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Developing One's Self: Adoption and Identity Formation Through the Eyes of Transracially Adopted Native American Adults

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DEVELOPING ONE'S SELF:
ADOPTION AND IDENTITY FORMATION THROUGH THE EYES OF
TRANSRACIALLY ADOPTED NATIVE AMERICAN ADULTS

by

JODY BECKER-GREEN

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

Portland State University
2009

DISSERTATION APPROVAL

The abstract and dissertation of Jody Becker-Green for the Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work and Social Research were presented April 30, 2009, and accepted by the dissertation committee and the doctoral program.

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ABSTRACT

An abstract of the dissertation of Jody Becker-Green for the Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work and Social Research presented April 30, 2009.

Title: Developing One's Self: Adoption and Identity Formation through the Eyes of Transracially Adopted Native American Adults

Life story methods were used to explore the contextual factors that influenced the experiences and identity formation of seven Native American adults who were transracially adopted prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978. These methods provided a deeper understanding of how these individuals have integrated their adoption experiences into their evolving sense of self. The life story methodology offered a way to acknowledge and validate participants' life experiences and allowed for the collection of rich information from the perspectives of the adoptees.

The life story interviews were structured to gather information on the influence of one's adoptive family and cultural, social, and educational experiences on participants' developing sense of self. Even though an interview guide was developed for use in the study, each story uniquely unfolded in a manner the participant was comfortable sharing.

The study examined the life stories for patterns or emerging themes related to identity development at different points in the narrators' life cycles in order to develop an aggregate account of the contextual factors influencing identity formation as well

as a collective understanding of sense of self. The study identified 12 contextual factors that have both positively and negatively influenced identity development among the participants throughout their lifespan. These factors are: 1) adoptive family; 2) community; 3) educational experiences; 4) religion/spirituality; 5) travel; 6) exposure to cultural experiences; 7) employment; 8) friendships; 9) peer groups; 10) military; 11) societal messages, and 12) reconnection to tribal heritage. Overall, findings from this study suggest that the majority of participants have developed strong Native American, multi-cultural, and/or bi-cultural identities that incorporate their various experiences as transracial adoptees.

Practice considerations for transracial adoptees as well as adoptive parents are suggested. Policy implications relating to granting access to original birth and/or adoption related records are presented. Finally, future research recommendations are offered specific to Native American transracial adoptees, their biological families, and tribal communities from which they adopted. While the practice, policy, and research recommendations are specific to Native American transracial adoptees, the recommendations may have broader implications to a wider population of adoptees in general.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background

Imagine the outcry if the government announced a plan to take one-fourth of all the white children in the country, separate them from their parents, and then place them in institutions or in foster or adoptive homes. Until 1978, it was as if such a plan actually existed for reservation Indian children. (Pevar, 2002, p. 333)

For centuries, policies and practices have been developed to undermine and erode the rights and abilities of tribal communities and family members to raise their children within the environmental, philosophical, spiritual, and cultural contexts of their communities. These policies and practices were developed and carried out by federal, state, and county governments, humanitarian agencies, philanthropic organizations, and various religious groups. As acknowledged by Byler (1977a), “the main thrust of federal policy, since the close of the Indian wars, has been to break up the extended family, the clan structure, to detribalize and assimilate Indian populations” (p. 7).

In part, the break-up of tribal families was done through the removal of tribal children and placement of those children in various institutional and familial settings. This practice violated the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1948 and made effective in 1951. Article 2 of the Convention defines genocide as “any of the following acts committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnic, racial, or

religious group, as such . . . forcibly transferring children of the group to another group” (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, n.d., p.1).

Efforts to assimilate Native Americans into the mainstream culture by changing their customs, dress, occupations, language, religion, extended family and kinship networks, and philosophy became deliberate and dominant in the late part of the 19th century with the creation of the residential boarding schools for Native American children (Adams, 1995; Child, 1998; Dippie, 1982; Utter, 2001). Such efforts continued through the mid-20th century with the often unwarranted or forced removal and adoptive or foster care placement of Native American children in non-Native families under the rubric of “best interest of the child” (Byler, 1977b; Freundlich, 2000; George, 1997; McCarthy, 1993; Prucha, 1984). While the removal actions may have been well intentioned at the time, the mainstream society notions of “best interests for Native American children” were not aligned with the standard eloquently described by Blanchard (1977) in reference to Native American children in which, “best interest must include recognition and appreciation for the persons they are. The best interest of the Indian child must be defined within the context of the child’s whole life” (p. 60).

The boarding school era, encompassing a time span of the late 1860’s through the mid-1930’s, and the adoption era, beginning in 1958 with the Indian Adoption Project and ending with the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978, have three distinct features in common. First, members of the dominant society used prejudicial policies, practices, and philosophies to exert control over tribal communities, families, and children. Second, the philosophical underpinnings of the

policies and practices were aimed at the suppression of Native American culture and identity through assimilation into mainstream society. Third, Native American children were intentionally removed from their families and extended kinship networks, thus destroying the very essence of many tribal communities, a next generation. The Association on American Indian Affairs (AAIA) (1974) summarizes the lasting effect of such practices in the following statement:

Perhaps the saddest aspect of the whole child welfare crisis is how regular a part of reservation life it has become for the government to interfere with Indian family life. The damage this has done to generations of Indian parents and children is incalculable. (p. 5)

Adoptive placement data during the time in which the transracial adoption of Native American children in America peaked is sparse due to inadequate and varied means used by states, counties, and adoption agencies to collect such information. Even though the Children's Bureau and National Center for Social Statistics gathered information on finalized state adoptions between 1944 and 1975, state participation was voluntary and not consistent over time (Hansen & Simon, 2004). However, what little is known and available in the literature provides some insights into the scope of the problem related to the vast numbers of Native American children who were removed from their homes and placed into non-Native adoptive families prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978. For example, a survey of tribes conducted by the AAIA between 1969 and 1975 found that between 25% and 35% of all Native

American children were separated from their families and placed in adoptive homes, foster homes, or boarding schools (H.R. Rep. No. 1386, 1978). In addition, AAIA discovered in their research that one in every four Native American children under the age of one was adopted in the years 1971-1972 (H.R. Rep. No. 1386, 1978). State specific survey data revealed that in Minnesota, Native American children were placed into adoptive homes at five times the rate of non-Indian children; 40% of all adoptions in South Dakota between 1967 and 1968 involved Native American children, even though they comprised only 7% of the child and youth population; and in Washington, the adoption rate for Native American children was 19 times greater than the non-Native adoption rate in the state (H.R. Rep. No. 1386, 1978).

Other statistics revealed that during the years 1971-1972 in Minnesota, one in every seven Native American children was placed outside of their biological home, with a total of 1,413 Native American children in adoptive placements (Mindell & Gurwitt, 1977). Nearly one in every four adopted Native American children was under the age of 1 (Byler, 1977b). Of the adoptive placements, 91% were placements in which a Native American child was living in a non-Native home (Mindell & Gurwitt, 1977).

Problem Statement

Little is known about the adjustment outcomes and identity formation of Native American children who were adopted into non-Native families (Bagley, 1991) during this time period, especially beyond their adolescent years (Fanshel, 1972; Ryant, 1984; Simon & Alstein, 1977). Based on what is known from the literature and

anecdotal information gathered through the researcher's professional experiences in the field of Indian child welfare, one can speculate that some Native American transracial adoptees struggle with the trauma of separation from biological and extended family networks depending on the age of their adoption, adjustment difficulties within new social, cultural, and environmental contexts, grief issues related to the loss of familial, spiritual, and cultural connections, and issues related to developing a sense of identity and belonging as they try to fit into and find acceptance in two different worlds (i.e., the one that they were born into and the one that they were adopted into).

This study addressed the paucity of information in the literature available on identity formation across the life span for Native American adults who were transracially adopted as children through an in-depth examination of the lives of seven transracially adopted Native American adults. The study responded to a noticeable lack of information in the literature regarding identity development among Native Americans who were transracially adopted prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978. The study used life story interview methods as a means to gather information from and give voice to this generation of children, now in their early to mid-adulthood, who were removed from their familial and environmental contexts and reared in non-Native homes and communities. The life story methodology offered a way to acknowledge and validate participants' life experiences and allowed for the collection of rich and detailed information from the perspectives of transracial adoptees.

The importance of this study was that it allowed participants to tell their own adoptive stories and to share how their varied adoptive experiences helped to shape them into who they are today. The study allowed participants to construct and tell their own adoptive life stories as compared to past research conducted with transracial adoptees that used quantitative approaches. The value of previous research studies involving transracial adoptees includes larger sample sizes, relatively short interviews with study participants, the use of standardized data collection instruments, and an examination of well-being and adjustment over time. These types of studies are also useful for testing hypotheses, tracking trends, and providing summary information on a variety of data elements related to identity formation and overall adjustment and well-being.

Despite the value of past studies using quantitative approaches, the studies are not particularly well suited to fully uncover and understand the process of identity development in transracial adoptees. Qualitative approaches, such as the one used in this study, provide in-depth information about process of identity formation. In addition, this study was designed to examine the adoptive life stories for patterns or emerging themes related to identity development at different points in the narrators' life cycles and to contribute to the ongoing dialog and debate about adjustment outcomes and identity development for transracial adoptees through thoughtful discussion of findings.

Research Questions

This qualitative research study was seen as a beginning step to understanding the contextual factors that influence identity formation in Native American transracial adoptees throughout their lifespan. The original research questions were:

1. How do Native American adults who were transracially adopted prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 understand and make meaning of their adoption experiences as they relate to their identity development in different realms of life?
2. What are the unique familial, social, and environmental factors that have influenced the experiences and identity of transracially adopted Native American adults throughout their life?

The research design was emergent, therefore, as the researcher interacted with research participants and transcribed, coded, and analyzed the life story interviews, the research questions became more refined. The final research questions addressed in this study were:

1. What are the primary contextual factors that have influenced the experiences and identity formation of transracially adopted Native American adults throughout their life?
2. How have Native American adults who were transracially adopted prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act integrated their adoption experiences into their sense of self?

Gathering information about the adoption experience through the eyes of transracially adopted Native American adults helped elucidate the multi-faceted interplay among participants' reflection of self as a transracial adoptee, adoptive experiences, and the various environmental contexts that have served to help shape the participants' identity across throughout their lifespan. It was the telling of participants' construction and reconstruction of self over time that allowed for a deeper understanding of the complexities of issues involved in the identity development of Native American transracial adoptees.

The researcher acknowledges that the development of one's identity is neither a static nor linear process; rather, it is a continual process that changes with time, psychosocial and physical growth and change, and life experiences. Feelings about one's status as an adoptee or transracial adoptee and how this status shapes one's identity can vary at different points in an individual's life.

Significance of the Proposed Study

Culturally sensitive research is needed to help understand how Native American children who were transracially adopted prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act fared into their adolescence and adulthood. This qualitative study was an important first step in understanding both the positive and negative experiences of transracially adopted Native American adults in terms of their development of self and sense of belonging, nature of support systems available to them as they develop their unique identities, and development of resilience that may stem from their experiences

as transracial adoptees across their lifespan. It is hoped that this study will be used to better inform future transracial adoption studies.

Illuminating the lived experiences of Native American adults who were transracially adopted prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 also provides valuable information to clinicians who may be providing services to this population and to tribal communities that are being contacted by adoptees who are searching for their roots. Further, the study contributes to the ongoing sealed record debates surrounding current policies regarding adoption records for participants who have engaged in the search process in hopes of uncovering hidden aspects of their identity. Findings also provide guidance to adoptive parents or potential adoptive parents who are interested in transracial adoption from the life span perspective of transracial adoptees.

Personal Statement

We are what we know. We are, however, also what we do not know. If what we know about ourselves---our history, our culture, our national identity---is deformed by absences, denials, and incompleteness than our identity, both as individuals and as Americans, is fragmented. (Pinar & Castenell, 1993, p. 61)

This statement resonates with me because it gets at the heart of my personal identity experiences as an adoptee. To help understand my interests in doing this research I offer the following perspectives on my personal search for meaning and

identity throughout my life. I was adopted during a time when adoption records were sealed and adoption was heavily linked with concepts of shame and secrecy, thus denying me access to vital information that would help link me to my biological past. My adoptive family was Caucasian, middle-class, conservative, and active members in a Christian church. I was fortunate to be adopted into a family in which my biological brother was adopted 15 months earlier. Despite my biological connection to my brother, my life has been marked by periods of doubt, insecurity, uncertainty, and unsettledness as a result of my adoptive status.

Throughout my adolescent and early adult years I struggled with trying to put the pieces of my life together in a coherent manner because of missing information linking me to my biological roots. This struggle played out in conflictual relationships with my adoptive parents and a strong yearning for learning about who else I was rather than just accepting the imposed identities placed upon me by familial and environmental contexts. While I was raised in a home full of love and support and was cognizant at an early age of the fact that “I was special” by virtue of my adoption status, I still suffered from issues of grief, loss, and abandonment due to the severing of early biological ties. My needs for understanding who I was in the contexts of my adoptive family, the social, cultural, academic, and spiritual environments in which I was raised, and the great unknowns of my past were overwhelming at times because I knew they were all related, yet incomplete. After searching for a connection to my past for over 10 years, I was finally reunited with my birth mother at the age of 37.

The perspective I bring into this research is one of both an insider and an outsider. I have an insider perspective on the lived experiences of an adoptee that has experienced first-hand struggles with finding my own voice within the complexities of my familial and environmental contexts over my lifespan. I am an outsider to this research in terms of transracial adoption and the unique challenges faced by transracial adoptees because I was adopted into a family who was of the same racial/ethnic background as my birth parents. I am in a unique position to conduct this research because I have an insider perspective that a non-adopted person may not have yet being on the outside contributes to my interest in gaining knowledge about the negotiation of identity among transracially adopted Native American adults.

The inherent biases that I bring to this study as an adoptee include my assumptions that: 1) the nature of adoption for many adoptees severs them from a connection to their genealogical past; 2) identity formation for adoptees is challenging because they do not have access to the “givens” in one’s life, namely information about their past; 3) identity construction is a dynamic, non-linear process that evolves over ones’ lifespan as a result of an individual’s reflection on his or her past, present, and future and ones’ interaction within fluid social contexts; and, 4) the mysteries of my own identity have allowed me to create multiple identities and to fit in with different groups of people.

As a social worker who is interested in social justice and advocacy on behalf of Native American children, families, and communities, I have a number of biases that stem from both living and working in tribal communities for over 10 years. These

biases include beliefs that: 1) the adoption of Native American children prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 is steeped in a myriad of intricate social, historical, and political policies and practices that eroded the ability of Native American families and communities to provide care for their children; 2) Native American transracial adoptees must tackle additional challenges (e.g., trying to fit into two different worlds, responding to societal prejudices and stereotypes, lack of support, incorporating a different worldview into their sense of self) in relation to the development of a racial/ethnic identity; 3) there are multiple familial and contextual factors that influence the identity formation of transracial adoptees, many of which are poorly understood; and 4) the untold stories of the long-term impact of transracial adoption on Native American children deserve to be told and heard in a culturally sensitive and respectful manner.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

During the late part of the 19th century, unilateral government policies aimed at the assimilation and destruction of tribal cultures was a distinguishing characteristic of the relationship between the federal government and Native American communities. Tribal children were often the targets of these governmental policies through their planned removal from their homes and communities. For example, the federal government established off-reservation boarding schools as a means to detribalize Native American children, in essence, to transform them into civilized and Christian beings. Regimentation, structure, discipline, and uniformity were all strategies used by the off-reservation boarding schools to complete this transformation. These schools were established to bring “civilization” to “savage” cultures by attempting to make one’s culture completely disappear in favor of another. Ironically, many children who survived the early off-reservation boarding school experiences remained connected to their tribal ways of life. They were resilient despite the disrespect shown to them by humanitarian reformers, educators, and government agencies.

During the middle half of the 20th century, similar ideologies were once again targeted directly at tribal children and families. Rather than focusing on education as a means of assimilation into the dominant society, federal agencies, child welfare organizations, and religious groups joined forces to promote the adoption of the “forgotten child”, that is, the adoption of Native American children living on reservations into predominantly non-Native homes. Unfortunately, little is known about how these children fared into adulthood as the majority of outcome research has

focused largely on their childhood experiences and data used to inform the outcome studies was gathered largely from adoptive parents (Bagley, 1991; Fanshel, 1972; Rosene, 1985).

What is known from the limited outcome studies focusing on transracially adopted Native American children is that they likely struggled with issues of identity and sense of belonging as they tried to negotiate and define their sense of self through markedly different cultural, familial, environmental, and spiritual worldviews (Bagley, 1991; Berlin, 1978; Locust, 1999, 2000; McCarthy, 1993; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996; Peterson, 2002; Westermeyer, 1979). The psychological, physical, cultural, and spiritual costs associated with the adoption era to Native American adoptees, families, and communities are immeasurable in terms of the collective losses experienced by those affected by the unwarranted removal and placement of Native children into non-Native homes. Culturally respectful research efforts are needed to further understand and document this important era in American history so that we do not forget the injustices perpetrated against Native American children, families, and communities for the sake of assimilation and absorption into mainstream society.

Transracial Adoption Controversy in America

While some form of adoption existed in the United States beginning in the early 1800s (Freundlich, 2000), legalized adoption began with the enactment of the first adoption statutes in the State of Massachusetts in 1851 (Silverman & Feigelman, 1990). However, it wasn't until nearly a century later that the concept of transracial adoption became popularized with the inter-country adoption of children from World

War II ravaged countries. Over a period of nearly 30 years, from the late 1940's until the late 1970's, the number of children from minority cultures who were transracially adopted waxed and waned. The changing transracial adoption rates were due in part to transforming race relations within the United States, changes in reproductive policies and practices, shifting practice theories surrounding transracial adoptions, a decrease in the number of Caucasian babies available for adoption, a limited number of minority adoptive homes, and an increased willingness of Caucasian parents to adopt a child from a different racial/ethnic background (Bussiere, 1998; Cole, 1984; Cole & Donley, 1990; Howard, 1984; Lipman, 1984; Simon & Alstein, 1977). Transracial adoptions were also being encouraged by the revision made to the Child Welfare League of America's (CWLA) *Standards of Excellence for Adoption Services* in 1968. The following language in support of transracial adoptions was incorporated into the standards issued by CWLA (1968), "In most communities, there are families who have the capacity to adopt a child whose racial background is different from their own. Such couples should be encouraged to consider such a child" (p. 34).

In addition, starting in the early 1960's there were sweeping child welfare policy changes in the reporting of alleged incidents of child abuse and neglect (Howard, 1984) as a result of the identification of the battered child syndrome (Kempe, Silverman, Steele, Droegemueller, & Silver, 1984). The policy changes resulted in an increased infrastructure burden on many state and county child welfare systems as they developed systems to respond to the child abuse and/or neglects allegations.

Throughout the years, the practice of transracial adoption has been met with mixed reviews by a variety of stakeholders concerned about the well-being of minority children and families. According to Simon and Alstein (1977), there were some individuals that believed it was “better for both children and adoptive parents if the former are raised in a family situation than if they remain either in an institution or in foster care,” while others strongly believed that “to transplant a child from his or her own culture is to court possible future personal confusion and societal rejection” (p. 11) and that resources should be expended to identify and recruit ethnic minority parents to become potential adoptive placements.

Proponents of transracial adoption believed that claims about the negative impact of transracial adoption on children were exaggerated. They based their views on limited outcome research focused with transracially-adopted children that indicated positive adjustment in their adoptive placements (Meezan, 1980). In addition, many adoptive parents felt they could help their transracially-adopted child develop a strong cultural identity and viewed transracial adoption as a way of building a multicultural society (Meezan, 1980). Finally, transracial adoption supporters thought “providing children with a loving secure home will give these children a strong sense of self as ‘human’ beings” (Meezan, 1980, p. 25).

Opponents of the transracial adoption of Native American children cite decimation of culture, child’s loss of cultural heritage, risk of permanent marginality, child’s inability to live on their native lands, illegitimate removal of children from their ancestral, racial, and community group, and perpetuation of beliefs that one

culture is unable to adequately care for their children as valid reasons for children to be reared within their own culture (Ryant, 1984). Allegations of cultural genocide were also made by opponents of transracial adoption by insinuating that “transracial adoptions threaten the development of ethnic pride and identification with ethnic culture, and that they undermined ethnic family life” (Meezan, 1980, p. 24).

According to Meezan (1980), the most frequently cited concerns over the transracial placement of minority children include the potential effects of such placement on identity development and the use of such placements as “an alternative to recruiting and serving minority families” (p. 23).

Indian Adoption Project

Project history. In 1958, the CWLA, the nation’s leading expert on child welfare related issues, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), the federal agency commissioned by the United States Congress to act in the best interest of the tribes, joined forces to create the Indian Adoption Project. The BIA entered into a contract with CWLA to operate a clearinghouse for the interstate placement of Native American children in non-Native families. A contract between the two agencies was necessary because the BIA was not authorized to directly engage in adoption related activities as such engagement would have easily been identified as acting in direct conflict with serving the best interest of tribes.

At the inception of the project, a nationwide survey had been conducted by the National Council of Protestant Churches indicating there were approximately 1,000 Native American children legally free for adoption and who were forced to live in

foster homes or institutions because adoptive resources had not been found for them (Child Welfare League of America [CWLA], 1960). At the beginning of the project it was anticipated that 50-100 Native American children from across the country would be placed primarily with non-Native families through specialized adoption agencies. Even though the project formally ended in 1967, its adoption-related activities continued through the Adoption Resource Exchange of North America (ARENA), a program created to support the adoption of hard-to-place children living in the United States and Canada (Lyslo, 1968). According to Prucha (1984), “what began as a sincere effort to protect the best interests of the child, as it was viewed by social workers, eventually was perceived more accurately as a force destructive of Indian families and Indian children” (p. 378).

The expressed purpose of the project was “to stimulate the adoption of American Indian children on a nation-wide basis” because Native American children were viewed as “forgotten” and “left unloved and uncared for on the reservation, without a home or parents” (CWLA, 1960, p.1). Further, the project believed that Native American children “could be adopted where there was less prejudice against Indians” (CWLA, 1960, p. 1). The underpinnings of this project were to “provide adoptive placements for American Indian children whose parents were deemed unable to provide a ‘suitable’ home for them” (Mannes, 1995, p. 267).

The BIA fueled the transracial adoption of Native American children by providing states with BIA funding to remove tribal children from their homes and to deny tribal access to adoption information about their children (Kunesh, 1996). Many

tribal children were removed from their homes on the grounds that they were being neglected in their current environments (Kunesh, 1996). Frequently, these children were placed into non-Native homes due to the lack of Native American families available to provide care for the children. In part, this was due to state and county policies (e.g., licensing requirements) and practices that created barriers for the development of Native foster or adoptive homes.

CWLA believed their efforts through the project would help them to become “involved more deeply in basic problems in the care of Indian children” and through their actions, “help improve the general conditions among Indians” (CWLA, 1960, p. 4). In addition to the main objectives, it was anticipated that the project would also 1) demonstrate that adoptive homes can be “secured for homeless or rejected Indian youth”; 2) improve services to unwed and expectant Native American mothers; 3) establish procedures for the off-reservation adoption of Native American children; 4) promote earlier court intervention in cases of neglected infants; 5) encourage other organizations to provide better services to unmarried Native American mothers and children; 6) disseminate information about the project and experiences of the adoption agencies in placing Native American children; and 7) evaluate the outcomes of children adopted through the project (CWLA, 1960, pp. 4-5).

It was hoped the evaluation would yield positive results for the Native American children placed through the project to support efforts to develop a permanent interstate plan for the adoption of Native American children. While the project was

ambitious, as demonstrated in the project objectives, it lacked respect for culture and respect for tribal sovereignty.

Early on in the project, CWLA developed guidelines to assist agencies participating in the project with the evaluation of prospective adoptive families for Native American children. These guidelines covered areas such as the motivation of the adoptive family to adopt a Native American child, attitudes surrounding illegitimacy, adoption readiness, attitudes toward the inherent tribal rights afforded Native American children such as the right to tribal enrollment, if eligible, and per capita disbursements, and preferences surrounding the age, gender, and health status of the potential adoptive child (Lyslo, 1962).

Environmental context. At the beginning of the Indian Adoption Project the reservation population was approximately 300,000 with more than half of the reservation population under the age of 18. There were 154 identified tribal jurisdictions under the responsibility of 51 BIA agency offices (CWLA, 1960). The Indian Adoption Project developed, in part, as a response to the environmental conditions that existed on many reservation communities. The environmental conditions, combined with the continued belief that the Indian child must be “saved” and not “doomed to lives of stark deprivation” through continued outside interference into Native American family life (Fanshel, 1972, p. 24). According to Carruth and Rabeau (cited in Fanshel, 1972), in 1962,

. . . the average reservation family had an income of \$1,500 and that unemployment on the reservation ran between 40 and 50

percent - -seven or eight times the national average. Average schooling on the reservation was only eight years - - two-thirds of the national average. Nine out of ten Indian families were reported to live in housing that was far below the minimum standard of comfort, safety and decency. . . . More than 80 percent of the Indians had to haul or carry all the water for their household use. (p. 22)

It is also important to note that this project was formulated during a period of time when the federal government was engaged in the termination of benefits and supports to certain tribes that resulted in the “forced dissolution of their reservations” (Pevar, 2002. p. 7). Between the years 1953-1968, federal assistance to over 100 reservation communities ended, tribal land in these communities was disbursed among tribal members, and tribal governments were dissolved (Pevar, 2002). During this time period, large numbers of Native American families were being re-located from reservation-based communities to metropolitan centers throughout the United States such as Seattle, Portland, Oakland, Minneapolis, Chicago, and New York. Congressional sentiment toward tribal communities may have also provided additional, albeit indirect, support of the removal of tribal children from their families through the Indian Adoption Project.

Finally, there were a few tribes throughout the United States with policies or procedures relating to the transracial adoption of their children. For those tribes who opposed the transracial adoption of their children, individuals involved with the

implementation of the project “believed that with understanding and faith in the good will of the adoption agencies, those tribes now opposed to the adoption of Indian children by white families will acquiesce” (CWLA, 1960, p. 3).

The Navajo Nation adopted a tribal policy on the adoption of Navajo orphans and abandoned or neglected children on November 18, 1960 (Navajo Tribal Council, 1960). The Navajo Nation tribal policy established a procedure for the adoption of Navajo children who were brought in person before the Navajo tribal court; however, there was no definite policy either in favor of or in opposition to the adoption of Navajo children by non-tribal members. In addition to the Navajo Nation, the Shoshone, Winnebago, and some Sioux Nations were known to occasionally permit the off-reservation adoption of their children while the Apache and Mojave expressed opposition to transracial adoption (CWLA, 1960). During the early years of the Indian Adoption Project, the states of Kansas, New Mexico, Arizona, South Dakota, and Washington were involved in some form of transracial adoption of Native American children through private adoption agencies (CWLA, 1960).

