
ICAV Perspective Paper

Lived Experience of Racism in Intercountry Adoption



21 April 2022

Introduction

On 3 April 2022, ICAV ran an online discussion consultation in response to the Australian Human Rights Commission's (AHRC) Concept Paper for a National Anti-Racism Framework. We gathered together to discuss and provide consultative input which we submitted to the AHRC. We also wanted to give a more in-depth nuanced perspective into the lived experiences of racism as it is a topic that is missing in Australian forums and even more so, within the global intercountry adoption discussion spaces.

Racism is an experience we can live daily as intercountry and transracial adoptees. What makes our lived experience complex and nuanced is that we are born a different skin colour to our mostly-white adoptive families who often do not understand racism, can dismiss that racism happens to us, and as you will read in some shared experiences here, the racism we live can sometimes happen from *within* our very own adoptive families. When we experience racism, it's an extra layer of violence and trauma that can compound our other underlying layers of loss and grief, accumulating over our lifetime to become an unacknowledged, unsupported, and unrecognised mountain of traumas.

In this paper, we aim to break down the myth that the proximity to whiteness within our adoptive families somehow shields us from experiencing racism. If only we could be adopted into families who understand and recognise racism in all its forms and are equipped to help us work through our racial traumas. Imagine if these adoptive families could be our allies! That would be such a positive change from the status quo. Instead of our trauma being compounded by naivety and ignorance, we'd actually have somewhere to turn to for validation, support, and taught how to be better equipped!

Within the many experiences shared here, we expose the fact that racism exists for us — a previously unrecognised minority group within the Australian community who aren't typically seen as experiencing racism. We are a community that sits 'in-betweens', in the no-man's land of belonging - not clearly fitting into the already identified 'refugee' or 'immigrant' category, but more akin to the Stolen Generation of Aboriginal Australians. We have lost not only our kin and often belong to minority ethnic groups within our birth countries, but we also lose our country, culture, language and religion in a very physical sense due to being exported from our country of origin and having our origins and right to identity legally severed forever. We provide many ideas and suggestions for how

racism within our community could be addressed and provide valuable input to government that could be extrapolated to the wider community.

We are experts in facing racism. We identify the deep need for education in all sectors of our community of what racism is and how it impacts people. We also show from the age range within this paper, that racism is definitely alive and well and hasn't changed substantially since our first cohorts were adopted here from overseas in the late 60s right through to adoptions facilitated within the past 20 years. As one of our consultation participants said so eloquently, *"Having an anti racism framework is only useful if the highest levels within our government embrace and acknowledge that racism exists within this country."* That means from our Prime Minister to the Education Department and Police Department; all levels of government needs to be advocates and champions to make visible the racism that exists and help bring about much needed change. We alone as individuals cannot change the ugly face of racism but we can speak out and put a name and voice to it. Empowering ourselves by speaking out against racism and naming it, is a step in the right direction.

I want to especially mention the adoptees raised in other countries - adoptees born in Mali and adopted to France, two adoptees raised in the USA and one in Switzerland who wanted to join in with Australians in this paper. I know our experiences of racism are a global phenomenon, not just an Australian intercountry adoptee experience. We need more conversations and forums to raise awareness of racism within the intercountry adoptee community and wider global communities.

I thank our amazing 19 adoptees who contributed within this paper, and the others who participated in our AHRC consultation. Without your courage to share what is often painful memories and experiences, we would not be able to put our voices together to show how significantly we experience racism and wish to do something to address it. Your input and suggestions for how to deal with racism are highly valued and I thank you for your willingness to contribute and participate!

Lynelle Long

Founder & Executive Director

InterCountry Adoptee Voices (ICAV)

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Ada

Born in Hong Kong, adopted to Australia in the 1970s.

I have experienced racism in multiple forms throughout my life, the hardest thing about the racism I have experience is when it comes from my own immediate family and also my extend family.

Both my adopted parents natural children are very good at talking in other accents and at one stage I said to my brothers they were being racists in the way they make fun of the Chinese people and the accents they were making. I was told I was being over sensitive and they are not racist. I also get a lot of passing comments from family members saying it's about time we have another Asian baby in the family. Due to my lived experience regarding racism within my own family, I hardly ever talk to them about anything to do with my adoption anymore.

Moving forward I think and feel more education needs to be conducted about racism in the home and also at the university education as the next generation will be teaching the young people of today. If racism is not explained - how it is damaging to people, this will then lead to bullying and racism in our schools and society.

Adama

Born in Mali, adopted to Switzerland in 1986.

I experienced racism in my life as an intercountry adoptee born in Mali and adopted to Switzerland. How did it impact me? Well, a feeling of injustice and if I compare for example with my little brother who is two years younger than me, all his life he was never controlled by the police while I can't count the number of times I've been controlled. The other injustice I felt was that having white parents who therefore did not know this experience, they did not understand when I talked about it.

Whereas my African friends understood right away when I was talking about some of my experiences like for example, certain teachers who were a bit borderline. For my father on the opposite end of the spectrum, he was disappointed that I was not fitting well in school. When I talked to my parents about issues at school, racism always had to be the last option. It was like, "Are you sure you didn't do anything wrong?" they always put it back and questioned my word. When talking to friends of mine or their parents they understood right away but I remember well my mother started to take me seriously when I spoke about those stories of racism. It was when she became very good friend with one of her colleagues who was Congolese and told her about some of her son's issues that she began to take mine seriously.

Then to the question how to improve things I think there should be mandatory training before being able to adopt and in this training there should be a course on racism and inviting an adopted person to testify. If there is really a misunderstanding, I have another example that comes to my mind. When I was shopping with my mother and I saw very well that the saleswomen were following me, I told my mother and she told me, "No, you're being paranoid, I didn't notice anything". So really, train adoptive parents in this, explain to them that racism still exists. Another example, my parents were eager to read books on racism in foreign countries like on Martin Luther King and to watch Uncle Tom's Cabin telling me, "Look what is happening to black people in the United States" and on the other hand when I was saying that I was being checked all the time by the cops their answer was always, "But if you have done nothing wrong why does it bother you?"

In French

OK alors réponse à la première question c'est oui bien sûr Comment ça ma impacté et ben un sentiment d'injustice et si je compare par exemple à mon petit frère qui a deux ans de moins que moi lui de toute sa vie il s'est jamais fait contrôler par la police à pied alors que moi je peux pas compter le nombre de fois ou je me suis fait contrôler et l'autre injustice que j'ai ressenti c'était que du faite d'avoir des parents blancs qui n'ont donc pas connu cette expérience il ne comprenait pas quand j'en parlais avec mes potes africains de certaines de mes expériences par exemple certains profs qui était un peu limite et pigeaient tout de suite mais moi mon père c'est l'autre ça me déçoit à l'école il retombe tout alors que quand moi j'en parle à mes parents bah pour le racisme devait toujours être la dernière option C'était du genre mais t'es sûr que t'as rien fait il remettait toujours en doute ma parole alors que je parlais à des potes à moi ou à leurs parents il comprenait tout de suite mais je me souviens bien ma mère a commencé à me prendre au sérieux quand je parlais de ces histoires de racisme c'est quand elle est devenu très amie avec une de ses collègues qui était congolaise et qui lui raconter certains déboires de son fils qu'elle commencé à prendre au sérieux . Ensuite à la question comment améliorer les choses je pense qu'il devrait y avoir une formation obligatoire avant d'être apte à adopter et dans cette formation il faudrait mettre un cours sur leur racisme et inviter une personne adopté à témoigner si il y a vraiment une incompréhension je reprends l'exemple qui me vient en tête quand j'étais dans les magasins avec ma mère et que je voyais très bien que les vendeuses me suivaient et que je lui disais elle me disait mais non t'es parano Pas du tout j'ai rien remarqué Donc vraiment former les parents adoptants à cela ; leur expliquer que ça existe toujours et je suis encore à l'exemple ou à mes parents c'était les premiers à lire des bouquins sur le racisme a L'étranger genre sur Martin Luther King et à regarder la Case de l'oncle Tom en me disant regarde comme elle est noir se faire aux États-Unis par contre quand moi je racontais que je vous ai tout le temps contrôler par les flics la réponse était toujours mais si t'as rien à te reprocher pourquoi ça te dérange Voilà ma petite contribution désolé pour l'écriture un peu dyslexique.

