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Intercountry, transracial adoption and ethnic identity
A Korean example

Nam Soon Huh and William J. Reid

Growing numbers of intercountry, transracial adoptions, especially from Asian countries such as Korea and China, have raised concerns in the child welfare field. For example, adoptions of Chinese children grew from less than 100 in 1990 to well over 3000 in 1996 and are expected to reach a level of 5000–6000 per year (US State Department, 1996).

Such adoptions have been justified as being in the best interests of the adopted children. For example, the United Nations has declared that 'if a child cannot be cared for in any suitable manner in their country of origin, intercountry adoption may be considered as an alternative means of providing the children with a family' (Tizard, 1991). However, a strong argument against intercountry, transracial adoptions concerns the development of a child’s ethnic identity. If children are uprooted from their own culture, their sense of ethnic identity may become confused or conflicted.

Ethnic identity and adoption
The ethnic identity of transracially and internationally adopted children may be thought of as a feeling of connection with both one’s cultural past and one’s present adoptive heritage (Lydens, 1988). Issues relating to the ethnic identities of adopted children have been explored in a number of studies. Feigelman and Silverman (1983) found that the stronger the parents’ positive orientation

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towards the race of their adoptee, the greater the likelihood of a positive attitude on the part of the child towards his or her heritage. Generally, if the parents recognize that intercountry adoptive family life involves defining themselves as an American-Korean (or Chinese, etc.) family, the children acquire similar perceptions about themselves (Gross and Gross, 1988; Huh, 1985; Cole, 1992). Cole’s study found that other important variables such as ethnic discussions within the home, parents having friends or work colleagues who are Asian, and the community in which the child lives could assist in fostering a positive ethnic identity in transracially adopted children. Feigelman and Silverman (1983) observed that adoptees who showed more pride in their own background were better adjusted than those who were less enthusiastic about their cultures of origin.

The findings thus far reported provide grounds for optimism about the development of the ethnic identities of intercountry, interracial adoptees. However, not all findings are so sanguine. Some adoptive parents appear confused about how strong an emphasis should be placed on racial and ethnic heritage (Cole, 1992). They seem concerned about becoming alienated from their adopted children. These parents were much more likely to reject the concept of ‘differentness’ as it applied to their children and to minimize the differences between themselves and their adopted child. Many adoptive parents see no color or race or nationality in their children, thus de-emphasizing racial and ethnic differences (McRory et al., 1982; Howe, 1992; Gill and Jackson, 1983; Kim, 1978).

Moreover, some studies have found that most adoptees have little ethnic identity or interest in exploring their own cultural heritage (Kim, 1976; Lydens, 1988). They have been found to identify themselves more with their adoptive parents’ ethnic group than with their own (Gonzalez, 1990). In one study, the majority of children were described by their parents as being apathetic, embarrassed, or confused about their racial background and heritage (Chatrand, 1978). Benson et al. (1994) reported that Asian adolescents sometimes felt ashamed or embarrassed about their racial background. These mixed findings highlight the tensions faced by transracially adopted children in reconciling their cultures of origin with present cultural realities.

The developmental course of the ethnic identity of internationally and transracially adoptive children has also been the subject of study. According to some investigations, ethnic identity begins to
form at around age six and simply increases with cognitive development (Bernal et al., 1990; Cole, 1992).

Cross (1980, 1987) distinguishes several steps in the process of forming an ethnic identity. In the 'pre-encounter stage', individuals identify themselves with the dominant culture. When children experience discrimination, they enter the 'encounter stage'. They begin to be aware of their membership in their ethnic group. In the 'immersion stage', which follows next, children immerse themselves in the ways of their ethnic group. They are likely to develop a high degree of awareness of their cultures of origin and devalue the ways of the dominant culture. Finally, in the 'internalization stage', children become able to appreciate themselves and others as individuals (Cross, 1980, 1987). In a somewhat similar vein Wilkinson (1985) described this progression as a lifelong process, moving from denial, to an inner awakening (noticing others from the same culture of origin), verbal acknowledgement, identification, acceptance, and finally to the integration of ethnicity into identity.

Unanswered by this body of research are questions about variations in such courses of development and factors that may be related to these variations. Some of the studies referred to above suggest that a sense of ethnic identity might not develop at all.