Project impact. Historical data indicates that 395 children were formally adopted through the Indian Adoption Project to families living in 26 states (Lyslo, 1968). A closer look at the 395 children reveals they were birth to 11 years of age, with 37 children over the age of five at the time of placement. Over half of the children were under the age of one at the time of placement. Fifty children were sets of siblings and there were six sets of twins. Over half of the children were considered full-blooded Indian and half of the children’s parents lived on a reservation. Finally,

the Native American children who were adopted through the project came from 16 different states with nearly one-quarter from South Dakota (n=104) and one-quarter from Arizona (n=112) (Lyslo, 1968).

What is rarely discussed in the historical context of this project is the increase in non-Native families' levels of interest to adopt a Native American child. The actual number of Native American children officially adopted through this project is small in comparison to the numbers of Native American children adopted through other avenues as a result of this project. For example, in addition to the actual transracial adoption of Native American children, the Indian Adoption Project also served to reduce "interstate barriers to adoption, established an ethos of adoption as the answer to Indian children in poverty, and reinforced the promotion of non-Indian families as the ultimate rescue for Indian children" (Red Horse, Martinez, Day, Day, Poupart, & Scharnberg, 2000, p. 17).

At the end of 1966, it was noted that national publicity increased the interest in the adoption of Native American children. Magazine articles about the project were published in *Good Housekeeping*, the *Lutheran Witness*, the *Lutheran Standard*, the *Consumer Union Report on Family Planning*, and the *Catholic Charities Review*. As a result of these articles, there were over 1,200 written inquiries about the project during the course of the year were received (Lyslo, 1967). By the end, the project had received over 5,000 inquiries by families who were interested in adopting a Native American child (Lyslo, 1968). In addition to increased interest in adopting a Native American child, courts were more willing to take action to free a Native American child for

adoption, agencies were providing more services to unmarried Native American women, and many Native American children were being adopted by their foster parents (Lyslo, 1967).

The exponential harm and devastation created within tribal children, families, and communities as a result of this project is unfathomable as the concept of adoption in some tribal communities “represented a spiritual death and a rupture in the social fabric of the tribe that could never be repaired” (George, 1997, p. 171). In part, this project was successful in diverting the nation’s attention away from dealing with the underlying issues and realities of reservation life that resulted from centuries of misguided policies and practices toward Native Americans.

The adoption requests for Native American children outgrew the capacity of the Indian Adoption Project and other agencies facilitated the adoption of Native American children at alarming rates. In 1965, CWLA sent a survey to 102 public and voluntary adoption agencies in states that had large Native American populations. The survey asked agencies about: 1) the number of Indian children of one-quarter or more degree Indian blood placed for adoption by the agency in 1965; 2) the race of the adoptive family; 3) the number of Indian children in care on December 21, 1965 considered adoptable; 4) special problems that prevented Indian children from being adopted; and 5) suggestions as to how services to Native Americans could be better coordinated and improved.

Ninety agencies replied and the survey revealed that 696 Native American children were placed in adoptive homes in 1965 by 66 agencies, an adoption rate that

was six times greater than children adopted through the Indian Adoption Project (George, 1997). White families adopted 585 of the 696 Native American children who were adopted through the project (Arnold Lyslo, personal communication, October 11, 1966). The survey also indicated there were 432 Native American children eligible for adoption as of December 31, 1965 and that had it not been for existing racial prejudices that existed in some states, more Native American children could have been adopted (A. Lyslo, personal communication, October 11, 1966).

While adoption data is sparse in part due to inadequate and varied means used to collect such information (Hansen & Simon, 2004), what we do know provides some insights into the magnitude of the removal of Native American children from their homes and communities prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978. As Table 1 indicates, for selected states where data is available, the likelihood of being adopted was higher for Native American children than non-Native children. Between 1973 and 1976, Native American children living in Washington and Wisconsin were at greatest risks of being adopted with their likelihood of adoptive placement 23.0 and 19.6 times that of their non-Native peers.

Table 1

Native American Adoption Statistics from 1973-1976 from Select States*

State	# of Native American children under 21	# of Native American children adopted	% Native American Children placed in non-Native Home	Native American Adoption Rate	Non-Native Adoption Rate	Prevalence Ratio***
Alaska	28,334	957	93%	1 out of 29.6	1 out of 13.7	2.2
Arizona	54,709	1,039	**	1 out of 52.7	1 out of 220.4	3.8
California	39,579	1,507	92.5%	1 out of 26.3	1 out of 219.8	7.6
Michigan	7,404	912	**	1 out of 8.1	1 out of 30.3	3.7
Minnesota	12,672	1,594	37.5%	1 out of 7.9	1 out of 31.1	4.0
Montana	15,124	541	87%	1 out of 30	1 out of 144.6	4.7
North Dakota	10,627	269	75%	1 out of 30.4	1 out of 86.2	2.8
Oregon	6,839	402	**	1 out of 17	1 out of 19.2	1.1
Oklahoma	45,511	1,116	**	1 out of 40.8	1 out of 188.1	5.0
South Dakota	18,322	1,019	**	1 out of 18	1 out of 32.4	1.8
Washington	15,980	740	**	1 out of 21.6	1 out of 407	23.0
Wisconsin	10,456	633	**	1 out of 14.3	1 out of 251.5	19.6
Utah	6,690	326	**	1 out of 20.4	1 out of 68.5	3.3

*Data contained in the table adapted from Task Force Four, 1976, pp 46-50.

** No data available.

***Prevalence ratios are estimates based on the Native American adoption rate and non-Native adoption rates provided.

A step toward reconciliation. Looking back on the Indian Adoption Project with the hindsight and wisdom of current child welfare policies and practices, it is not difficult to see how the once perceived good-intentions of the project were hurtful to many tribal children, families, and communities. What happened during and as a result of the project in terms of cultural loss must be remembered so that adult adoptees, their families, and their tribal communities can begin their own journeys of healing. In

2001, CWLA took a significant step on the journey toward healing the wounds of the Indian Adoption Project. In a historic keynote address to hundreds of Native Americans attending a national conference focused on Native American child welfare in Anchorage, Alaska, Shay Bilchik, CWLA executive director, offered a formal apology on behalf of CWLA for their role in the project by saying, in part,

No matter how well intentioned and how squarely in the mainstream this was at the time, it was wrong, it was hurtful, and it reflected a kind of bias that surfaces feeling of shame, as we look back with the 20/20 vision of hindsight. . . . While adoption was not as wholesale as the infamous Indian schools, in terms of lost heritage, it was even more absolute. I deeply regret the fact that CWLA's active participation gave credibility to such a hurtful, biased, and disgraceful course of action. . . . We acknowledge this inheritance, this legacy of racism and arrogance. . . . we also accept the moral responsibility to move forward in an aggressive, proactive, and positive manner, as we pledge ourselves to see that nothing like what has happened ever happens again. (Bilchik, 2001, pp. 2-3)

Adoption Research Overview

There is a moderate body of knowledge examining multiple aspects of adoption as it relates to identity formation among adoptees in general. Haugaard (1998) attempts to synthesize and analyze four sets of research of studies that

examined: 1) the proportion of adoptees seen in outpatient and inpatient mental health settings; 2) the types of disorders found among adopted and non-adopted children who were seen in mental health facilities; 3) developmental adjustment issues in samples of non-clinical adoptees; and, 4) longitudinal adjustment of non-clinical populations of adoptees.

The first set of studies reveal there was a greater percentage of adopted children seen in both inpatient and outpatient settings (Haugaard, 1998). This finding must be interpreted with caution as many of the samples viewed adoptees as a homogenous group and did not take into consideration age of adoption, pre-adoptive placement history, and likelihood of adopted parents to seek mental health services. Some authors (Feigleman, 2000; Grotevant, 1997a; Weinberg, Waldman, van Dulmen, & Scarr, 2004) argue that the over-representation of adoptees in clinical settings may be attributable to adoptive parents being more comfortable with seeking mental health services because they have, in general, above average incomes and a higher education than the average population. In addition, previous familiarity and success working with social service systems through the adoption process may help adoptive parents become more willing to seek professional help (Weinberg, et al., 2004). The potentially biased patterns of referral to both outpatient and inpatient mental health services is a factor that should be considered in studies that focus primarily on clinical samples of adoptees.

The cross-sectional studies examined by Haugaard (1998) that attempted to identify specific disorders, as diagnosed based on the *Diagnostic and Statistical*

Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition (American Psychiatric Association, 1994), associated with an individual's status as an adoptee found no pattern or differences in diagnoses given to adopted and non-adopted adolescents seen in inpatient psychiatric service settings. Thus, the research is inconclusive about the relationship of being adopted and having an increased risk for specific mental health diagnoses.

The body of research examining cross-sectional and non-clinical samples of adopted children included three studies and provided an assorted depiction of adoptees. One study did not find any associations between adopted status and behavioral problems (Haugaard, 1998). The other studies found small differences between adopted and non-adopted children, with some adopted children experiencing significant problems.

The longitudinal, non-clinical studies examined by Haugaard (1998) included a 1958 British cohort, a 1970 British cohort, and a cohort of Swedish infants placed for adoption during a two-year period in the 1950s. Each study used different measures and assessed study participants at different points in time making it difficult to make comparisons across the studies. Similar to the first group of studies examined, two of the longitudinal studies did not examine pre-adoptive placement histories. One finding highlighted by Haugaard (1998) was that all of the studies conducted an assessment of participants at age 10 or 11 and found that the adopted children experienced greater levels of maladjustment than their non-adoptive peers.

Weirzbicki (1993) conducted a meta-analysis of 66 studies that examined the psychological adjustment of adoptees as compared to non-adoptees with a particular focus on determining whether adoptees experience greater psychological adjustment than their non-adopted peers, are over-represented in clinical mental health settings, and have more externalizing disorders (e.g., hyperactivity, aggressive behaviors, delinquency, conduct disorder, running away, and conflictual relationships with peers). Weirzbicki (1993) found that adoptees, based on their over-representation in clinical samples, had significantly higher levels of maladjustment, externalizing behaviors, academic problems, and general severity compared to their non-adopted peers. The meta-analysis did not find any adjustment differences between adoptees and non-adoptees that were attributable to age at the time of adoption (Weirzbicki, 1993).

Transracial Adoption Research Overview

The issue of transracial adoption has sparked controversy over the years, especially in terms of whether individuals who are transracially adopted are able to develop a racial or ethnic identity that is characteristic of their racial or ethnic groups. Other areas of concern about individuals that were transracially adopted include the overall adjustment of transracial adoptees, the type of information shared with transracial adoptees about the circumstances surrounding their adoption and biological roots, and problems associated with the nontraditional composition of transracial adoptive homes (Shireman & Johnson, 1986). Simon and Alstein (1977) eloquently summarize the concerns surrounding transracial adoption in the following statement:

If the fears expressed by black and Indian opponents of transracial adoption are realized, that these children will be white on the inside and black on the outside, and that they will be perceived by both whites and blacks as pariahs, transracial adoption will be remembered as a dismal and emotionally costly experiment. If the hopes and expectation of the parents involved in transracial adoption are realized, and their children are emotionally whole, well-adjusted, and able to move easily within and between black and white communities, society's failure to maintain and support the program will be remembered with deep regret. Time, thus, will determine transracial adoption's final evaluation. (p. 187)

Thirty-two years after Simon and Alstein made this statement, there is still a lack of empirical research that either proves or disproves the merits of transracial adoption and whether being transracially adopted negatively impacts the development of a positive racial identity. According to Courtney (1997), "Those with strongly held views are likely to maintain their convictions: advocates of transracial adoption will continue to believe that the research supports their beliefs, while opponents will contend that transracial adoption is harmful or that the jury is still out" (p.753). Some transracial adoptees have successfully traversed issues related to their racial identity. Others may have experienced moderate to strong feelings of isolation,

marginality, and difficulties in identity formation on their adoptive journey from childhood through adulthood as they navigate through the divergent worlds of the family and culture they were born into and the one in which they were raised.

The following sections provide a brief overview of some of the transracial adoption studies that have been conducted over the past four decades. While the review of studies is not exhaustive in nature, it does provide a summary and critique of some of the major bodies of research that have been conducted on this controversial and emotionally laden topic. Many of the studies described below have focused on overall adjustment, psychological adjustment, identity formation, outcomes, and self-esteem among transracial adoptees.

There is a limited amount of adoption research focused exclusively on adjustment outcomes and identity development among Native American children who were transracially adopted. To date, transracially adopted African American children have been the primary focus of transracial adoption research. Early on in debate surrounding the merits of transracial adoption, Grow and Shapiro (1974), studied the adjustment of 125 African American children who were transracially adopted into White homes. Based on personality testing and parental reports of adjustment, the authors concluded that 77% of the transracially adopted African American children had successfully adjusted to their adoptive placement (Grow & Shapiro, 1974).

In another study, McRoy and colleagues (1982) conducted an exploratory study using purposive sampling methods to explore the self-esteem and racial identity of transracially adopted African American children. Participants included a group of 30 White families who had adopted African American children and 30 African American families who had adopted African American children. Findings suggest that the children involved in the study were almost identical in their reported self-worth as measured by the Tennessee Self Concept Scale and their scores were as high as those reported in the general population.

While levels of measured self-esteem were similar between the two groups, content analysis of the responses on the Twenty Statements Test revealed significant differences between the transracial and inracial adoptees in terms of their sense of racial identity and adopted status. McRoy and colleagues (1982) found “transracially adopted children were more likely to identify themselves as being adopted and to use racial self-referents than inracially adopted children” (p. 525). Having a clear sense of racial identity was more problematic for the transracially adopted African American children. The authors stressed the importance of parental attitudes and environmental influences in shaping the child’s identity. Factors associated with developing a positive racial identity included nurturance of the child’s African American identity, access to African American role models and peers in the child’s environment, and parental attention to the child’s African American heritage.

McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, and Anderson (1984) conducted an exploratory study with a non-representative sample of 30 White families who had adopted an

African American child to identify the familial and contextual factors that may contribute to identity development among the transracial adoptees. Separate interviews were conducted with both the child and adoptive parents. Results suggest a relationship between the adoptees' racial identity and parental attitudes toward the child's racial background (e.g., a child may have described him or her self as mixed race if his/her parent referred to the child as having a mixed race background).

Findings also suggest that transracial adoptees who were being raised in an integrated area, who attended a racially integrated school, and who had parents who acknowledged the child's racial background tended to describe themselves positively as an African American (McRoy, et al., 1984). Similar to their findings in previous research (McRoy, et al., 1982), the authors stress the importance and influence of a transracially-adopted child's psychosocial environment on his/her racial identity.

Simon and Alstein (1987) describe their research conducted with adoptive families from the Midwest over three separate data collection points (i.e., 1972, 1979, and 1984). Participants were initially contacted through their involvement in the Open Door Society and the Council on Adoptable Children. Despite the attrition in the number of families participating in the research (n=206 in 1972, n=133 in 1979, and n=88 in 1984), their longitudinal findings contribute to the knowledge of transracial adoption outcomes from both adoptive parent and adoptee perspectives and add to the discussion of the pros and cons of transracial adoption.

From an adoptive parental perspective, the authors report findings on how adoption changed their families, perceptions of children's academic performance and

aspirations, racial identity, relationships among family members, plans for the future, birth records, and advice about transracial adoption. In terms of identity, 63% of adoptive parents interviewed believed that their child identified with the racial/ethnic background of their birth as well as the background of their adoptive parents (Simon & Alstein, 1987). At the end of their study in 1984, 86% of the adoptive parents still participating in the study expressed support for transracial adoption and would advise others who are interested to adopt transracially.

Simon and Alstein (1987) also examined different aspects of the adoptee's experiences by presenting findings on school performance and educational plans, interests and friendships, race and family, family integration and commitment, self-esteem, and plans for the future. Similar to McRoy and colleagues' (1982) findings, the authors found that 56% of the transracial adoptees made reference to their race in their self-description compared to 27% of inracial adoptees. Among the Native American, Korean, Vietnamese and other transracial adoptees (n=22), 82% reported being proud of their racial heritage, 9% reported that they did not mind their racial heritage, and the remaining 9% reported wanting to be White (Simon & Alstein, 1987). One Native American adoptee expressed a strong negative racial identity in the following statement, "It bothers me that I'm Indian. People don't look up to the Indians. The whites always fought the Indians and the Indians got beat. We aren't looked up to. There is nothing special about being Indian" (Simon & Alstein, 1987, p. 63).

In 1986, Shireman and Johnson presented some outcomes of a longitudinal study originally involving 118 African American children who were transracially adopted (n=42), inracially adopted (n=45), or adopted into a single parent home (n=31). The study involved children who were placed for adoption through two child-placing agencies in Chicago between 1970 and 1972. Adjustment was assessed using parental reports of the child's behavior, observations of the adopted children, and standardized measures. Identity development, the main interest of the study, was assessed using the Clark Doll Test. The Clark Doll Test was administered to the adoptees at both age 4 and age 8 in order to allow for comparisons.

Findings from the Clark Doll Test indicate that the transracial adoptees involved with the study, despite their limited exposure to other African Americans, “displayed a greater black preference than those children in homes with Black parents” at age four (Shireman & Johnson, 1986, p. 174). The transracial adoptees maintained positive conceptions of their racial background at age eight. This study suggests that transracial adoptees develop a sense of their racial identity at an early age and are able to maintain this identity as they age. However, the authors are cognizant of the challenges that these children may face as they go through “that stage of development in which the basic building blocks of self-identity are laid down” (Shireman & Johnson, 1986, p. 175).

In the 1988 follow-up study with these children who were now in their early teens, Shireman found no significant differences between the inracial and transracial adoptees with regard to serious problems in their family relationships; however,

parents did report serious academic or behavior problems in 33% of the transracial group versus 21% in the inracial group (Shireman, 1988). There were no significant differences in levels of self-esteem, as measured by the Piers Harris Self-Esteem Scale, between the inracial, transracial, and single parent adoptees. Findings regarding racial identity, measured by the Semantic Differential Test and the Social Distance Inventory, showed no significant differences between the groups. Shireman estimated that approximately 70% of each group was considered to be problem-free and concluded that “these transracially adopted adolescents have developed pride in being black and are comfortable in interaction with both black and white races” (Shireman, 1988, p. 27)

Vroegh (1997), as part of the fifth phase of a longitudinal study examining transracial adoption outcomes (Shireman & Johnson, 1986), interviewed 52 African American adolescents (i.e., 34 transracial adoptees and 18 inracial adoptees) with respect to their racial self-identity, general adjustment, and self-esteem. The participants, with an average age of 17, were part of the original cohort that was identified and studied since the early 1970’s (Shireman & Johnson, 1975, 1980, 1986). Vroegh (1997) did not find any significant differences between the transracial and inracial adoptees in terms of their overall adjustment, levels of self-esteem as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, family relations, and peer relations. However, transracial adoptees did report a higher occurrence of racial incidents. Inracial adoptees more often identified as solely as African American (83%) compared to transracial adoptees (33%).

Brooks and Barth (1999) examined long-term adjustment outcomes of 224 transracial and inracial adoptees (Asian adoptees =144, African American adoptees = 39, and Caucasian adoptees = 41) using longitudinal data gathered over a 17-year period by Feigelman and Silverman (1984) and Silverman (1980). Results indicated that overall, approximately 70% of the transracial and inracial adoptees appear to have developed into well-adjusted adults, with the female adoptees exhibiting fewer problems than the male adoptees. Caucasian and African American males were found to be more likely have drug, alcohol, law, or police related problems. Interestingly, findings suggest that in-racially adopted Caucasian males were at the greatest risk of all adoptees included in the study for maladjustment. African American adoptees reported experiencing more racist comments than Asian adoptees. The authors did not find any significant difference in the adoptees' racial identities with 65% of the participants classified as having a secure racial identity and 35% classified as having a strong racial identity.

Logistic regression was used to test the effects of family and child characteristics on an adoptee's overall adjustment (n =181). The child characteristics included in the model were ethno-racial background and male gender. The family structure characteristics included in the models were only child, all adopted children, all (others) birth children, and adopted and birth children (Brooks & Barth, 1999). Overall, the model correctly classified 70.17% of the cases. Results indicated ethnoracial background for Asian adoptees nearly doubled their odds of experiencing a good adjustment, $b=-0.4880$, $SE_b=0.2354$, $p<.05$, $OR=.61$. The strength of the

association was weak and the effect size was small. Male adoptees were 1.52 times more likely to experience adjustment difficulties, $b=0.4215$, $SE_b=0.1705$, $p<.05$. The strength of the association was weak and the effect size was small. Family structure was also significantly related to adoptee adjustment. Within the four categories of family structure, being raised in a home with birth children of the adoptive parents increased an adoptees odds of having adjustment difficulties, $b=0.9330$, $SE_b=0.2929$, $p<.001$, $OR=2.54$. The strength of the association was moderate.

Hollingsworth (1997) conducted a meta-analysis of six transracial adoption studies, including one longitudinal study (Shireman, 1988; Shireman & Johnson, 1980, 1986), focused on racial identity and self-esteem. The purpose of the analysis was to examine whether there was an effect of transracial adoption on racial/ethnic identity and self-esteem across multiple studies. The five criteria used for inclusion of studies in the meta-analysis included: 1) use of a comparison groups of Caucasian families who adopted transracially; 2) non-White families who adopted inracially and/or families with non-White biological children; 3) use of racial/ethnic identity and self-esteem as dependent variables; 4) use of data collected directly from adoptees; studies conducted in the United States; and 5) categorization of bi-racial children the same as their biological parents if their race or ethnic group was considered an ethnic minority group in the United States (Hollingsworth, 1997).

Hollingsworth found a small negative effect of transracial adoption ($d=-0.3775$, $p<.01$) on a combined racial/ethnic identity and self-esteem variable. When the racial/ethnic identity variable and self-esteem variable were separated,

Hollingsworth reported a moderate negative effect ($d=-0.5220$, $p<.01$) on racial/ethnic identity and a non-significant effect on the self-esteem variable, with the effect in the positive direction. The negative direction of the effect indicates lowered racial/ethnic identity or self-esteem among transracial adoptees when compared to inracial adoptees. While the studies reviewed in the analysis met the criteria for inclusion in the review, there was some variability across studies in terms of geographic locations, average age of participants in the studies, recruitment source, and measures used to assess racial/ethnic identity and self-esteem. These variables alone or in combination must be considered when interpreting the findings of this review.

While many adoption related studies are focused on children and youth, a few have been published that examine psychological adjustment and identity issues faced by adoptees during late adolescence and early adulthood. Feigelman (2000) compares adjustment data of 203 transracially adopted young adults (Asian adoptees = 151, African American adoptees= 37, and Latino adoptees = 19) and 37 inracially adopted young adults based on parental assessments conducted when the adoptees were in their early 20's. While no significant differences in adjustment were found between the transracial and inracial adoptees, Feigelman (2000) reported discrimination and discomfort with physical appearance as significant correlates to adjustment challenges for the transracial adoptees. The environmental context in which a transracial adoptee was raised influenced whether a transracial adoptee experienced discomfort with their appearance. That is, the more culturally diverse the community, the more comfortable a transracially adopted individual was with their appearance.

Weinberg and colleagues (2004) in a follow-up to the Minnesota Transracial Adoption study, conducted interviews with adoptive parents (n=91) to explore the differences in psychological adjustment among transracial adoptees, inracial adoptees, and their non-adopted siblings. Findings suggest that the majority of adoptees did not experience poor psychological adjustment and that individual differences were important to understanding the psychological adjustment of the samples. Similar to the findings of Weirzbicki (1993), the transracial adoptees included in the study were at greater risk for externalizing behavior problems compared to their non-adopted peers.

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2008) analyzed 21 transracial adoption studies conducted between the years 1995 and 2007. These studies included samples of inter- and intra-national transracial adoptees as well as children who were adopted through the foster care system. Over half of the studies included in the analysis focused on samples of international transracial adoptees.

Six thematic areas were presented based on the Institute's analysis of the studies. The thematic areas included the following findings: 1) transracial adoptees struggle with a sense of being "different"; 2) transracial adoptees experience difficulties in trying to fit into various familial, social, and environmental contexts; 3) some transracial adoptees may be at risk for adjustment related issues; 4) transracial adoptees may struggle with racial/ethnic identity issues; 5) the ability to cope with discrimination is an important skill for transracial adoptees; and 6) parental attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors can positively or negatively impact the identity

development and adjustment of transracial adoptees (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2008).

Native American Focused Transracial Adoption Research

Fanshel (1972), in his landmark book *Far from the Reservation*, documented the experiences of 97 Native American children who were adopted through the Indian Adoption Project in their non-Native adoptive homes over a five-year period. The majority of children involved in this study were under 21 months of age at the time of their adoptive placement. Approximately 30% of the families who had transracially adopted Native American children through the Indian Adoption Project participated in this study. The study is not without limitations, notably that all of the data was collected from the adoptive parents rather than the adoptees. Despite this limitation, the study does provide some initial insight into the early adjustment and development of transracially adopted Native American children.

Fanshel's descriptive study was comprised of five distinct series of interviews over the five-year period. The majority of children being studied were under the age of two at the time of their adoption and not yet teenagers when the study ended. At no point during the research were systematic observations made of the children by the researchers or clinicians. The first interview, conducted jointly with both adoptive parents, explored the circumstances surrounding the transracial adoption as well the couple's reaction to the child's Native American background and the child's adjustment to the adoptive placement. The second interview was conducted only with the adoptive mother. The purpose of this interview was to gather information about the adoptee's

developmental progress, problems, degree of security, behavior traits, child-rearing disposition, and ability to relate to and interact with other members of the nuclear family. In addition the interview focused on the mother's perception of the child, family, lifestyle, community reaction, and her social and political viewpoints.

The third interview was conducted only with the adoptive father and the line of questioning was similar to that of the adoptive mother-only interview. The fourth interview was similar to the first adoptive parent interview. The final interview was with the adoptive mother only and focused on major events in the family that occurred in the previous year, the adoptee's developmental progress and pre-school experience, school adjustment, behavioral description, health status, and social relationships. Parental responses and impressions gathered through the interviews were converted into an Overall Child Adjustment Rating that was used to assess a child's overall adoption adjustment.