Aimee

Born in Taiwan, adopted to Australia in 1980.

In terms of racism, I have experienced many different types. However, I am going to address a particular type of racism that is extremely frustrating. Despite the fact, that all Australians except the Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islander people have ancestry from elsewhere, the words Caucasian and Australian, have and continue to remain incorrectly assimilated. As a result, I am confronted with an ignorant racism.

If you have a Caucasian appearance and also speak English with an Australian accent, then you are fortunate to receive an automatic exemption. You are not expected to explain where your ancestry comes from. You can proudly claim, "I am Australian mate!" However due to my Asian appearance, the aforementioned is for the most part, not my experience.

I often come across Australians who are absolutely adamant that they are 'just Australian', whilst simultaneously denying me the same Australian status. They are determined to satisfy their curiosity with regards to my ancestry. "I am Australian mate", is not an acceptable answer.

When I have challenged this double standard, I have often been accused of having an 'identity crisis' and denying who I apparently really am. In fact, it would take more than 20 years and thanks to the Irish, that I would feel accepted, included and good enough, for the first time in my life. This occurred, when I won the South Australia Rose of Tralee Quest and was selected to represent South Australians of Irish descent at the International Rose of Tralee.

Gabbie

Born in Sri Lanka, adopted to Australia in 1981; clinical Social Worker.

I have experienced many and varied forms of racism in my 40 years of living, walking and breathing in this world. It has impacted me in so many ways, how do I write them all down? I have grown up navigating this white washed world as a proud woman of colour, however being proud of who I am and what I have become in my life are not mutually exclusive. It has taken a lot of hard work, soul searching and conscious reflection many times over to become the most evolved person I am to date, and I am constant work in progress.

I have many family stories of racism, ones which now can be seen for what they were, in the time and place and the generational context from the speaker, not a reflection of my family as a whole.

One of the earliest memories I have is being told that a member of my family said, "No black child is going to carry my name!" But once I was put into my family member's arms, all the racist bullshit fell away and I was treated like everyone else. As I grew up, I in turn had great love and respect for this person, I forgave their ignorance and focussed on our shared love of cricket and footy!

I have had experiences during my primary school years that I can still remember as if it were yesterday. Being kicked in the shins for sticking up of myself, for getting into physical altercations with racist bullies. For having teachers say to me, "I am ashamed to come from the same country as you".

I have been called the N word more times than I can count. I have experienced overt, covert, intentional and unintentional racism throughout my life. I have been racially profiled by the police, been followed around in shopping centres by security guards.

I have worked in workplaces where people have said to me "where are you from" and what about your "real parents". I have had people say to me, "Your English is so good for someone who was not born here". I have had a boss not talk to me for months at a time because of something he perceived I had done wrong. But it wasn't the case, he was just a racist asshole and I was so glad to leave that workplace and step into the workplace of my dreams!

I have not being given opportunities to further my career because of people's attitudes, resentments and petty jealousy, which really boils down to, we don't want to work for a person of colour.

I have been underestimated, dismissed, undervalued and not seen my whole life, which is why I probably am drawn to social work and the fight for the underdog and to try and dismantle the structural inequalities that remain so entrenched in our society.

I am a fighter, I am a social justice warrior, I am a firm believer in the power to make a difference and a positive impact on people's actions, I believe in kindness and giving people a fair-go.

How has this impacted me.... Well I consider myself as a person who thinks and reflects deeply about my actions and decisions. I have had the "what to do if you are stopped by the police" conversation with my children, in the wake of the well published murders of George Floyd, Tamar Rice, Brianna Taylor, and not to forget the tragic tale of our first nations peoples with the highest incarceration rate for young people and all the Black deaths in custody in which no-one is or has been accountable. I am sad, I am angry, I am dismayed that this is the current state of affairs that my children and I live in. Yet I do have hope - hope that we can build a community that brings about change, to work with like-minded individuals who share my passion and drive for positive change.

My experiences of racism have shaped the person I am, the parent I am and the social worker that I am. It impacts on my thoughts, actions and deeds. I am mindful with how people view me, I am respectful in the face of racist pigs, and I refuse to be drawn down to their level. I think it has had an impact on my mental health when I was younger, it caused a lot of self-doubt and searching for my place in this world.

I think that one of my saving graces has been the reconnection with my birth family and culture. Getting to know them is getting to know myself! I have spent the last 22 years knowing, growing and loving my family and I am thankful every day that I sit in a unique position where I am part of two worlds and I can sit comfortably in both.

What would I suggest be done to better address the racism experienced by intercountry/ transracial adoptees? I believe that adoption does not have to be the first resort. I believe that keeping family together in their birth countries with support via sponsorship/ education/ income generating activities would be beneficial to adoptees in general but specifically in terms of their mental health and connection to their roots and

cultures. If adoptions do have to occur - maintaining a relationship with family is imperative! This includes birth parents, aunties, uncles, cousins, grandparents and siblings.

There needs to be a greater emphasis on the adopter's thoughts and feelings in relation to adopting a child of colour. Deep dive into their history and experiences, get them to take annual courses on the impact of racism and how to be an anti-racism ally/advocate. Ask them to look at their friendship circles, is it diverse? Does it represent a wide range of culturally appropriate, socio-economic, gender diverse people?

I think we should try collectively to share our stories and experiences, in the hope that with great knowledge comes great responsibility - and that is everyone's business!

Gabby

Born in New Zealand, transracial adoptee from 1966 residing in Australia.

I was born in 1966 in Auckland New Zealand. I am 100% Chinese and at the time of writing, I am 56 years old. I started coming out of the adoption fog at 48 years of age, after meeting my birth mother in 2004. It seems old but to clarify, at 48, I finally connected with other Asian adoptees and found validation, support and the language to express my feelings around my life experience.

I have a huge respect for parents. I am a step parent but have not done the heavy lifting that parents do. It's hard being a parent. Throw adoption or fostering into the mix and that becomes very hard. Throw transracial adoption into that mix and the challenges become even more so. These are my thoughts around racism. All of our experiences are different.

I am very happy. I see the value of good relationships with friends, peers and family, and acknowledge that all of us have experienced trauma at some point in our lives. However, I have struggled with racism my entire life with my difference pointed out almost daily by classmates, co-workers and friends. Not too regularly, I have also been attacked and harassed on the street and was bullied badly throughout my school years. Jokes and micro-aggressions seem harmless and it took me decades to understand why I was constantly angry: an innocent question about my name / my origins / my nationality seems innocuous, but day after day, often from complete strangers makes a person exhausted, wary and sad / angry. I often withdraw.

I have this to say - I could not tell you this at age 12, 18, 25, 30 or even 40. It took decades to begin to process, understand and articulate what I am feeling.

Dear adoptive parents. Here is what I would like you to know about my life experience as a transracial adoptee:

■ Please understand my life experience is, was and will always be different to that of my white peers, siblings and parents. Like it or not, quite often we transracial adoptees are treated very differently to our white siblings and peers. I noted a big change in people's behaviour towards me when they saw one of my parents come into view. Racists are sneaky – they are not going to say stuff with you around. And it

comes in many subtle forms: how many brown kids are watched like a hawk as soon as they enter a store? How many brown girls are told they talk too much or are too loud/naughty when their white classmates are termed 'enthusiastic' or 'confident' for the same behaviour?

■ I was raised colourblind. It was the 60s, 70s and 80s. We knew no better. I was 55 years old when the penny finally dropped about my own family's response to my experience with racism. An older sister said, "But we just assumed you were one of us," (therefore, it was impossible for you to experience racism). Another piece of the puzzle solved. However, my 7 year old me would not thank my family for the dismissal, harsh words or outright denial that anything had taken place. Things are different now. We have resources and so much information available.

■ If you are triggered by the terms: white privilege, white fragility and wilful ignorance then think long and hard before adopting a child of different race to you. We are looking to you to teach us, to have our backs and stand up for us. And this includes your circle of friends, your own family and peers. I was raised in the age where children were seen and not heard. I accepted outright racist comments/acts from neighbours, friends, extended family, and later, colleagues because I felt that it was my lot or I was undeserving of better. But think about what that does to someone over a lifetime! Is it any wonder that we adoptees are 4 times more likely to have substance abuse or will commit suicide? Let's try to change that.

