

# Ethnic Racial Socialization Among Inracial International Adoptive Placements

Jessica A.K. Matthews, and Ellen E. Pinderhughes

Tufts University, Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study & Human Development

## Abstract

Parents of international adoptees are encouraged to provide ethnic socialization for their children. Retrospective evidence from adult adoptees suggests this is important for identity development, particularly among transracially adopted persons. However little is known about ethnic identity development among children placed internationally in in-racial placements. It is unknown whether a focus on ethnic socialization by the adoptive family might further distinguish an adopted child as different, or relate to an adoptee's increased perception of adoption visibility. The current study examined the ethnic identity development of 31 adoptees ages 11-18 in in-racial international adoptive placements. Adoption visibility, perceived self-competence, and affiliation with the adoptee's country-of-origin ethnic group and the adoptive family's ethnic group were assessed using an online questionnaire. The survey was completed by both the adoptee and the adoptive parent. Analyses of responses indicates that the majority of adoptees do not feel highly visible with respect to physical dissimilarity and have positive feelings about adoption and their birth countries. The vast majority of parents indicate that they have provided the right amount of exposure to the adoptee's culture of origin. However, adoptees who affiliate more strongly with the ethnicity and culture of their birth countries have higher perceived self-competence than those who affiliate more strongly with the culture of their adoptive families. This suggests that ethnic socialization is important for all adoptive families regardless of racial identification. Further analysis will explore parental exposure to birth country culture as related to geographic area, as well as other relational factors like parent-child relationship closeness. Implications for policy and practice for families with in-racial placements will be discussed.

## Key Concepts and Definitions

- Hague requirements in the U.S. require ICA parents to have 10 hours of training on international adoption, which often includes information on ethnic-racial socialization and occasionally country-specific information
- Ethnic-racial socialization (E-RS)** – the process by which parents raise a child who may not share their race, ethnicity or culture
- We know from retrospective accounts from adult adoptees that E-RS is important, especially for transracial adoptees (McGinnis et al., 2009)
- Adoption visibility** refers to the extent to which an adoptive family is immediately recognizable by an outside observer – i.e. how obvious is it that the family was formed by adoption (Brodzinsky, 2011; Grotevant et al., 2000)
- Adoption visibility deals with not only physical differences, but also *perceived differences* – in temperament, personality, talent, skill, etc.
- So many children adopted within race, might “pass” as non-adopted, but may still *feel* very visible in their adoptions

## Research Question

So does our encouragement of ethnic-racial socialization serve to increase the perceived differences between adoptee and adoptive parents/family, or is it a needed support for in-racial intercountry adoptees?

Basically are we *insisting* on difference? (Kirk, 1964)

## Method

### Sample:

- 31 internationally adopted children, in-racially placed, between ages 11-18 and their parents; 62%F:38%M
- Children adopted from Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Belarus, Republic of Georgia
- All spent time in orphanages, 42% (7-12 months); 21% (3+ years)
- 58% have a special need (LD, ADHD, PTSD), all mild to moderate;

### Survey:

Parents answered questions on race, ethnicity, child's preplacement history, visibility, special needs, the provision of E-RS, birth family search

The children and teens answered questions on:

- Adoption visibility
- Perceived self-competence/self-worth (Harter Scale)
- Ethnic identity (Phinney's MEIM)
  - Answered once for their birth cultural group
  - Answered a second time for their adoptive parent's ethnic group

## Results

### Parent Results

#### On Culture:

- 90% mother respondents, 10% were single parents
- 96% spoke with child about BC culture; 92% encouraged learning about BC; 60% said BC cultural experiences were very or extremely important
- Only 17% had been back to BC with child since adoption, but 54% “had plans” to return
- 92% were the primary cultural resource for their children
- 62% were very comfortable accessing cultural resources for their children; 19% said somewhat comfortable
- 73% said their child has had the “right amount of exposure” to their BC culture

#### On Visibility:

- 81% said they rarely or never received comments from strangers about their adoptive family status
- 50% said they are frequently told their child looks like them (or spouse); 31% said sometimes
- 69% said they lived in a somewhat-very diverse area