In response to the questions regarding the adoptive parents' reaction to their adopted child's racial background, the findings revealed that the adoptive parents were comfortable with the child's racial features and looked upon them positively. Overall, adoptive parental attitudes were positive and some of the parents were "even delighted" with their adopted child (Fanshel, 1972, p. 339). Nearly half of the parents actively encouraged interest in the child's Native American heritage and incorporated this line of thinking into their future goals for the child. According to Fanshel (1972),

While some families tended to play down this aspect, they were the distinct minority. Some parents went so far as to indicate

that they hoped the children would return to the reservations some day and make a contribution to their people; others hoped to make trips with the children so that they might someday get related to the tribes from which they came. (p. 337)

One parent responded to the question of identity development within his/her child by stating the following:

Our child will have to seek out an identity for himself besides being a member of our family. He is different in two ways: he has experienced being adopted and he is an Indian. In a sense, that makes him a different person and he and we have to be comfortable with that difference. (Fanshel, 1972, p. 133)

Approximately 20% of the parent respondents suggested they might minimize their child's Native American heritage; however, none of the parents intended to deny the child ties to his or her Native American background (Fanshel, 1972).

While physically and developmentally the children appeared to be thriving, Fanshel (1972) was less optimistic about their future, "It is to be expected that as our Indian adoptees get older, the prevalence of problems will increase" (p. 323). His overall impressions were favorable of the transracial adoption of Native American children, despite the finding that 30% of the children experienced moderate personality and behavioral problems (Fanshel, 1972). Overall, he found that such adoptive placements represented low levels of risk for the children in terms of their

overall emotional and physical well-being (Fanshel, 1972). When compared to the lives they could have had, he stated:

Even if the adjustment of the children proves to be somewhat more problematic as they get older – particularly during their adolescence when the factor of racial difference many loom larger – the overall prospect for their futures can be termed “guardedly optimistic.” When one contrasts the relative security of their lives with the horrendous growing up experiences endured by their mothers . . . one has to take the position that adoption has saved many of these children from lives of utter ruination. (Fanshel, 1972, p. 339)

After the publication of the Fanshel study, other authors began writing about the challenges faced by transracially adopted Native American children. For example, Berlin (1978), reflecting on data presented at the 1977 American Academy of Child Psychiatry Conference on American Indian Children held in Bottle Hollow, Utah, stressed the importance of the loss of cultural identity experienced by Native American adolescents who were adopted into non-Native homes and the challenges experienced by these adolescents as a result of their cultural loss. In an article published shortly after the conference he states, “The loss of ties with their tribal customs and culture leaves these children without an identity and can result in an adult life of estrangement from both worlds” (Berlin, 1978, p. 388). In addition to the expressed concern of cultural identity loss among transracially adopted Native American children, other

authors cited increased social, behavioral, and emotional problems (McCarthy, 1993; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1996; Westermeyer, 1979); higher rates of suicide in adolescence and adulthood (McCarthy, 1993); difficulties with personal and social identity (Westermeyer, 1979), and an increased likelihood of becoming a status offender (Westermeyer, 1979) among this population of transracial adoptees.

Early results of a longitudinal study being conducted in Canada focused on the adjustment of randomly selected adopted adolescents from various ethnic groups (Bagley, 1991). Participants included First Nations adoptees (n=37), White adoptees (n=42), inter-country adoptees (n=20), non-adopted White adolescents (n=40), and non-adopted First Nations adolescents (n=23). Family interviews indicated profound identity and adjustment issues for the First Nations adoptees. Two adjustment measures were administered to the youth involved in the study: 1) the Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory and 2) a measure of suicidal ideation and behavior.

Compared to the other adolescent groups under study, First Nations adoptees had significantly poorer self-esteem (i.e., 64.9% of the First Nations adolescents scored below the 1st quartile of the normative group on the self-esteem inventory) and were three times as likely compared to the other adolescent groups to have reported problems with suicidal ideation or committed acts of intentional self-harm over the past six months (Bagley, 1991).

In addition to collecting the youth measures, Bagley interviewed the adoptive mothers and administered a measure of child identity integration and a child behavior disorder scale. Adoptive mothers of the First Nations adoptees reported that the

adoptees experienced a higher percentage of problems compared to the other groups under study. For example, 51.3% of the mothers reported that the First Nations adoptees experienced racial harassment or insults in elementary school compared to no harassment directed toward White adoptees or non-adopted White adolescents, 15% of inter-country adoptees, and 34.8% of the non-adopted First Nations adolescents (Bagley, 1991). Approximately 49% of the adoptive mothers reported lack of identity integration among the First Nations adoptees compared to 14.3% of mothers of White adoptees, 10% of mothers of inter-country adoptees, 7.5% of non-adopted White adolescents, and 13% of non-adopted First Nations adolescents (Bagley, 1991).

While 32.4% of adoptive mothers reported psychosomatic signs or signs of anxiety and/or depression among the First Nations adoptees, a higher percentage of mothers, 38.9%, reported these problems among non-adopted First Nations adolescents (Bagley, 1991). Approximately 43% of the adoptive mothers of First Nations children reported signs of aggression, hyperactivity, or conduct disorder in their child. Nearly 60% of those adoptive mothers reported behavior problems such as rebellion, running away, drug or alcohol use, delinquency, or sexual acting out at the time of the interview (Bagley, 1991). In contrast, approximately 12% of the mothers of White adoptees, 15% of the mothers the inter-country adoptees, 15% of the mothers of non-adopted White adolescents, and 17% of the mother of non-adopted First Nations adolescents reported such behaviors problems.

Rosene (1985) conducted an exploratory study with 110 adoptive mothers and 140 transracially adopted Native American children who were adopted through

Lutheran Family Services in South Dakota between the years 1965 and 1976. The aims of her study were to explore the following: 1) ethnic identity development; 2) overall adjustment as measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; 3) academic adjustment and aspirations; 4) problem behaviors; and 5) both adoptee and adoptive perspectives on the overall adoption experience.

Results of her semi-structured interviews and questionnaires completed by both the adoptee and adoptive mother revealed that a mother's educational level, whether she wanted to adopt a Native American child, and level of contact with other Native Americans significantly related to the child's identity as a Native American. Findings also suggested that as adoptees' perceptions of Native American identity increased, they tended to experience anti-transracial adoption attitudes and interacted more poorly with Whites. In addition, older adoptees involved in the study reported more social problems, expressed a greater desire to live with a different family, scored lower on the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, and had mothers who now thought their child would have been better off if s/he was raised in a Native American family.

Although the majority of studies examining the impact of transracial adoption children do not extend beyond a child's adolescent years (Bagley & Young, 1979), there are a few that have examined the impact of transracial adoption in the lives of Native American adult adoptees. For example, Westermeyer (1979) examined the experience of the "Apple Syndrome" in a group of 17 Native American patients over the age of 18 who were raised either for part or all of their lives in a non-Indian setting (e.g., non-Indian foster or adoptive home or group home) and who were being seen for

psychiatric care. In his article, Westermeyer (1979) uses the term “Apple” to refer to “racially Indian people with ethnic preference of the majority, i.e., ‘Red’ or Indian on the outside and ‘White’ on the inside” (p. 134).

Westermeyer found that early placement of Native American children into non-Native settings did not result in psychological disharmony for the 13 patients involved in his study who were placed away from their biological home prior to age 13 until he or she reached adolescence, a critical time in the development of one’s identity. Study participants reported experiencing psychiatric problems (e.g., alcoholism, drug abuse, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts, anxiety, depression, and behavioral problems) during their mid-late teenage years and early 20s (Westermeyer, 1979).

Caught between two worlds, one in which s/he was raised and one s/he was born into created a sense of racial-ethnic discontinuity for the majority of patients. According to Westermeyer (1979), “At the same time that they were deprived of the only ethnic identity which they knew, they found society trying to force upon them an American Indian ethnic identity, about which they new virtually nothing other than what they observed in movies and on television” (p. 136). Westermeyer used a definition of ethnic identity proposed by Benet (1978) where ethnic identity was defined as “the feeling of attachment to and affiliation with an ethnic group that is based upon learning meaningful cultural symbols, values, and behaviors that are incorporated into the social life of the individual and upon learning social roles appropriate for interaction within an ethnic group” (p. 11).

In his concluding remarks Westermeyer states, “society was putting on [Indian children] an identity which they didn’t possess and taking from them an identity they did possess” (cited in Freundlich, 2000, p. 72). Finding a place to belong has caused problems for other Native Americans adopted into non-Native homes (Magagnini, 1997).

Locust (2000) studied the impact of transracial adoption by gathering and analyzing personal testimonies of Native American adult adoptees that volunteered to participate in her study. In total, 20 personal testimonies were randomly selected for review and inclusion in her study. Through her research, she developed what is known as Split Feather Syndrome to describe the psychological trauma experienced by Native American adoptees that were raised in non-Native homes.

Findings from her study reveal that nearly all of the research participants who were transracially adopted (n=19) experienced moderate to severe psychological problems and all of the participants expressed difficulties with intimate relationships. Over half of the participants (n=13) used drugs or alcohol as a way of dealing with their emotional pain and struggles with identity-related issues, over half of the participants were in remedial educational programs despite describing themselves as intellectually average or above average, and all of the participants expressed negative feelings about being different from their adoptive families (Locust, 2000).

In describing their adoption experiences, one message was clear, that adoptive families could not give participants what they needed the most, a sense of cultural connection and identity. One participant stated, “They gave me everything they could,

but they could not give me the thing I needed most, to know who I really was and to know my Indian heritage” (Locust, 1999, p. 5). Another participant reflected on his/her adoption experience in the following remarks:

Adoption causes such intense inner pain that you do anything just to get away from it. No one understands you, you are different, and there’s no one to talk to. That’s how I got in trouble with alcohol: it was pain medicine. (Locust, 2000, p. 14)

According to Locust (1999), “when an individual is denied a true heritage, a breakdown of the psyche occurs that undermines the concept of self, self-esteem, self-confidence, and self-respect” (p. 13). Locust summarizes the characteristics of individuals experiencing the Split Feathers Syndrome as 1) experiencing the loss of Indian identity; 2) experiencing the loss of family, culture, heritage, language, spiritual beliefs, tribal affiliation and tribal ceremonial experiences; 3) growing up feeling and being different; 4) experiencing different forms of prejudice and discrimination from the mainstream culture; and 5) having a different style of learning (Locust, 2000).

Peterson (2002) conducted semi-structured interviews, based on a modified ethnic interview, with 12 self-identified transracially adopted Native American adults to gain a fuller understanding of the development and expression of an ethnic identity among his participants. Participants represented nine tribes from the U.S. and Canada and ranged in age from 26-55 years old. His findings were organized around seven thematic areas: 1) Native American identity influences; 2) motivation behind adoption

search; 3) impact of Native American heritage; 4) adoptive family issues; 5) bicultural experiences; 6) opinions regarding Native American adoption; and 7) advice for families who adopt Native American children (Peterson, 2002). Similar to the findings of Locust (1999), Peterson found that many of the participants experienced feelings of loss and grief resulting from the lack of access to information about their tribal culture.

Simon and Hernandez (2008) published a book of Native American transracial adoption stories. The authors conducted in-person, telephone, and/or e-mail interviews with 13 transracially adopted Native American women and 7 transracially adopted Native American men to capture information about their adoption experiences. Of the 20 participants who were interviewed, 16 described positive experiences and associations growing up in a non-Native family. One interviewee reflected on her adoptive family in the following statement:

It was such a fortunate situation for me to be placed into the adopted family that I was because they were kind, very loving, and very nurturing. And were very attentive and always cared about what was going on in my life and always kept me happy and healthy and loved me just as if I was truly born to them.

(Simon & Hernandez, 2008, p. 64)

When asked about her adoptive parents, another participant recalled, “They are great parents. They’ve always been very supportive. They’ve been married now for forty-five years, and they’ve proved a really good family role model for me” (Simon & Hernandez, 2008, p. 127). The four participants who recalled negative experiences

being raised in their adoptive families no longer have ties to their adoptive families and still harbor feelings of anger toward their adoptive families.

The majority of the participants (n=14) reported experiencing varying degrees of racism or discrimination in the predominantly White communities in which they lived and in the predominantly White schools they attended. One participant stated, “It is not easy growing up in an all-White community at all and not being able to be proud of your heritage and tell people about it openly” (Simon & Hernandez, 2008, p. 41). One participant remembered “little girls telling me I couldn’t play with them because only blonde girls could play together” and then later being told by a school counselor, “I would not be successful at the school of my choice” (Simon & Hernandez, 2008, p. 216). Another participant described experiences where teachers and peers would make derogatory or culturally insensitive remarks toward her.

In relation to the development of a strong racial and cultural identity, two adoptees were provided with opportunities to learn about and engage in Native American activities in their communities throughout their childhood. Even though the other adoptees described positive adoptive familial experiences, they recalled how their adoptive family could not help in the area of racial or cultural identity development. One adoptee stated:

I think they did a really nice job raising me . . . But they weren’t familiar with the Tuscarora, with the Indian aspects, and so they did the best they could, but they didn’t really talk about it

because they didn't know. (Simon & Hernandez, 2008, p. 87-88)

Another interviewee recalled, "I think they did the best they could. It was just – maybe it was just me. I was always looking for things that they couldn't give me" (Simon & Hernandez, 2008, p. 328).

As adults, all of the interviewees reported having a sense of security about their Native American identity, despite the fact that many reported that they still had more to learn about their tribal history, culture, and traditions. Many of the adoptees had been reconnected with their birth families and attributed their reconnection to their tribal heritage to their sense of security about their Native American identity. For one interviewee, a sense of cultural identity began to emerge after she was reunited with her biological family. She stated, "I started being more involved in the Indian community probably fifteen years ago when I found my biological family and that was really where my own cultural identity of being Indian really started developing" (Simon & Hernandez, 2008, p. 90). For another participant, there was always a knowledge of who he was as echoed in the following, "Even if you don't know who you are, your blood knows who you are" (Simon & Hernandez, 2008, p. 54).

Research Summary

The largest body of transracial adoption literature pertaining to adjustment outcomes and racial identity development has been focused on transracially and inracially adopted African American children and adolescents. While empirical research on transracial adoptees has been conducted for the past four decades, the

majority of research was conducted over 20 years ago. As a whole, the existing body of research has found no significant difference in overall adjustment between the transracially and in-racially adoptees studied and it has found that transracial adoptees are able to develop strong racial identities (Silverman, 1993).

However, the generalizability of transracial adoption studies to date is limited due to small sample sizes, samples drawn from clinical populations, geographic isolation, volunteer samples, samples including predominantly African American children and adolescents, heavy reliance on parental reports of adjustment and identity development, and attrition in sample size in longitudinal studies (Freundlich, 2000, Hollingsworth, 1997; Park & Green, 2000). Another critique of the existing body of literature examining adoption related adjustment and identity issues is that the samples of many of the published studies have included young children, when adjustment and identity issues are less relevant. Few studies have followed adoptees into their adulthood. Finally, much of the research on transracial adoption provides a point-in-time assessment of identity development and/or adjustment. These snapshots in time are important; however, they do not take into consideration the changing developmental factors and environmental influences on one's identity development or adjustment. These factors alone, or in combination, may lead to bias in the reporting of positive outcomes from transracially-adopted children.

While not specific to Native American adoptees, Lee's (2003) review of transracial adoption studies reveals "a significant amount of variability in the psychological adjustment and racial/ethnic identity development of transracial

adoptees” (p. 727). Lee (2003) partially attributes the adjustment differences to the methodological issues in much of the research examining the outcomes of transracial adoption on ethnic minority children and is critical of the body of outcome research literature’s “failure to directly measure the racial and ethnic experience of adoptees and its potential contribution to psychological adjustment” (p. 716). In part, studies may not have examined the racial and ethnic experiences of adoptees based upon the assumption that racial and ethnic differences did not present any threats to psychological adjustments for transracial adoptees. Tizard (1991) argues that existing research on identity formation has failed to take into consideration the degree to which a transracial adoptee develops a mixed cultural identity, that is, an identity that encompasses both that of his/her adoptive family and biological family.

There are numerous factors that potentially contribute to psychological adjustment and racial/ethnic identity development that should be considered when interpreting the findings of transracial adoption research studies. These factors include the age of the children involved in the sample, the age at which a child was adopted, the pre-adoptive placement history of the child, the validity and reliability of the measures used to assess racial identity development or psychological adjustment, and the reporting source.

In summary, a considerable limitation in existing transracial adoption studies is the heavy reliance on quantitative methods to study adjustment and identity development. Empirical approaches using a variety of standardized quantitative measures are not well suited to fully uncover and understand the process of identity

development in transracial adoptees, especially when such approaches have relied heavily on parental reports of identity development and adjustment. Such approaches fail to uncover the meanings of one's life (Wakefield, 1995) because they do not present a holistic representation of one's experiences; rather they, isolate, compartmentalize, and categorize the richness of one's life. According to Patton (2000), "the human construction of a meaningful sense of self is rarely played out in such simple, neatly divided categories" (p. 11).

Transracial adoptees, by and large, have been measured, observed, and talked about, as opposed to being given the opportunity to speak about their experiences from their unique perspectives. Existing literature has treated transracial adoptees as a homogenous group (Baden & Steward, 2000), and is largely based on quantitative studies. While not without merit, these studies often do not explore the unique individual experiences of transracial adoptees. This led to the conduct of empirical studies that have failed to deeply explore the adoptees' thoughts, insights, and understanding around their experiences, social interactions, and human relationships (Patel, 2005). Qualitative studies give voice to participants and allow researchers to gain insights and "an understanding of the view of the world held by those people involved in the situation" (Rodwell, 1998, p. 27). Such studies are needed to understand the complexities of the lived experiences of transracial adoptees and how such experiences interact with and shape their identity over the lifespan.

Theoretical Frameworks

The issues surrounding the transracial adoption of Native American children prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 are complex and steeped in a myriad of historical, social, political, economical, and moral values and ideologies. Culturally sensitive research is needed to help understand how Native American children that were transracially adopted fared into their adolescence and adulthood in terms of their identity development. Identity formation is a complex, evolving, and lifelong process. The personality theories, ethnic identity theories, and models of identity development presented next provide solid frameworks for examining how an individual develops a sense of self in complex and multi-faceted environments.

Adoption and Identity Formation

In all of us there is a hunger, marrow deep, to know our heritage, to know who we are and where we have come from. Without this enriching knowledge, there is a hollow yearning; no matter what our attainments in life, there is the most disquieting loneliness. (Alex Haley, as cited in Freundlich, 2007, p. 3)

Who am I? Where do I come from? Who am I in relationship to other people in my life? Who am I becoming? These types of questions are at the heart of identity formation and involve exploring choices and making commitments based on “the historical and cultural contexts of the self, and change over time (Grotevant, 1997b,

p.4). Adoptees go through the search for self in many of the same ways as their non-adopted peers; however, adoptees are faced with the additional challenges of trying to figure out their sense of self and place in the world with only the stories and experiences of the familial, cultural, spiritual, and environmental context in which they were raised. This can be especially challenging for transracial adoptees as their physical appearance is likely to be different from that of their adopted family.

Based on her clinical experiences as a psychologist working with adoptees, Lifton (1998) describes nine commonalities among adoptees that pose particular challenges in relation to their development of self. These challenges are part of her theory of the “adopted self” and are focused primarily on the identity issues faced by adoptees that grew up in closed adoption systems. According to Lifton (1998), the shared identity challenges experienced by adoptees include: 1) ghosts of what might have been; 2) the adoption journey; 3) cumulative adoption trauma; 4) a broken narrative of their lives; 5) a sense of abandonment; 6) the burden to feel grateful; 7) a predisposition to fantasy; 8) the challenge of adolescence; and 9) a need to form an authentic self.

Goebel and Lott (1986) also describe the challenges of identity formation among adoptees who do not have access to information about their genetic past in the following statement, “Adoptees not only must form a synthesis of past and future, but must also integrate the now with those parts of self that have been left in the past”

(p.6). Unlike their non-adopted peers, adoptees must grapple with integrating many “unknowns” about their origin and heritage into their sense of self. Schoenberg (1974)

asserts, “The creation of families based on psychological, not blood, ties contains inherent identity problems that practice and law seek to mitigate, but can never eliminate” (p. 549).

Finally, adoptees must not only develop a sense of who they are but must also grapple with who they are in terms of being adopted, whether their adoption occurred transracially or inracially. Brodzinsky and colleagues (1992) describe this struggle in terms of an adoptee experiencing “genealogical bewilderment.” This type of bewilderment is described as “feeling of being cut off from your heritage, your religious background, your culture, your race” (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992, p. 108). Feelings of grief and loss are typically associated with genealogical bewilderment as an adoptee comes to terms with the losses of self that are directly linked to the loss of one’s birth parents. As a result of being cut-off from their past, adoptees may struggle with identity development because they have little continuity in their lives.

Personality Theory

Erikson’s Eight Stages of Man. The concepts of identity and identity formation are often linked in the literature to Erikson’s seminal writing on the “eight stages of man.” Erikson conceptualizes identity as the confidence in one’s inner continuity among changes (Erikson, 1968). Erikson’s eight developmental stages, which extend throughout the lifespan, are: trust vs. mistrust, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, initiative vs. guilt, industry vs. inferiority, ego identity vs. role diffusion, intimacy vs. isolation, generativity vs. self-absorption, and integrity vs. despair (Erikson, 1980).

Each stage presents an individual with a developmental task that is psychosocial in nature and is based on the epigenetic principle. According to the epigenetic principle, individuals develop through a predetermined and orderly unfolding of their personalities over time until “all parts have arisen to form a functioning whole” (Erikson, 1980, p. 53).

Individuals pass through each stage at certain optimal times in their life. It is the success or lack of success at each stage in life that allows an individual to master his/her environment, develop a unified personality, and perceive the world and his/her self accurately (Erikson, 1980). When an individual successfully negotiates each life stage, s/he carries the virtue or psychological strength associated with that stage through each successive stage in life. According to Erickson (1980), if the individual does not fully master a stage, s/he may develop maladaptations or malignancies that will influence future developmental stages and the tasks associated with each stage.

Erikson’s fifth stage of psychosocial development, ego identity vs. role diffusion, occurs during adolescence and is marked by physiological changes as well as concerns about self-concept and social roles. According to Erikson, identity formation or development is “a continuing process that has roots in earlier stages of growth” (Hoopes, 1990, p. 144) and is a developmental consequence of earlier life experiences (Erikson, 1968). In other words, an individual’s ability to meet the challenges presented during his/her fifth stage of development is based on the successful or unsuccessful resolution of the developmental tasks associated with earlier stages of development. Erikson (1959) views an optimal “sense of identity” as

a sense of psychosocial well-being, “a feeling of being at home in one’s body, a sense of knowing where one is going, and an inner assuredness or anticipated recognition from those who count” (p. 165). Unsuccessful resolution of the psychosocial tasks associated with this stage may lead to role diffusion which is marked by doubts about one’s physical or sexual being, challenges or inability to make decisions and commitments, and an inability to sense the continuity of self over time (Hoopes, 1990).

Brodzinsky and colleagues (1992) argue that the development of one’s identity is not as clear-cut as described by Erikson; rather, they believe that an individual develops a sense of identity across different realms of his/her life. For example, an individual may have an academic identity, sexual identity, relational identity, occupational identity, religious identity, cultural identity, and/or moral identity, which are interdependent upon one another. Accordingly, to achieve a sense of identity, an individual must, “integrate these various aspects of the self with each other over different points in time” (Brodzinsky, et al, 1992, p. 102).

Marcia (1966, 2002), elaborated on the work of Erikson by creating a four stage model regarding ego identity achievement based on the process by which an individual confronts who s/he is, explores alternatives to one’s self, and then commits one’s self to a particular set of values and beliefs. Marcia operationalized the concept of identity by developing four ways of coping with the identity crisis posed by Erikson. The four identity statuses posed by Marcia (1966) are identity achievement, moratorium, identity foreclosure, and identity diffusion. Under this model, identity

achievement can occur at different times or stages in one's identity formation as well as in specific or multiple realms of an individual's identity. Identity development is viewed as a dynamic process throughout adolescence and adulthood that "continually evolves from evaluation to resolution, from disruption to reevaluation" (Brodzinsky, et al., 1992, p. 103). It is important to note, however, that neither Erikson nor Marcia describe the process of identity exploration in their work.

Within the Marcia (1966, 2002) model, a person who experiences identity diffusion does not demonstrate an exploration or a commitment to an identity, often due to a lack of support or a lack of a role model(s). An individual exhibiting identity foreclosure may appear to have achieved a sense of identity; however, the individual has committed to an identity without exploring options. An individual in the moratorium stage is actively exploring and experimenting with different identity options, but has not made a clear commitment to a particular identity. Finally, an individual experiences an achieved identity when s/he typically has experienced a crisis, attempted to resolve the crisis through experimentation and exploration of different alternatives, and then committed to a particular identity or set of values and beliefs.

Applying this model to adoptees, those who are described as identity achievers have been provided with opportunities to openly discuss and explore their adoption in terms of how it affects their overall sense of self. As such, these adoptees have achieved a relatively stable sense of self through resolution of their adoption-related questions. Adoptees in the moratorium stage may not have the same environmental

opportunities to openly discuss and explore their adoption and adoption related questions; therefore, they have not been able to resolve their adoption related questions. Adoptees in this stage may spend a significant amount of time focused on the “whys” of their adoption in search for answers. Moratorium is not a long-term solution to one’s identity issues because of the uncomfortable feelings of being in limbo that are associated with it. An adoptee will pass through this stage and typically find either an achieved identity or a diffuse identity (Brodzinsky, et al., 1992).

Identity foreclosure is another way in which adoptees experience their adoption. While outwardly appearing as if s/he has achieved a sense of identity, the adoptee has prematurely settled on an identity without giving his/her self the proper opportunities to explore and try on different identities. An adoptee with a foreclosed identity may accept the prescribed identities of his/her adoptive family, has had few opportunities to openly discuss and explore his/her adoption and related questions, and may feel guilty about his/her adoption curiosities (Brodzinsky, et al., 1992). Adoptees expressing a foreclosed identity may appear well-adjusted through their adolescent years. It is not until their adulthood that they begin experiencing uncertainties related to their sense of self.

Finally, adoptees that develop a diffuse identity appear lost on the path of life. The life of an adoptee at this stage is full of many uncertainties in terms of who s/he is, where s/he came from, and where s/he is headed. Adoptees are plagued with the inability to explore and experiment with different options in part due to the lack of

opportunities or an inability to identify a supportive environment that is safe for them to explore their curiosities surrounding their adoptive status.