■ Believe us. I was 5 or 6 years old when I reported my first racist incident to my parents (and this was because I was scared. I didn't report the 'ching chong' chants, the pulling back of eyes and harsher treatment by certain nuns because I was brown and clearly born of sin - those were a daily occurrence). Two much larger and older boys cornered me and pulled down my pants to see if 'my bum was the same as the other girls'. Horrific and it still haunts me to this day. In response to sharing what happened, I was punished and told not to lie. So I stopped. It was clearly not safe for me to speak up and I didn't want to be punished for it (to be fair I think it was the mention of private parts that had them more outraged). I left NZ for good in 1988. I put distance between myself and my family because of the above and some bonds were sadly broken for a while. Do you want this for your own family? If your children do not trust you to have their back they may be reticent to report more serious stuff like abuse, bullying and even date rape/ domestic violence.

■ Just because they don't tell you doesn't mean it doesn't happen. I finally found the courage to speak up in the last two years. I cut friends, extended family members and suppliers for my own mental health and sanity but also I finally understood that I didn't have to engage with such people.

■ Words hurt. And the hurt lasts a lifetime. So those jokes you make about other races — their food, shopping habits, hoarding, driving skills ... all those lazy stereotypes that the Australian media like to peddle - well, your kids are listening. When we see racist incidents reported be dismissed or downplayed by the media (especially if it is a footy star/ celebrity accused), how do you think that makes us feel? We don't need to hear:

'They weren't racist to me – are you sure it happened?'

'What did you do to make them act in this way?'

'Rise above it!'

'Ignore it!'

'Can't you take a joke?'

'I'm sure Xxxx didn't mean to be offensive...'

This ain't it. Do better.

■ Quite often we are rejected by our own race – we are seen as 'too white', too culturally ignorant, and our names are white. This can be very confronting. We grow up, study, work and socialise generally in white spaces. We adapt to our environments to fit in but can be treated very harshly by our own race because of this. A heritage camp and trip once a year can't help with this and if we are living in a white country – it is understandable that we just want to fit in/ fade into the background like everyone else. But we can't. Don't shame us for trying to survive in our own environments.

■ Racism is hard to process when the perpetrator looks like a member of your own family. An Asian child who grows up with their own cultural background watches how their parents react and behave when they are faced with racist incidents. They see how their parents behave and speak to the offender. Nothing may be said but there is a shared experience within the family and younger members can learn from their elders – and even grow up to challenge passive responses.

Jacki

Born in South Korea, adopted to Australia in 1986.

I have experienced racism growing up. Mostly school playground kind of stuff and pretty harmless compared to some people's experiences. But I think it has kept with me and shaped my thoughts, self-perception and self-esteem to this day. I grew up on the Sunshine Coast, Queensland, where there were very few non-Caucasian people. There were only a handful of Asian kids in the whole primary school so we stuck out like a sore thumb. I had friends so I was never lonely or ostracised but it was a regular occurrence that the 'mean boys' would taunt me and call me names. They'd pull their eyes back and go, 'Ching chong chinaman' and say things like, 'Do you know karate?' I can't remember if the teachers ever knew about it but it continued for most of my time at this school until I left in Grade 5 when my parents and I moved away. I know my mum must have gone to the school to complain a couple of times but I'm not sure it achieved much.

Sometimes my parents bring it up and lament how they feel bad that I was bullied when I was younger and they wished they could have done more for me because they can see how it's still affecting me now. I left home and moved to Brisbane as soon as I finished high school because I couldn't wait to get away from the Sunshine Coast and start a new life as an independent adult. I remember walking around feeling a sense of belonging and relief seeing so many Asian faces, feeling like I was anonymous and fit in. Not like on the Sunshine Coast, where I used to get stared at just going to the supermarket. It still hasn't changed much - every time I go to the Sunshine Coast to visit my parents I still feel like I don't really belong there and I still get some odd stares from people.

As an adult I haven't experienced too much racism, thankfully. Mainly just the odd encounter with people who have an odd demeanour or kind of look right through you or ignore you. It's hard to describe to people who have never experienced racism but those who have, know what I mean. When it comes to dating, I've had a lot of men approach me because they have an Asian fetish which can become very tiresome and frustrating. I've had a couple of guys even break up with me because I don't live up to their 'Asian girlfriend' fantasy, I guess. I'm pretty strong, independent and demand respect and it doesn't sit well with some men who just want a nice docile domesticated asian woman(!)

I actually didn't have my first boyfriend until I was 21 years old (after I had finished university and was working full time) because I was so shy and introverted and had low

self-esteem. I always felt like I wasn't good enough, wasn't pretty enough, wasn't 'white' enough. When I was a kid I used to stare at myself in the mirror playing with my eyes just wishing that I could have double eyelids. It wasn't until I was in my mid-20s that I embraced my Asianness and grew to love my Asian features. I now love and accept my Asian-Australianness but it's taken a long time to get to this point of embracing both sides.

In terms of addressing the issue of racism experienced by future transracial and intercountry adoptees, I would definitely see the benefit in post-adoption services such as one-on-one counselling, family counselling and group events/activities for adoptees to connect and share their experiences. While there's not much that can be done about kids being bullied, just by being able to share their experiences and not feel so alone will go a long way. Also, connecting adult adoptees with counselling/psychology services where the practitioner has experience working with transracial adoptees would be very helpful. I actually sought out this kind of service a few years ago while I was trying to work through some things but even though the psychologist I had was sympathetic, she had no real concept of what I was going through or how to help me.

James

Born in Colombia with African origins, adopted to Australia in 1994.

Racism in Australia can be the obvious, such as racist slurs, attacks and jokes, but for me it was also less direct actions or micro-aggressions, both of which shaped who I am and how I feel about myself today. Growing up and still regularly today, I experience things such as:

- Studying law and people always being surprised and/or asking “I thought you’d be studying physiotherapy or sports science’.
- People clutching their belongings and/or locking their cars when I would walk past.
- Not being able to wear a hoodie or have my hair braided- without being labeled a gangster/thug or having bags checked.
 - Always having my bag searched when leaving a store.
 - Being followed around stores and watched like a hawk when I, just like the other 20 customers, would simply be window shopping.
 - People touching my hair with and without asking.
 - Having to conform to a stereotype type to fit in and or to be accepted.
 - Being sexually fetishised at an age when I was too young to know what it really meant.
- Being taken aside for special checks at the airport and treated with more suspicion.
 - Technically being Australian in citizenship but not always being fully accepted.
 - Teachers and other students, referring to pink/cream pencils/paints as skin colour.
- Being that friend who often got “randomly” searched for drugs at the club or whom people would ask to buy drugs from.

In order to address racism in Australia, I fundamentally believe that one of our very first courses of action, should be to ensure we appropriately address, acknowledge and educate ourselves about Australia’s colonial history and its past and present impacts. As a society, it is hard to progress forward when we do not know where we came from, both in terms of our history here at home and the larger impacts of colonialism as it shapes the world and global notions of race today.

This is especially relevant in relation to micro-aggressions, a few of which have been outlined above. Often these micro-aggressions are done out of ignorance and are based on factual misconceptions or hurtful stereotypes, that could slowly be lessened through education and exposure.

Jessica

Born in South Korea, adopted to the USA and residing in Australia; academic.

I was one of the researchers who did a nationwide survey on Asian Australian experiences of racism during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the things to remember though is that anti-Asian racism is not a new phenomenon (i.e., dating back to the Gold Rush). In my 2015 article, this excerpt is very relevant, in particular the last sentence quoting Vasta:

"Many of the Korean adoptees I spoke with had so effectively embodied a white cultural identity that they also embodied a white racial identity to the extent that they 'forgot' that their bodies were not white. Therefore, despite being shining examples of cultural assimilation, their 'non-white' bodies prevented them from being seen and accepted as fully assimilated, based on a hegemonic view of national identity (e. g. as Australian, American, Swedish, etc.) as being synonymous with a white racial and cultural identity (Hage 1998). These experiences of 'difference' in their adoptive countries support Vasta's (2013: 211) argument that a shared sense of belonging 'remains meaningless in the face of racism and exclusion by the majority cultural group and by its institutions'." (Walton 2015, 409)

I would like to reiterate is that adoption doesn't begin and end with the legal or illegal transfer of a child from one set of parents to another, and the adoptive parents need to understand not simply what it means to be transcultural but moreover transracial. The transcultural remains largely superficial because adoptees, particularly those as babies, are not socialised into their birth culture and so a deeper understanding of culture including language and cultural practices / social behaviours are not "transferred" as such. Instead, while adoptees have to adapt to their new cultural context and can indeed become culturally Australian, the dominant (explicit and implicit) views of Australian as "white" mean that being Australian is commonly associated with being white. Transracial adoptees of colour cannot become white in the same way that they can become culturally Australian. So more than a focus on culture, adoptive families need to be aware of what it means to be a transracial family. Unfortunately, in Australia - race becomes a proxy for culture so people talk about culture but not 'race' (see my article, Walton 2020). Talking about race doesn't mean not talking about culture - whatever families can do to connect the birth culture depending on how the adoptee feels about it can potentially be a positive one. However, all that culture work cannot replace work to have better racial literacy.