Aware of some of the issues we have reviewed, adoption agencies and professionals have taken steps to facilitate the development of ethnic identity in intercountry, transracial adoptions. For example, they usually emphasize with adoptive families the need for sensitivity to the child's culture. In addition, many adoption agencies provide cultural activity programs and encourage the adoptive families to participate. Some adoptive families attend these activities and try to help their children learn about their cultures of origin. Other adoptive families appear to have less investment in teaching their children about their cultural roots.

The present study

Previous research and current agency practices relating to intercountry, transracial adoptions raised several questions that prompted the present study. What kind of ethnic identities are developed by children who have experienced such adoptions? What factors appear to be associated with the development of these identities? Specifically, does family involvement in culturally-related activities appear to be a factor? Does the development of ethnic identity seem to be related to other aspects of the child's
adjustment? Do children seem to go through distinct stages in the development of ethnic identity? What factors seem related to variations in this development?

This study addresses these questions in the context of the adoption of South Korean children. Since 1953, more than 100,000 Korean children have been adopted by American families (Chung and Ahn, 1994). Up till 1995, Korean adoptees formed the largest number of foreign-born children who were placed in American families. We assume that findings for Korean children will have relevance to other intercountry, transracial adoptions as well as those that may be either intercountry or transracial.

Method

All the subjects were selected from children placed through a child welfare agency in north-eastern New York. The agency sent out mailings to the 115 families whose children met the following criteria: (1) adopted as infants (under 15 months); (2) at least 9 years of age at the time of the study; (3) fully Korean. Further, the families had to reside within 90 minutes' driving distance of the adoption agency. Finally, if a family consisted of more than one adopted Korean child, then all Korean adoptees age 9 and over were selected as subjects.

Thirty adoptive families, including their 40 Korean children, agreed to participate in the study. The children ranged in age from 9 to 14, with a median age of 10. The parents were all Caucasian. The great majority were in their 40s, well educated (some with college or higher degrees) and employed in professional or technical occupations.

Data collection took place from March 1995 to February 1996. Semi-structured, in-depth interviewing with children and their parents separately was the primary method of data collection. To increase the reliability of the subject’s memory and to control for social desirability bias, adoptees and their parents were asked to describe specific events. The request for descriptions of specific events was followed with probes and cross-checked between children and parents. All interviews (which were tape-recorded and later transcribed) were done at each family’s home by the first author, who is Korean. Interviews with each subject lasted 1–2 hours.

The study made use of a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative component consisted of constructing and applying scales to measure:
1. the extent of family involvement in Korean cultural activities;
2. the extent of the child’s identification with Korean culture;
3. ease of communication between parents and children concerning the adoption.

The scales were applied to all the interviews by the first author and by a second coder to nine of the interviews. Percentages of agreement between the author and coder exceeded 80 percent across all scales. The qualitative aspects of the study were guided by grounded theory (Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), which was used primarily to understand the development of Korean identity formation as it related to parents’ attitudes towards Korean culture.

Results

Factors associated with the extent of ethnic identity
Multiple regression analysis suggested that two factors were significantly associated (p < .05) with the extent of ethnic identity in the children: the children’s participation in Korean cultural activities and ease of communication between the children and their parents about the adoption. The children’s participation in cultural activities was by far the strongest factor, with a standardized regression coefficient of .68, and was the primary contributor to the adjusted $r^2$ for the entire model (.47). To express this finding another way, children who were judged to be high participators in Korean cultural activities ($n = 23$) had a mean identity score of 9.2 (on a scale ranging from −10 to +10); the mean for the relatively low participators ($n = 17$) was 2.6 (p < .001, t test). As findings in the next section will make clear, participation in Korean cultural activities, such as attending Korean ‘culture camps’, was instigated by the parents, whose Korean cultural participation score correlated .92 with that of the children. It is not surprising that parents and children more intensely involved in Korean cultural activities would find it easier to communicate about the child’s Korean origins – i.e. the adoption process – than those less intensely involved.