## Results

### Child Results

#### On Visibility:

- 100% knew other adoptees; 81% had adopted friends; 70% wish they had more adoptee friends
- 86% said they never or rarely got comments about being adopted
- On standing out from other kids: 30% said never, 20% rarely, 30% sometimes; 15% most of the time; 5% always
- On feeling different due to adoption: 24% said no; 14% in a good way; 52% in a neutral way; 10% in a negative way
- 81% said they don't ever or rarely talk about being adopted with their peers
- 77% said they look a lot or a little like their adoptive family

#### On Self-Competence/ Self-Worth & Ethnic Identity:

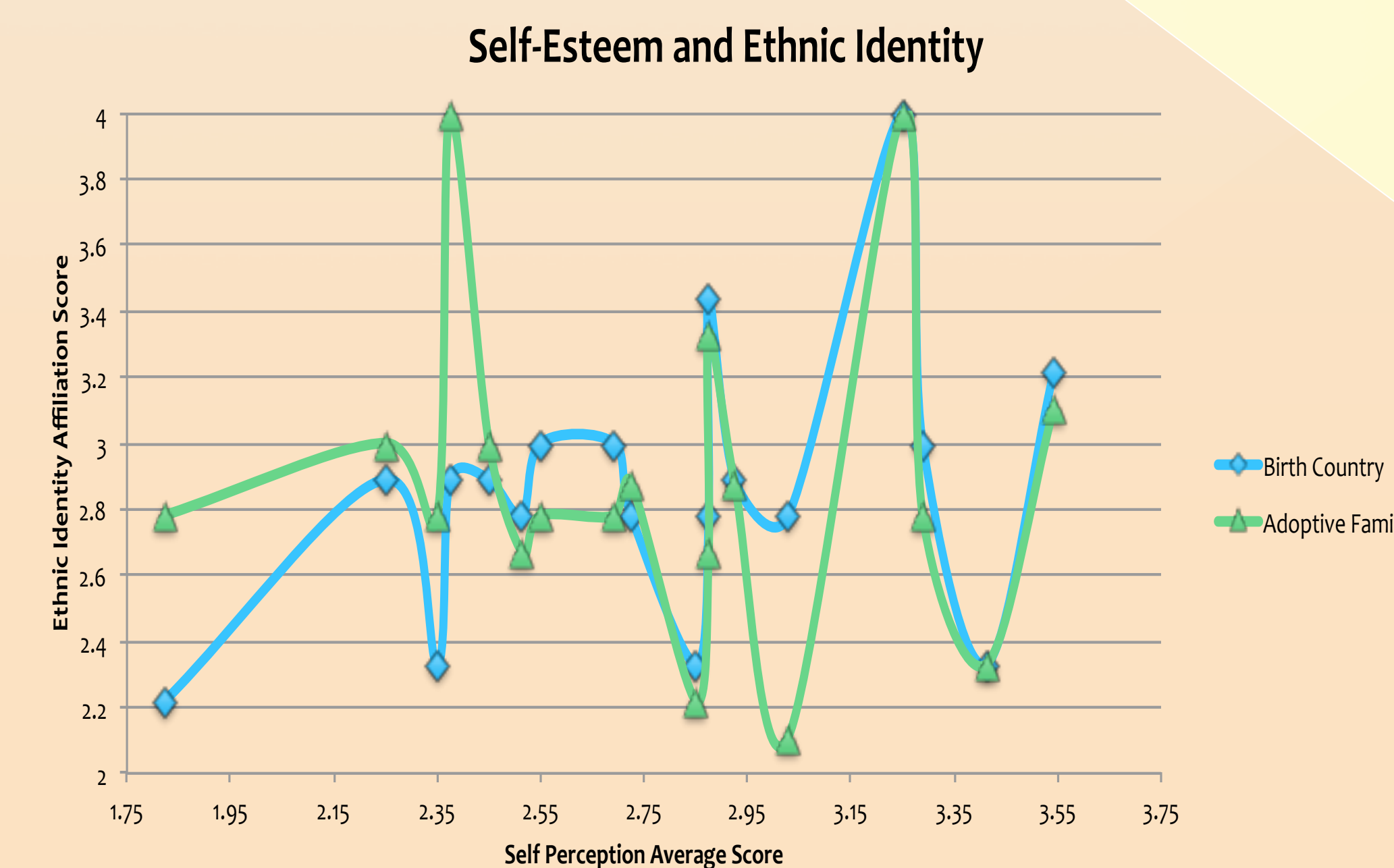
All Score Ranges [1.0-4.0]