Jules

Born in Mali, adopted to France in 1998.

I have experienced racism more times than I can count and in the many shapes and forms it can take.

Racism impacts me every day. Not in the sense that it is on my mind every single second, or that every day someone shouts some racial slur at me, no. Rather, just like Toni Morrison, racism distracts me. Every day I wonder, every day something happens that makes me wonder whether it has anything to do with race or not. One of the repercussions of racism is the constant wondering. Wondering whether it had a part to play in me not getting a job or not even getting through to the interview stage of the job I applied for, despite having all the right qualifications. Or whether the sudden shift in behaviour of the estate agent from rude to overly nice coincided with the moment they noticed the white lady next to me was actually my mother. Or wondering what this cutie meant exactly when on our first date the first word she used to describe me was “spicy”.

Racism is about violence. Violence that can be physical but that goes way beyond that as well. It is as much in the pain caused by some people’s overtly racist comments or actions as it is in the stress and exhaustion of constantly having to be on the lookout for people who mean well but will still perpetuate racism.

To address the racism intercountry adoptees face, I think the first thing to do is to give the floor to the adoptee-led organisations. These communities exist and who better to speak about adoptees’ experiences than adoptees themselves? However, for all of those who fall under the intercountry/transracial adoptée category and wonder what they can do, I think what can be done by everyone is to actively support these groups that are already there. Support them financially with monetary donations so that they can keep organising. Support them by giving them a platform, whether it is on social media, on tv, in the news but supporting also means helping them be more visible I think. And at a smaller scale, by talking about these issues around you, even if you haven’t read a particular book or know a particular organisation, do say that you’ve heard of them, i.e., recommend them to others.

But because not everything should fall onto the individuals and the community, I believe that institutions have the major part to play in all this but they’re also who I

believe in the least. Racism that intercountry/transracial adoptees experience should first and foremost not come from their immediate family, which means investigating adoption candidates' values and politics more thoroughly. It means changing the narrative around adoption by shifting the way it is seen and talked about, by the institutions themselves. It also mean providing funding, a lot of funding to adoptee-led organisations.

It is also important to realise racism experienced by adoptees is not a separate issue from all the other social issues that exist. The fight for social, economic and environmental justice is one that has to be led in every area of our lives where inequalities persist. I think racism experienced by adoptees is not something that can be tackled without touching upon systemic racism as a whole, power relations between countries and class inequalities.

In French

Avez-vous vécu le racisme ?

Une réponse courte à cette question serait oui. Simplement oui. J'ai connu le racisme plus de fois que je ne peux compter, et sous les nombreuses formes et aspects qu'il peut prendre.

Comment cela vous a-t-il affecté ?

Le racisme me touche au quotidien. Pas dans le sens où j'y pense à chaque seconde, ou que chaque jour quelqu'un me crie des insultes raciales, non. Au contraire, tout comme Toni Morrison, le racisme me distrait. Chaque jour, je me demande si il va se passer quelque chose qui me fera me demander si cela a quelque chose à voir avec la race ou non. L'une des répercussions du racisme est l'interrogation constante. Je me demande si cela a joué un rôle dans le fait que je n'ai pas trouvé d'emploi ou que je n'ai même pas réussi à passer l'étape de l'entretien pour l'emploi pour lequel j'ai postulé, malgré toutes les bonnes qualifications. Ou si le changement soudain de comportement de l'agent immobilier de grossier à trop gentil a coïncidé avec le moment où ils ont remarqué que la dame blanche à côté de moi était en fait ma mère. Ou se demander ce que cette mignonne voulait dire exactement quand lors de notre premier rendez-vous, le premier mot qu'elle a utilisé pour me décrire était « épice ». Le racisme, c'est la violence. Une violence qui peut être physique mais qui va bien au-delà aussi. C'est autant dans la douleur causée par les commentaires ou les actions ouvertement racistes de certaines personnes que dans le stress et l'épuisement de devoir constamment être à l'affût de personnes qui veulent bien faire mais perpétuent elles-mêmes le racisme.

Que suggèreriez-vous de faire pour mieux lutter contre le racisme vécu par les adoptés internationaux/transraciaux ?

Je pense que la première chose à faire est de donner la parole aux organisations dirigées par des adoptés. Parce que ces communautés existent, et qui de mieux placé pour parler des expériences des adoptés que les adoptés eux-mêmes ? Cependant, pour tous ceux qui relèvent de la catégorie « adoptés internationaux / transraciaux, et qui se demandent ce qu'ils peuvent faire, je pense que ce que tout le monde peut faire est de soutenir activement ces groupes qui sont déjà là. Soutenez-les financièrement avec des dons afin qu'ils puissent continuer à s'organiser. Soutenez-les en leur donnant une plateforme, que ce soit sur les réseaux sociaux, à la télé, dans l'actualité ; je pense que soutenir c'est aussi aider à être plus visible. Et à plus petite échelle, en parlant de ces questions autour de vous, même si vous n'avez pas lu un livre en particulier ou ne connaissez pas une organisation en particulier, dites que vous en avez entendu parler. Recommandez-les.

Mais parce que tout ne doit pas retomber sur les individus et la communauté, je crois que les institutions ont un rôle majeur à jouer dans tout cela mais elles sont aussi celles en qui je crois le moins. Le racisme que subissent les adoptés internationaux/transraciaux ne doit avant tout pas provenir de leur famille immédiate, ce qui implique d'enquêter plus en profondeur sur les valeurs et la politique des candidats à l'adoption. Cela signifie changer le récit autour de l'adoption en changeant la façon dont elle est vue et dont on parle, par les institutions elles-mêmes. Cela signifie également fournir des fonds, beaucoup de fonds aux organisations dirigées par des adoptés.

Il est également important de réaliser que le racisme vécu par les adoptés n'est pas un problème distinct de tous les autres problèmes sociaux qui existent. Le combat pour la justice sociale, économique et environnementale est celui qui doit être mené dans tous les domaines de notre vie où les inégalités persistent. Je pense que le racisme vécu par les adoptés n'est pas quelque chose qui peut être abordé sans toucher au racisme systémique dans son ensemble, aux relations de pouvoir entre les pays et aux inégalités de classe.

Kadiatou

Born in Mali, adopted to France in 1990.

Yes, I experienced racism. However it took a few years before I could put the accurate words on what I was undergoing, as no-one told me about racism ever before. It was at primary school that I became conscious that a dark skin colour was perceived as a difference. A difference that could entail me being treated differently than my schoolmates, my adoptive parents, or my siblings. How could one put words and understand what does not exist as a concept in a child's mind?

I experienced racism as a violent, unpleasant ordeal, which entailed pain, solitude, lack of understanding, and above all anger and a great feeling of injustice. When I was very young, I was reacting very violently. I responded with physical violence or with moody attitudes. However, with growing up (around age 9-10 years old) I quickly came to understand that that it was only creating additional issues. I then adopted the opposite stance. I focused myself on school work; I was making sure I'd be appreciated as much as possible by people. I wanted to be popular. I was aspiring to fit into the standards of the society. I therefore let go of my nappy hair, swapped them for braids and hair straightening, no matter that this was damaging my hair. I was dressing following popular people's fashion and not how I would have liked. I was trying to use a sophisticated vocabulary with complicated words so that people could see me as a "good acquaintance". This entailed my rejection of Africa and I was then feeling ill at ease when meeting other black people. It was taboo as none of my relatives was speaking about racism. I therefore felt lonely and powerless.