Somewhat unexpected, however, were findings concerning the relation between the extent of ethnic identity and the child’s ethnic self-designations. Children were asked to say how they thought of themselves in ethnic terms. Response options were: American, Korean, Korean-American, ‘just a person’, or ‘haven’t thought
about it’. Of those with high Korean ethnic identity scores, 80 percent identified themselves as Korean-American, in contrast to only 20 percent with low identity scores. For the latter group the most popular response was, interestingly enough, ‘Korean’ (53%) and the next highest a response in the combined category of ‘American’, ‘just a person’, or ‘haven’t thought about it’ (27%). The results were similar when high participators in Korean cultural activities were compared with low participators. It is not immediately apparent why children scoring high on Korean identity and cultural participation should see themselves as Korean-American while their low-scoring counterparts tended to see themselves as just Korean. A possible answer is that the high scorers on these variables had been able to achieve a better integration between their Korean and American identities than the low scorers, yet the answer does not explain the process by which such an integration might be achieved.

Earlier research (Feigelman and Silverman, 1983) suggested that adoptees with a strong identification with their cultures or origin might be better adjusted than those with a weak identification. We could find little support for this finding in our data, using estimates of adjustment based on parents’ and children’s reports of problems at home and school as well as the interviewer’s observations. However, a sense of identity that incorporates one’s cultural origins as well as ease in communicating about these origins might be seen as valued attributes in themselves.

The development of ethnic identity: results of the qualitative analysis

Data from both parents and adoptees were used to trace the processes of the adoptees’ identity formation. Respondents were asked to recall events concerning developmental processes that had occurred before the child’s current age. The picture that emerged should help clarify the quantitative findings presented above.

Recognizing and rejecting differences (4–6) Recognising differences began when children entered a new situation like kindergarten. However, many of them were still not able to grasp the idea of ethnicity. They heard that they came from Korea, but they did not understand what that meant. Lambert and Klineberg (1967) found that children in this age group did not understand the concentric relationships among town, region, country and the world. National differentiations are often too abstract for young children to comprehend.
When adoptees recognized differences, they sometimes wished to change their appearance. One girl said, 'When I was 5 or 6, it really hit me that I was different, and I wanted to look like my mom.' In the initial stage of recognizing differences, children's ethnic identification is still undeveloped. Some children were still confused about their race. One parent said, 'One time my son asked whether he was considered black. It was summertime, and he tans very well.' Similarly Cole (1992) concluded from her study that Korean children of this age assumed that if they were not white, they were black.

Parents played an important role in exposing their children to Korean culture at this stage of recognizing differences. During this age period, most parents tried to introduce their children to Korean culture or gave them a chance to meet Korean children. However, when the children started kindergarten, some parents continued to take active roles in exposing children to different cultural activities, while other families became more neutral.

As one parent said, 'We were a part of a Korean-American club, but we stopped that because we felt that we were alienating them... She wanted to be just the same as every other kid in her school.' Like this parent, some parents explained that their child's lack of exposure to Korean culture was not due to the parent's unwillingness but rather to the child's reluctance to participate.

The beginning of ethnic identification (7-8) Beginning about the age of 7, the children began to learn that their ethnicity and facial structure would remain constant across time even as they grew into adulthood. They began to understand that Korea is another country and that was the reason why they looked different from their parents. Children were able to identify themselves as Korean.

Questions about their ethnicity and teasing from other children frequently made the children aware they were different. Most children said that they experienced a great deal of teasing at this stage. While teasing was hard for all the children, the way they coped with it varied. Some children had negative feelings about themselves, whereas other children felt angry towards the teaser. One child said, 'Sometimes people would call me Chinese. I would say that I am not Chinese. I am Korean. I didn't like that because I was Korean.'

These kinds of external factors pushed the children to develop certain attitudes towards their Korean identity. At this point the role of the parents seemed to be especially important. Since Korean
adoptees did not have an immediate reference group, adoptive parents took a primary role in helping their children develop a positive attitude towards their ethnicity. When parents valued learning about Korean culture, children generally developed a positive attitude towards that culture. Moreover, the parents’ actions often helped bring about reinforcing responses from peers and teachers. One parent said, ‘My son was confused and asked me why they were calling him Chinese. So we took him to see a film on China. He was fascinated. Then we took him to the Korean cultural camp and he really enjoyed it. Then after that he had a lot of pride in it because we talked it up.’ One child said, ‘My mom brought Korean food to school and explained about Korea in the class. My friends liked that because they learned new things. I was very proud of that.’ Such interactions, involving parents, peers and teachers, helped the adoptees develop a positive sense about being Korean.

