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## Unique Features of Identity Development in Transnational Adoptions

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### ABSTRACT

Identity formation has been defined as the process by which an individual develops a coherent self-definition of one's uniqueness (Erikson, 1968). Arnett (2000;2014) proposed the concept of emerging adulthood (between ages 18 and 29) as the developmental stage of later adolescence at which an individual is both cognitively and psychologically best suited for identity formation. Emerging adults who had been adopted transnationally as children often struggle to articulate their ethnic identity as a dimension of their broader individual identity (Schwartz et al., 2013) because they have characteristics that do not fit into those of the majority (Adams & Marshall, 1996). Guided by ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1998), this mixed-method pilot study seeks to demonstrate how family environments, contact with birth parents, community context, and culture (Grotevant et al., 2000) influence the ethnic identity development of emerging adults who have been adopted transnationally. It employs the Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) proposed by Phinney et al. (1999) in order to investigate the influence of age at adoption, adoptive parental support of adoptee exploration of identity and cultural roots, and adoptee contact with birth parents upon the ethnic identity formation of eleven emerging adults who had been adopted from China. It then suggests that adoptive parental support of their child's exploration of her birth culture is a positive influence, that contact with birth parents may be both a positive and a negative influence, and that belonging to an adoptee support group may not only be a positive influence but also may foster the formation of an identity as an ethnic adoptee in the adoptive country—in the case of this study's participants, of being Chinese adoptees in America.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Previous Researchers Focus

Researchers who investigate the ethnic identity development of adoptees *have tended to agree on four aspects* that influence ethnic identity:

- Age at adoption (Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996)
- Contact with their birth parents (Koff & Grotevant, 2011; Wrobel et al., 2013; Gonzales-Backen, 2013)
- Adoptive parents support of exploring their identity (Johnston et al, 2007)
- Ability to explore cultural roots (Vonk, 2011; Haymer & Simon 2003)

*But* they tend to overlook how adoption statuses influence adoptees' ethnic identity, and which factors have a strong influence or a weak influence pertaining to adoption status.

#### Emerging Adulthood and Ethnic Identity

- The ages included in this stage of later adolescence between ages 18 and 29 based on continued changes in our society that extend the period before adulthood (Arnett, 2000, 2014).
- Cognitive and psychological ability to focus realistically on the future and the freedom to truly explore and experiment with identity (Arnett, 2000) .
- Successful identity formation also includes developing a sense of belonging and connection to others and the larger cultural context (Adams & Marshall, 1996) .
- Identity and ethnic identity formation are complex processes for most adolescents and emerging adults who were adopted transracially or transnationally as children (Schwartz et al., 2013).

### RECRUITMENT

Emerging adults between ages 18 and 29, either currently attending college or graduated from college, and having experienced either transracial adoption or transnational adoption.

11 female participants (n = 21.5) who are transnational adoptees of Chinese descent. All but one were also transracial adoptees with White adoptive parents; one was adopted by Asian American parents of Chinese descent. Active in a formal support network for Chinese adoptees in which members communicate with each other and share their experiences being adoptees. As participants were recruited from various parts of the country, and in one instance a participant was living abroad, all interviews were conducted by Skype.

### RESEARCH METHOD

An interview conducted either by Skype or in person and lasting between 45 minutes and one hour. The researcher asked each participant questions about her ethnic identity formation, adoptive family, and birth parents.

### HYPOTHESIS

1. Adoptee contact with birth parents would have both positive and negative impact on ethnic identity formation.
2. The adoptee's ability to explore cultural roots and the support of adoptive parents in the process of ethnic identity exploration will have a positive influence on the ethnic identity development of transnational adoptees.
3. The developmental factors affecting transnational adolescent adoptees, particularly their ability to explore their ethnic identity and cultural roots, are influenced by both the socio-economic status of the adoptive family and the community in which adoptees live with their adoptive families.

### RESULT

- **Reports Always Being Aware of Having Been Adopted:** None of the 11 participants could recall a specific age in which she was told that she was adopted.
- **Exploration of Ethnicity and Culture:** Most of the Chinese adoptees who participated in this study (10 out of 11) explained to the researcher that their adoptive parents enrolled them in Chinese school or sent them to a Chinese camp on the weekends or during summers as they were growing up. Most were enrolled in these types of experiences around age 5 or 6.
- **Adoptive Family Support of Exploration: Incorporating Culture in the Home:** The participants mentioned that their adoptive parents displayed crafts, books, and pictures pertaining to their adopted children's root culture at their homes.
- **Adoptive Family Support of Exploration: Participation in Cultural Celebrations:** Their adoptive parents had participated in a holiday or cultural event related to the participants' native culture to help them to explore their ethnic heritage. Most of the Chinese adoptees noted that their adoptive families celebrated Chinese New Year.
- **Root Identity Versus Adoptive Whiteness:** The impact of living in a context classified by "whiteness" not only of the adoptive parents but also of the community in which adoptees were raised and schooled cannot be underestimated.

- **Racial Categories:** The adoptees described facing some difficulty identifying themselves racially. They often came across official documents, especially Census forms and student loan or graduate school applications, requiring them to self-identify by race or ethnicity according to pre-set categories.
- **Higher Education and Being Critical:** The majority of adoptees interviewed believed that formal education was valuable to their exploration of their ethnic identity. Higher education gave them the ability and the tools to study and think critically about culture and ethnicity and race. This critical thought in some cases led participants to reevaluate their adoptions and their ethnic labels.

### CONCLUSION

**1<sup>st</sup> hypothesis:** Several participants expressed general interest in and even excitement about finding their birth family and relatives. But they also expressed difficulty in forgiving their parents for having put them up for adoption.

In addition, a couple of participants wondered whether their birth family and relatives might take advantage of them because they lived in the United States and were assumed to be more economically advantaged.

**2<sup>nd</sup> hypothesis:** Most of the participants from the Chinese adoptee network said that they explored Chinese language and Chinese culture when they were young with the encouragement and even insistence of their adoptive parents. Yet while most expressed satisfaction with their adoptive parents' encouragement and intentions, most also reported an experience of at least some struggle with self-identification.

**3<sup>rd</sup> Hypothesis:** Participants who were raised in a high social higher socio-economic status were also raised in a predominantly or entirely white community. Growing up there, people cared more about how adoptees dressed rather than an adoptee's root ethnicity. Since their parents have some amount of means (even if they do not self-identify as "wealthy"), they had more opportunities to explore their root cultures, including language lessons and immersion camps. On the other hand, since all but one of these adoptees had been raised as children in a White community, they fit in more with white identity than with particularly Chinese or even Asian American identity.

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