Here are some of my suggestions as for what could be done to better address the racism experienced by intercountry/transracial adoptees:

- Mandatory training on racism and related matters for the future candidates of adoption.
- Accompany and monitor adoptive families after the adoption to ensure that adopted children are not subject to racism.
- Conduct campaigns to raise awareness on racism in adoption involving adoptees to share their experience.
- Deny the right to adopt to those who express racist opinions or are refusing to adopt from certain countries or areas for racist reasons.

- Ensure that adoptees within the same household are all coming from the same source country / area.

In French

1/ Avez-vous vécu le racisme ?

Oui, cependant il m'a fallu quelques années avant de mettre des mots exacts sur ce que je vivais car on ne m'avait jamais parlé de racisme auparavant. C'est à l'école primaire que j'ai pris conscience que la couleur de peau noire était perçue comme une différence qui pouvait faire que je recevais un traitement différent par rapport à mes camarades, à mes parents adoptifs ou à mes frères et sœurs. Comment mettre des mots et comprendre ce qui n'existe pas dans l'esprit d'un enfant...

2/ Comment cela vous a-t-il affecté ?

Le racisme a été perçu comme une expérience violente, désagréable ; ayant pour conséquences la douleur, la solitude, l'incompréhension mais surtout de la colère et un grand sentiment d'injustice.

Très jeune, je réagissais de manière très violente. Je répondais par de la violence physique, par une attitude boudeuse. Mais j'ai vite compris en grandissant vers l'âge de 9-10 ans que cela ne faisait qu'apporter des problèmes supplémentaires.

J'ai alors adopté une attitude tout à fait opposée. Je me suis plus concentrée sur mon travail scolaire. Je faisais en sorte d'être appréciée le plus possible par les gens. Je voulais être populaire. J'aspirais à rentrer dans le « moule de la société ». J'abandonnais mes cheveux crépus pour des tresses et des défrisages quitte à m'abimer les cheveux. Je m'habillais selon la mode des gens populaires et non pas comme j'aimais. J'essayais d'employer un langage soutenu avec des mots compliqués pour « être une bonne fréquentation » aux yeux des gens.

Il s'en est suivi un rejet de l'Afrique et je me sentais mal à l'aise lors que je rencontrais d'autres personnes noires.

C'était un sujet tabou car personne dans mon entourage ne parlait de racisme... J'avais donc un sentiment de solitude et d'impuissance.

3/ Que suggérez-vous de faire pour mieux combattre le racisme vécu par les adoptés internationaux/transraciaux ?

- Formation obligatoire des futurs candidats à l'adoption aux questions de racisme.
- Suivi des familles adoptives post-adoption pour s'assurer que les enfants ne soient pas victimes de racisme.
- Campagne de sensibilisation par les personnes adoptées adultes afin de témoigner du racisme dans l'adoption.
- Refuser les candidats à l'adoption qui refusent certains pays d'origine pour leurs enfants ou qui tiennent des propos racistes.
- Essayer qu'il n'y ait que des adoptions d'un même pays d'origine pour les différents enfants d'une famille adoptive.

Linzi

Born in Sri Lanka, adopted to Australia in 1986.

I would like to link an anti racism framework to our key educational frameworks. This would ensure a broad community understanding of anti-racism and cultural diversity.

As a Sri Lankan adoptee, this is the most important point for me. I went to school with mostly white children, in primary school it was more multi cultural and in high school, it was mostly white. In high school most of the brown girls were either adopted or on Aboriginal scholarships.

A few of my school friends would make black jokes and at first, I laughed along with them. On a few occasions they made me feel so small, it wasn't just what they were saying, it was the fact that they were saying it about me and not one of my other friends intervened, despite most of them looking visibly uncomfortable. When I confronted one of them and commented that what she is saying is racist, she replied, "I couldn't be racist because I'm friends with you".

My daughter is 5 years old and attends a dancing school. Most of the kids there are white. There are a few South Asian girls who also attend. My daughter says they are nice but she doesn't really relate to them. She is like me - we look south Asian but we can't relate to South Asian people very well. We tend to relate more to white Australian people because that's how I've been raised.

There's a little girl at her dancing school. She has white skin and blonde hair and my daughter wants to be friends with the girl but she recoils when my daughter tries to talk to her. I said to my daughter, 'Perhaps she's shy'.. but she said 'No, I think she doesn't like brown people'. That broke my heart to hear my 5 year old say this.

There needs to be more of an educational framework that includes racial awareness and what racism is within daycare centres, preschools and schools. They already celebrate cultural diversity, but what about kids like mine who don't really have a clear culture they relate to?

My Australian adoptive white parents raised me as a white child but my mum would get angry at a child if they asked me why I was brown and yet my parents were white. Talking about skin colour should be okay, not something that's demonised. Not talking about it, shuts down the conversation for kids of all ethnicities and makes it a taboo topic. The change starts with our children. Teaching our children not only to respect each other's cultures and beliefs but most importantly to love and appreciate each other's beautiful and unique appearances.

Madou

Born in Mali, adopted to France in 1990.

I know racism a lot. At work, for example, taking out the trash, and other non rewarding tasks are always allocated to the same people. And this is not due to the bosses but to the other employees. In the stores, they try to give us defective goods, like an end of Levis series with a defect on the label of the back pocket and most often it is to disgust us with work that is why young people submit to dealing drugs, and the day we get caught we are handcuffed at the limit of the fracture of the wrist with a cyst on the wrist as a consequence. Racism has no limits anymore.

In French

Le racisme on le connaît beaucoup dans le travail exemple comme descendre les poubelles toute les tâches qui sont pas enrichissante et toujours les mêmes personnes qui doivent le faire et c'est pas les patrons c'est les employés autre dans les magasins on essaye de nous donner en premier cas les denrées avec des défauts exemple comme une fin de série Levis avec un défaut sur l'étiquette de la poche arrière et le plus fréquemment c'est nous dégoûter du travail voilà pourquoi les jeunes se soumettent bicraver et le jour où on se fait pincer on nous sert les menottes a la limite de la fracture du poignet avec un kyste au poignet comme guise de séquelles le racisme a plus de limites

Meseret

Born in Ethiopia, adopted to Australia in 2009.

Yes I have experienced racism as a teen and also as young adult. The top two worst examples I would like to share. My teachers have made indirect and very direct comments to me while I was in class. One actually asked me in class whether babies are born black or white.

At my work place, I've also had been told to go back to where I came from by a white middle aged man who was not happy with my response regarding a customer issue. He shouted this in front of many people.

Racism is a form of trauma and it is stuck in my mind and body. It has contributed toward the fact that I feel I don't belong which is an everyday struggle for me and many adoptees whom I come into contact with. Racism makes me feel isolated and alone. I also felt powerless in those moments; I couldn't change my skin colour so I just didn't know what to do about it or who I can speak to for support.

I would like to suggest we need to have racism education in schools. It should start when we are young and the teacher should have compulsory education on race and identity.

The public should know racism is a form of abuse and that it is serious - maybe educational materials could be developed and handed out at work places and schools.

I also think children should be taught how to identify what racism is and ways they can receive help after the racism occurs.

Ofir

Born in Colombia, adopted to the USA in 1976.

I unfortunately experienced racism in Middle School, moving in from another town, being an interracial and intercountry adoptee was challenging, to say the least. I defended myself. On the street that I lived there was a big boulder at the top of the hill and the girls spray painted Rico.

Something that didn't even bother me I think by that time I was just so immune to accepting pain that it was just whatever. One time one of the girls said, "Why don't you go back to the black hole"? and I ended up having an altercation with her in the girls locker room. She never said a word to me until I was 45 years old I saw her at one of the stores. I was looking for shoes and she was at the register and she was giving me my change back. I said, "Hi Kerri, do you still have your issues"? she totally ignored me so I said, "You have a very good day."

I will never be okay with adoption, but if it is going to happen, I think that they should pair children with the same race and ethnic background to the family. It is bad enough that we are taken from our families and our roots - this is the least they could do. Imagine walking into a stranger's home and being expected to be smiling and happy and saying mom and dad to them. Being so young, I knew what was happening but I couldn't explain it. I was in complete darkness until I learned how to speak their language.