However, some parents did not feel strongly that they needed to teach Korean culture to their children. One parent observed, ‘We will support her if she wants to learn about Korean culture, but we will not push her. I see her as American, not Korean.’ Following their parents’ lead, these children began to see themselves as American or just human beings. They did not see being Korean as significant to their sense of self.

Acceptance of difference vs ethnic dissonance (9–11) With the development of their knowledge about different ethnic groups in society, children developed certain attitudes towards their own Korean ethnicity. Some children accepted their differences and had good feelings about themselves. They liked the way they looked and it became a source of pride. They indicated their uniqueness as a strength: ‘I am proud because I am special.’ They developed a positive attitude towards Korean culture and wanted to learn more about Korea. These were the children who tended to identify their ethnicity as Korean-American. These children also immersed themselves in Korean culture: learning Korean, attending Korean cultural camp; and going to Tae Kwon Do centers.

However, children who did not have much experience of Korean culture began to identify themselves as American or Korean, or did not know how to indicate their ethnicity. These children’s ethnic identities tended to be dominated by an American concept of ethnicity. They believed that other people saw them as part of the human race or just a person. They downplayed their differences from other children. As one child commented, ‘I am really A mer-
ican. I just look like a Korean.’ When asked how she would answer the question ‘What is your nationality?’, she said, ‘I would say Korean. It is easy to answer. If I say American, they would ask more questions.’

In some cases, lack of interest in Korean culture seemed to be the outgrowth of an interaction between the parents and child. For example, some parents responded to their child’s perceived lack of interest in learning about Korean culture by becoming inactive themselves. A parent put it, ‘We’ve never had a strong Korean identity. There’s really nothing here in our household that we do that’s truly Korean. Last year Kim (11 years old) went to Mu J i G ae with Sandy. She didn’t want to go back. It didn’t really mean a whole lot to her. I don’t even know if people see her as Korean any more. Basically she’s just like an American kid.’

The observations of Johnson et al. (1987) are relevant here: ‘When a parent no longer thinks of the child as different, the child’s sense of racial identity stops growing’ (p. 54).

Integrating Korean heritage and American culture (12–14)

At the age of 12 or 13, children’s cognitive development enters a new phase. They are now capable of more abstract thinking. Most children who had been involved in Korean culture clearly identified themselves as Korean-American. They were able to explain how they integrated their Korean ethnic heritage and American culture. To the question of nationality, one said, ‘I would say probably Korean and American, because I was born in Korea, but I am also part American because I am living in America. I am used to the American ways and customs.’

Children can also better articulate their reasons for ethnic pride or their need to learn more about Korean culture. Their desire to learn about Korea now stems more from inner needs and interests than from their parents’ encouragement. A child observed, ‘I think it is important to know what your background is and to know about where you came from. It makes you a little bit different from other people, instead of the only difference being that you have dark hair. I think it is important to learn about your country, its history and what it is doing now.’

School and friends take a bigger role in making children interested or proud of Korean ethnicity than parents do at this stage. When children enter the 6th grade (though timing varies), they learn about different countries at school. They have a chance to select countries they would like to present. Most children who were involved with Korean culture selected Korea for their presentation. It encouraged them to study more about Korea and helped them
develop ethnic pride. In the words of one child, ‘I get to tell people about South Korea. I am just real proud because I know a lot of stuff, and I am teaching everybody else about it.’

Children also learned what kind of stereotypes are attached to Korean people. One girl remarked, ‘Koreans have a reputation for being hard workers. So if I don’t turn in something in school, they say, “You are Korean, so how come?”’ Adoptees said that being Korean is good sometimes, but sometimes it is a burden because they do not fit the stereotypes. Other children’s responses to Korean adoptees were also important with regard to their self-esteem. One girl said, ‘I get more compliments than I do put-downs. Everybody likes my hair, the color, everybody … they try to dye it black and stuff … Children used to tease me. Now they don’t.’

