

Positive and negative aspects of transracial adoption: An exploratory study from Korean transracial adoptees' perspectives

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Abstract

This purpose of this study was to learn how transracial adoptees (TRAs) feel about transracial adoption. Ninety-five adult Korean-born adoptees (73 female and 22 male) responded to open-ended questions about the positive and negative aspects of being transracially adopted. More adoptees felt generally positive than negative, but most had mixed feelings. Positive aspects most often cited included: being a part of two cultures; developing personal awareness, open-mindedness, and deeper understandings; and being unique. Common negative aspects included isolation from one's adoptive and birth families and cultures; the burden of dealing with others' assumptions and questions about transracial adoption; and identity fragmentation.

Introduction

Transracial and international adoptions have been the subject of much controversy (McGinnis, 2007). The National Association of Black Social Workers referred to transracial adoption as "cultural genocide" (Batholet, 1993), and South Korea's adoption practices were once criticized by the media as "blatant trade in human beings" (Hubinette, 2004, p. 18). Some research has suggested TRAs have difficulty developing a coherent identity that embraces their birth and adoptive backgrounds (Hollingsworth, 1998) and feeling a sense of belonging and finding comfortable communities (Roorda, 2007). Although transracial and international adoptions are widely debated issues, little research has systematically investigated the positive and negative aspects from the perspective of TRAs, themselves.

Method

Participants

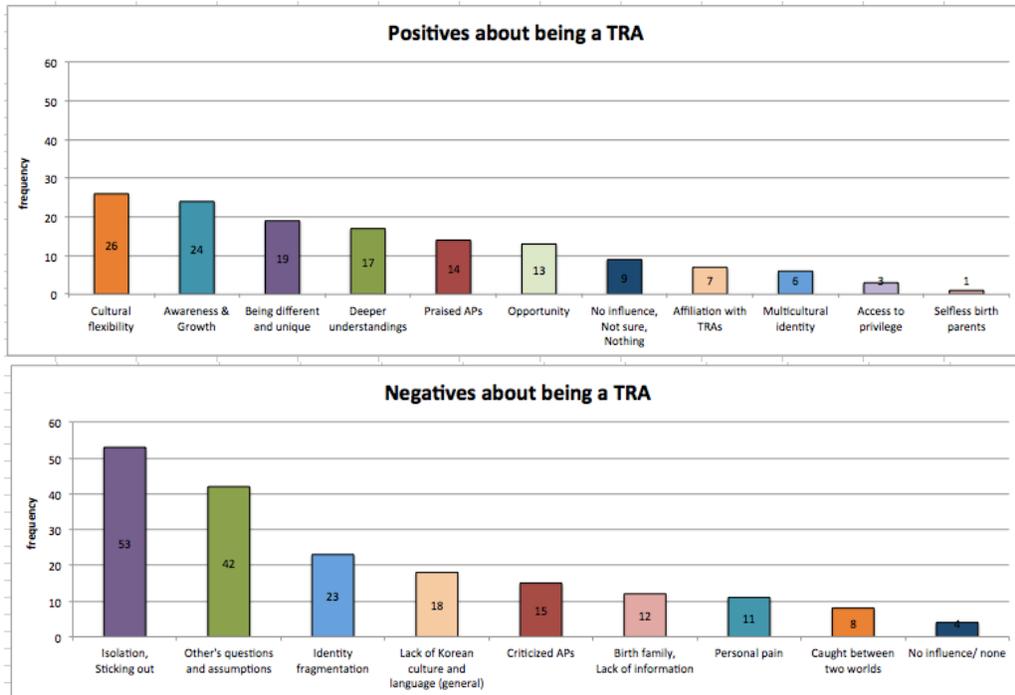
- 95 adult adoptees (73 female, 22 male)
- Born in Korea and adopted transracially by White parent(s)
- Age range: 19 to 57 years ($M = 31.8$, $SD = 7.7$)
- Recruited from Internet sources
- 43% indicated they feel positive about being a TRA, 48% feel neutral, and 8% reported feeling negatively

Materials & Analysis

- Participants rated their level of pride in being a transracial adoptee: positive, neutral, negative
- Participants answered two open-ended questions:
 1. What are some positive aspects about being a transracial adoptee?
 2. What are some negative aspects about being a transracial adoptee?
- Thematic qualitative analysis was conducted by two independent coders. Coders met multiple times to resolve discrepancies and reach consensus for the codebook. We are still in the process of refining codes, so the data presented here are preliminary.