Adoption robbed me of my entire life! Those American people that adopted me robbed me of my life! All the adults in Colombia and in the United States that were involved with my adoption they robbed me of my life! I am grateful for myself that I made it to the end, and I'm very sad for those that didn't due to being adopted!

Life is supposed to be about choices and adoptees did not have that choice! And after all the b***** that we go through of finding our families and our roots, you would think that with all the technology available, they would make it a lot easier for adoptees to get their records, get their paperwork and find their families. Just this evening I was watching Laverne and Shirley and one of the episodes it was talking about adoption and one of the nurses at the hospital said, "If you're adopted, you don't have a right to look at your records." Having to also deal with racism is the last thing an adoptee wants to deal with!

Roopali

Born in India, adopted to Australia in 2005.

I have experienced lots of racism from birth till now. My whole life, as a child I was told I was a Hindu and was born in a low socio economic class. This placed my whole life on a fixed social status of being labourers even though my family was Buddhist and nomads. Because of this, I lived many experiences of racial discrimination.

In 2005, I was 12 years old and adopted into a white middle class Australian family. My parents were white and I was a dark child. At school I got told numerous times that I should go back to my country. I did not understand any of this and it confused me a lot. It made me feel like I did not belong here and no-one wanted to be my friend simply because I was black in a white community.

I grew up feeling ashamed of being dark and I did not want to be part of my white family. I did not feel comfortable to call them my mum and dad. I felt I did not belong and after I turned 17 years old, I left home and continue to live alone.

I think that education at early school, from kindergarten to University, should have compulsory subjects about respect and making people aware of differences and celebrating different cultures and races, teaching how to accept our community of different coloured people and cultures.

Also, racism should be taken seriously. Those who discriminate need to be taught about the importance of respect and how their actions impact others, plus there should be punishment for certain levels of racism. Otherwise on a larger scale, bad things happen - for example War World II and the mass genocide of different races.

Samanthi

Adopted from Sri Lanka to Australia in 1985; Social Worker

As a Sri Lankan adoptee living in NSW Australia, my brown skin is visually distinctive from the white Australian family and community that surrounds me. In my life, I have experienced racism in a variety of forms including overt, systemic, covert and positive racism.

Systemic and Societal Racism

I have lived in Australia with my white adoptive family since being two months of age. To provide some context in 1985 when I arrived in Australia it had been:

- Only 12 years since **The White Australia Policy** had ended in 1973, (The Immigration Restriction Act).
- Only 15 years since **The Stolen Generation** had ended in 1970.
- Only 5 years since Australian **Mother and Babies homes** had stopped functioning in 1980.

The White Australia Policy and The Stolen Generation relate to racial discrimination while Mother and Babies homes relate to religious and gender discrimination. All three influenced the Racist Gendered Australian Society I grew up in.

Mother and Babies homes were rife in the 50s to the 90s. This involved non-married mothers being sent to Homes (Magdalene Laundry's) to perform unpaid work until they gave birth. In these homes often run by Nuns, the mothers were subject to extreme discrimination and poor treatment. Often being blackmailed and coerced or tricked into relinquishing their babies. Only 9 years ago on 21 March 2013 did then Prime Minister Julia Gillard apologise on behalf of the Australian Government to people affected by forced adoption or removal policies and practices. The apology was delivered in the Great Hall of Parliament House, Canberra.

For intercountry adoptees, our own birth mothers were undoubtedly largely treated in the same discriminatory manner and were left unsupported due to religious, gender and socio-economic/class discrimination. Across many non-white countries, known baby farms existed in which young women were held against their will and sexually assaulted in order to get them pregnant and produce a baby/babies to be adopted by white parents

in western countries. During and after the Vietnamese and Korean Wars, many Asian families didn't understand that they would never see their children again and believed the support to be temporary and within their own country / culture. Within Australia white unmarried mothers were coerced to give up their babies to other white couples unable to conceive. So, there was a total disregard for the deep and lasting connection between a baby / child and their birth mother. (*Interesting fact: Feto-maternal microchimerism – genetic cells of the baby travel across the placenta and become part of the birth mother and genetic cells from the mother travel across the placenta and become part of the baby*).

Adoptive families from the 50s to the 90s were encouraged to bring up their adoptive children “as if they were their own” which on one hand can seem a lovely sentiment except that it has undertones of racial whitewashing in children who are visually distinctive and easily identifiable as nonbiological children. It sets up a sort of purgatory for intercountry adoptees because our racial and physical difference were “ignored” while simultaneously the cause of multiple levels of discrimination daily over the entirety of our lives in Australia. Our racial differences are out there for all to see which allowed targeted racism to occur, meanwhile we have been unsupported with little or no tools to develop a real and deep racial identity and pride. And how could our white parents teach us that which they did not know, did not understand, or (due to underlying societal systems built on white superiority) did not believe we should be proud of our origins?

I grew up in a society that normalised and internalised white colonial ideology: revering whiteness as “civilised and righteous” while devaluing, ridiculing and othering people of East Asian, South Asian, African and Aboriginal origins. There was white saviour type thinking (somewhat) responsible for The Stolen Generation of Aboriginal children who were stripped of their family, racial identity, and cultural identity and had no say when these elements were replaced with whiteness. Australia has become very well practiced at turning a blind eye to the value of non-white people and their cultures.

For myself, Australian Society has shown me through the media that I am not allowed, accepted, or deserving of belonging (there were no people of my colour and race on TV until I was 31 years old when *The Mindy Project* aired on Australian TV). I am currently 36 years old. My white brother and sister at any stage in their lives could / can turn on any channel and have a role model or see a character of their own race and gender. This is because in Australia (a country that happily calls itself multicultural) white people were / are not interested in seeing non-white races on TV. They were just

competition for white actors and could drive down views because the white population didn't find them attractive or relatable. And culturally I am white, so I know this is true. I know I had more difficulty finding employment as a teenager because the sentiment "give an Aussie a job" was widespread in the white Hicksville community (1hr out of Sydney) where I lived/live.

Growing up, many white people I knew when in populations of non-Anglo Australians made comments to the effect of "let's spot the Aussie" without any insight into the oddness that they would identify a white blonde (Lara Bingle type) as Australian as opposed to an Aboriginal Brown/dark-skinned (Cathy Freeman type). But the advertising campaign launched by Tourism Australian in 2006 (under the approval of Scott Morrison, who was then managing director of Tourism Australian) thought of course Lara Bingle is the perfect icon of an Australian, not a person of Aboriginal descent welcoming people to country.

How racism has impacted my quality of life

These experiences leave me feeling a deep sense of abandonment, shame and then intense anger. As a transracial adoptee, I lost not only my birth family but also my country of origin, cultural identity and racial identity. I was fractured from adults of my own race and culture who could authentically role model racial pride and teach culture to me. Because of this, I have been unable to develop a cohesive identity or a sense of racial pride. However, from being brought up (as if I were white), I do have a real and true understanding of how deeply racist a country Australia is.

Possible Avenues of Support

■ Equitable and consistent policies for intercountry and domestic adoptees

Policies for intercountry adoptees need to be consistent with policies for minority races who are domestically adopted. These domestic foster children and adoptees are extended protections that acknowledge the importance of birth family connection (family finding, family contact, family tree information) and the ongoing need for access to cultural knowledge and practices (cultural practices and norms, cultural dress, music and dance, history, sports and games, and martial arts). It makes no sense that intercountry adoptees who are dealing with more points of loss and racial alienation should not be extended these supports in a uniform and reliable manner.

■ Genetic Counselling and free genetic testing

The vast majority of intercountry adoptees have no information or records about their family genetic and medical history. Having this information can assist adoptees to make informed choices about their healthcare and lifestyle. This would also benefit wider society by supporting better health outcomes for adoptees so we can stay healthy and remain productive working/tax-paying members of society.

■ **Support to live and integrate within Australia amongst our own racial and cultural groups**

Support to relocate, find work and build social contacts within Australian communities from your country of origin and culture of origin. This opens a gateway to building racial identity and learning about cultural heritage. Alternatively linking adoptees with cultural advisors who can teach them about their country and culture of origin and support friendships within their racial origin group.