Their identification as a Korean and their pride in their own ethnicity were becoming based on more concrete knowledge about Korea rather than just about their differences or uniqueness. For example, they wanted more specific knowledge, such as about ancient Korean history and the daily life of the children of their age. They asked, ‘Why is it different from the United States?’ They also looked for Korean role models. They were curious about how Korean teenagers were using make-up and what kind of hair styles they wore. Some of the adoptees had Korean teen journals delivered at home monthly. According to one girl, ‘It is nice to have a Korean friend because you are always a little bit different than everybody else, and with Brenda [a Korean adoptee too] I am not. It does not bother me, being different. I like being different, but I cannot really talk about Korea to anybody else because they don’t really get it, but I think Brenda does.’

At this stage, even some children who were not interested or not involved in Korean culture began to show a little interest because of the school curriculum. One boy who identified himself as American said, ‘I feel more American, but sometimes I do get interested in finding out about Korea. I used to not really be interested in it. I am not quite interested yet …’ With these children, however, their interest was inconsistent unless there was continuous stimulation to learn about Korean culture. Such sporadic spurts of interest may offer parents opportunities to encourage the further development of ethnic identity.

Most of the children said it should be up to the child how much he or she wants to learn about Korea. One child gave this piece of advice: ‘Don’t push them to learn, but ask the children if they want to learn about their Korean heritage. Don’t make them learn about
it if they don’t want to. Try to help them understand that they are not really different than other people.’

Discussion

As anticipated, it was found that children who were high participants in Korean cultural activities scored higher on Korean identity than their low participating counterparts. These findings can perhaps be best explained in interactional terms: parents and their children who were favorably inclined to incorporate Korean culture into their lives actively participated in the cultural activities, which likely reinforced their Korean interests. High participators may also have achieved an identity more integrated with American culture than low participators, given their greater tendency to see themselves as Korean-American. While high participators were not necessarily better adjusted, their better ‘integrated’ identities and their greater ease in discussing their adoptions with their parents may be considered as desirable.

Qualitative analysis suggested two courses in the development of Korean identity: for children who were high participators in Korean cultural activities, the process of ethnic identification began to take hold in the 7–8 age range and to become established by the beginning of adolescence; for low participators this process did not develop or became arrested before attaining an integrated sense of identity.

Parental encouragement and co-participation in cultural activities seemed critical to the process. If such parental involvement were lacking, children seemed less likely to develop the Korean side of their identities. In some cases lack of parental involvement seemed reactive to the child’s lack of interest. However, it is possible that the children who showed a lack of interest were responding to subtle parental cues that might have discouraged such interests from developing in the first place. In any case, the children’s interest in their native cultures seemed to vary over time, particularly in early adolescence. Such variation would give parents additional opportunities to involve the child in activities that might foster ethnic identification.

These findings and conclusions must be regarded as quite tentative, given the limitations of the study. The sample was small and self-selected. The subjects’ recall of earlier years may have been distorted by problems of memory and other biases. That the interviewer was herself Korean may have caused the children to be more
self-revealing; but it may have prompted the children and their parents to exaggerate their affiliation with Korean culture.

Implications for practice

As previously noted, the study has relevance for intercountry, transracial adoptees and the implications are offered with such children in mind. In developing implications from the study we assume that there is value in helping adopted children to develop ethnic identities that incorporate their cultures of origin.

Social workers should help facilitate parental involvement with their children in activities that will foster their children’s development of integrated ethnic identities. Such activities might include participation in cultural programs (that hopefully agencies would sponsor), helping children develop relationships with other children from their cultures, and providing cultural experiences in the home, such as serving ethnic food and accompanying their children on visits to their native countries. However, parents might be cautioned to be sensitive to their children’s own interest in their cultures. Parents might be advised to provide encouragement and stimulation, but not to push too hard if their children become resistant at a particular point in time. However, parents should continue to be encouraging and wait for other opportunities, since children may show renewed interest at a later point as a result of school projects, friends, etc.

In addition, social workers might work with the schools to increase teachers’ sensitivity to the needs of adoptees. For example, teachers might be encouraged to give children opportunities to study and talk about their native cultures. Diversity education might be encouraged. Instruction in the children’s native language might be indicated if there are enough children from a given culture in a school or school district.

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