adoptive parents, they defined the roles of “mom” and “dad” differently; for some, their adoptive parents were their “real” mother and father, while for others that title was reserved for their biological parents. The former point can be illustrated in how one man perceived his adoptive parents. He was adopted in his infancy, so his strongest identity and connection was to his adoptive parents:

I view my parents as my parents, you know. They're, you know ... I don't view them any differently; that's one of the big reasons why I'm really not concerned about finding my biological parents because to be honest, I mean, right now I don't feel any attachment towards them, you know. Obviously I feel a great attachment towards my mom, dad, and my sister and my grandma.

The latter view was also shared by one adoptee who compared his biological mother to his adoptive family, and more specifically his mother, because he knew his biological mother and felt the love from her, thus defining his adoptive mother as a caregiver:

For me I always felt like an outsider, and I think much of it had to do with the fact that I felt outside of my family too; that there was no support network; my family existed in Korea ... I've never felt at home there.

He continued,

They were encouraging about the whole adoption piece 'cause I made it pretty clear that my mom was my mom, and that was it; I made that really clear. And that's always been an issue; we don't have the greatest relationship ... I think what I really struggle with sometimes is defining what family really is; I think that's the piece that I really struggle with. I know that I based what a parental relationship is like with what my mom did. She doted on me; I always knew that she loved me.

Pride

Pride in being adopted was a theme for some adoptees, as it carries with it a sense of strength and survival. For others, pride imbued empowerment in being adopted. One woman felt pride for being adopted because she survived the orphanage for 10 years, which is an integral part of who she is now. Being on her own led to her wanting to know who she was and where she came from. She stated:

I think being adopted is something that, you know, I should be proud of as far as I survived the life in the orphanage for 10 years and then I see my life as a kind of like different basis. ... I was on my own in the orphanage you know 'cause it was people there all the time kind of thing but I was on my own and that's when I started finding my identity and wanting to, and that's when I started showing interest about my past and who I am and what I am. And my past is who I am kind of thing; I can't ignore it.

Another stated that being adopted was fundamental to her sense of self. She was empowered by this status and heralds it as a part of her past and future:

Being adopted is something that is intrinsic to my being and I am hurt when others attempt to de-emphasize this aspect of my life, because it is something that I see as so fundamental to who I am. I often think about being adopted, especially in terms of my past and my future.

Some adoptees were able to break free of such negative feelings and embrace their status, as this woman shared:

I am who I am because of you know how I started out and ... I got to the point where I'm proud of it and I'm not ashamed of it and I talk about it openly and I make comments about it openly ... sometimes people were surprised [and] sometimes they just don't know what to say, but I'm not ashamed of it anymore. I think when I grew up being adopted, my mom made me feel like I should be ashamed of it only because she wouldn't let us talk about our past.

Addressing adoption difficulties

The adoptees' history and identity exploration was always couched in their "adoption story," which appeared as a primary link to the past. However, this was often shrouded in mystery because the adoptees were either abandoned or taken to an orphanage, where the workers only knew of the child once they arrived. For some, being adopted was, therefore, a difficult issue to deal with, and the question of "Who am I?" could emerge at various times of their lives. One woman emphasized the negative times in her life as a means of self-analysis. She looked back to the beginnings of her life and not knowing her past, which can trigger present events. In this case, it was not having a birth certificate, name, or date of birth, thus leaving more questions unanswered. She explained:

... most days it's fine but just every now and then it's kind of like you know how adoptees kind of go through like "where am I" and ... just when I had sort of a down period which might have been like a half a dozen times in my whole life it did it just kind of like. ... Well it all starts with not having a birth certificate, it all starts with not knowing like a birth name or a birth date ...

The difficulties of being adopted also resonated into other aspects of one's life, as this woman stated regarding some of the psychological issues that one may face:

Adoptees are the beginning of a new culture. They face issues like abandonment, phobias, and commitments. So there is an identity issue by default because it does not fit anywhere else. They are never quite pure enough for any other category.

Birthdays

Birthdays were rites of passages that were celebrated and embraced by many. For some adoptees, they represented a time of self-evaluation and retrospection. For some, birthdays brought heartache, while for others it was a day of joy. For those

who did not know the actual date of their birthday, it caused a sense of frustration. This woman explained that her birthday was made up, and as such, her sense of self was a façade, was fake, and had no meaning (no context with which to gauge a center/self), “Your birthday isn’t your birthday; it’s all a lie; it’s all made up; your identity is all made up. I knew it was fake; it has no meaning.”