- Harter Scale of Perceived Self-Competence: Mean score of 2.77, [range: 1.825-3.54], SD=0.44
- Birth Culture Multi-Ethnic Identity Measure: Mean score of 2.86, [range: 2.22-4.0], SD=0.43
- Adoptive Family Multi-Ethnic Identity Measure: Mean score of 2.89 [range: 2.11-4.0], SD=0.50

## Results of Statistical Analyses

### Correlation:

	Harter	BC MEIM	AF MEIM
Harter	1.0	r=0.41, p≤0.089	r=-0.061, p≤0.8
BC MEIM	r=0.41, p≤0.089	1.0	r=0.68, p≤0.0019**
AF MEIM	r=-0.061, p≤0.8	r=0.68, p≤0.0019**	1.0



This plot shows that at the lower end of self-esteem (Harter's Global Self-Worth score), the Ethnic Identity (EI) affiliation scores are less related. At the higher end of self-esteem, the EI affiliation scores are nearly identical for each adoptee.

## Results:

### Relationship at High SC and Low SC:

	BC Ethnic Identity	AF Ethnic Identity
Low Self Competence	r=0.7, p≤0.036*	r=-0.06, p≤0.88
High Self Competence	r=0.18, p≤0.64	r=0.20, p≤0.61

## Discussion

- Most of this sample has relatively high self worth, and affiliation to both their birth country culture and their adoptive family's culture
- Ethnic identity as related to both the birth country culture and the culture of the adoptive family are highly correlated → this may indicate that parents balance birth country socialization with family-culture socialization (i.e. this may show families are overall, either very interested in cultural socialization or uninterested in cultural socialization)
- But at lower levels of self-worth, birth country cultural affiliation seems particularly important
- One possible explanation for the relationship between EI and Self-Worth may be that affiliation with the birth culture acts as a protective factor during identity development, particularly with respect to adoptive identity
- This suggests that E-RS is in fact an important process for in-racially placed adoptees, especially for those who are struggling in other areas
- Limitations: small sample size, special needs within the sample

## References:

- Brodzinsky, D. M. (2011). Children's understanding of adoption: Developmental and clinical implications. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 42*(2), 200–207.
- Grotevant, H. D., Dunbar, N., Kohler, J. K., & Esau, A.M. L. (2000). Adoptive identity: How contexts within and beyond the family shape developmental pathways. *Family Relations, 49*(4), 379–387.
- Hague Conference on Private International Law. (1993). *33: Convention of 29 May 1993 on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption, Contracting States*. Retrieved from [http://www.hcch.net/index\\_en.php?act=conventions.status&cid=69](http://www.hcch.net/index_en.php?act=conventions.status&cid=69)
- Kirk, H. D. (1964). *Shared fate: A theory of adoption and mental health*. New York, NY: Free Press of Glencoe.
- McGinnis, H., Smith, S. L., Ryan, S., & Howard, J. A. (2009). *Beyond culture camp: Promoting healthy identity formation in adoption*. New York: Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. [www.adoptioninstitute.org](http://www.adoptioninstitute.org)

## Acknowledgements:

This project would not have been possible without the support of my advisors: Ellen E. Pinderhughes, Ann Easterbrooks, Laurie C. Miller And FRUA – Families for Russian and Ukrainian Adoption who helped with distribution of the survey and access to participants; the young adoptees and their parents!