Results

Preliminary analysis of responses to the open-ended questions revealed that participants valued being a part of two cultures, developing personal awareness, open-mindedness, and deeper understandings of race, culture, family, and inequality. Furthermore, they said being different and unique was an advantage. Conversely, negative aspects cited by almost half of participants included isolation due to both physical and cultural differences from one's adoptive and birth families, respectively. They also talked about the burden of "sticking out" and dealing with others' misperceptions and questions about race, culture, and transracial adoption.



POS	NEG		
Cultural flexibility, Part of two cultures, Best of both worlds	26	Caught between two worlds	8
Awareness & Growth		Personal pain (loss, abandonment)	11
1. Self-awareness, Emotional growth, Resilience	11		
2. Open-mind, Broad perspective, Empathy	13		
Being different and unique, challenging perceptions	19	Isolation, Only one, Stick out	
		1. Only Asian (all Whites)	20
		2. Not Asian enough, Authenticity concerns	13
		3. General exclusion (discrimination, never fit in, stuck in the middle, being different)	20
Deeper Understanding of		Other's questions and assumptions	
1. Race	5	1. Racism & Stereotypes	12
2. Culture	7	2. Having to explain myself	11
3. Family	4	3. Assumptions of others (you must be from...)	19
4. Inequality	1		
Praised APs, APs wanted you	14	Criticized APs	
		1. Not understanding	3
		2. No exposure to Korean culture	6
		3. No preparation for racism	5
		4. No connection	1
Economic & educational opportunity in adoptive country	13		
No influence/ not sure/ nothing	9	No influence/ none	4
Affiliation with TRAs	7	Lack of Korean culture and language (general)	18
Multicultural identity, Deeper understanding of self	6	Identity fragmentation	23
Access to privilege without associated blame	3		
Selfless birth parents	1	Birth family, Lack of information	12
total positive	139	total negative	186

Conclusion/Implications

This study offers a perspective on transracial and international adoption from the lived experiences of TRAs themselves. Although far more respondents endorsed feeling positive than negative about being a TRA, an even greater number felt neutral. This pattern suggests that there are mixed feelings about transracial adoption, as was evident in the responses to the open-ended questions in which the negative aspects (f=186) discussed exceeded the positive ones (f=139). Interestingly, there were parallels between commonly cited positive and negative experiences. For example, being different and unique was viewed positively, but its flip side of isolation and sticking out was seen as negative. Awareness and growth and deeper understanding were cited as advantages of being a TRA, but dealing with others' misconceptions and assumptions was a burden. Adoptive parents were praised and criticized with similar frequencies, suggesting that TRAs valued their parents' love and caring, but they also resented and regretted that their parents did not understand their dilemmas and better prepare them for dealing with racism and for connecting with their birth culture, similar to Roorda's accounts (2007). The results support concerns about identity formation (Hollingsworth, 1998) as identity fragmentation was mentioned almost four times more often than the positive experience of forming a multicultural identity.

These findings remind us that extreme positive and negative opinions about transracial adoption are overly simplistic as there are many nuances to TRAs' experiences. They also suggest that adoptive parents and others could do more to foster connections with birth cultures and languages and to prepare TRAs for living in a world of racism and misperceptions. These efforts may support TRAs to form positive multicultural identities and for "being unique" to be more salient than feeling fragmented and isolated. They may also help TRAs negotiate and manage the intrusive stereotypes, questions, and assumptions of others. More importantly, the fact that participants frequently mentioned these experiences also speaks to the importance of educating people about transracial adoption and challenging related stereotypes and assumptions.

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