Transracial Adoptees: Searching for Birth Families and Developing Identities

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-method study explored transracial adoptees' (TRA) interest in searching for and/or contact with their birth families. Participants, 109 TRAs (ages 18-37), completed an on-line survey, and 11 respondents were interviewed. Interest in searching/contact was related to ethnic identity and diversity of adoptive community, but not to social or psychological adjustment. Interviewees illustrated that the question of searching for birth parents is part of a broader decision about whether or not to metaphorically "search" for identity development. They talked about complexities of searching and identity and challenges connecting with both their adoptive and birth communities.

INTRODUCTION

Most search-related studies have focused on domestic in-race adoptions. We know less about the additional layers of complexity unique to transracial adoption. In addition to the socio-cultural and normative challenges that all adoptees face, such as dissimilarity from the adoptive family (Grotevant et al., 2000; Hollingsworth, 1998), TRAs also have to deal with racial and cultural differences between themselves and their adoptive parents and communities. While searching may satisfy curiosity (Wrobel et al., 2004) or fill emotional voids (McGinness et al., 2009) for adoptees in general, TRAs' inclination to search might also reflect a desire to seek out racial and cultural connections.

PURPOSE/OBJECTIVES

Survey addressed if searching/contact was related to:
• Ethnic identity development
• Communities where TRAs were raised
• Self esteem, school performance, family and peer relationships, and mental health

Interviews explored the meaning of search and contact for individual TRAs and how it evolves and intersects with identity.

METHOD

Online Survey

Participants (n = 109)
• 82 female, 27 male
• 18 to 37 yrs (M = 26.2, SD = 5.8)
• Birth countries/regions:
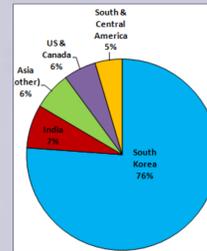
Survey questions inquired about:
• Demographics
• Birth family contact & search interest
• Birth group ethnic identity: Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992)
• Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1979)
• Successes and challenges in school and with their families, friends, and communities

Interviews

Participants (n = 11)
• 8 female, 3 male
• 19 to 23 yrs (M = 21)
• Birth countries/regions:
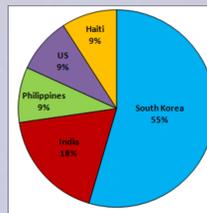
Semi-Structured Interview Guide
Questions encouraged participants to reflect on:
• Search interests
• Views of their birth and adoptive families
• Racial/cultural identities

Analysis: Thematic analysis, focusing on themes related to searching and/or contact with birth families and identity development.

RESULTS

Online Survey
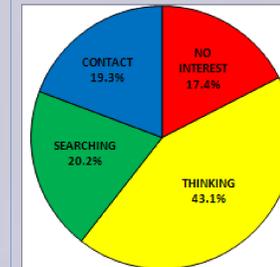
Levels of search interest
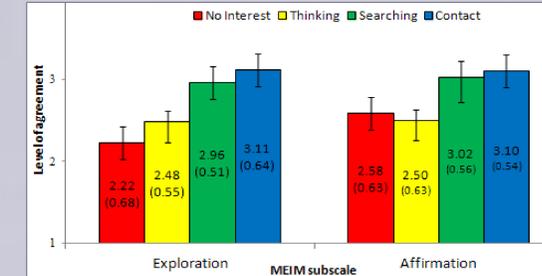
Birth Group Ethnic Identity
Exp: $F(3,98) = 10.26$, $p < .000$; Aff: $F(3,95) = 6.35$, $p = .001$

SEARCHING and CONTACT groups have significantly higher ethnic identity than the NO INTEREST & THINKING groups

Diversity of Community
$\chi^2(3, N = 108) = 11.25$, $p = .010$

THINKING group was more likely than expected to come from diverse communities; SEARCHING group came from non-diverse communities.

Psychological Adjustment
No significant differences between groups in: self-esteem; success in academics, social life, family relationships, or presence of emotional/behavioral problems

Interview Themes
• ***Cultural and Adoptive Generativity***: "...there's definitely an urge for me to work in the [birth] community and get involved with adoptees... understanding their stories and sharing stories." **- Jay**
• ***Gaps between birth and adoptive identities***: "...no matter how Korean I am, I'm still adopted, and no matter how American I am, people still see me as Korean." **- Selma**
• ***Mixed feelings about TRA status***: "pioneer" and "best of both worlds" versus "bi-culturally deprived." **Sharon** said: "... your whole life is like a jigsaw puzzle... you're always trying to put the pieces together and there's always a piece missing..."
• ***Complex search experiences***: "[Searching] filled a gap, or a void... having a picture of her [birth mother],and being with her really, um, really healed up patches that were missing in my life." **– Jay**
  "... it was overwhelming, in every single emotional, physical, spiritual... way. ...But it was *so* worth it, and I would do it again in a heartbeat!" **– Selma**

CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

These findings have implications for adoptees, adoptive parents, counselors, and people who support adoptees as they navigate through the decision-making process about whether or not to embark on a search. Those who support TRAs should be aware that search and contact is a:
1. Normative process, and not a manifestation of psychological problems or difficulty;
2. Fluid and multifaceted process that plays out differently across individuals, situations, and time;
3. Related to ethnic identity exploration and affirmation;
4. May be influenced by diversity of adoptive community.

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