Ethnic Identity

The majority of research on ethnic development among transracial adoptees has focused on African Americans, Hispanics, and Asian Americans (Feigelman & Silverman, 1984; Silverman, 1993), and little is known about the processes used by Native Americans to construct their ethnic identities (Mihsuah, 1998). Rotherman and Phinney (1987) define ethnic identity as “one’s sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one’s thinking, perceptions, feelings, and behavior that is due to ethnic group membership” (p. 13). In a review of the literature on ethnic identity development in adolescents and adults, Phinney (1990) concluded that research on this topic area is both “fragmentary and inconclusive” (p. 499).

An oft-cited ethnic identity development model for African Americans was developed by William E. Cross and termed “Cycles of Nigrescence” (Parham, 1989). Cross (1991) postulated that African Americans travel through a set of definable stages aimed toward identity resolution through their responses to various social, economic, and political influences on their lives. The four stages of ethnic identity development that underpin the identity development model constructed by Cross (1991) are the pre-encounter stage, encounter stage, immersion-emersion stage, and the internalization stage. The complexities of the model are evident due to the fact that individuals move backwards and forwards through each stage, may find themselves between stages, or may be in more than one stage simultaneously (Cross, 1991).

Mihesuah (1998) applied the Cross model to ethnic identity among Native Americans. Briefly, during the pre-encounter stage, an individual pays little attention to his/her ethnic identity and tends to identify with the mainstream culture. Native Americans in this stage may be aware of their “Indianess,” but “know little about their tribal history and culture, much less about other Indians or the political, economic, and social state of tribes in general” (Mihesuah, 1998, p. 198). Mihesuah (1998) stresses the importance and influence of a child’s contextual environment during this stage especially as a child strives to find his/her place in the world.

The encounter stage occurs when an individual experiences an event, either positive or negative, that forces him/her to reexamine his/her frame of reference(s) used in his/her own identity development (Cross, 1991). Such events act as a catalyst for an individual to explore his/her ethnic identity. Applied to Native Americans, the three goals identified by Mihesuah (1998) for individuals who experience an “Indian encounter” are becoming an Indian, becoming more Indian or rediscovering Indianess, and becoming less Indian. For Native American transracial adoptees, under this model of ethnic identity development, the mere fact that they look different from their adoptive families may be the catalyst for exploring their ethnic identity.

During immersion-emersion, an individual becomes interested in everything related to his/her ethnic identity and tries to develop a complete ethnic identity (Cross, 1991; Parham, 1989). This stage is highly emotional as “the person begins to demolish the old perspective and simultaneously tries to construct what will become his/her new frame of reference” (Cross, 1991, p. 202). Individuals exhibit insecurities in different

areas of their own identities. According to Mihesuah (1998), Native Americans at this stage may engage in aggressive behaviors, continue to seek out information about their culture, deny the mainstream aspects of themselves, become hostile toward non-Native people, or adopt a “redder than thou” attitude (p. 214).

The fourth stage of the Cross (1991) ethnic identity model, internalization, is marked by the attainment of an inner sense of peace, security, and self-confidence about one’s identity. Mihesuah (1998) suggests that an individual’s achievement of an internalized identity can only be assessed on a case-by-case basis and that many Native Americans struggle with internalized oppression and are likely to reject their racial heritage because they believe that “to achieve approval from one group, they must embrace only the personal aspects that conform to that group and reject the other parts” (p. 215).

Phinney (1989) proposed another model of ethnic identity development based on commonalities found among existing ethnic identity models. The three-stage model progresses from an unexamined ethnic identity through a period of identity exploration until reaching an achieved ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990). The first stage of the model represents an unexamined ethnic identity in which an individual has not been exposed to ethnic identity issues and is likely to align with the dominant culture. This stage is similar to Marcia’s stage of identity foreclosure and identity diffusion and Cross’s pre-encounter stage.

The second stage of ethnic identity development proposed by Phinney (1989) is ethnic identity search that reflects one’s own exploration into his/her identity. This

stage is similar to the moratorium stage described by Marcia (1966) and may take place as a result of an experience or “encounter” described in Cross’s model (Phinney, 1990). During this stage an individual may experience an intense immersion in his/her culture and may reject the views and values of the dominant culture. As a result of one’s ethnic identity search, an individual gains a deeper understanding of and greater appreciation for his/her ethnicity, thus reaching the third stage of Phinney’s model, achieved ethnic identity (Phinney, 1989). Both Phinney (1990) and Marcia (1966) assert that an individual cannot make a commitment to an ethnic identity without a meaningful and involved search.

Process Model of Identity Formation

Grotevant and colleagues (2000), building on Erikson’s theory of identity development, purport “the essence of identity is self-in-context” (p. 381) and emphasize three aspects of identity development: self-definition (i.e., the characteristics by which one defines oneself), subjective sense of coherence of personality or how well different aspects of the individual fit together, and sense of continuity over time, across multiple contexts, and within different relationships. According to Grotevant (1997b), the interactional and dynamic process of identity development “proceeds through phases of openness, when one is exploring, reviewing, or reconsidering life choices as well as phases of consolidating or integrating commitments” (p. 5) across one’s lifespan.

The process model of identity formation proposed by Grotevant (1987) is comprised of four components: 1) individual characteristics; 2) identity formation

process within a specific identity domain; 3) contexts of development; and 4) interdependencies among developments in different identity domains. Individual characteristics include one's personality, cognitive abilities, and current identity that come to bear in the identity formation process. Four core individual constructs that have been linked to identity exploration include self-esteem, self-monitoring, ego-resiliency, and openness to experience.

The second component of the model, one's orientation to engage in the process of identity formation, involves the interaction of one's personal characteristics with "environmental presses emanating from within the individual's developmental contexts to determine the likelihood that an individual will engage in 'identity work' at any particular time" (Grotevant, 1987, p. 209). This component of the model involves the active exploration of identity and is largely influenced by an individual's developmental position in the lifespan as well as normative life events (e.g., graduating from high school, attending college, getting married, etc.). Grotevant (1987) suggests five processes that interact over time to support an individual's identity exploration. These processes include an individual's expectations and beliefs about the identity formation process, identity exploration through information gathering and hypothesis testing, investment of time, energy toward a particular course of action, acknowledgment of competing forces that hinder an individual's journey down a particular identity path, and ongoing cognitive and affective evaluation of the identity exploration process.

Contexts of identity formation, the third component of the process model of identity formation, include the social, familial, environmental, and cultural contexts of an individual. One of the strengths of this model is that it begins to address how these different contexts influence the identity development of an individual, an area that is largely ignored in the research on identity formation (Grotevant, 1987). While the contexts in which one interacts may help shape one's identity, one's identity may conversely influence the contexts in which they interact.

The final component of the model, interdependence among identity domains, is another area in which little has been written because researchers tend to examine identity in separate domains of a person's life (Grotevant, 1987). This model asserts that identity formation can be studied in specific realms of an individual's life while acknowledging "the structural integration that takes place across the domains" (Grotevant, 1987, p.217).

In later writings on the construction of identity among adoptees from adolescence into adulthood, Grotevant (1997b) described a model of identity development similar to the Cross (1991) model of ethnic identity. Concisely, identity formation among adoptees begins with a general lack of awareness or lack of conflict with one's identity followed by a sensitizing experience in which one may experience confusion, incongruence, and disequilibrium (Grotevant, 1997b). The volatility within one's self as a result of the sensitizing experience places the individual in a state of crisis, doubt, or exploration. The state of crisis, doubt, or exploration energizes an individual to move toward resolution. During this stage, an individual may begin to

question his/her fundamental sense of self and begin to explore possible alternative identities and accompanying behaviors.

Resolution of the crisis may result in an individual weaving new identities into his/her emerging life narrative by integrating this new found sense of self into one's affective and cognitive structures (Grotevant, 1997b). An individual may repeat this process several times over his/her lifespan, with each experience bringing an expanded integration of self.

Conclusion

The personality theories, ethnic identity theories, and models of identity development presented provide a general overview of how an individual develops his/her identity. Several of the theories of identity development provide a progressive look at how an individual moves through stages of identity questioning, exploration, understanding, and mastery. For example, in the racial identity theories presented above, individuals generally move through progressive stages where they may not be questioning or exploring issues related to their racial identity to stages of intense questioning, exploration, and introspection, and finally to a stage where they integrate their racial identity, once thoroughly explored, into their larger sense of self (Cross, 1991; Miheuah, 1998; Phinney, 1989).

What is apparent from existing identity development theories and models is that the essence of self is deeply personal and rooted in a myriad of shifting environments, structures, and reflections on one's life. The writings of Grotevant (1987, 1997, 1997b) were influential in the design of this study, in particular the

design of the interview guide and analytical framework. The process model of identity formation (Grotevant, 1987, 1997a, 1997b) provided a framework for developing the life story interview guide. Further, it was valuable during the analytical phases of the research as it provided a foundation for exploring and understanding the complex and interdependent themes that emerged from the life story interviews.

This qualitative study involving Native American adult adoptees that were transracially adopted is an important first step in learning about the impact of this era on the adoptee as well as informing future studies in the area of Native American children that were transracially adopted. Giving voice to the Native American adoptees that were directly impacted by the child welfare policies and practices of this era, empowers them to begin healing the intergenerational trauma, shame, and wounds that exist within tribal communities, families, and transracial adoptees as a result of the adoptive placements that occurred prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978.

Chapter Three: Methods

Researcher Paradigm

The research study was rooted in the constructivist paradigm as the overarching aim of this study was to develop knowledge by describing and understanding the lived experiences of transracially adopted Native American adult adoptees from their own perspectives. This paradigm allowed for multiple, constructed, and holistic realities to exist and recognized the unique perspectives of different individuals in the construction of a final product that was bounded by time and context (Rodwell, 1998). Within this paradigm, the researcher and the research participants interacted in dynamic relationships. Through the richness of the interactions, this paradigm assumes that insight and knowledge about the area of inquiry will develop (Rodwell, 1998). According to Rodwell (1998), the desired product of a constructivist study is “one that is an accurate, rich, reconstruction of the various perspectives within the context of an investigation” (p. 31).

Following the basic assumptions of this constructivist model outlined by Rodwell (1998), the research study occurred in natural settings and the researcher interacted with and collected qualitative information from the participants through naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Given the researcher’s personal experiences as an adoptee, knowledge of the available literature focused on transracial adoption, and experiences living in tribal communities and working in the field of Indian child welfare, the researcher relied on tacit knowledge to understand some of the potential complexities of the data gathered throughout the study.

Within the constructivist paradigm, the researcher must “negotiate meanings, interpretation, and final products” with the individuals involved in the study because it is the participants’ constructions of reality, not the researchers, that are the focus (Rodwell, 1998, p. 35). Maintaining a focus on each participant’s lived stories was achieved by sharing interview transcripts with participants, by asking them to review and make any changes to their story, by conferring with the participants throughout the analysis process to get further clarification and understanding of what they had said, and by sharing the final draft dissertation with participants and asking for final comments to help ensure their voices were accurately represented.

Approach and Rationale

Story provides the parts – motifs, plot, connections, feeling- that make understanding and meaning possible. Story is a valuable and essential form of knowing, a system of meaning making to learn what is unique to some and universal to others and how both are part of a dynamic, interacting whole. (Atkinson, 1998, p. 74)

The study used life story interviews to capture the subjective reality of the changing and multifaceted nature of identity development among Native American adults who were transracially adopted. Life story refers to “the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 125). This narrative approach allowed for an in-depth examination of the contextual influences that helped to shape participant identities as well as how each participant integrated his/her

experiences into an evolving sense of self. According to McAdams (1988), a life story “provides a coherent narrative framework within which the disparate events and the various roles of a person’s life can be embedded and given meaning” (p. 19). The telling of one’s life story lets an individual knit together the various aspects of who s/he is into a coherent truth.

Life story interviews allowed each participant to tell his/her story and provided access to the “socially constructed reflective thoughts” about the process of identity formation among participants (Patel, 2005, p. 338). The telling of one’s story creates a sense of coherence and meaning to one’s experiences as a transracial adoptee through highlighting “the most important influences, experiences, circumstances, issues, themes, and lessons of a lifetime” (Atkinson, 1998, p. 7). The telling of one’s story can also be empowering to an individual. According to Etherington (2005), “when we enable other people (and ourselves) to give voice to our experience, those voices create a sense of power and authority” (p. 32).

The inherent strengths of this method include a holistic attention to one’s lifespan, an exploration of the contextual aspects that contributed to the formation of one’s sense of self, and a circular rather than linear approach to understanding the multi-faceted nature of identity formation. Life story approaches are sensitive to the changing, complex, and sometimes conflictual nature of identity development. An added strength of this approach was that the reflexive nature of the interview allowed each participant to gain a fuller understanding of his/her self through dialog about

his/her experiences, life events, and feelings. According to Atkinson (1998), life story interviews

. . . carry the wisdom of lived experiences. They show us the direction of human development and the possible paths through life. Maybe most important, they lead us to the human spirit, to our deepest feelings, the values we live by, and the eternal meaning of life. (p. 76)

Life stories are dynamic and allow individuals to express their individuality over time through a retrospective construction of their life. Because they are the stories of a person's life, they are open to change as time goes by as certain aspects of a person's narratives may be incorporated into his/her identity while other pieces may be forgotten or rewritten. The stories represent the participants' versions of the truth at the time of the interviews and must be understood as such.

The use of life story interviews to understand identity formation is supported by the literature on identity development. For example, Erikson (1980) believed that in order to more fully understand the genetics of identity development, one had to "trace its development through the life histories or through significant life episodes of ordinary individuals" (p. 118). Grotevant and colleagues (2000) identified a need for research that is aimed at "how adoptees personally negotiate their identities and sense of place in society" (p. 385). Such research is based on the belief that only transracial adoptees themselves can identify the influences that helped to shape their unique identities. Atkinson (1998) asserts that life story interviews "may be the most effective

means for gaining an understanding of how the self evolves over time” (p. 11).

Therefore it is a credible method when exploring the process of identity formation.

There are practical and logistical limitations to the use of life story interviews that are worth noting. The in-depth nature of a life story interview required a lengthy time commitment on the part of the participants. Therefore, the anticipated time commitment was made explicit through the recruitment process so that participants had a clear understanding from the outset about their likely time involvement in the interview process. Three participants, who initially volunteered to participate in the study, made a choice to decline participation based on the anticipated time commitment.

Another limitation of this method was that the intimate nature of a life story interview required the researcher to spend a significant amount of time building trust and rapport with each participant prior to conducting the interview. This typically took the form of spending time in conversation either in person or over the telephone with each participant prior to scheduling the life story interview. Conversations were generally focused on newsworthy events of the day, the researcher’s background, and the study in general. Spending time engaged in this type of dialog helped to build rapport with the research participants and to create a relationship where participants would feel comfortable disclosing their personal adoptive stories. Finally, the life story interviews generated a considerable volume of data. Each transcribed interview ranged in page length from approximately 20 to 40 pages. The use of this type of interview

required thoughtful strategies to manage and analyze such large volumes of information.

Sample

Given the in-depth and personal nature of the life story interview method, a limited number of Native American transracial adoptees were recruited to participate in the study. Small sample sizes are recommended when using the life story methodology in part due to the amount of time required to develop and to maintain trusting relationships with research participants (Atkinson, 1998; Goldman, Hunt, Allen, Hauser, Emmons, Maeda, & Sorensen, 2003; Patel, 2005). Purposive sampling methods, recommended for use in conducting constructivist research, were used to recruit research participants (Rodwell, 1998). This method allowed the researcher to select individuals for participation “to ensure that certain individuals or persons displaying certain attributes are included in the study” (Berg, 2004, p. 36).

The initial selection criteria used to recruit study participants included: 1) being a self-identified Native American transracial adoptee between the ages of 28 and 48; 2) having searched for and been reconnected with their tribal heritage; and 3) being willing and able to share their adoption story and explore their personal identities that have emerged over their lifespan. A spreadsheet was developed to track potential participants for participation in the study. A copy of the spreadsheet can be found in Appendix A of the document. The spreadsheet contained confidential contact information for each participant as well as basic demographic information such as

gender, age, participant age at the time of adoption, engagement in the search process, tribal affiliation, and interview preference (i.e., in-person or over the telephone).

The proposed criteria were modified approximately seven months into the study after consultation with the chair of the dissertation committee and approval from the Human Subjects Research Review Committee at Portland State University. The proposed sampling frame included Native American adult adoptees between the ages of 28 to 48. The lower end of the age group was the critical component of the sampling frame as it is connected to the date of the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act. The researcher did not want to include adults in the study who were adopted after the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 given the dramatic change in adoption policy and practice of Native American children that resulted from the passage of the Act. The upper age limit (i.e., 48) was connected to the inception of the Indian Adoption Project in 1958.

The upper range of the age limit was expanded to age 60 for two reasons. First, recruitment for participation in the study was extremely difficult and time consuming. By extending the upper age limit to 48 to 60 years of age, additional participants were recruited for participation. Second, extending the upper age limit to 60 did not impact the overall aim of the study. Individuals in the age range of 48 to 60 would have been adopted during an era of similar policy and treatment of Native American children and families and their participation in the study would be valuable in terms of learning about identity formation.

The researcher developed a flyer and recruitment letter that provided general information about the study and contact information for individuals if they were interested in learning more about or participating in the study. The recruitment materials can be found in Appendix B of the document. The recruitment materials were circulated via email to urban organizations serving Native American adults in the Portland metropolitan area, eastern Washington, and western Washington. The organizations included the National Indian Child Welfare Association, the Native American Youth and Family Center, Bow and Arrow, the Native Wellness Institute, the Native Project, Evergreen State College, Skokomish Tribal Nation, the Nisqually Tribe, Eastern Washington University, and Washington State Indian Policy and Support Services. In addition, the researcher presented a workshop titled, *Reflections on the Indian Adoption Project*, at the Indian Child Welfare Summit held at the Little Creek Resort located near Shelton, Washington, on March 24 -25, 2008. The workshop was presented two times during the Summit and approximately 75 people attended each session. Information about the study was disseminated to workshop attendees.

Initially, 10 individuals were identified as potential research participants. Three individuals declined participation in the study largely due to their inability to commit to the time required to participate in the interviews and the subsequent expectations of transcript review and final product review. In total, seven individuals (five females and two males) participated in the study. Participants ranged in age from 32 to 52 years of age, represented diverse tribal backgrounds, and were infants at the time of

their adoption. The majority of participants had been reunited with their birth families and all of the participants had been reconnected with their tribal heritage.

Participants were interviewed on a one-on-one basis. Interviews were conducted over a six-month time period. Interviews ranged in length from approximately two to four hours, with the majority of interviews conducted across multiple meetings. One of the interviews was conducted in a single meeting while the other interviews ranged from two to four meetings, depending upon the schedule and preference of the participant. Subsequent interviews were focused on completing the life story interview as well as seeking clarification or answers to questions that emerged from the review of interview transcripts from previous interviews. Overall, the interviews generated approximately 22 hours of in-depth narrative related to the adoptive experiences of the seven participants.

Data Collection

An interview guide was developed and used to collect qualitative data from participants. A copy of the interview guide can be found in Appendix C. The interview began with a broad opening question that allowed each participant to begin his/her own adoption story in a way that was relevant and meaningful to him/her. The interview questions were divided into five broad categories: 1) adoptive family identity; 2) cultural factors influencing identity; 3) social factors influencing identity; 4) educational factors influencing identity; and 5) sense of self. Despite the development and use of the interview guide, it is important to note that each of the participants

controlled the direction and flow of the interviews in the way in which they chose to deliver their personal adoption narratives.

The interview guide was piloted with a Native American adoptee and revisions to the guide were made prior to submission of the dissertation proposal to the Portland State University School of Social Work. Piloting the interview guide allowed the researcher to modify the questions, practice the flow of the life story interview, and to solicit input from an individual with similar characteristics of the research participants for the development of the final interview guide.

The strengths of this approach, including increased comprehensiveness of the data, systematic data collection, and fairly conversational and situational interviews, greatly outweighed the weaknesses of the approach (Patton, 1990). A semi-structured interview “involves the implementation of a number of predetermined questions and special topics . . . but the interviewers are allowed freedom to digress” (Berg, 2004, p. 81). The flexibility of this type of interview allowed the researcher to ask specific questions not on the interview guide to help further clarify and understand the various answers given by the participants. The flexible nature of the interview guide allowed each participant’s story to unfold in its own unique way.

The interviews were conducted in mutually agreed upon locations and on mutually agreed upon dates and times. Due to geographic distance and interviewee preference, two of the interviews were conducted by telephone. Prior to the scheduled interview, the researcher provided the interviewee with an electronic copy of the interview guide and informed consent form for review. A copy of the informed

consent form can be found in Appendix D of the document. Prior to conducting the interview, the researcher reviewed the consent form with the interviewee, stressing the voluntary nature of participation in the study and informing the interviewees that they may request to stop the interview at any time and that their request would be honored. Interviewees were offered an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and then asked to sign the form. Each interviewee was provided with a copy of the signed informed consent form.

The life story interview was highly personal; therefore, to build the level of trust and rapport needed to conduct the interview, the researcher allowed for time and opportunities in the week(s) leading up to an interview and at the beginning of each interview for general conversation and information sharing. Through a demonstration of warmth, friendliness, and genuineness on the part of the researcher, a context in which each participant felt comfortable to share his/her adoption story was created. Further, near the end of each interview, the researcher let the individual know that the interview was nearing the end and allowed for ample time for closure and debriefing.

Each of the life story interviews was audio recorded, with consent of the interview participant. Audio recording the interviews helped ensure accuracy of the information gathered through the interview and allowed for the development of a detailed transcription of each interview. In addition, the researcher took handwritten notes throughout the interview to capture key phrases, major points, and non-verbal communication cues and observations. Upon completion of the interviews, the audiotapes were assigned a number to help ensure confidentiality of the recording and

manage the organization of multiple audio recordings. The researcher transcribed the audio recordings. The choice to personally transcribe each of the interviews allowed the researcher to spend more time going over each interview. Repetitive listening to the audio recordings allowed the researcher to pick-up on additional information (e.g., long pauses, laughter, changes in tone, and the repeated use of certain words) that was not “heard” during the original interview. The audiotapes are stored in a locked filing cabinet in the home of the researcher. Proper names and potential identifying information were excluded from the final interview transcriptions that were used for the analysis.

Within 24 hours of completion of each life story interview, the researcher recorded field notes from the interview that captured personal observations about the interview or what was said during the interview. The recording of field notes allowed the researcher to record important observations or areas requiring further investigation in subsequent interviews. The field notes provided the researcher with an additional source of data that was useful during the data coding, analysis, and interpretation processes.

In addition to interview field notes, the researcher maintained reflexive and methodological journals. The methodological journal allowed the researcher to document key methodological issues and decisions related to the research as they emerged. The reflexive journal was used to record the researcher’s personal insights, thoughts, and feelings about what was happening or being learned throughout the research process. Because the researcher is an adoptee and brings biases and

assumptions to the research, the reflexive journal served as a strategy to address the threat of researcher bias during the analysis and reporting of findings.

During the data analysis and interpretation phase of the dissertation, the researcher used the reflexive journal as a tool in helping to understand the interpretive framework of the researcher and how the researcher's beliefs and assumptions influenced and shaped the data analysis, interpretation, and presentation of findings. The information contained in the field notes, methodological journal, and reflexive journals served as a resource for "sensemaking and meaning construction" throughout the research endeavor (Rodwell, 1998, p. 134).

To ensure credibility and authenticity of the data gathered through the life story interviews, each participant received an electronic copy of his/her transcribed interview. Each participant was asked to review and make necessary changes to their interview to reflect his/her personal story. According to Atkinson (1998), "people telling their stories should always have the last word in how their stories end up in written form before being passed on to others or published in any form" (p. 26). No substantial changes were made to the interview transcripts; rather, participants used the review period as an opportunity to make grammatical and spelling changes in their transcript. Two participants added minor clarifying language about what they had said by adding specific details about a few stories they had recounted.

Interestingly, during an in-person meeting with one of the participants after the individual had an opportunity to read and reflect upon his/her interview transcript, the participant made several comments about the tone of his/her interview and felt s/he

was too critical about his/her relationship with his/her adoptive mother. However, when asked what the participant would like to have changed, the individual did not want to revise the content of his/her statements because to him/her it was relevant at the point-in-time the interview was conducted. Participants received a final electronic version of his/her interview transcription.

Data Analysis

The researcher used the thematic analysis method framework developed by the National Centre for Social Research as a guide for data organization and analysis. According to Spencer, Ritchie, and O'Connor (2004), this framework allows a researcher to "classify and organize data according to key themes, concepts, and emergent categories" (p. 220). This framework allowed for in-depth exploration of each life story as well as a comparison of data across multiple life story interviews.

Upon completion of an interview transcription, the researcher read through each life story interview to become familiar with the data, to identify areas needing additional investigation, and to identify emerging themes and/or recurring themes in which the data was subsequently labeled, sorted, and analyzed. The transcripts were then sent electronically to the participant for review and feedback. Upon receiving the revised transcripts, the researcher reread the transcripts and began coding the transcripts using a conceptual framework guided by the research questions.

Given the length, breadth, and depth of information presented in each life story interview, it was essential to focus the analysis early on in the process. The conceptual framework guided by the research questions provided principles of selectivity that

allowed the researcher to begin reducing the lengthy interviews to a manageable size for subsequent coding and analysis.

The categorization, labeling, and organization of data based on the conceptual framework was accomplished through the use of the qualitative software package Weft QDA (available to download from www.pressure.to/qda.) Weft QDA is an open source qualitative analytical tool that allows for data organization through the ability to categorize text into thematic segments within a single text file as well as across multiple text files. Using this data management tool, categories were electronically developed and defined for use in the coding of the interview transcripts. New categories were established throughout the analytical process as they emerged from the unique stories of each participant. Data were coded using the categories and criteria established in the analytical tool.

The final step of data analysis involved pulling together the data in a synthesized fashion while maintaining as much of the participant's own language as possible, minimizing interpretation of the data, and avoiding the exclusion of data that may seem unimportant (Spencer, et al., 2004). Again, WEFT QDA was a powerful tool in synthesizing the data across the life story interviews because it has functional capacity to arrange data categorically across multiple interviews.

Key findings related to the over-arching research questions began to emerge during the interpretive phase of the interview data analysis. In the development of descriptive accounts related to the research questions, the researcher identified relationships between different themes identified earlier in the analysis process across

the life story interviews. Given the sensitive nature of the data and assurances to participants that measures would be taken to safeguard their confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process, the researcher, in consultation with a Native American elder and the dissertation chair, made a decision to present aggregate narrative accounts addressing the research questions rather than individual narrative accounts.