■ **Allow adoptee's biological descendants the rights to search for their ancestors**

Many policies only allow the adopted child themselves to search for their birth family. So, if an adoptee passes away (or is not interested) and leaves behind children who are interested in knowing their own ancestry they are unable to search. This can also happen if services to locate relatives are just not available during the adoptee's lifetime. Sometimes birth families live in obscure communities and it takes time, money and resources to narrow this down (not everyone can have an experience like in the movie "Lion").

■ **Funded lifelong access to psychological and psychiatric services**

Normal life events bring up our trauma. Here are various examples from my life:
Primary school friends ask, "Who is that white lady you are going home with?"
High school friends ask, "Who is that white lady you are going home with?"
Teachers ask, "Who is that white lady you are going home with?"
University says, "We have a CALD group you can join" (but my culture is white).
University says, "We have an Aboriginal Hub with computers you can use (but I'm not Aboriginal, I just have brown skin!?"
Restaurants ask, "Is it a table for 4? (They don't include the random brown woman with the white family because a brown woman can't be part of the white family)
I go out with my grandmother and the shop clerk treats me like I'm a paid support worker because I couldn't be her grandchild (ouch!)
I'm in a group job induction at Optus Sydney and other people in the group are either South Asian or White Australian and after induction both groups of their own accord split

off into two separate groups: one white and the other South Asian. The facilitator asks, “Where on earth do you go?” (I stand in between the groups and have no idea what to do because the white people will think I’m lost if I join them and the South Asian will not take long to realise I’m culturally white).

My white colleague in 2017 saying she thinks dark-skinned women are unattractive and none of my colleagues say anything to show their disgust. (In an all-white workplace if I say anything I’m just going to be typecast as over-sensitive).

Support can involve advocacy when triggering life events happen like searching for birth family, family reunion, having own children, grief loss and separation which can trigger previous feelings of loss. Many adoptees have complex childhood trauma and it is known that trauma impacts even young newborn babies. Studies have shown newborn babies know their mother’s voice and scent and show increased distress hormone elevation when separated.

■ **Programs in Schools to Support the Extra Complexities experienced by Adoptees**

Having school programs to bring awareness to the existence of blended families, intercultural or interracial families so children learn that belonging is not “limited” to race, or colour. Wherever possible have outreach and buddy programs so children of minority race can be amongst their own racial group or have communications with others of the same race and culture as themselves.

■ **Higher Education Support**

Assist adoptees to access higher education and support programs that acknowledge their lifelong experience of adversity through intergenerational trauma, economic disadvantage, human rights violations, and ongoing alienation due to not visually being white and not having a cultural understanding that “matches” your physical race.

Sophie

Born in Vietnam, adopted to Australia in 1970.

I have experienced racism all my life. It is some of my first memories I have, a lot of it was done very quietly by adults who seemed to think it was okay to point out I was not my mother's child.

A lot came from my actual adoptive family. My maternal grandparents refused to meet me as they were so ashamed my parents had adopted an Asian child. It took until I was one year old for them to meet me.

I have been shouted at whilst on the street, on trains everywhere and spat at. Racism affects one to the core as it makes one feel 'less than' and ashamed. Especially growing up in a white family, being adopted, one does not feel Asian nor white. Having a white upbringing one does not feel 'Asian' — only looking so. Therefore it is hard to ratify with oneself what is being said, as it does not really fit; it's like 'but I am adopted, I am not Asian!' It erodes one's sense of self.

I do not know what can be done about intercountry adoption racism, I think talking about it and acknowledging it. Giving us a voice to talk about it to help adoptees is what is important, so we know we are not the only ones. Most of society does not understand the intricacies of intercountry adoption, let alone the racism within it.

Sue-Yen aka Luu Thi Van

Born in Vietnam, adopted to Australia in 1974.

Racism is here to stay. It is enmeshed in the very fabric of society, at every level. It manifests within us as individuals, at a systemic level pervading our policies and practices, reflected in our interpersonal behaviours and is accumulated and compounded in the base structures of our history, culture and ideology.

In order to mitigate the harm caused by racism we must be actively anti-racist. It is not enough to merely be “not racist”, as this, often results in a passive racism, which is as equally toxic as overt racism. Tolerance is a poor substitute for acceptance. Tolerance offers tokenism and indifference. Acceptance offers a place for all voices, a public validation as individuals and a genuine place at the table to self-determination.

Every person carries their racial biases differently. Acknowledgment of these biases on a personal individual level is important, however being open to listening, validating and accepting the experiences of others takes courage.

My expectation within this forum, is to offer to an opportunity to broaden the discussion of anti-racism to embrace all forms and manifestations of racism within Australian society today. To offer encouragement to address the complex “grey” zones of racism. Through this broadening a more mature collective and inclusive voice will evolve, which I believe Australia is ready to share with the world.

The foundations of my identity lie amongst the chaos of war time Vietnam 1974. Within the first 3 weeks of my life, I experienced my initiation into the full audio and aromatic reality of war, surrounded by screaming and traumatised children and adults. Racial identity did not protect any of us from the horrors, what we all absorbed would remain forever with us as visceral burdens to tame. War and terror are the greatest levellers in stripping even the bravest to the very foundations of humanity. And then in one swift spin of the planet I would find myself a world away in the eerie quiet and calmness of Perth, Western Australia. This journey would also mark the beginning of a life’s self-education of racial fluidity. Being one heart and soul, but a chameleon of racial identities. Born of one culture, raised in another, looking as though I belong to one group,

but in at my core, I belong to another, the duplicity and fluidity is complex and exhausting.

The need to feel safe, accepted, understood and validated seems to be a naturally human pursuit. As an intercountry adoptee the journey is complex and confusing. We slip into the cracks of racial stereotypes offering up apologetically a reason for inclusion or explanation for exclusion. Either way no matter where we are in our communities we are an anomaly. We are constantly offered up as a reminder that a book shouldn't be judged by its cover and if you care to listen carefully, you will hear the simple request for safety and acceptance.

My childhood cultural identity was shaped through the lens of middle class suburban 1970's Australia. It was fortunate that the primary school I went to attracted a good proportion of Asian immigrant families. This enabled me, at a young age to observe the "other" type of Asian. The Asian person who spoke the language, ate the food, complied with the Asian cultural norms, while they themselves were carving out the unique existence in post "White Australia Policy" era. It was clear to me from the very beginning that I was an "Asian variant". I was to experience racial prejudice from all sides. My immediate family comprised of a white Australian adoptive mother, a white Dutch (first generation migrant) adoptive father and their two biological white sons. Straddling my home and school environments I began to acknowledge the fragmented racial identity which was uniquely mine.

I would learn to instinctively navigate the pros and cons of racial profiling expressed by adults and classmates. At times it afforded me a shield to hide behind, at other times it just bewildered me at how ignorant and entitled people could be.

Teachers would regard me with the marginalising stereotype of female Asian student, this meant that no matter what I did, or didn't do, I was considered polite, conscientious and studious. This enabled me to glide through my studies relatively smoothly. Where this backfired was when I would be herded together with all the Asian "look-a-likes" to be given special instructions in Chinese/Cambodian/Vietnamese. There were always a few of us that would simply shrug our shoulders, knowing it was too hard to explain to the teachers that English was in fact our only language.

Classmate interactions were more complex. While they seemed to want to flex their insecurities through bullying behaviours, I suspect they would often leave these bullying interactions more confused and with increased insecurities about themselves. They would

corner me and spit out racial slurs “Ching Chong!”, “Go back to where you came from!”, “Asians out!” with the standard accompanying slanted eye gesture. I learnt very early to lean into the bullying. To not turn away in shame or embarrassment, I summoned the airs of entitlement I learnt from my white Australian family. It was an educational opportunity. I would not show weakness. So armed with a vocabulary not generally associated with a small Asian female of 11 years I would lean in and say with a perfect Aussie twang, “Get f***ed you immature ignorant bigot!” While they processed the response in stunned silence, I was already half down the hall or across the oval. When I think back to those times, I know in my heart I still hold a deep resentment toward those who racially vilified me. The fact I could still name those individuals today shows how deeply it affected me. I built a wall to protect myself, a tough persona that would later in life be softened with self-deprecating humour.

Humour has become one of the most powerful tools for disarming awkwardness though it should be noted that humour can only be genuinely offered by me (the vilified) otherwise it can have the effect of adding insult or increasing alienation.