For others, birthdays were of no significance; it was an arbitrary day since there were no records of the fact. This woman stated her case as such succinctly:

Birthdays don’t really mean much to me since I was found on a doorstep, so my orphanage guesstimated my birthday. Then my parents changed it. Maybe it would mean more to me if I knew the exact date, who knows.

One woman sometimes thought about her birth mother on her birthdays, as the two were inextricably interwoven:

I actually found out that I was born on June 12th, but like this whole time I’ve been celebrating it ... my birthday on the 13th, so it’s kind of strange. And like when I went to Korea I found out the precise time that I was born so it’s just a strange feeling. ... And I ... sometimes I just wonder, you know, does my birth mother think about me on my birthday? Does she remember the day I was born? You know, that type of thing, but then it’s not like it’s this huge thing that I think about.

Discussion

This study explored adults’ adoption experiences, including thoughts and feelings related to being adopted by families in the United States. We interviewed 16 transnational adoptees from Korea and analyzed the data using a qualitative descriptive approach. From the interviews, three themes and two subthemes emerged, including biological parents, adoption history (and the adoptive families, pride in being adopted, and difficulties associated with being adopted), and birthdays as literal symbols of being adopted.

Adoption identity experiences

Being chosen by adoptive parents

The theme of adoption history and parents involved elements suggestive of different mechanisms for self-building for the participants. Participants identifying with being adopted commonly reported a sense of pride in being adopted and having been chosen by their adoptive parents. For those who always knew they were adopted, the parents had shared the adoption story with them early in their lives to make them feel special, thus leading to a sense of pride stemming from the perspective of “I was chosen.” For some, pride was a badge of honor from having survived the orphanage or their previous life. The participants shared that their adoptive parents were positive role models who encouraged and supported their Korean heritage, as well as told their adoption story to them in an understanding and loving way. Pride allowed the adoptee to overcome the

social or self-imposed stigma associated with being adopted. By describing the experience that related most to positive adoption identity, the finding adds to existing research on the self-esteem of transnational adoptees. A large meta-analytic review has shown that the self-esteem of transnational adoptees is equal to that of same-race adoptees (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007). The authors' conclusion was that this was due to the considerable investments made by the adoptive families in supporting their children, but these issues were not specifically explored. The current study suggests that adoptive parents help build self-esteem by openly talking about the adoptee's experiences of being adopted, while he or she is growing up.

Birthdays as landmark events in self-building

The primary motivation for participants to address their adopted self was to have a solid foundation for explaining family history to others or feel healthy for the sake of children or extended family; thus, the theme of dealing with adoption difficulties emerged. Many difficulties are related to being adopted, including not knowing one's birth parents, not knowing one's actual birthday, and not having knowledge of one's biological medical history. For some, these experiences of broken relationships, loss of loved ones, and simple plights of rejection apparently plagued the adoptees' worldview and sense of existence, forcing them to constantly self-reflect, associated with bouts of depression. The pivotal "who am I?" question was asked during these moments, and the answers were not readily available (Groza & Rosenberg, 2001). However, noticing birthdays appeared as a route to naturally process these difficulties. Knowing one's birthday appeared to be an advantage to those participants who knew their exact date of birth. It related to a more positive attitude toward being adopted. The emergence of birthdays as a theme in this study is in accordance with psychological research showing experimentally that when birthdays are made salient, people feel less sure about themselves (Peetz & Wilson, 2013). They see possible future selves as less related to who they are presently. This opens up vistas of opportunity including motivation for change. Although the purpose of this study was to describe experiences, not to build theory, the findings suggest that coming to identify with being adopted likely depends on a process of seeking answers to questions about one's adoption history, in which one's birthday works as a mechanism for change. If an individual learns that their date of birth is not proven, this may increase the discrepancy experienced between perceived current and future self when one's birthday is made salient. The current self is thus made uncertain. This could lead to anxiety and reluctance to self-disclose and explore (Lee, 2003) during the time of one's birthday, possibly weakening the effect of the mechanism as well as increasing one's need for social support.