Ethical Considerations

Before conducting any fieldwork, the researcher received the necessary approval to conduct the research from the Human Subjects Research Review Committee (HSRRC) at Portland State University. A continuation report was mailed to the HSRRC in the fall of 2008 because the research project was not concluded within a one-year timeframe. Prior to beginning a life story interview, the researcher reviewed the informed consent form with the participant, answered any questions regarding participation in the study, and obtained the participant's signature on the informed consent form. A copy of the signed consent form was provided to each of the participants. Original copies of the signed informed consent form are maintained in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home. Only the researcher had access to the materials contained in the locked filing cabinet.

To help maintain the confidentiality of the data, handwritten notes from each interview along with the researcher's reflexive and methodological journals, and audiotapes were also stored in the locked filing cabinet when not in use by the researcher. To help safeguard the anonymity of participants, proper names and

potential identifying information were excluded from the transcriptions used in the final data analysis. Materials related to this study will be kept in a secure location for three years following the completion of the study.

Research participants had opportunities throughout the research process to review and provide input into various products produced by the research (e.g., transcriptions, coding schema, and the final dissertation). For example, each participant received an electronic version of his/her transcribed interview to review and edit. Each participant was asked to provide feedback and any additional information they would like to add to their adoption story. The edited versions of each transcription, containing grammatical, spelling, and other minor changes that were added by two participants to provide greater clarity to some of the stories they had shared, were used for analysis. Encouraging participant review and input into the final transcript helped to ensure that unique perspectives were fairly and accurately represented in the research, thus aiding in the establishment of an authentic (Rodwell, 1998) representation of the adoptees' lived experiences.

Participants were asked a series of personal questions related to their experiences as a transracial adoptee. Due to the intimate nature of the study, the researcher anticipated that some participants might experience some degree of emotional discomfort when reflecting on and sharing their personal stories. Prior to conducting an interview, participants were reminded that they did not have to answer any questions that they were uncomfortable answering. Additional strategies to

safeguard and protect the emotional well-being of participants included an opportunity for debriefing with the researcher at the conclusion of each interview.

Strategies to Enhance the Trustworthiness of Data

Trustworthiness is a standard in constructivist research that must be demonstrated to ensure rigor (Rodwell, 1998). Specific measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness (i.e., credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the data throughout the research study. To help ensure credibility of the data, the researcher 1) transcribed the audio recordings of each interview and provided each participant with an electronic copy of his or her interview for review and editing; 2) maintained a methodological and reflexive journal throughout the research process to help capture the researcher's developing understanding of method and content as well as areas of researcher bias; 3) engaged in peer debriefing throughout the research process with two individuals with expertise in Indian child welfare; and 4) conducted member checks via e-mail and telephone with the research participants during the collection and analytical phases of the research.

Transferability is ensured through the provision of a thick description of the research context and findings so that others may draw their own conclusion as to whether the findings are applicable in other places (Rodwell, 1998). In the findings section, aggregate responses to the interview questions are provided in a manner that answers the two primary questions guiding this research inquiry. For example, describing the different contextual influences on identity development using the selected narratives of interview participants allows readers to gain a richer

understanding of the contextual factors and determine if they are applicable in helping to better understand the adoptive lives of other transracial Native American adoptees. The selected narratives reflect the voices of the research participants and provide rich details that aid in the construction of meaning and interpretation of the findings.

To help ensure the dependability of the data, the researcher created an audit trail comprised of field notes, field journals (i.e., a reflexive journal and a methodological journal), interview transcriptions, and notes from all stages of the data analysis and interpretation. Prior to any future publications based on this dissertation, an external auditor that has been identified by the researcher will conduct a dependability audit to verify the consistency, appropriateness, and accuracy of the content and analytical process (Rodwell, 1998). This individual has expertise in the field of child welfare and is familiar with the researcher's personal journey as an adoptee. While it was the original intent to have this completed prior to the dissertation defense, due to time constraints and previous commitments of the external auditor, this review will not be completed until after the dissertation defense. Any discrepancies or major findings from this audit will be reported in future publications.

While the audit helps to ensure confirmability of the data, that is, that the findings being reported are linked to the data collected and analyzed (Lincoln & Guba, 2000), the researcher used other methods to support confirmability of the data. For example, the researcher was able to triangulate the various data sources used throughout the research process during the analytical and reporting phases of the research. These data sources included field notes, reflexive and methodological

journal entries, and interview transcriptions. The use of qualitative software for the data analysis also provides a reliable means to understand how the raw data was interpreted, coded, and subsequently analyzed. Member checking was also a valuable tool used during the data gathering, analysis, interpretation, and reporting phases of the research to help confirm the findings being reported. Member checking was accomplished through the sharing of interview transcriptions, analytical framework, draft findings, and draft final dissertation with each participant for their review and comment.

Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter provides the findings of the life story interviews that were conducted with seven Native American adults who were transracially adopted. The analysis is based on the information gathered through these in-depth interviews. The process model of identity formation (Grotevant, 1987, Grotevant, 1997a, and Grotevant, 1997b) served as the framework within which the interview data was gathered, explored, and presented. This model was used to help understand the complex and evolving relationships between the participants and the contextual factors that have influenced their identity formation over time. In addition, this model was used to help understand how each participant was able to integrate their adoptive experiences into their evolving sense of self. The two components of the process model of identity formation that were most relevant in the data analysis and presentation of findings were the contexts of development and interdependencies and integration of experiences and contextual factors throughout the course of participants' lives across different identity domains.

Due to the small sample size and relational interconnectedness throughout Indian County, no proper nouns were used in this section. Further, the findings represent an aggregate description of the contextual influences on identity formation among the participants. Presenting aggregate findings arranged around the contextual factors influencing identity development as well as integration of experiences into the participants' understanding of self helps to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the research participants. The decision to present the findings in this manner was

made after consultation with a Native American elder that served as a mentor to the researcher throughout the research process as well as the dissertation committee chairperson. In addition, the author uses the pronouns “she”, “her”, “hers”, and “herself” in reference to all of the participants to ease in the readability of the findings.

The findings are arranged in a manner to answer the two questions posed by this research: 1) What are the primary contextual factors that have influenced the experiences and identity formation of transracially adopted Native American adults throughout their life?, and 2) How have Native American adults who were transracially adopted prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act integrated their adoption experiences into their sense of self?

The first set of findings addresses the first question and is organized around 12 contextual factors that emerged from the life story interviews: 1) adoptive family; 2) community; 3) educational experiences; 4) religion/spirituality; 5) travel; 6) exposure to cultural experiences; 7) employment; 8) friendships; 9) peer groups; 10) military; 11) societal messages, and 12) reconnection to tribal heritage. Definitions used during the analytical process for each contextual factor are provided prior to the presentation of findings within a specific context.

The second set of findings addresses the second question and is organized around four themes that emerged through the participants’ interviews: 1) self- esteem; 2) sense of belonging; 3) sense of physical appearance; and 4) sense of loss. This section concludes with participant statements that reflect upon their own personal adoptive experiences and provide some insight into participants’ thoughts, feeling, and

understandings about the nature of transracial adoption and the potential impact it may have on one's identity formation.

Contextual Factors Influencing Identity Formation

Adoptive family. Adoptive family was defined as the family into which a Native American child was legally adopted. The adoptive family encompasses parents, siblings, and extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc. All of the participants were adopted into a two-parent family with only one of the participants experiencing parental divorce during the individual's childhood. Six of the seven participants described positive family environments in which they were reared. One individual recounted negative experiences throughout her childhood and is no longer in contact with her adoptive family. She stated, "I haven't talked to them since I was 18 so I don't know where they are or what they are doing and I don't really care."

The majority of participants described feelings of love, support, connectedness, and belonging in their adoptive families. In part, this was attributed to the way in which they were viewed and treated by their respective adoptive parents. One participant reflected on her adoptive mother in the following manner:

I was hers from the moment they brought me home. I was hers and whether it be a spiritual connection or soulful connection or just abundant love, there has never been any doubt in her mind that she is my mom.

Another participant recalled:

Even though I was adopted, I felt like I was just part of the family. As far as my mom and dad were concerned I was theirs and they loved me unconditionally. My parents have been so supportive of me throughout my life and always treated me really well.

One participant summarized her experiences as, “There are loving families who grow a baby outside of their heart as opposed to under their heart. So I was fortunate enough to have been adopted by such a family.” Another participant described love as the key ingredient in her adoptive family by stating:

We have a lot of love for one another and that is what really mattered. . . . It is the way that they love and the way that they give of themselves. It's not like they have money or it's that they are just solid people who are generous with their time and their love and their knowledge and you know they are generous people in that regard and that has definitely been beneficial for me.

Finally, upon reflection about her childhood, one participant summarized her adoptive family experiences in the following:

I really feel that overall I had a very amazing childhood. I had a really excellent childhood, you know I didn't get beat up or anything like that so I feel really blessed. You know I had a really healthy upbringing.

Not all of the participants recounted stories of love, support, and connectedness to their adoptive parents. For one participant, her adoptive family experiences were just the opposite. The participant recalled:

We always felt like they adopted us to prove what good parents they were because they were . . . ministers. I don't really feel like they ever did it because they really wanted us or they really loved us. I think that was a crock of crap. I think they did it to try to prove something to the people around them. I don't remember ever feeling any kind of love from them. Like it was always them telling me how I was feeling or them telling me how I was feeling was stupid or them having total, total, control over what I did, what I said, how I was, who I talked to. It was more of an abusive relationship.

Participants expressed a number of life lessons or core values learned through their familial environments and experiences, especially as they relate to their adoptive parents. For example, one participant stated, "we were never taught to chastise or belittle anybody because they were different." Another acknowledged the importance of appreciating differences among people in the following statement ". . . the way that my parents raised us we were always taught to be proud of our differences. That just because from an outward appearance we didn't look like everybody else, that we had

strengths.” Finally, one participant summarized the learning of her core values in the following statement:

My adoptive family taught me a strong set of core values that I carry with me today and I am appreciative of that. I have a strong work ethic, reverence to a higher power, and generous heart for those who are less fortunate because of how I was raised.

While most participants described intrinsic values or lessons learned from their adoptive parents, they weren't necessarily positive in nature. One participant internalized negative associations with being adoptive or being Native American as a result of disciplinary actions taken by her adoptive parents. For example, she stated, “Anytime we got in trouble or anytime anything would happen it was because we were adopted or because we were Indian.”

In the telling of their adoption stories, participants were asked how and when they learned from their adoptive parents that they were adopted as well as how and when they learned they were Native American. All of the participants learned at an early age they were adopted from their adoptive parents. One participant expressed appreciation in knowing about her adoptive status by stating, “My parents were very open about it and I think that they did a really great job about me knowing my entire life that I was adopted, even before I knew what it meant.” One aspect of adoption that many of the participants had in common was learning that they were adopted at an

early age. Where there were differences among adoptees however was in the ages at which they learned they were Native American.

While some of the adoptive parents shared the fact that the individual was Native American, this knowledge did not influence or impact the cultural ways in which some participants were raised. One participant recalled:

My parents told me I was Indian at an early age, but they aren't, so they weren't able to share with me any of our cultural traditions because they weren't interested in it. They didn't provide that to me because it just didn't interest them.

Another participant recalled:

They didn't really make a big deal about the fact that I was Indian, which I guess was okay. I was just theirs. I mean looking back it might have been nice to know more about that part of me but mostly I just took on the identity of my family.

One participant was not told that she was Native American and struggled with knowing she was different, especially throughout her adolescent years. The participant stated:

It was horrible because I didn't fit in with them and I knew I didn't fit in with them and I knew that they weren't my parents. They never acknowledged that I was Native. They kept me from my culture. So it was like they were trying to make me be like them but the more they made me and my

sister try to be like them the more we went in the opposite direction. . . . They thought they were protecting us by not letting us associate with anything that was representative of our cultures.

One component of the process model of identity formation (Grotevant, 1987) is the ability of an individual to engage in the process of identity formation through active inquiry, interaction within their contextual environments, and ongoing evaluation of one's thoughts and feelings about what one is discovering. For one participant, this occurred during her adolescent years and was marked by some difficulty with her adoptive parents:

As I got older I think I started making a bigger deal out of my cultural differentness and my parents probably weren't really equipped to handle that. My mom especially had a hard time as I started asking questions about where I came from. I mean more about who my birth family was.

Sometimes I think she hoped I would just stop wondering and asking.

Another participant described a lifelong journey of understanding the impact of how she was raised. In particular, she recalled her relationship with her adoptive mother and the potential harm it had on her ability to develop intimate relationships with others. The participant recollected:

My mom's not your lovey, touchy, feely you know hugging, kissing kind of mom. She kind of has the old school philosophy that if you touch your kid too much you are going to spoil them. I have had every opportunity in the world. She strongly believed in education. She was very supportive in that way but there just wasn't that emotional connection to her. So I think that absolutely affected me in intimate relationships. . . it has been a lifelong issue.

The loss of culture or loss to connection to one's biological heritage was evident in the statement offered by one participant as she shared a story about an experience she had participating in a traditional ceremony in the following narrative:

My parents standing outside of the circle behind me and for me knowing really that was the only thing they could never really give me. They could give me all of the love and support in the world but that thing that they couldn't ever provide me was that touchstone to my familial past. And to have them standing there, behind me, outside of the circle was probably the most profound moment of my life.

Overall, the majority of participants described positive experiences within their adoptive families. For some, these experiences have been integrated into their construction of self over time. For example, two participants emphasized the importance of being wanted by their adoptive parents. One participant stated, "I think

when you are raised by a family that wants you, you come out of it stronger.” The other participant recalled:

I guess that is what is so unique about being adopted I mean, there is such emphasis on that, you know, that you were so wanted, were chosen, and are special in that way, no matter what your cultural background might be.

Another participant stressed the importance of love and taking care of one another that was central to her adoptive family in the following narrative:

I knew that while we didn't have the conventional family we were a family just because we loved one another, we cared for one another, we looked out for one another, and as far as I was concerned that was how family was supposed to be. I think that definitely my unusual home situation was such a gift because it allowed me to appreciate differences in other people. I really cannot stress that enough.

Two other participants spoke about the importance of having a loving relationship with their adoptive families. For one participant, this helped to build a level of resiliency against negative societal messages. She stated, “My parents gave us enough, armed us with enough in the way of love and information and pride. Even if people were overly being rude or discriminatory or whatever, I never cared.” For the other participant, love was seen as a basic right of every adoptee as reflected in the following statement:

They really loved me and treated me well and I guess as someone who is adopted that is the best that you can hope for. I mean, being loved by a family in a way that is so real and that transcends biological connections should be a right of everyone who is adopted.

In addition to adoptive parents, siblings also had positive and negative impacts or influences on the adoptees that participated in this study. Two of the participants had other siblings who were also adopted, one participant had one sibling who was adopted as well as siblings who were the biological children of the adoptive parents, three participants had siblings who were the biological children of the adoptive parents, and one participant was an only child. None of the participants were raised in an adoptive family with other biological siblings.

One participant remembered the profound influence of her siblings in the following statement:

I just followed my sister because she was my sister and I thought she was my whole world. You know at the time I didn't really know, but now looking back on it, I just did whatever my sister told me to do. My sister and my brother were more parents to me and took care of me better than the parents we were supposed to have.

This participant was later reminded of how her siblings influenced her life by stating, "My sister and my brother just older than me had the biggest influences on my life

because they protected me. . . . My 'Black' sister and my 'White' brother became my strength as I searched for myself.”

One participant reported that she internalized a coping mechanism learned from her sister that upon reflection over time has not served the individual in a healthy manner. The participant remembered:

Well, my sister taught me how to be really, really strong. I mean in some ways it was good because it protected me for many, many years and it wasn't until I actually started going to counseling that I realized that what she had taught me was really not helping me because there was a lot of stuff that I was not dealing with and I was just acting like nothing bothered me, nothing hurt me, like nothing affected me.

Growing up in a family with other adopted siblings made a big difference for one participant in the way in which the participant views others who may be different from her. The individual stated:

The fact that I had all adopted siblings made for a different upbringing and I always remember feeling really proud of that fact. For me, growing in my family and having adopted siblings of other ethnicities has been an advantage because I developed an appreciation for people who are different from you.

While some participants described positive associations with their sibling group, for one participant, her childhood years and memories of her sibling were not so affirmative. The participant said:

He could be real mean to me to and call me names like “dirty Injun.” That would hurt my feelings because I just wanted to be White like everyone else around me. I remember one time trying so hard to scrub my skin clean so that I would be lighter in color so he wouldn't tease me anymore. He was just mean to me a lot and I sort of felt helpless around him. My parents never really heard him say those things and when I would tell them they would just sort of blow it off like it really was nothing or that he was just kidding around with me. I just didn't want to see myself the way that he saw me.

Even though this participant remembered challenges with her sibling and the way in which she internalized what she was being told about who she was in relation to their cultural background, the relationship evolved in her early adulthood years. The participant recalled:

Now that I am an adult, our relationship has really changed. After college I went through some pretty rough times, was really depressed, and drinking quite a bit. He was really

there to help me out and get me through it all. . . . I now consider him a good friend.

Extended family members also had influential roles to play in identity formation among the adoptees. Many of the participants expressed similar feelings of love and belonging within the context of their extended families. Reflecting on her relationship with her grandparents, one participant remembered with some emotion:

Not only did they love me and accept me but they loved my sisters, of course, and would shower us with gifts and little candies and tell us stories and they were just, you know, perfect grandparents. So it was a close family and in fact my last grandparent died in April and she and I had become friends, good friends. I know that she is not my blood but we had a connection and, gosh, there is not a day that goes by you know that I get teary-eyed or misty and think, “Oh I wish my friend were still here.”

Another participant recounted memories of the influence her adoptive grandmother had in her life in the following statement, “I mean my adoptive grandmother basically said, ‘Service to God, service to community, and service to family’ and I try to pass those thing on the way that I basically use it is to put it into a parable or teaching.”

One participant described feelings of being special because of her status as a Native American, “One relative once told me that they thought I was extra cool

because I was Native American you know compared to all of them being White.”

Other participants were more generic in describing their sense of belonging in their extended families. One participant said, “All of them hugged me and you talked to me just as much as my other brothers and sisters. Like growing up I didn't really feel that different.” Another recalled, “All of my relatives just really loved me even though I didn't look like any of them.” Finally, one participant reflected on the lesson she learned about acceptance of others who are different than one’s self, “the way that I have been taught . . . they are all very open-minded about who is family and they are all family to me.”

Not all participants had constructive interactions with all of their extended family members. Due to racism and prejudicial treatment toward the participant, one adoptive family discontinued contact with the father’s side of the family; however, maintained a very open and healthy relationship with extended family members on her adoptive mother’s side. The participant reflected on her relationship with extended family members on both sides of her adoptive parents in the following narrative:

My grandfather was a pretty racist and bigoted person and a raging alcoholic. So we didn't really have much contact with my dad's family and we aren't very close to my dad's family by any stretch. I grew up near my mom's parents and my aunts and uncles. . . . I never really felt as if we were treated any differently by my aunts and uncles because of having been adopted. They have always loved us and valued us and

see us as people. You know we were their nieces and nephews and they loved us.

When interpersonal relationships became strained in one participant's adoptive home, she went to live with an extended family member. This experience was remembered with mixed emotions. While the participant was provided a safe, loving and nurturing environment for a period of time, she also internalized a coping strategy for difficult life situations that has not proven to be healthy for the participant over time. The participant stated:

I mean the whole family was very Lutheran, very strict, very Norwegian. I came out here to live with my adoptive aunt. That was great. I was like in fourth or fifth grade and that was great because I got more love and attention from her in that one year than I ever had before. She was always very put together and I never saw any other emotions from her other than being put together and happy. If anything every came up and there was a situation like I experienced racism at school or whatever she would just say, "Oh, well God never gives us more than we can handle" . . . you know she said that to me every day.

Community. For purposes of this analysis, community was defined by geographical boundaries such as neighborhood, city or town, state, or country. During the interview process, all of the participants referenced the communities in which they

lived and discussed the impact of such environments on their developing sense of self. One participant, in the following statement, summarized the importance of one's community on identity development, "Where you grow up in influences you immensely."

One participant related her experiences of growing up in a neighborhood with few people who were similar in race or ethnicity in the following:

We lived in a rich, White, hoity-toity neighborhood . . . me and my sister for a long time were the only minority people that we saw. It was a richer White neighborhood and there weren't a lot of minorities that fit into that socio-economic class at that time.

Another participant recalled also being raised in an area that was predominantly White, "I was also raised in area where Blacks may be less than one half of one percent of the population."

A different participant illustrated her experiences growing up in a geographic location with little ethnic diversity in the following narrative:

Well I grew up in a White area, farm country, you know. When we first moved to [name of city] there was nothing there, it was straight up farm country and now it has become incredibly affluent you know, just a lot of money and right wing religious fanatics. It has become absolutely nuts out there . . . I grew up in a place where you know you could

count the minority children on one hand. And you know different was not necessarily a good thing . . . There was not much in the way of cultural diversity growing up where I lived.

The following story illustrates the experiences of one participant who was raised in small, predominantly White rural community that was impacted by other racial/ethnic minorities through migrant farm labor and proximity to a reservation. Interestingly, this participant, who had not developed a strong racial or ethnic identity, did not choose to associate herself with either group and cites her reasons why. The participant recounted:

Well it was a pretty small town where I grew up. I grew up in the country. It was actually a nice place to be for the most part. It's weird thinking back on it and wondering if I am really making it sound better than it probably was. There were Indians on reservations in nearby towns but I didn't really see myself as part of them and didn't want to be because people were always saying bad things about them. For some reason I saw myself different than them even though I knew I was Indian. . . All my friends were White, my family was White and I guess I saw myself more like my friends and family than those people. I remember hearing stories about how all the Indians were drunks, they

were poor, the kids were always dirty, and they lived in shacks with a lot of garbage and broken down cars and junk in their yards. I just didn't see myself like that. It was probably a pretty racist community now that I think of it. . . . Pretty much the entire town I grew up in was White. It was a small community and some summers we had Mexicans that would come to our town to help work in the fields. It was sort of weird though because for me, these people looked most like me in terms of their hair, and eyes, and color of their skin but I really distanced myself from that whole culture because how bad they were treated by people in my town. . . . They were really hard on those guys because of their language, their darker skin color, I don't know if it was real or just perceived dirtiness, and food they ate like beans and stuff. . . . The town was pretty small-minded if you were different than the norm which was White, Christian, and hard working. I was just part of my family and my family had a long history of being part of the community so I got by.

The participant went on to talk about how she was influenced by virtue of being raised on a farm. Daily life on the farm and the responsibilities associated with

this lifestyle instilled some core values within this participant. The context of farm life and the impact it had on this participant is portrayed in the following narrative:

I mean like there is a culture of work and responsibility and contribution and dependence that I don't think you necessarily have if you don't grow up out in the country. . . I always had responsibilities and things I did either before or after school and that was just expected of me. I took care of animals and think I learned a whole lot of things that looking back are pretty cool experiences. . . I learned how to fix things, how to plant things, how to harvest things and really the value of hard work. . I guess when you live on a farm and raise things you really get a better understanding of all of that.

For one participant, being raised in a military family and living overseas had a tremendous impact on her identity development. This individual did not have a cultural or ethnic identity as Native American; rather, she considered herself as Caucasian. During the participant's time living overseas however she did experience difficulties fitting in due to her status as an American. The participant illustrated this in the following statement:

I grew up mostly in [name of country]. I spent 10 years in [name of country]. We spent a couple of years in [name of state]. We were a military family so we moved around quite a

bit. . . I think probably being in [name of country] shaped me the most. In a way you kind of fit in because you know you are White and you fit in that way but they don't like us over there and so they make that very clear. They make it known that they don't like Americans and they don't like our military bases being there and so I kind of did feel um I don't know it's not racism I don't know exactly what it is but kind of knowing that you are not wanted, that you are different and you stay with your kind.

In contrast to the experiences illustrated above, one participant was exposed to the community context of other Native American cultures throughout her childhood and internalized these environmental influences. The participant described the teachings she integrated in the following way:

One of the things about Native culture over there is that everybody is related. The way you make friends and avoid enemies is to inter-marry, visit your relatives often, bring gifts, blah, blah, blah. There is a rich culture of extended family. . . . You would visit relatives, you would visit friends, you will be welcome at their place so I feel that even to this day I could fall out of the sky in [name of state] and within 10 miles I would be among family and friends. Granted it's the next generation or two from the people that I knew as a child but it's that kind of thing. . . . If you really

want to be amongst neighbors, friends, and lovers who accept you for who you are and support you in your endeavors regardless of whether they think it is right or wrong, like I said, I have had that all of my life.

Education. Many of the participants described educational experiences that were influential on their developing sense of self. These experiences encompass elementary school, junior high school, high school, and post-secondary educational settings. The findings are presented from earliest experiences to latest experiences in terms of chronological age. Collectively, the stories represent institutional challenges participants' encountered in public education systems as well as challenges faced in social and peer relationships within the context of school as a result of their status as a Native American.

The role of the educational system had both positive and negative influences on the individuals who participated in this study. All of the participants attended schools in which there were few ethnic minority students. The earliest memory of being treated poorly by a classmate recounted by one participant occurred during the participant's pre-school years. The participant reported:

You know I remember being at my pre-school. I would have been like 4 years old and some kid made a crack about, I don't know if it was about, you know, my being brown or being adopted and I don't remember what I said but I

remember I was on a swing and I kicked him in the face. I was like, "take that, you jerk."

Having few peers who were also members of racial/ethnic minority groups made it difficult for another participant to fit in within her school environment. The lack of having other students of color created significant challenges in forming social connections with her peers in an educational setting. The participant portrayed her experiences as in the following manner:

You know our schools were two of the best schools around and there weren't a lot of minorities in the schools. We were sent to a few schools where the majority of kids were White, rich, all American. . . I just didn't fit in to that.

Another participant described a similar educational setting in which she was one of the few ethnic minority students in attendance. She stated, "From about 1st to 8th grade I attended a private school and you could count on one hand how many children of color there were in the school. My brother and sister and I were three of those kids."

One participant attended elementary, junior high, and high school with other Native American students; however, she did not share the same cultural or ethnic identity with those students. Subsequently, she had limited interaction with the other Native American students. The participant described her memory of other school age peers in the following narrative:

Yes, there were some Indians in my school, even in my grade because at some point they had closed the reservation school and moved everyone to our school. I remember not really being impacted by it other than there would be these kids in school that were new and sort of looked like me. It was hard for me though to really relate to them because as far as I was concerned I was White. My family was White, my friends were all White, the people that went to my church were White so I just considered myself White. I never made friends with any of the Indian kids that came to our school. They did some of the same school activities as me but that was about it because I already had my group of friends.