Australian society in general is getting better at navigating racially blended families. However, there have been times where an awkward visual double take or racial slur has been reconsidered once formal introductions have concluded.

For example, my adoptive mother is the personified “white saviour” heroine and therefore in this narrative, I embody the role of a grateful saved soul. There is no place in this narrative version for reality and it only serves to perpetuate the stereotypes. This distilled classification of our relationship as an adoptive mother and daughter has resulted in a chasm of empathy where my experience of racial prejudice and marginalisation cannot be reconciled with my adoptive mother’s version of my lived experience. She cannot/will not acknowledge that I have/do experience any racial prejudice. It’s unfathomable and therefore remains a taboo subject between us. I would suggest a classic case of “colour blindness” which is the most common manifestation of passive racism. Let me strongly suggest that racial “colour blindness” is not a positive construct to build a relationship in. I don’t advocate for a monochrome world. It cancels out important conversations that need to be had to build empathy and understanding. It bypasses the integral act of individual and collective validation.

A typical interaction in a social setting with my white husband, would start with a few awkward glances while people assessed my proficiency in English. Once the

conversation has warmed up a little, the question is always asked “How did you two meet each other?” At this point all newbies begin listening in the hope to hear some spectacular Tinder dating app story with me gaining Australian citizenship when we married. Sad to say the story takes an epic sad tone when it is revealed I was a baby from the Viet Nam war. The conversation moves very quickly from one set of stereotypes to another. The chameleon game is afoot. We have now moved into the Viet Nam war genre and to be honest the racial stereotypes are just as nauseating. As the conversation peters out, I am left with a very uncomfortable feeling that I might be the daughter of a B-Grade war romance story of a soldier and prostitute but on the positive side, I have ruled out that I am a “mail order bride” from Asia desperate to get my claws into a rich white “sugar daddy”. Either way, I always leave these gatherings feeling like I have shared way too much about myself, simply to justify my equal status at the table of white Australians. Needless to say, it’s exhausting and incredible invasive. At times my inner evil chameleon just wants to re-enforce the stereotypes rather than use my life as an education case study. In the end I see curiosity is better than fear and putting examples forward and building knowledge is a slow continuous but necessary journey.

With regards to my children, I am conscious that they physically are racially ambiguous. They could have genetic origins from various backgrounds, but once I stand next to them then it becomes evident their dark features come from me and they are of Asian origins. My daughter has experienced racial slurs from having an Asian looking mother. It wasn’t until she spent her gap year in Viet Nam that she developed her own understanding of her origins. She has in fact spent more time in Viet Nam than me.

School parent social groups are an interesting micro society and navigating them is a full-time job. In the private school my children attended I had two very distinct social groups that I interacted with. One was a group of Asian looking mothers where I felt like an honouree member. I learnt Asian cultural things and etiquette that I didn’t get elsewhere. I did a lot of listening. The other group were all Anglo-Saxon looking mothers and I was dubbed the “token” Asian (humorous chameleon!) These girlfriends understood how I saw the world. It’s in these situations that I reflect on the sophistication of my chameleon gift and in a positive moment reflect on the bridges I can construct between the groups just through listening and sharing.

There is a niche and powerful position that intercountry adoptees have in the conversation around racism and prejudice. It’s borne from the hybrid and fluid nature of our self-identities. We exist in the space between cultures and races. The triumphal story

of our survival is in fact a narrative of weaving together of cultures, racial identity, tolerance and acceptance. Intercountry adoptees must reconcile the disparity between the physical and internal nature of racial identity, because at every turn we are challenging the stereotypes and presumptions. As an Asian in white Australia, we challenge the mainstream colonial stereotypes, as an Asian in Asia, we find ourselves challenging the long-held stereotypes in our birth culture. We belong to both yet neither wholly.

If I was to consider the future of racism in context of Australia, I would continue to raise the challenge to government and individuals to embrace the complexity. Find the words, create the platforms, lead with optimism. Systemic racism embedded in the policies and practices by government and institutions needs to be constantly questioned and reviewed to ensure it leads in activating change. Structural racism that unpins mainstream think-tanks needs to be shaken loose. It is an uncomfortable and confronting task, but I believe Australia is mature enough to take this task on. Interpersonal racism is very difficult to navigate as an intercountry adoptee, but the freedom to express an alternate reality from the stereotypes is a good platform to build upon. Internalised racism is insipid and so very damaging. We want to move from passive tolerance to active validation of individuals.

Ongoing political bi-partisan support for research and consultation is an essential investment to engage in effective societal change. A firm commitment to reviewing and evaluating key milestones is required for accountability and integrity. Educational resources coupled with public awareness and youth engagement are core to developing a more mature future for all Australians.

Tim

Born in South Korea, adopted to Australia in 1990.

I have experienced racism throughout my life. As a child, I was always bullied for being different. Kids would call me racial slurs, pull their eyes back calling out, “Slant eyes”, etc. Back then I didn't necessarily identify it as racism, but it was certainly racism.

I believe when I was younger, the school's solution for racism was to deal with it like bullying. I was always told that it was up to me to “manage the bully”. My teachers were always blaming my reaction rather than dealing with the problem at hand.

Nothing seemed to work, the bullies would be spoken to, supposedly. But it would never stop their behaviour. My teachers would always say, “You need to ignore them and they'll get bored and go away”. So the origins of why I was bullied was brushed under the rug by the adults who were supposed to educate and support us.

As I have grown older, my experience with racism changed. I internalised it and became more aware of it as racism and that it wasn't necessarily associated with bullying.

My experience as a young adult, was of being continually asked the infamous question we adoptees get, "Where are your real parents from?" I always knew what they wanted to know but it was frustrating to feel obligated to tell them my personal story each time.

Living in Korea for 2 years, I experienced reverse racism. Living in Korea was an experience like no other. It's a country where by looks I fit in, but culturally and language-wise, I don't quite fit in 100%. I found at times I was accepted as Korean when it suited the Korean natives but when it didn't, they would treat me like a foreigner.

I think experiences of racism have helped me build a thick skin, but also I've come to accept that there is going to be racism in the world and to feel individually like we are all responsible for ending racism.

I feel at times racism has hurt me emotionally and also prevented me from doing things I wanted to do. It has impacted me over time in my self confidence, fear of being called out for being Asian, etc..

I think we need to address unquestionably that racism exists.

We also need to be better equipped on how to address and call out racist behaviour assertively without aggression.

We need to educate potential adoptive parents and existing parents of adoptees on how to listen to their children's experiences of racism objectively and with supportive. Most of the issues I experience is that parents can become very defensive when dealing with racism. Also understanding that lived experience is different from what you read and learn. We need to build resources for dealing with racism but they must be led by transracial adoptees and can be created collaboratively with adoptive parents.

I think it's important to understand racism has many layers: you have colour based racism, immigrant based racism and transracial adoptees who have a mixture of these kinds of racism.

We also need to build an understanding of how being raised as an Australian intercountry adoptee can challenge our identity. Most of us are raised very white Australian, but struggle with our identity as we generally have suppressed our Motherland culture for many years, in order to fit in. This can cause reverse racism when we connect with people from our Motherland.

Some Quotes from the Group Consultation

Tim:

Racism has always been here. I think the Framework only addresses the topic of racism, not a real collaborative solution, factoring in the multi-levels of racism i.e., the cause of racism, where racism originates.

Dominic:

Frameworks need an action plan with stated policy goals and measures. Multicultural policy is centred on social cohesion. White supremacy needs to be named and articulated with measures to address inequality. e.g. council boards need to represent the diversity of the local community. School education curriculum needs to include racism as a core social studies topic linked to history. Celebrating diversity needs to be balanced with a grounded understanding of settler colonialism. Can we address racism the same way as gender inequality or a wage gap?

Jessica:

One of the first things we need, is to really understand that racism is systemic in our society - so not just seeing racism as primarily interpersonal issue because then it is easy for "good" white people to distinguish themselves from "bad" white people and to make statements like, "Oh I can't be racist because I have brown friends/ children", or to say I live in "left-leaning suburb" and so I can't be racist because I'm against racism. We need to understand how racism works like in workplaces and who gets hired/promoted etc.

Sue:

It would be interesting to gauge the consequences of racism - the feeling of discomfort, fear, exclusion.