Adoption triad and implications for assessment

The themes already discussed, including adoptive history and parents as well as birthdays, appeared along with the theme of biological parents. Every

adoptee within the study shared some or all aspects of the adoption triad (the biological family, the adoptive family, and the adoptee herself/himself) weaved into their adoption story. In addressing their adoption identity, we find that the theme of biological parents is consistent with earlier work, suggesting the historical and underlying contexts of the biological family that brought the child into the world may always play an important role in the formation of the adoptees' sense of self (Nydam, 1999). Being adopted is not as simple as existing in a new family. Both the adoptive and biological parents are important to adoptive identity (Sallee, 1990). As suggested previously, better measurement of adoption identity is needed, paying attention to the hidden self-stigma that adoptees have to overcome as well as tendencies within their environment to suppress exploration of differences. Transnational adoptees likely have a need to develop both identities of ethnicity and adoption in order to feel more secure in their social roles. Measurement of adoption should encompass questions pertaining to the degree to which adoptees feel motivated to explore their adoption history, the degree to which they have successfully used their birthdays to self-explore, and their sense of being chosen by their adoptive parents, experienced as acceptance due to being openly told one's adoption history. Scale construction including these factors or processes should furthermore be validated against existing, relevant adoption constructs such as ethnic identity, adoption adjustment, and self-esteem, so the scale and its potential subfactors can be analyzed for convergent and discriminant validity using the method of the multitrait-multimethod matrix (Campbell & Fiske, 1959) to compare with other measures of similar and dissimilar constructs.

Limitations

Because the study was conducted with a small sample, recruited primarily from two special interest groups, and assessed using the phenomenological method, natural limitations apply. First, only two of the participants were male, which potentially skews the results toward female-focused experiences. Findings are not representative of all adult Korean-American adoptees and may not generalize to male adoptees or adoptees within other settings. Also, because the study was phenomenological in nature and focused on obtaining a variation in experience, it does not explain the process of reaching such experience per se. However, because the sample was purposive in nature and obtained through recruitment from special interest groups, it allowed obtainment of the adoption experiences of participants interested in their experience of being adopted. The sampling as such appeared to have adequately assessed the range of identity in being Korean-American and adopted and thus is valid as hypotheses for elements that can explain its development. The concepts developed herein can thus serve as departures for additional research into adoption identity awareness.

Clinical implications and future research

This study revealed a number of elements related to adoptive identity. Clinicians and adoption services are encouraged to gain an in-depth understanding of the subjective experiences of adoptees by assessing the degree of adoptive identity development and facilitate destigmatization of adoption and exploration of personal and social differences related to being adopted. The results from this study suggest that some adoptees identify positively with being adopted and as such come to terms with being adopted through a process of becoming aware of differences. Because adoption is a hidden stigma and the need to belong is of primary and earlier importance than the need to differentiate, our results suggest that adoptees may not want to acknowledge or pursue exploring this part of themselves. Caregivers and professionals thus need to be aware that the adoptee may feel stigmatized, holding concerns about such things as whether, how, and when to reveal their adopted status.

Although just a few identified positively in being adopted, the adoption history subtheme of feeling pride and a sense of personal meaning attached to one's adoption experience can prepare people positively for taking on responsibilities, including parenting. As such, adoption identity is likely a marker of health, not specifically moving from "rejection of difference," but toward an "acknowledgment of difference" (Kirk, 1964). In addition, research showing that the ease parents feel in regard to discussing the child's family of origins relates to ethnic identity (Lee & Song, 2009) and that children left with the message that they cannot talk about their adoption feel there is something wrong with them (Groza & Rosenberg, 2001). The current study suggests that birthdays are important to developing adoption awareness and make up a natural psychosocial marker and event that clinicians may use to facilitate exploration of adoption identity. For example, through examining the meanings attached to personal experiences of one's birthdays one can better understand root variables in an adoption identity.

Conclusion

Adult transnational adoptees may experience various social and psychological struggles when addressing their adopted identity. From this study we can derive an adoption identity scale that may provide insight into the development of an adoption identity, resulting in various support systems encouraging one's adoption identity including their history, being available to process the meaning of birthdays, and the role of the biological family in acknowledging a sense of difference.

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