In contrast, one participant described participation in educational opportunities during elementary school that were specifically designed for Native American students. Participation in a specialized class geared toward Native American students provided the participant with a strong cultural connection as well as an opportunity to learn about Native American teachings. However, this was also one of the first times this participant realized she was different from other students because she was singled out of her classroom for participation. The participant recalled:

They would pull out all the Natives from the classrooms and we would go to a special classroom. It was taught by a

Native and she was really cool. She was like, “Okay, forget the whole sit in rows” and so we sat all about her on the floor and she told us stories and we talked about histories and it was fascinating. But it was really, really the first time that I was singled out as different. It was actually kind of scary at the same time you know, “oh so I am different” and you know how kids love to be different (laughter).

Being Native American did not always result in affirmative differential treatment. For one participant, the fact that she was Native American caused some difficulty as she was singled out as being Native American. In addition, she was always looked to for answers about Native American history and Native American issues in general by virtue of her status as a Native American. The difficulty for this individual arose because the individual did not have a strong Native American cultural or ethnic identity. The participant portrayed the challenge as, “I was the token Indian. Anytime something came up it was like, ‘Oh she's Indian, she'll know.’ I didn't know where I came from.”

For one participant, the high school in which she graduated from was integrated into her sense of identity over their lifetime in terms of where they are from. The participant stated:

Well, I mean I think I asked this question of you earlier,

“Where did you graduate from? What high school?”

Because I think that is your identity. You are from X high

school, in X city, in X state and that is what your hometown identity will be for the rest of your life. . . . My identity became my school. . . . My identity became . . . where you graduate from. My school was the Indians. I was an Indian. I was in that school. I felt that they named the whole damn school after me. This was way cool you know, they call themselves Indians and they are not Indians. I am an Indian.

Many of the participants described encounters with racism in the schools they attended. The following stories demonstrate examples of racism narrated by three participants. The first participant remembered:

My mom thought my 3rd grade teacher was racist against me so we had some trouble there. . . she resented the fact that we got pulled out of class and wouldn't make things easy for me to catch up to the rest of the class . . . so I missed the lessons. She wouldn't send me home with make-up work or anything so I would just miss the lesson. And then she would give me a bad grade in that particular subject. And so my mom went straight to the principal and oh man, what a time (laughter). I was just a little 3rd grader caught in the middle. And they ended up yanking me out of her classroom and putting me into a different class but my best friend was in that class so I was happy. Ironically, that

teacher who was so antagonistic toward me, she was Black. And that was some of my first experiences with someone from other races (other than White and Native) anyway. And I remember my mom came to my bedside and said, “I think . . . is acting inappropriately toward you because of your race.” I was like, “how can she be because she's Black?” It didn't cross my mind that oh, yeah she is a person too and had feelings toward me in a way that aren't appropriate. But good for my mom for seeing that because now when I look back, why wouldn't a teacher do anything they could to help a child reconnect with his past and heritage?

The next participant explained:

There was racism. One of the African American students was called a derogatory term in junior high school and basically I beat the person up for calling him a name. I went to the principal's office, they called my parents, and basically my parents had it out with the principal and said that “I did what was right, you know. What's wrong with you if you are kicking my son out of school or punishing my son for doing the right thing then to hell with you.” By saying, “we are leaving now and if my son is not allowed

back in school tomorrow, then we are going right to the school board, there may be a class action suit about this.” That person through high school and afterwards, early college years, became one of my lifelong dear friends . . . that is a situation where I remember vividly and that has been more than 40 some years ago.

The third participant recounted:

There was a lot of racism at my school. A lot of racism. I walked through the halls and people would yell just the most horrible things at me. . . when I was at school I was called every name in the book and people always made comments about me or my sister or my brother. I remember I was in 7th grade and I beat this Black boy up and he was taller than me. He made some comment about my Black sister and my White brother and I just took him and threw him up against the wall and beat the crap out of him. I said, “You can say whatever you want about me but don’t talk about my brother or my sister.” You know that was the one and only time that I was ever in a fight, ever.

Post-secondary education experiences were significant for some of the participants in developing greater insights into their cultural and ethnic identities. It was through these educational experiences that some participants had an opportunity

to interact with other Native American students for the first time, had an opportunity to participate in culturally specific activities being held on campus, and had the opportunity to enroll in classes specific to Native American history and culture.

One participant eloquently described her exposure to cultural experiences in college as an opportunity to question and deepen her understanding of self in the context of new information and experiences. She recalled the impact of her exposure to new experiences and information in the following narrative:

During college I remember this strong desire to learn more about who I was and what it meant to be Indian. I took some classes on Native American history and would sometimes go to the Pow Wows that they had on campus. . . . For the first time I began to feel connected to something greater than the family I was raised in, like, this curious part of me from deep down inside was beginning to grow. I think that is what may have caused so many of the problems I had, I had this new awakening that maybe I wasn't the person that I thought I was and really began to question myself, my choices, and really just my life.

Another participant recalled the first time she attended a cultural event sponsored by and for Native American students in the following way,

I was contacted a couple of weeks into the school year by [name of student group]. And I was like, "Okay, this is

creepy. How do they know that I am Native anyway and why would I want to go and sit around and talk to these people?" I don't remember if I tossed away the first invitation or went out of just curiosity or to ask why they got my name. But I went and we just sat around and had a good talk and then we had fry bread. And I was like, "This is good." And I remember writing about it later in my journal and going, "I like frybread."

The opportunity to be connected with other Native American students during her college years exposed a deeper understanding of this participant's childhood experiences, as they related to both her adoptive family and educational experiences. The participant reflected on this in the following narrative:

Being adopted by a different race is not being exposed to your history, this history of your people. And that's what gave me a lot of angst in college. Was being, having you know, having all these kids throughout my childhood growing up, your know, on culture days they could come to school in their Lederhosen and they were wearing all green because they were Irish or whatever and I was like, "Well, my parents told me I was Indian but they are not so they weren't able to share with my any of our cultural traditions because they weren't interested in it."

For one participant, attending Native American cultural events in college caused a certain level of discomfort. For this individual, this was her first time living away from home and first time being exposed to cultural events. The participant recalled:

I started going to college away from my family and you know being put in the category, “Oh, you are Native American so here are some multi-cultural services. We have Pow Wows if you are interested in coming to any of them.” Honestly, I never felt comfortable, but I would go.

Despite some of the challenging experiences encountered within the public education system, upon reflection, one participant summed up the life value of her education in the following statement:

Having an education got me off the streets, got me off of doing menial work, got me into a place where I can make good money, create a family of my own, support them financially and as such. I encourage everybody to go back and continue their education.

Religion/spirituality. For purposes of this analysis, religion/spirituality was defined as participation in organized religious/spiritual activities. While the participation and type of religious/spiritual involvement varied by individual across her lifespan, five of the participants mentioned the influence of religion/spirituality on their life.

According to one participant, regular involvement in organized religious activities was “a big part of my life throughout my childhood.” The participant recalled:

We went to church every Sunday We did a lot of activities related to the church like Sunday School, potlucks and gatherings, and just a lot of social events. . . A lot of my friends went to the same church as me so that was cool.

Despite infrequent attendance or involvement during early and mid-adulthood, the individual described the influence of religion/spirituality on her life in the following manner:

I think that being part of my church really helped give me a good grounding in terms of some of my values in life. You know just learning right from wrong and how to get along with people. It has provided me with a sense of grounding, something that I can lean on and go back to no matter what phase I may be in about religion. When I went away to college I stopped going to church because it just wasn't cool or something. I think religion and spirituality kind of come and go but I just feel a sense of security and grounding.

Unlike the story above that described regular involvement in organized religious activities, for two participants, it wasn't necessarily the regular attendance or participation in organized religious activities but the underlying messages and values

that were instilled in them as a result of having an association with a particular church.

One participant recalled,

We did some stuff with churches. . . I mean we were basically brought up to be Christians and we took that to heart. . . having been raised to love the Lord, to love your brother, to have brother and sisters of different ethnicities.

The other participant described the influence of religion and familial attitudes about religion on her life in the following statement:

I attended youth group and what not. My parents gave us the choice of whether or not we wanted to be confirmed and my brother was the only one that actually chose to. I wouldn't say that religion has played a very big part other than [name of specific church] has a very big like social justice bend so my parents have always been more of you know, "be mindful, be fair." They have always just kind of approached it from a you as a person in your environment and, you know, just kind of figure out how to you use yourself in your environment with your responsibility. It was just kind of you as a responsible human being and citizen and what not. That is sort of how we were raised. Not with any religious bend, just being a good person.

One participant recalled, with mixed emotions due to the way in which congregation members interacted with her, her involvement in a traditional Christian church during her childhood and adolescent years. Despite some difficulties encountered, attendance and participation in church activities provided a strong foundation for spirituality for this individual. As this individual aged and was reconnected with her tribal heritage, she began participating in traditional spiritual practices. The participant remembered:

We went to church every Sunday, every Wednesday youth group, and bible camp. I was more into it than my brothers or my sister. They kind of did their own thing but of all the things that they [the church] taught me, they taught me how not to be. They taught me how not to treat people. . . In that setting because it is so protected and the people that we were around were so, I don't know how you would say it, but it's like they were very strict. It's like in that environment there was still racist remarks but it wasn't as obvious or I didn't feel it as much in being in a youth group or a church camp. When I would go to those church camps there were more people from different parts of the area and more minorities. But they did give me a very solid base for a sense of spirituality. You know I moved away from the Lutheran church because I went back to the traditional ways. . . I reached a point well if this is what your

God's gonna do then I don't want to have anything to do with it.
.. It was like the whole spiritual aspect like if this is what God is really about, why did he put me in this situation? What does God have to do with this? So it created this whole other aspect of confusion about spirituality, Christianity, that made no sense to me.

One participant, who moved around the country quite often during her childhood, was strictly raised in a particular faith that was “predominantly White” and described her experiences as “the constant community that I was associated with the whole time growing up.” Being a member of this particular faith was challenging at times because some of the religious teachings caused internal conflicts for this participant due to the derogatory nature of the teachings toward Native American people. The individual “distinctly” remembered the following encounter that occurred when she was six years old with a religious instructor that caused a “starting of an internal conflict about transracial adoption” regarding her ethnic identity:

The memory from when I was six years old was the primary teacher, primary is basically like Sunday School and the primary teacher was telling the story of the wicked Lamenites and the righteous Nephites and he had a picture of a White man and a picture of a brown man and the brown man was the bad guy. . . For some reason it is a very strong memory I have. I

have very detailed visions or memories of that one experience and it is like a deep memory and experience.

For this participant, some of the conflict was caused, in part, by interpretation of the teachings because she also had experiences throughout her life that were contradictory to earlier ones. The participant explained:

The interesting thing about [name of religious group] is they actually, I mean it may not sound like it from what I told you before, but they actually have a very strong respect for and interest in Native Americans. They do have a lot of deep respect for Native Americans. . . . Like I felt like I was either something abnormally special or abnormally wrong.

Reflecting back on her life, one participant synthesized the influence of religion/spirituality in the following remark:

I know that it doesn't matter what religion or spirituality you have in your life. . . . I know that it is only by the grace of God that I am alive today. The only thing that has kept me alive for 37 years, that's it. Because if you looked at the way my life was and the things that have happened to me I shouldn't be here. I shouldn't have made it because of all of things that occurred. I shouldn't have survived this, I shouldn't have lived through this, so it doesn't have anything to do with me and I know that. It totally doesn't have anything to do with me.

In contrast to the stories mentioned above, for one participant, involvement in religious/spiritual activities has never been a part of her life. In fact, it wasn't until she was reconnected with her birth mother that religion became an issue. She summarized this sentiment in the following remarks:

Never went to church and still don't. My birth mother is very religious which is one of the ways that we are very different. In fact, when we first met, one of her first gifts to me was a Bible with my name on, which apparently means something in religious worlds but meant nothing to me. I am so disconnected from that. So we kind of know that that's a place that we don't go together.

Travel. For two individuals, travel to foreign countries provided an opportunity to be in physical proximity to other people that had a similar skin color. Interestingly, both individuals described travel experiences that were connected to their religious/spiritual upbringings. These experiences were recounted as influential on the participants' identity development because it helped to shape their perceptions of who they were. One of the participants vividly narrated her experiences in the following narrative account:

In [name of country] that whole experience was very significant for me because it was the first time in my whole life that I started wondering about my ancestry. Like who I descended from. It was my first time to be around people who

resembled me physically somewhat. In [name of country] maybe about 30% of the time the [name of countrymen] thought I was indigenous Mayan. There were things I had in common with the [name of countrymen] people that I didn't have in common with my adopted family that I was raised with my whole life. . . that was my first time to live among a people that I really found something really in my core that was never understood by my family and embraced. . . So [name of country] was a very important experience like in a lot of ways for me. It was a turning point for me in wanting to learn about my ancestry. . . something inside of me finally clicked when I saw a [name of countrymen] baby and I was like, "Oh my gosh, my baby is going to be brown and not White." I mean like it was really weird coming into my own there in [name of country] in terms of just learning more about me and my ancestry and all those questions started for the first time.

While one of the participants described a positive experience associated with her travel to a foreign country, the other individual had an opposite experience. For this participant, it was hoped she would finally be in a place where she would "fit in", however, this was not the case as evident the following story:

No the kids all thought I was Asian. When I went there part of my thinking was, "oh good, I will finally go somewhere where

I am not going to feel left out.” But when I got there, there was this little boy . . . and him and his brother asked me for weeks at a time, “Are you Asian, are you Asian?” And I would say “No.” It took me a while to get that they didn't understand what I was saying. And so I had to explain to them that I was Indian. That was hard for them to understand because they were little and their limited understanding of things. But once they finally did then they quit asking me if I was Asian. But that really struck me because I thought, “yeah, I am in another country and I don't really fit in here either, so yeah, that's great.” And it was really evident and I remember that and I remember everything about that day because that struck me so much.

Exposure to cultural experiences. Four of the participants mentioned exposure or lack of exposure to cultural experiences as one of the contextual influences on their identity formation. Cultural experiences are defined as awareness of, exposure to, and/or active engagement in activities that are representative of cultural or ethnic backgrounds that are different than those of the individuals' adoptive families.

One participant described her exposure to cultural events throughout childhood as, “we would also do cultural events, be it rodeos, Pow Wows, luaus, jazz festivals, be it whatever.” Even though this individual remembered as a child she “didn't want to go to the Pow Wow because I didn't really care for the food.” As an adult, this individual attends Pow Wows and recounted, “we see all of the little kids running

around and having fun and I don't remember doing that. All my relatives say, "Yeah, that is exactly what you did."

For another participant, it wasn't until her college years that she would "sometimes go to the Pow Wows that they had on campus" in attempt to learn more about her cultural heritage. One participant reflected on the inner significance of her experiences participating in tribal activities in the following narrative:

I was fortunate enough to go back to my reservation and carve on totem poles, to carve on boats and to participate in these paddles around the state. Even by just putting hands to cedar with some very rudimentary handmade or modified tools it made me feel fulfilled. I mean it soothed my soul.

Exposure to opportunities to engage in cultural activities became a reality for another participant during her college years when she joined a multi-cultural dance group. For this individual, "it was the first time in my country, in the United States, to be surrounded by brown people." Participation in the dance group was "very momentous" for this participant because to compete to become a member of the dance group, the individual was required to learn a dance style specific to her cultural background. Not knowing any cultural dances, this individual, while visiting her father the summer before the competition, recounted the following story with some laughter:

I just drove onto the reservation one day and asked if there was anyone that could teach me how to dance Native American dance. I didn't even know that much about Pow Wow dances or

nothing but there was a girl who taught me, who just volunteered to teach me just some basic Native, ah, it was jingle dance.

One participant, who was raised near a reservation community, reflected on her childhood with a sense of missed opportunities for a connection to her cultural heritage. The individual recalled:

I could have done a lot of cultural things growing up if my family only would have connected me to someone or found out how to go or be a part of some of the events they do on the reservation. . . . They do a lot of cultural events at the casino, I hear but I don't go home that often to go and watch.

For one participant, it was connecting with her birth mom that provided a window of opportunity to learn about her cultural heritage. While the level of exposure to cultural experiences related to her tribal heritage was indirect, the participant felt it was worth mentioning. The participant stated, “You know I get on and read the newsletters and um I have done a lot of research into where the tribe came from and how they ended up there. I am just starting to figure out that part.”

Employment. Six of the seven participants recounted employment histories that included working in Indian Country as adults. Working in Indian Country has provided many of the participants with a cultural connection that has influenced their understanding of who they are. One participant portrayed this connection in the following narrative:

Well it is kind of nice to know that I have that connection. You know it all goes back to that identity thing and it is kind of nice to have one more piece to who I am and it is just interesting that I am working in Indian Country and I fit in so well there and I see myself being there for a long time. And so I don't know if instinctively or genetically or for some reason I was meant to be there. It just feels right.

Another participant illustrated the intricate linkage between her professional life and personal life as a result of working in Indian Country in the following manner:

Well, what started as my understanding that I was American Indian didn't have much effect on my personal life when I was young but as I grew older and began to work in Indian Country it really started to take shape and now the two are forever inextricably linked. . . I was 22. And the question of "Where are you from?" didn't resonate for me. I would answer the question with, "Oh, I grew up in [name of city]." And what they were actually referring to was "Where are your relatives from? What reservation are they from?" . . . I was struck with, well I don't know how to answer that because I am adopted and I struggled with I don't know if that means well, that is where I am from or that's just where my relatives are from and that kind of began the whole identity crisis for me. . . You know now when I hear

that question I answer it differently. So that actually spawned something within me. That is where I would have to say that my professional life and my personal life kind of began a dual track. It got me thinking about things differently.

For one individual working in Indian Country was not without a financial sacrifice, "I worked there for 12 plus years working at way under my market rate essentially because I was doing stuff for my family." Additionally, this individual recounted experiences of prejudicial treatment due to her status as a Native American and the influences such experiences have had on the individual's sense of self as related to her employment. The participant recalled the following:

Basically being black-balled from big jurisdictions or big companies, private sector companies because I was not White like them. I did not go to their school. I am not of their religion. I am much more tolerant than they would ever want to be. People hire people who are like themselves. They don't like to hire people who are better than them or who are more open-minded than them, etc. So I have learned that throughout my entire life. It has made me become who I am. I don't hire people like me. I hire people who think outside of the box. I look at people's potential, desire, and I look to empower people and that is not corporate America. It has helped me on my pathway through life.

Even though one participant did not have any direct experience working in Indian County, she described the importance of the workplace environment in the following manner:

In the workplace for me it is always about being treated with respect and wanting to feel that what I am doing is important. . . . I have never really worked in a place that the fact that I am Indian really mattered all that much. Maybe I am lucky or just didn't realize it though.

Friendships. For this analysis, friendships were defined as social relationships with individuals that had developmental significance in terms of psychological health and well-being. Five of the participants made reference to individuals throughout their lifespan that either were or have remained close friends. One participant described a number of individuals who impacted her psychological well-being in different ways throughout her lifespan. This participant reflected on a friendship that was significant to her during her middle school years in the following statement:

I remember one next door neighbor girl when I was in middle school. She was a White girl and like we really connected. She too romanticized about the world and that is something that we really connected on. We would have slumber parties on the lawn in between our two houses and just tell stories and stuff. I remember her. I don't even really remember her name actually.

We just would romanticize about life and our dreams. I mean it was great. We were really good friends.

Later in life, when the participant began college, she recalled meeting “my longest lifelong friend that I have ever had and still to this day she is one of my bestest friends that I ever had.” Other friendships were also formed in college and remain a strong base of support for this participant. The participant explained the significance of these social relationships in the following manner:

There is this group of four of us girlfriends from college that are just the best of friends. Like for some reason we just never got tired of being in touch with one another. We are just always connected and we go through a lot of different things at the same time. . . Every year we have an annual girlfriend get together at some city of our choosing. . . All three girls are White girls and are very talkative. . . Whenever I talk about racial issues or Native oppression, Native sovereignty, they are all cheering me on. They are very, very supportive. But it's interesting because I think about it sometimes and you know my closest friend ever, you know, and I wish I wouldn't think about it this way but I do because I am peer pressured sometimes from people in the Native community because they look at the race of your friends and stuff. So I have thought about it because of things like that but you know they are my closest girlfriends,

they are White and I love them to death. It doesn't matter to me because they are going to be my bestest girlfriends until the day I die.

One friend was described by a participant as “a role model to me but at the same time she is one of my bestest friends” while another friend was described as both a mentor and a friend, “She is absolutely an amazing friend. I see her as a friend first but her role in my life, like without her even being aware of it, she has been a huge influence.”

For one participant, the friendship connections made during her college years were important because, for the first time, she was around individuals who were similar to her. The participant portrayed this in the following narrative:

It really helped a lot. I mean, just being around people who had been through a lot of similar experiences and who had lived day-to-day in a similar world, you know, where you know you are Native and you know some of your tribe's history and you are singled out and you are different and then you get these slamming messages from society, these sports teams and the histories. Other people finally who have had to sit through that and feel that same discomfort that I had felt and who took pride in what I took pride in. It was just . . . it was really neat.

Another participant described the friendships she made in her former work environment “as still very important to me.” This individual went on to describe these

friendships as having “really been cemented in my life.” One friendship, in particular has “made a huge impact in my life” according to the participant. In part because one individual has been able to impact the relationship this participant has with her adoptive mother in a positive way. The participant described this in the following statement, “I had the good fortune of her and my mom sitting down together this last week and talking for almost four hours trying to help my mom get a better understanding, you know, of me, life, Native people, etc. I am so grateful.”

For one participant, growing up in a small community meant “going to school with almost the very same people from kindergarten until I graduated from high school.” This participant described the significance of friendships during her childhood years in the following:

I had a pretty core group of friends especially when I hit junior high and high school. There were five of us that would hang out together all of the time and I like to think of us as the really popular ones in the school. We were pretty clicky with one another and probably pretty snobby to other people. We were all cheerleaders together for football and basketball and in the spring did stats for the baseball team. We were in the school play together and went to lots of parties on the weekends with one another. It’s really weird though because we all sort of went our separate ways after high school.

On the subject of friendships, one participant talked in more general terms as reflected in the following:

You know, sure there are people that I remember and people that I have in my life now that are important to me. I think mostly friendships have helped me get through some difficult times or just having someone to talk to about something going on in my life is important. . . . There are people that I have known in my life that I deeply respect and will always carry a part of them with me.

In contrast to the experiences described above, one participant struggled to build and maintain friendships throughout her life because her family moved quite often. The participant recounted, “moving so much and never really having a home and never you know friends would sort of come and go and you would lose touch.”

Peer groups. Six of the seven participants described the importance of involvement in different kinds of peer or social groups in relation to their identity development. Peer groups were defined as social groups that comprised individuals with similar interests or other commonalities. One participant found a connection in the multi-cultural dance groups she belonged to due to the fact that she was with “people who mirror me physically.” For one participant, connecting with a peer group had a strong impact on her developing sense of self. The participant reflected on this in the following statement:

Actually that's where my story gets more interesting because I found a two-spirit group. Now, not only had I connected with people who had ethnic similarities and ethnic histories that were similar to mine but also this other part of me, you know, this identity part just as core to me and uh, wow, what a relief. What a life-changing event.

Another participant joined an organization even though she did not have the same racial background of other group members. The participant recalled her experiences and lessons learned through her affiliation in the following remarks:

The National Association of Colored People was strong in the city that I grew up in and they wanted to outreach to all persons of color. There really were no Blacks in my high school. I mean there were two families and both of them were basically military brats and so when the NAACP comes calling and says we want to take you to this luncheon and want me to attend. What they preached was what I heard in church you know give your heart to the Lord and service to man the best you can. One of the things that they taught me was to give to the Lord what was the Lord's. I was taught that you basically need to turn the other cheek, turn the other eye, etc. But in the 70s it was all about standing up for social justice etc. I participated in the NAACP stuff, politics, all sort of student stuff, Indian stuff, etc.

One participant described her involvement in numerous peer groups and the way in which she reveals different aspects of her identity depending on the group. The individuals explained:

I have these people that I go to Sundance with right. And so that's like one group of people and then and then there is the people that I go to Smokehouse with and there are some people that do both but the people that I go to Smokehouse with that's another group of people that is separate from whatever and then like it is just like all these different parts of my life are kept so separate.

One participant was able to find personal success through involvement in peer group activities. Participation in school related activities provided an avenue to connect with others, learn something new, and help this particular individual settle in to her new environment. The participant explained:

I joined a swim team and I was really good at that so I started finding things that I was good at. I sang all through elementary school way up until college so I started getting active in choir and just kind of trying to make the best of being miserable. . . I think probably in high school being in swimming and having not been a part of a group or connected like that and to have a group of girls was nice.

Finally, for one participant, the social isolation of her home environment was contrasted with the importance of involvement in peer activities. The participant remembered, “You know just being a part of a group was good for me I think and I think just because when I was younger I was mostly left to play by myself on the farm and that was just kind of, you know, isolating.”

Societal messages. Three of the participants cited examples of societal messages as influential on their identity formation. One participant described her growing up in “naïve times, dark times, times of racial hatred, and very little acceptance of people who may be different.” Some of the societal messages internalized by this individual were impacted by the portrayal of Native Americans on television. The participant recalled:

This was a time of cowboys and Indians on TV and the Indians were played by Mexicans or White people in dark face and the various types of stereotypical attire. Good guys wore white hats and bad guys wore black hats or feathers.

The participant went on to explain her desire to identify with the White person being portrayed through the media. She recalled:

I wanted to be White because I wanted a coonskin cap and to be Daniel Boone because he was cool, he was the hero, and he had his own theme song. Earlier on I wanted to be Hop-Along Cassidy because he wore a white hat and had a way cool horse. Even though we lived in the city.

The other participant, while not specific, discussed the types of message she received from society and pointed out the fact that the silence on these issues in her room led to some challenges in developing a sense of self. The participant stated:

Just listening to society's messages, which for Native kids is overwhelmingly negative, I think I could have really benefited from more guidance and really just more talking about it so I didn't have to feel so different. I am two-spirit. I am, you know, what the larger society sees as gay. I've known that I was two-spirit since I was a very little boy, probably since I was about four. I knew that there was something about me that was different aside from just the color of my skin. . . Growing up though, we didn't talk about any of this, so I was left to make my own conclusions based on what society told me.

The participant continued to talk about the impact of society and societal messages as conveyed in the following narrative:

I still think that there are horrible things that go on everyday - overt forms of racism - and I just can't look at these stupid teams like the Cleveland Indians. I can't believe that team name and mascot like that even exists and it just grates my nerves to think about the terribly negative messages that it is sending not only to Native kids, but to kids all over the place. That it is okay to characterize a whole entire race of people, to make them into

cartoon caricatures. I really can't think about it too much because it draws me back into this angst that I used to have.

The third participant struggled with figuring out how the societal messages that she heard or was told about Native Americans applied to her understanding of who she was. The participant recalled, "There are some many stereotypes about Indians being drunk and lazy especially in the small town that I grew up in and that is not who I am." The participant described her childhood and young adulthood identity struggles as "trying to reconcile societal stereotypes about being Indian with the reality of who I am."

Reconnection to tribal heritage. For some participants, reconnection to their tribal heritage meant reuniting with their birth parent(s) and extended family members, while for others it meant reconnecting to their tribe even though they had not yet met their birth parent(s) or extended family members. All of the participants spoke of the importance of connecting to their biological past as a way of increasing and expanding their understanding of self through the personal discoveries that were made through the connection to their tribal heritage. In describing the importance of connecting to one's biological past, one participant provided the following insight:

People can connect to the community, people can connect to the spirit, people can connect to the land. . . . They can go there and participate and in salmon ceremonies and Pow Wows. They can go there to be rejuvenated and then go back to the city, to their jobs and know that they are more than just a

worker bee somewhere. . . if they go back to recharge their batteries, to connect with their genetic past, to find and nurture a part within them that says you belong here it will do them a world of good.

When asked to provide advice to potential or current adoptive parents, one participant expounded on the importance of connecting the adopted child to his or her cultural background in the following statement:

I always encourage attending culturally based activities and really trying to connect the child to culture and not to just Native culture in general but to their specific tribal culture. Because without that then you end up like me, a child while incredibly loved and supported and who understood that she was Native but has questions. Even well intentioned people can still miss when raising a Native American child in a non-Native home.

For many of the participants, the yearning to reconnect to a biological past grew during their adolescent and late teenage years. One participant eloquently captures the difficulty of this period of time in the following narrative:

Probably when I turned around the age of 17, 16 or 17. I was very (long pause) I just wanted to know where that other part of me was, where that family was that I came from because obviously I was a freak. I mean by the . . . as a child I felt you

know okay but by the time that I got to high school I uh, it was just hell, I hated it. So it all started boiling over like this pot that had been a nice warm pot as a child even though there was this questioning and slight discomfort but by the time I got to high school I was a raging pot boiling over with angst and what I am and what's going on, and where do I come from and all sorts of stuff and it just strained the relationship with my family (pause) extremely.

One participant recounted the meeting of both her biological mother and her biological father's family as "one of the happiest weekends in my life." The participant went on to say,

It was a heady time. It was wonderful because the message I got over and over from everybody was "Welcome home." And it was something that I had always wanted. And it didn't make me love my adoptive family any less. It just gave me a whole other family to love.

This participant was faced with an unexpected reality when she met her biological mother, this is, her biological mother was White. The participant recalled, with laughter, "It was really neat to go down there and meet them but it was also utterly disturbing you know because I had grown up with such a strong Native identity and my family on that side was White." Despite learning that one side of her

biological family was White, the participant was able to integrate this knowledge into her larger understanding about relationships as portrayed in the following statement:

So it was a real shocker to me but also it was a really great thing for me because it just brings back to me which is really important the idea that we are all just one people, you know. Native schmative, I don't care. We are all just my brothers and sisters anyway and it just kind of reinforced the whole idea for me that we are just people, we are all just one people.

Another participant illustrated her reconnection to her biological family as a life-changing event in that for the first time, this individual felt a connection to her relatives in a way that was not possible in her adoptive family. The participant describes this feeling in the following story:

The very first time that I went home, I went to church with my biological mom. And she went to this little Baptist church on the rez' and we were sitting there and they were praying for people and people were saying stuff and my mom got up and introduced me, "This is my daughter." This is the baby that she gave away. And my grandma got up and she came over to me and she just looked at me. Just this big old Indian lady and she just had tears streaming down her face and she said, "We have been praying for you since the day that you left us." And in that moment it was like that took away a huge piece of the years that

I spent locked in my room feeling lonely. Like the years that I felt that nobody cared. It took a huge, not all of it, but a huge chunk of that away. To have somebody say that we thought about you, we cared about you. Even though you weren't here we prayed for you, we cared about you. That changed something in me. But then when I started doing ceremonies and I went back for a ceremony and they said, "Oh you are the one that we have been waiting for" and there was nothing that felt weird about it. Even though it was a weird experience because it was a different ceremony it didn't feel weird to me. The people that I was with, it was just like "Oh yeah, we have been waiting for you, we knew that you were coming, we knew." So in a spiritual sense they knew and that is where it changed.

In addition to the spiritual connection described above, this participant also talked about the physical connection she was able to make with her biological parents and the significance of that connection. She recalled:

I could look at this woman and see that I had her same eyeballs. And so I could look at her and know that I had this part of her face. When I met my biological father it was like people would look at me and go "Oh yeah, you are definitely part of that family, oh yeah, you can tell you are". . . that feeling of actually having somebody say "You look like somebody" was the start

or touched on the part of that need of having that emptiness filled. And so having that feeling of not just being out in space by myself and not being so alone. For that little second that somebody said that it changed a little bit.

Despite being reunited with her biological family, this participant still struggled with the notion of family and sense of belonging. She stated,

I don't really feel like my mom is my mom, my dad was my dad because he wasn't, they weren't. . . It's almost kind of disconnect you know, like I keep myself at a distance from people a lot. And I don't want them people to get that close to me.

In part, the disconnect stems from the fact that the participant was raised in an environment very different from that of her biological family. The participant explained,

In my biological family I didn't really fit in there because I was so different from them and my values are so different because of simply the fact that I didn't grow up on the reservation with them. It's different and I don't do the things that they do and I didn't ever go drinking with them and didn't go to the bars with them or do any of the things that they do with them. I know this is going to sound self-centered but I know this for a fact that there was a lot of jealousy because I was the only person in my

family who has a college education, um, one of the few that graduated from high school, I didn't have kids, never you know the list goes on and on.

The participant went on to state:

But as far as my family, you know no matter what I did it was always I was too good for them because I had an education, you know I had a sports car when I moved back there. I was there for two days and got a job as a social worker and was getting paid 15 bucks right off the bat and my relatives were still working in the casino for minimum wage. They made fun of me because I was a vegetarian and I took care of myself and I exercised and no matter what I did, according, you know, to them it wasn't good enough or I acted like I was too good for them because I did things differently so they were always criticizing me because I was so different from them. And they assumed certain things and so their expectations of what they thought I should be or whatever didn't fit it to what they wanted me to be.

One participant recalled the story of being welcomed back into her community in the following narrative:

So basically, we had a dinner and sort of whole welcome to the community. One of the things about Native culture and Native society is the positive healing power of food. When you sit

down to grieve, to mourn, to rejoice, to celebrate, it all revolves around a meal. I have been to countless you know and it is truly amazing the healing powers of food. So when we have a dinner up on my reservation and being welcomed back to the family and to the community I mean I felt that I was home.

Similar to the experience of another participant, having a physical connection to someone who looks like you was significant for another participant. She stated:

Growing up not looking like anybody it is so nice to go out in public and have people go “Wow. Oh, are you guys related” because I look so much like them. . . . I have never had anybody say that before.

Interestingly, this individual did not learn that she was Native American until after being reunited with her birth mom in her young adulthood years. As told by the participant, this was a surprising piece of information that was difficult to integrate into her understanding of self at this particular point in her life. The participant explained this in the following narrative:

My parents got one sheet of information that kind of gave um you know, eye color, hair color, weight and all of that. So they had once piece of paper and it said Irish on it. And so you know I had blue eyes, and freckles, and fair skin so I thought okay I am Irish. And then um I met my birth mother when I was 23 (pause) 22. It was 10 years yesterday. Um and I have a very

good relationship with her and she didn't even tell me when we met. She had been enrolled all of her life and her sister and her mom and everybody. And she is still connected with the reservation but she never told me until I started working for the tribe in 2003. And so she told me that I was eligible for enrollment in the tribe and I had no idea what to do with that so I actually didn't pursue it for about two years. I just kind of sat with that information. I had no idea what to do. . . Yeah, now that I am an enrolled tribal member with a completely different history than what I thought. I think the biggest struggle is just wondering what to do with it. You know I tell people and they are like "No you're White," you know. And so there is this huge disconnect between my history, my culture, my birth mom, and her family and the way that people perceive me. So it's like "I am an enrolled tribal member" and people are like "no you're not" and want to argue about it. So I am trying to figure out okay so what do I do with this? Or even like checking the boxes about what is your ethnicity I still check White even though you know (laughter). I think it also has separated me from my adoptive parents because that is one more way that I am different from them and that is kind of a struggle a little bit.

In recounting the story about being reunited with her birth mom, the participant expressed both appreciation for the family in which she was raised as well as a yearning for what could have been if only she had known more about her birth mother. The participant illustrates this in the following narrative:

We are very, very different people. Actually I am very glad that she didn't raise me. Um but just knowing her has changed me. It has given me a lot more understanding of who I am and even why I look the way I look. You know knowing her family and where she came from. She is a very successful woman. Very successful and um just even knowing that um just made me feel different. Like if I had known she is who she is ten years ago I probably could have, you know, done more in my life. You know I could have achieved higher if I would have known where I came from.

Two of the participants have not been reunited with their birth families; however, they have been reconnected to their tribal heritage. One participant describes the importance of this connection in the following remarks:

I think knowing which tribe I am from is helpful because I have been able to find some books and read some stuff about our tribal history and that is good. It helps me feel a little more secure about that part of me.

The participant continued with her story and talked about the possibility of reuniting with birth relatives with some hesitation. She recounted, “What if you find out something about the people who gave birth to you that is just devastating or not what you thought and then you have to somehow figure out how that information fits into who you are.”

Even though this participant has not been reunited with her birth family, the notion of such a reunion has been a part of her thoughts. The participant recounted the fascination with such a connection during her high school years, a critical period of identity formation according to Erikson (1968; 1980), in the following narrative:

I think I was still in high school when I just really wanted to know more about my real family. You know, everyone goes through the stage in life where you are just trying to figure out who you are and where you fit in. I think it is a struggle we all have, not just because I am Indian. There were times at home when my relationship with my parents, especially my mom, was pretty rocky. When I would get mad at her I would just yell "Well, I don't care because you are not my real mom" and stuff like that. . . I had these fantasies that my birth mom was somehow different, that she had a good job in a big city and that she was tall and beautiful. It wasn't like my life was bad or anything, it was that I just would find myself daydreaming about this other person who I knew I was a part of yet knew

nothing about. I secretly hoped that she was curious about me too and would dream up all sorts of crazy ways that we would meet.

The other participant reported that she continues to make strides in reuniting with her birth family. The participant summed up her optimism in reuniting with her biological family in the following,

I remain hopeful and I have just heard from people along that way that I resemble a particular family up there and have even been told to by other people that I look and sound and have the same mannerisms of one particular person so I am confident that they are my people. . . . I know that there are relatives of mine closer than I am even aware of and I know that we will meet when we are supposed to and it will be a wonderful day.

The participant went on to describe her desire to search for her biological family in the following manner:

I think being American Indian has made me want to explore my family of origin. Um and so much of that has to do with the fact that I work in Indian Country and my personal life and professional life have just become inextricably linked. While I can separate it on one aspect there is kind of this piece that needs to be explored. Not for the fact that I am trying to fill a void but that I am looking to add to my already generous circle.

Despite having been reconnected with her biological family, one participant cautioned other transracial adoptees who are preparing to search for their biological roots in the following statement, “Don't go looking for the fantasy. . . don't go looking into it with any expectations because it won't be what you think it is going to be.” Another participant also expressed a more cautionary approach to thinking through the implication of requesting and accessing information related to her adoption. For this participant, the biggest concern was integrating the information about one's biological family into one's existing perception and sense of self. The participant reflected on this in the following way:

It is probably going to be a lifelong quest of mine. I mean it is overwhelming when you think about it because what if you find out something about the people who gave birth to you that is just devastating or not what you thought and then you have to someone figure out how that information fits into who you are.

Most of study participants described frustrations along their journey of gaining access to information related to their adoption. One participant recounted the following story about her efforts to access records:

I did some research and came to the conclusion that only a judge, and they might have informed me of that in there too, but only a judge could open my records because it is sealed. So

I wrote the judge a very nice, a very eloquent letter about why I want my records unsealed and the judge wrote back and said no. So I was kind of like at this roadblock. I didn't know what else to do, you know? So I did some more research throughout college and um still was butting up against dead ends.

Another participant summed up her experiences in trying to access adoption-related information in the following statement, "Basically it took me awhile to put the paperwork together." Two participants expressed disappointment in the depth of non-identifying information that they had requested and received from the respective adoption agencies that handled their adoptions. One participant stated, "All I do know is that my biological mother was adopted by Lebanese people. You just don't get a lot of information when you are adopted." The other recounted the following:

On some of the paperwork that I have the adoption agency has some information about my birth mom and her family but not very much. It is really pretty general and not very well written. They didn't have any information about who my dad was but some of the papers that my mom and dad had said that my mom was Indian.

Finally, one participant summarized her philosophies related to access to adoption-related information with great emotion in the following manner:

There are just so many barriers for people who are adopted to learn about where they come from. . . it is just really frustrating

and sometimes makes me really mad. Like just trying to get your original birth certificate or even just basic health information is so difficult. I don't understand why adoptees can't have that information. Keeping that information secret or hidden creates so many problems for other adoptees I have spoken with. It's like you know who you are in relationship to the family that you grew up in but have no idea of so many other aspects of who you. It is really hard to explain this feeling of loss and emptiness that at times can become so pervasive. People who aren't adopted just don't understand that disconnectedness and feeling of trying to find out why you are who you are sometimes and not really being able to get too far down the path because someone who you don't even know tells you that you can't have the information. Why can complete strangers have access to my birth records but I can't. It is quite puzzling and just wrong.

Sense of Self

Throughout the life story interviews, participants provided insights into how they integrated their adoptive experiences into their self-identity as they spoke about the different contextual influences they encountered as well as how they answered questions tailored to gain a deeper understanding of identity formation. In the telling of their adoptive stories, participants eloquently summarized their experiences and processes

related to the formation of their identities in the following narratives. One participant illustrated her view of identity formation in the following statements:

I am so at peace at where I have come from and my identity now like I have almost stopped working on it. I worked on it for so long and throughout all my life. It's like I am finally, I am finally to the point where I, even though I identify as Native and that has always been my strongest ethnic identifier, it's like I identify as a human, you know, first. And I even, I step back out of the nationality, out of male, out of female, I am just a human. We are all living this experience; this experience of sadness and happiness, ecstasy and pain - we all have curiosities, it's not unique to a Native, it's not unique to being male or female and then I am so comfortable with that. Sometimes I think that just getting to the point of recognizing in the end we are all just one. We are all one.

Another participant reflected positively on her understanding of self in the following statement, "I feel that I am finally coming fully into my own skin, I know who I am, and I love who I am and I am a very expressive person with my emotions."

Two participants described feeling "different" as a result of how they were perceived and treated by their respective adoptive families. One participant summarized her experiences in the following narrative:

Being adopted for me always meant that I was special and that I was so wanted. I mean that is probably the one word that best describes my experiences. I am and always have been special. How that gets interpreted over time and integrated into who I am I don't know, it makes me feel different. . . . Although when you hear that enough times you really make that a part of who you are.

The other participant recounted, "To me it is just like, 'Okay you are just a little different.' I think that's what it boils down to, what it means to be adopted."

Finally, one participant reflected on her life as a transracial adoptee in a positive manner as she stated:

I feel blessed because for me it means that somebody loved me enough to have me and that there were other people that were excited and you know opened their home to me too. And I don't know, it's a blessing for sure. You know, I know that I definitely had a very good experience and not everyone can say the same thing. I think that my upbringing has allowed me to do the kind of work that I do. I think that given, you know, if I had ended up somewhere else or whatever, I may not be here now.

In addition to the narratives portrayed above, four themes emerged from the data that provide a deeper understanding of how the transracial adoptees that participated in this study have integrated their unique experiences into their sense of

self. The themes are self-esteem, sense of belonging, sense of physical self, and sense of loss. Definitions used during the analytical process for each of the thematic areas are provided prior to the presentation of findings within a specific theme.

Self-esteem. Three of the participants commented on their levels of self-esteem as it related to their sense of self. Self-esteem was defined as a feeling of confidence in one's self. One participant described how she was instilled with a low self-esteem as a result of how she was treated by her adoptive parents. The way in which she was treated caused her to internalize negative feelings of self-worth. The participant illustrates this in the following narrative:

That being who I was wasn't good enough. That things had to be kept a secret. That showing any kind of emotion to a certain extent was not okay. That (pause) like everything they could possibly say to me that would belittle me and make me feel like crap they did. So I never felt like anything I ever did was good enough or gonna be good enough. Feeling like I was a failure. Feeling like I was (pause) just not good enough for anything. . . . To not have told me that the things I did wrong was because I was Native. Because like I said earlier, that was always the excuse. It was always because I was adopted or because I was Indian and that is why this happened. So it created a double thing for me. It was like okay this is who I am but it is bad.

Who I am is bad because this is the way that God made me and they are telling me that I am bad and so I suck.

In contrast, the other two participants recounted being instilled with positive self-esteem that has been integrated into their sense of self. One participant described her understanding of self-esteem as both a product of one's self as well as one's environment as reflected in the following statement:

I mean overall I have a really strong self-esteem. . . That self-esteem and self-confidence, you know, I think it starts with the individual but then it is really fostered, developed, and fertilized by just the safety of like having a loving and accepting home environment.

The other participant recalled how her adoptive parents influenced her self-esteem in the following comment:

I would have to say because of how my parents instilled self-esteem and you know pride in who we were as individuals. I grew up knowing that I was American Indian, and they taught me to be very proud of that.

Despite having a strong self-esteem, this individual still questioned the level of confidence she has in her self as a result of her adoptive status. The individual stated:

I think that no matter what you do as far as trying to instill pride within somebody, inherently there is going to be some questions in the back of your mind . . . even though I was given

all of the love and support and pride in who I was as an American Indian, it still doesn't set aside the fact that I still don't know who my relatives are and granted that really became a challenge for me when I began to work in Indian Country. I still think that would have existed in a completely different profession. I still think that you would have those issues.

Sense of belonging. All of the participants talked about the notion of belonging when describing their adoptive experiences. For purposes of this analysis, the concept of sense of belonging was defined broadly as feeling a part of or having an intimate relationship with one's adoptive family. One participant described this notion as a tremendous challenge in the following statement:

There are broad challenges like having a sense of belonging. That's probably the biggest one. That sense of course, "This is where I come from, this is my family," and just being able to say that with a firm belief that you know that is not where you come from and if you don't know your biological family, then you kind of it is almost like I would feel lost.

Another participant struggled in finding words to describe her feelings of disconnect with her adoptive family. The participant stated:

I can't describe it. There are just no words for it . . . I wouldn't even know how to put that into a picture or anything . . . I mean

you can say like you know that I feel empty or I feel hollow or whatever but it's more than that. It is way more than that and it goes a lot deeper than that. . . . Yeah, there is no other explanation for it because no matter what, no matter where I was in my life I never fit in to anything. Because I mean like from the beginning of my life that is how it was. . . I mean as far back as I can remember, I remember that. Not belonging. And I knew that because like just in my heart and in my mind I knew that I just didn't belong there.

One participant, even though feeling a part of the adoptive family she was raised in, still expressed not feeling fully connected to her adoptive family because of not knowing where she came from. The participant reflected on this feeling of belonging in the following:

Even though I was adopted, I did feel like I was just part of the family . . . It's like you know who you are in relationship to the family that you grew up in but have no idea of so many other aspects of who you. It is really hard to explain this feeling of loss and emptiness that at times can become so pervasive. People who aren't adopted just don't understand that disconnectedness.

The participant also portrayed her feeling of belonging and the struggles with this concept in the following story from her childhood:

We had to make family history trees in one of my classes like in the 4th grade and um I remember that it was really hard for me because I didn't know who my real family was. I mean I knew about my adopted family but because I knew that I was adopted I remember thinking that there were this other people out there too and that I um was a part of this family that I didn't really know anything about. It was probably one of the first times that I really began to feel different from all of my friends. They had such neat stories to tell about their grandparents and great grandparents and knew these long histories of where people came from. I remember just feeling awkward and sad and maybe like I just didn't belong. I mean I knew I was part of a family but also knew that it wasn't my real family so I just felt like I was sort of fake, like the stuff I put together and shared with the class just wasn't real. I think I was confused because for me it might have been the first time that I really thought a lot about these different families that I came from and then I think trying to tell your family story . . . that was just hard to think about at that age.

Another participant reflected on her sense of belonging in her adoptive family by relating a story of how she feels as an adult when she attends family gathering. She

described the “emptiness of not having that kind of attachment with anybody” in the following manner:

I didn't grow up with these people. I lived overseas. So I didn't go through pretty important life events with them. So when I moved here when I was 13 I had to get to know my family. And they always like went camping together and went to the ocean together and shared holidays together and did so many things that I never got to be a part of. So even now when I have family gatherings it is like everybody sticks together and I am off playing with my kids. It's happy. I mean. We are a happy family. It is just that I have always felt different.

One participant framed the sense of belonging felt by an adoptee in more broad terms and as a consequence of one's adoptive status. In part, this participant felt that adoptees can choose to embark on an added life journey in attempts to gain a fuller understanding of who they are and where they come from. The participant explained this in the following remarks:

I want to say the disadvantage of adoption is that you are disconnected. You then have a personal journey to attend to. Some people make it and some people don't. But like I said that becomes their choice. Whereas if you are raised on the reservation you are who you are, you are who your grandparents say you are and you almost have no choice whatsoever.

Unlike the experiences that participants described of not fully experiencing a sense of belonging in their respective adoptive families, one participant recalled a story that illustrates how she felt fully a part of her adoptive family. The participant recalled:

I grew up with one brother and one sister my whole life. It was funny like, it was 4 or 5 years ago we were at a family reunion or something and we were talking about the process of giving birth and our mom was there. He was like, “How was it for your first child, how was it giving birth to [name of participant]?” He was like 25 or 26 years old and he totally spaced that I was adopted. And then like our mom was like, “Well [name of participant] was adopted remember?” He was like “I totally forgot”. . . . You know the more and more people that I meet and especially out here I have been working with a lot of Native people, I am just really astonished like at how you know like how unusual, like how unusually positive my experience has been.

Sense of physical self. For adoptees in general, understanding one’s physical sense of self can be difficult absent any connection to one’s biological past. This can be further complicated for transracial adoptees who are raised in homes or communities where there are few, if any, individuals who share similar physical characteristics. Five participants made comments about their physical appearances and

how, by virtue of their physical appearances, they felt that they were “different” or did not fit in. One participant expressed feeling different as a child and pondered about the possibility of what changing her physical appearance would have meant by stating, “I was different, being Indian made me different and I didn't want to be different and I was like, gee I can't change my looks. But if I could have?”

Another participant recounted a story of traveling overseas to participate in missionary work and how she felt that this opportunity would allow her to “finally go somewhere where I am not going to feel left out.” Unfortunately, this was not the case as people thought she was Asian. The participant recalled, “I am in another country and I don't really fit in here either, so yeah, that's great.”

One participant contrasted her appearance with that of her adoptive family and how this impacted her. The participant explained:

I just looked nothing like either my mom or dad or brother for that matter. I was tall, skinny, really gangly growing up with jet black hair and really dark eyes and skin compared to my family. They were pretty fair-skinned. By our looks alone, it was clear that I did belong in this family, that I came from somewhere else but no one really made a big deal of it other than reminding me of how special I was.

Another participant described a deep yearning to have a physical connection to someone in the following remarks:

I wanted so much to look like someone, to be a part of something. I wanted the emptiness I felt to be filled, if only to look like someone. I did not want people to look at me and wonder why I was with this family.

Finally, one participant described her differences in physical appearance by stating, "Just being adopted I don't look like my family, I don't look like my parents. I have freckles and just don't resemble them at all obviously because I am not related to them." For this participant, who has been reunited with her birth mother, having a physical connection to someone has been a positive experience, "I was going to say growing up not looking like anybody it is so nice to go out in public and have people go 'Wow. Oh, are you guys related?' because I look so much like them."

Sense of loss. For one participant, the concept of loss was used to describe how the individual integrated her adoptive status into understanding her sense of self. For this participant, the feelings of loss and loneliness were apparent in both her adoptive family as well as biological family. The participant framed her feelings in the following way:

And the only thing that comes to mind is the word, loss. Like loss of everything. I mean who you are, where you come from, your family. And even though I have found my family, it still doesn't feel like it because they are not there. Because everyone that is supposed to be my family is so completely lost. . . And more than any feeling that I ever feel, more than fear, more

than love, more than whatever, the feeling of being alone and being lonely is the most intense feeling that I have 24/7. And I don't know that that will ever change. It might not be as intense at some point but I don't remember it ever not being because it has always been the way it is now.

Another participant reflected on the losses she felt as a result of being adopted as a pervasive feeling that remains within her despite having been raised in a loving and supportive adoptive family. For her, there is a sense of longing for a biological connection that is intergenerational in nature. She describes her feelings in the following narrative:

There is going to be certain things about that child that it is in their DNA. No matter what you do, no matter what you provide for that kid it's never going to go away. They are of another culture, they are built different, their DNA is different. There is always going to be something that is in them that is going to be different that is going to want to um, know who they are, especially if they are adopted. Being adopted compounds the cultural stuff and they are going to want to know who they are and knowing who they are definitely goes back to where their culture is. That's something that you cannot hide from them, no matter what. No matter how hard you try you know do whatever to give them the best you can, it's not

going to be enough. Just by thinking that you can love a child, it's not ever going to be enough for a child who is adopted. Once a child experiences that loss and that trauma, no matter how old they are, it's always in them I think.

Statement on Identity Formation

Toward the end of each of the life story interviews, participants were asked to respond to the statement:

There are some people who think that transracial adoption does not affect a person's ability to develop a strong racial identity and that children who were transracially adopted do not experience many problems as a result of their adoption.

The following narratives reflect the mixed responses of the participants. The first response provided a recognition that a transracial adoptee can develop a racial identity, but not without some challenges along the way given that a transracial adoptee is not raised within her own culture. The participant stated:

I think that you can develop a strong sense of identity but there are problems getting there. You are roughly not exposed to that from people who have been through it themselves. . . you are probably not being exposed from the time that you were born to people that have been through the same thing that you are going to go through. So to have that kind of outside perspective. The perspective forced upon you from the outside So, yes, you can

still develop your sense of identity. It's just there will be bumps getting there along the road. I am sure of it. And those problems caused by that and the problems caused by you being different, looking different, perceived as different, are going to cause trouble there are going to cause you know, it's not going to be smooth sailing. So that second part of that statement I also think is true. Like there is not going to be any problems. No. There are going to be problems. Doesn't mean they can't be overcome. Doesn't mean you can't belong to a loving family. Doesn't mean that it can't work out wonderfully in the end. It's like climbing a mountain. Maybe it will be an easy walk or maybe it will be a tough hike. If you want to get to the top, you are going to have to face that fact that you are going to have to have special equipment (other people's perspectives), that you are going to have special training (exposure to different backgrounds and experiences), and that it's not going to be like roller skating to the top (if only life were that easy!).

Another participant provided an optimistic response to this statement and in doing so, recognized the importance of both inner characteristics as well as environmental contexts. The participant responded:

I believe if you were given the right tools you become a productive member of society. That does not necessarily mean

become White, look White, etc. But it means that the tools that you need to have is belief in your self and other people believing in you. Having a social network in which people love you unconditionally. I want to say a friend will help you move, a best friend will help you move a body and if you have people who will help you move a body then you can move society and the body that you may have to move may be your own. Because you have to get beyond hate, you have to get into a place where you are not dependent upon what other people think.

Three participants reacted negatively to this statement. The first participant responded:

I disagree with that completely. I don't even know how to explain it. I mean I can feel it and I understand because I have lived it but it is hard to explain to people that once you are taken away from the people you are genetically connected to you have no idea who you are. And you know you may be great, you may be given every opportunity in the world and be raised in a wonderful, loving, happy family but you always know that you are different. There is this wonder about, you know, where did I come from and who I am capable of being based on that. I don't know if I am explaining it very well but no, I completely disagree with that. I think that anybody who is raised by

somebody who is not your family, you know who is a different race and culture, that affects who you are and your identity. The way that you were raised by other people, you are always questioning do I fit in here, do I fit in there?

In her response, the second participant acknowledged the role of her adoptive parents and their good intentions while also describing the piece of her that her parents were not able to connect her to. The participant stated:

Bullshit. Of course kids that are transracially adopted are going to have identity issues. I totally disagree with that statement. Wholly. The most well-intentioned people who may do and want the best and love their child doesn't mean that piece the cultural piece for that child will be there. As I stood in that circle going through the ceremony my parents stood behind me and I think they were just as emotionally moved but I think in a different way because they knew that this was the one thing that they could never do for me. They could love me to the end of the earth but they could never give this to me. So it doesn't matter how much love you give a child, you can't provide them with that culture identity.

Finally, the third participant who responded negatively to this statement expressed her concern for transracial adoptees' ability to develop a strong racial

identity and connected this concern to the ability of the individual's adoptive family to recognize the adoptee's uniqueness as an individual. The participant responded:

I think that people who think that way are like my adoptive parents. They are ignorant and so small minded that they don't want that person to be their own person. They want them to be who they are trying to make be. And to say that because we adopted you and whatever happened to you before means nothing to us so it cannot mean anything to you. It's like you are not really accepting that person for who they are. Like you are not just letting them be who they need to be because you are telling them that where they began doesn't mean crap.

One participant responded in a neutral manner as she reflected on her adoptive experiences. She stated:

I wouldn't say that I had many problems that were about me being adopted, some of the struggles I have had are more just about going through life. You know, would I stand up today and say that I am proud of who I am? Yes I would. But, I am many things, and being Indian is just a piece of me that I am still learning about. I think I am lucky because I grew up in family that really loved and cared for me, and that I grew up in a pretty sheltered and protected environment. I mean, I know that I am part Indian and I like that even if I don't fully understand what

that really means yet. It makes me feel connected to something larger. I think growing up in a different family, like a White family meant that I took on some of the characteristics and history of that family. It can be confusing, especially during your teenage years when things are awkward enough just trying to put these pieces together to help understand who you are. It is hard when you are adopted because there are so many holes and what happens is that you begin to create your own stories or fantasies to fill in some of those information gaps.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The main purpose of this study was two-fold. First, it explored the contextual factors that have influenced the experiences and identity formation of a small number of transracially adopted Native American adults throughout their lifespan. Second, it aimed to gain a deeper understanding of how these individuals have integrated their adoption experiences into their evolving sense of self. Compared to past empirical studies examining identity development and psychological adjustment of transracial adoptees, this study attempted to provide a richer and more in-depth understanding of the unique adoptive experiences of transracially adopted Native American adults over the course of their lifespan.

While a number of identity formation theories and racial/ethnic identity theories and models for adoption identity development were presented and reviewed to help guide the development of the study (Cross, 1991; Erikson, 1968, 1980; Grotevant, 1987, 1997b Grotevant, et al., 2000; Marcia, 1966, 2002; Mihesuah, 1998; Phinney, 1989, 1990), no single specific theory or model was used in the discussion of findings. Rather, pieces of the various theories and models were used to help guide the reporting of findings and subsequent discussion of findings. Existing theories and models were beneficial in helping to establish a framework by which participant experiences could be understood and reported in the context of their evolving identities.

Life story methods were used to gain a subjective understanding of the participants' unique adoptive experiences. The interviews were guided by a core set of

questions, however; they were participant-driven. Allowing participants to shape the telling of their own personal adoption story yielded a deeper understanding of different aspects of each participant's life story. This chapter provides a critique of the strengths and limitations of the study, a discussion of the findings, practice implications for transracial adoptees and adoptive parents, policy implications as they relate to open records for adoptees, and suggestions for future research involving transracially-adopted Native American adults, as well as voices from their tribal communities and biological family members. The chapter concludes with a brief synopsis of the researcher's reflections on the study.

Strengths and Limitations

The use of life story methods to gather qualitative information had inherent strengths and limitations. One of the greatest strengths of this study was the explicit focus on a sample of Native American adults that were transracially adopted. Existing research on transracial adoption is primarily focused on African American children and adolescents (Brooks & Barth, 1999; Feigelman, 2000; McRoy, et al., 1982, 1984; Shireman & Johnson, 1975, 1980, 1986; Simon & Alstein, 1984, 1987; Vroegh, 1997). While some researchers have included a small number of Native American transracial adoptees in their samples (Simon & Alstein, 1984, 1987; Weinberg, Waldman, van Dulman, & Scarr, 2004), few studies have focused exclusively on Native American transracial adoptees (Fanshel, 1972; Bagley, 1991; Locust, 2000; Peterson, 2002; Rosene, 1985; Westermeyer, 1979;).

The limited sample size used in this study provided an opportunity for an in-depth exploration of the lives of seven Native American adults that were transracially adopted. The small sample size allowed the researcher to spend significant amounts of time with each participant building trust and rapport prior to conducting the life story interviews as well as actually conducting the interviews. In addition, it provided opportunities for the research participants to actively engage in the research process by reviewing and providing input into various products of the research (e.g., transcriptions, coding schema, draft findings, and the draft final dissertation). Engaging participants throughout the research process and actively seeking their review, feedback, and approval helped ensure that their unique stories were fairly and accurately represented, thus helping to establish an authentic representation of the adoptees' lived experiences.

Further, this qualitative study empowered a population of transracial adoptees that has, in general, been left out of transracial adoption-related studies to date, to share their personal adoption stories. According to Patel (2005), the use of life story methods empowers individuals by providing them with an opportunity to tell their own stories. Through ongoing involvement and engagement in the research process, participants had opportunities for continual input and refinement of their adoptive story. Through the telling and re-telling of their adoptive stories, participants gained a deeper understanding of their sense of self and sense of belonging in a larger context.

This study was unique in that it used a life story approach to examine the contextual factors that have influenced identity development from the perspective of

transracially adopted Native American adults. To date, many of the studies examining identity formation among transracial adoptees were conducted during adoptees' adolescent years, a time in which, according to Erikson (1968), an individual's identity is still under development and testing. By focusing on an adult population of transracial adoptees, the study was able to gather information related to the evolution of one's identity development over time to help understand the interplay and interdependencies of multiple contextual factors. It explored identity formation and related issues post-adolescence, when aspects of identity have been more fully explored and integrated into one's sense of self. However, unlike previous research examining identity formation among transracial adoptees (Andujo, 1988; Bagley, 1991; Brooks & Barth, 1999; Hollingsworth, 1997; Locust, 2000; McRoy, et al., 1982, 1984; Peterson, 2002; Shireman, 1988; Shireman & Johnson, 1975, 1980, 1986; Vroegh, 1997), this study did not define the construct of identity nor did it use empirically-based, standardized measures to capture data related to identity formation or measure the strength of one's racial/ethnic identity.

Despite these strengths, the study is not without its limitations. For example, the small sample size used in this study makes it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the findings as they relate to other Native American transracial adoptees. The recruitment strategies used in this study may have resulted in more "professionals" in the sample as individuals were largely recruited through existing Native American organizations, networks, and/or tribal communities. In addition, the sample resulted in five female and two males participants, thus making it difficult to

ascertain the impact of gender differences on identity exploration and formation. Further, the recruitment strategies resulted in a sample of individuals who had chosen to be reconnected with their tribal heritage and/or birth families. Adoptees are not a homogenous group and their unique cultural and environmental contexts must be taken into consideration when interpreting findings related to their experiences.

Further, while there were common themes that emerged across the life stories, each story was unique and the subtleness of each participant's experiences may have been lost in the aggregate representation of findings. A decision was made by the researcher to present the findings as an aggregate response to the research questions rather than in an individualized fashion. This was done to maintain commitments to research participants to safeguard their anonymity and confidentiality. In doing so, the researcher attempted to provide a thick description of the information gathered through the interviews that pertained to the overarching research questions. By providing such descriptions, others who are interested in transracially adopted Native American adoptees can determine the degree to which the findings are transferable to similar or other populations of transracial adoptees.

Second, the study was designed to gather information from participants about their thoughts and feelings in relation to the influences of various contextual factors on their identity development. Questions were not asked of participants that would lead to an understanding of how the participants influenced their various contextual environments. While this provided an opportunity to gain a rich understanding of the various contextual factors that both positively and negatively

impacted participants' over the course of their life, it did not provide an opportunity to gain insights into how the participants may have impacted the various contexts in which they interacted.

Third, one critique of the use of life story methods presented in the literature is that the approach provides a retrospective account of a participant's life (Yow, 1994). Throughout the interviews, the participants provided narrative descriptions of childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, and adulthood experiences. Such stories were told through the lens of their subjective reality at the time of the interview and represent a version of their truth, a version that is bounded by time. Despite this limitation, Atkinson (2002) argues, "if we want to know the unique perspective of an individual, there is no better way to get this than in that person's own voice" (p. 124). While retrospective in nature, the narratives provide a rich and detailed account of the participants' adoptive experiences and an understanding of how these experiences may have influenced their understanding and sense of self in the present day.

There are a number of methodological challenges worth noting that arose from the use of life story approaches to gather in-depth information from research participants in this study. These challenges included: 1) the amount of time required on behalf of the research participants to complete the interviews and remain engaged throughout the research process; 2) the amount of time it took to establish an honest, genuine, respectful, and safe relationship between the researcher and participants that allowed the participants to disclose personal information about their lives; and 3) the

considerable volume of data that was generated in terms of audio recording as well as the transcribed interviews.

Further, the use of life story methodologies can be highly emotional in nature as participants recount events from their past as well as how they describe the impact of such events on their lives. While there were no adverse reactions experienced by the study participants, researchers using this methodology should be aware of this and have necessary response mechanisms in place to help safeguard the emotional and psychological health and well-being of participants. In this study, techniques such as interview debriefing, researcher acknowledgement of the participants' emotional reactions to their narratives, and resource lists of community-based providers that offered mental health services were made available, upon request, for participants who desired to talk with someone further about their thoughts and feelings related to the sharing of their adoptive experiences.

Discussion of Findings

Previous writings on identity formation support the notion that the nature of identity development is highly relational and interdependent across multiple contexts (Cross, 1991; Erickson, 1968, 1980; Grotevant, 1987, 1997b; Grotevant, et al., 2000; Marcia, 1966, 2002; Mihesuah, 1998; Phinney 1989; 1990). Findings from this study suggest there are a variety of contextual factors that influenced identity development among Native American adults that were transracially adopted. Twelve such factors were identified in this study. These contextual factors had different levels of influence across the participants' lifespans. Acknowledgment of the importance and level of

influence of various psychosocial contexts on the overall adjustment and identity formation of transracial adoptees is stressed by others who have conducted research with transracial adoptees (Feigelman, 2000; McRoy, et al., 1982, 1984).

Given the number of contextual influences on identity formation uncovered by the life story interviews, one may speculate that there are factors other than the racial and cultural differences between a transracial adoptee and her adoptive family that contribute to the psychological and behavioral adjustment of transracial adoptees as well as their ability to form a strong racial/cultural identity. Findings from previous research (McRoy, et al., 1982, 1984) emphasize the important influence that an individual's psychosocial environment has on the identity development of a transracial adoptee. One of the complexities in understanding identity formation that became apparent through the life stories interviews was the interdependence of different contextual and social influences impacting identity formation at different points in time in the participants' lives.

For instance, during one's early childhood years, participants' adoptive family members and other authority figures such as school personnel or religious instructors were influential whereas friendships, community, involvement in peer groups, place of employment, and societal messages became more influential during participants' adolescent and early adulthood years. This is commonly found in human development theories in general.

It is difficult to compartmentalize and understand identity development across the contextual factors identified in this study because the construction of a meaningful

sense of self does not occur categorically, rather it occurs within the totality of one's life experiences (Erikson, 1968, 1980). For these participants, the contextual influences identified through the life story interviews did not occur in isolation from one another. For example, participants' experiences and the integration of those experiences into their developing sense of self were likely shaped by multiple contextual influences at given points in their lifecycle. Patton (2000) argues, "the human construction of a meaningful sense of self is rarely played out in such simple, neatly divided categories" (p. 11). The interdependence of the contextual factors was evident in this study in the way participants reconstructed past life events through the telling of their adoptive stories.

For example, one participant recounted childhood experiences in the educational system and in telling this story also described the role of her parents in reacting to the described school-related events. This was further complicated by the description of the community environment in which the individual was raised and the impact of being raised in that particular community. Another example occurred when a participant described the mixed messages she received about being a Native American from the various people influencing her life at a specific period of time. Being the recipient of mixed messages led to identity confusion and mixed allegiances, depending on her environment. Interestingly, Grotevant (1987), in describing his Process Model of Identity Formation, discussed similar interdependencies between contextual factors impacting identity formation as those that were illuminated through this study.

With the exception of one participant, the ongoing role and importance of relationships with adoptive family members was illustrated through the participants' narratives. The majority of participants described adoptive families that offered an appropriate combination of love, support, and understanding that allowed them to develop a sense of belonging within their respective adoptive families. Family members had influential roles in teaching participants core values and how to appreciate differences among people as well as in providing participants with some foundational tools that helped them to deal with prejudicial treatment or acts of racism. For many of the participants, adoptive family members provided a source of strength and an avenue for building resiliency. In addition, two participants found strength in the fact they were "wanted" by their adoptive families.

While all of the participants learned that they were adopted at an early age, there were differences in the ages that they learned they were Native American. The majority of adoptive parents did not place a lot of attention on the fact that individuals were Native American, rather they put a greater emphasis on their adopted status. Interestingly, Bagley (1991) found that transracially adopted First Nations adolescents with significant identity issues were split between adoptive families "who ignored identity issues and those who tried to emphasize Native identity" (p. 75). It is unclear the degree to which familial recognition of Native American status influenced identity formation among the study participants. Some participants took on the identity of their adoptive family, others were more questioning about their "differentness", and one constantly struggled with not fitting in with her adoptive family members.

The influence of one's community environment has been explored by others conducting research involving transracial adoptees (Brooks & Barth, 1999; McRoy, et al., 1982, 1984; Simon & Alstein, 1984). Feigelman (2002) found that transracial adoptees that were primarily raised in White communities were more likely than transracial adoptees that were raised in mixed racial or ethnic communities to express discomfort with their physical appearance. None of the participants involved in study were raised in Native American communities; rather, they were raised primarily in White communities with few other racial or ethnic minorities present. Only a few of the participants made specific reference to their feelings of "differentness" in relation to their physical appearances when compared to their family or community environments.

Unfortunately, the majority of participants reported first-hand experiences with racism or being the recipient of prejudicial comments within the context of their own family or community; however, the degree of racism the participants encountered varied. This finding supports the work of previous authors who have reported transracial adoptees' experiences with racism within family or community settings. (Bagley, 1991; Brooks & Barth, 1999; Feigelman, 2002; Locust, 1999, 2000; Rosene, 1985; Simon & Hernandez, 2008).

One interesting finding from this study was the influential role of religious institutions on identity formation. For example, one participant vividly described early childhood experiences where she repeatedly heard derogatory statements about Native American people based on the teachings of her religion. For years, this individual

struggled in trying to reconcile the message she received through church functions with other, more positive messages she was receiving from adoptive family members and other sources about her race. As a young adult, this individual went on to participate in missionary work in a foreign country and this work completely transformed her sense of self. For the first time in her life, this individual was interacting with other people who shared similarities in physical appearances. Through her missionary work, this individual really began exploring identity issues and challenging some of the notions that she had learned about Native American people when she was younger.

Another individual reported their involvement in religious activities was perceived as an opportunity for her adoptive parents to demonstrate to their congregation their own values as a Christian by adopting a child of another race. Unfortunately, there was great discrepancy between the outward appearances and treatment of the individual while in a public setting and the treatment she received at home. During her adolescent years, this individual used opportunities to participate in church activities (e.g., church camp, study groups, and missionary work) to escape from her life with her adoptive parents. While she was still the recipient of racist comments in these settings, such functions afforded an opportunity for her to interact with other minority youth because the activities attracted participants from other geographic areas.

Other study participants made several positive comments about the role and influence of participation in organized religion on their core sense of self. For some,

participation in religious activities offered opportunities to learn important morals and values. For others, such participation led to the learning of tolerance of others who are different. The level of engagement in religious activities and role of religion has varied across each participant's lifespan.

Employment was another contextual factor that, as adults, was highly influential on identity development and understanding among the participants. All but one of the participants were either currently employed working in Indian Country in positions that provided services to and for tribal communities or was previously employed in such a position. While this may be an artifact of the recruitment strategy and the limited sample size it is worth noting because of the emphasis participants placed on the level of importance to them of working in Indian Country.

For some of the participants, the importance of giving back to their tribal community was important and the significance of such work was made apparent through their narratives about why they had chosen a career working in Indian Country. For others, there were mutual benefits of such careers in that the participants were able to reconnect with their biological cultures or traditions, develop a strong network of support, and gain access to information that helped in their personal journey of self-discovery while at the same time contributing their knowledge, skills, and abilities. One participant described the catalytic impact of her work in Indian County as it has led her down a path of recognizing and learning more about her tribal heritage. These findings are similar to the stories told by other Native American

transracial adoptees (Simon & Hernandez, 2008) that also emphasized the personal and professional gains of working in Indian Country.

As study participants began to explore their cultural heritages and develop a stronger Native American identity, many began participating in a wider variety of community-based culturally specific activities and organizations and began engaging with their respective tribal communities in various manners. Exploration of and immersion in one's culture of origin is a common characteristic of racial identity theories (Cross, 1991; Mihesuah, 1998; Phinney, 1990). Pathways to identity development that are similar to those described earlier in this document began to emerge in the narratives provided by the participants.

For example, the four-stage ethnic identity model proposed by Mihesuah (1991), was particularly evident in the narrative of one participant. During the pre-encounter stage, this individual was aware of her status as a Native American; however, she did not know anything about her particular tribe. During this stage, the individual was provided opportunities through different contextual factors to learn about Native Americans in a broad sense. As this individual reached her later adolescent years, she experienced high levels of stress in the relationships with her adoptive parents and left home in search of locating her birth family. Strained relationships at home were a significant catalyst for this individual to learn more about her Native American heritage. Another key event for this individual occurred when she moved away to attend college and, early in her post-secondary endeavors, was contacted by a Native American student group. Through involvement with this group,

she was connected to other Native American students who shared many similar beliefs, experiences, and feelings. Involvement in the Native American student group activities also provided her with opportunities to immerse herself in learning about and experiencing a variety of tribal foods, customs, and teachings.

During the immersion-emersion stage, the individual became active in Native American causes, was integrally involved in organizing campus Pow Wows and other Native American events, founded a Native American organization, and became highly motivated to search for her biological roots, a search that eventually resulted in reconnecting with birth family members. The individual passed through this stage of development and has achieved a true sense of inner peace, confidence, and security in the multi-faceted dimensions of her identity.

The finding of increased cultural involvement and connection associated with a stronger racial identity is similar to that of other research findings that suggest, “transracial adoptees may become more comfortable with people from their own racial group when they have gained more knowledge of, awareness of, competence for, and comfort with their culture of origin” (Baden, 2002, p. 186). Peterson (2002) also found that “upon discovering and embracing their cultural heritage, the pendulum swings to where participants identified largely with their Indian heritage, suggesting an immersion phase of identity development” (p. 82). Participants involved in this study exhibited varying degrees of involvement in cultural activities. For some, it was a vital connection to their biological self that helped to nourish their understanding and sense

of self as a Native American. For others, such activities provided an avenue to learn more about this aspect of their being.

The degree to which the study participants developed and attained a secure racial identity was not directly measured in this study; however, all of the participants self-identified as Native American, and the majority identified as a member of a specific tribe. All but one of the participants felt secure with their identity as a Native American, in part because she did not learn she was a Native American until she was a young adult and had already developed a strong identity as a Caucasian. Brooks and Barth (1999) reported that all of the transracial adoptees included in their study were classified as having secure ethnic identities. In contrast, Hollingsworth (1997) found that transracial adoptees had lower levels of racial identity as compared to inracial adoptees. Other authors have found that African American children that were transracially adopted experience some degree of difficulty with their racial identity (Andujo, 1998; de Haymes & Simon, 2003; McRoy et al., 1984).

Even though many of the participants felt secure about their identity as a Native American, they still yearned to learn more about their specific tribal culture. This finding is similar to that found in stories told by other Native American transracial adoptees (Simon & Hernandez, 2008) who described their journeys of understanding and learning about their tribal cultures, histories, and traditions. For many, their biological families played a significant role in their learning processes (Simon & Hernandez, 2008).

The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2008) offers a realistic outlook on the adjustment and identity development of transracial adoptees in the following statement:

Many transracially adopted individuals become highly competent in matters of race and successfully negotiate regarding their racial identity . . . others deal with moderate difficulties that they are able to resolve as they achieve the developmental tasks of adolescence and adulthood. Yet others experience strong feelings of marginality and difficulties in self-acceptance that persist through childhood and into their later lives. (p. 20)

This statement resonates with the adoption stories that were shared through this research. While the majority of participants have developed a healthy and secure understanding of who they are in multiple aspects of self, others have and continue to struggle with understanding and integrating their various experiences into their evolving sense of self. One individual experienced significant childhood and adolescent struggles as a result of her adoptive placement. These challenges have persisted into her adulthood because she did not have the necessary information or tools to support her earlier in her life. As an adult, this individual has recognized the trauma and losses that have occurred as a part of her adoptive experiences and is actively engaged in healing processes that will help her to achieve a more integrated self of self and greater level of self-acceptance.

For the individuals who shared their life stories through this study, their search for a sense of self and personal identity were complicated by the mystery of their genetic background. While some of the participants began asking questions about their family of origin at an early age, others began to fantasize and develop stories about where they came from and where they belong as they grappled with making meaning of their adoptive experiences. Beginning to wonder about where one came from and developing stories to help fill-in so many of the unknowns is not uncommon among adoptees (Brodzinsky, et al., 1992; Grotevant, et al., 2000; Lifton, 1998, 2002).

Implications for Practice

Transracial adoptees. It is important for transracial adoptees to recognize and acknowledge the existence and influence of both trauma and loss on the psychosocial adjustments that result from being separated from their biological roots. In this study, the theme of loss was evident in all of the adoptive stories, regardless of how well their adoptive experience may have been. This finding is similar to that of other research conducted with Native American transracial adoptees (Berlin, 1978; Locust, 1999, 2000; Peterson, 2002; Simon & Hernandez, 2008) whose participants described similar feelings of loss related to the separation from their biological roots.

Some authors argue that adoptees, in general, experience many different types of loss during the course of their life as a direct result of their adoption status (Brodzinsky, et al., 1992; Lifton, 1998, 2002). Through the legal arrangement of adoption itself, adoptees lose their entire biological family, their family names, access to their own birth records, their identities in the context of their genealogical family,

their cultures, and the continuity of family history over time. Lifton (2002) recognizes the types of loss experienced by adoptees and the isolation many experience despite being surrounded by a loving and supportive family. In part, this loss is heavily influenced by a disconnection from one's biological past, that is, "the part that was born of other parents, whose genetic code is stamped into every cell of their bodies" (Lifton, 2002, p. 2008).

Transracial adoptees involved with this study identified a number of losses experienced throughout their lifespan. Many of these losses were centered on being denied access to and having little or no knowledge about their cultural background during their childhood and adolescent years. Three participants discussed the frustrations they had in trying to access birth records and medical records that could have been helpful early on in their search process when they were experiencing psychological distress related to identity issues. One participant did not learn that she was Native American until after being reunited with her birth mother when she was a young adult. The loss of such awareness throughout this individual's life had a profound impact on integrating this astounding piece information into her existing sense of self as an adult. Clinicians working with adoptees need to be aware of the feelings of trauma and loss that is commonly found among adoptees.

Search and reunion efforts played an influential role in the lives of the study participants. In particular, in their quest to gain a deeper understanding of self and to answer some of the questions that had plagued them throughout childhood and adolescence related to their "differentness" from their adoptive families and many of

their psychosocial environments. Part of the participants' quest in searching for and being reunited with their biological families was to help fill in some of the missing pieces of their self that would better enable them to develop a coherent sense of self, a key underpinning of Erikson's (1959, 1968, 1980) writings on identity development.

While search and reunion efforts can lead to positive results for some adoptees, the experiences along the way and positive outcomes of such reunions are not universal. Reunion efforts can also bring about emotional and psychological distress for adoptees if they have gone into the experiences with a certain set of expectations that were not fully realized. They may also feel marginalized from their biological families due to perceived and real differences that develop as a result of the different environmental contexts in which an individual was raised. For Native American transracial adoptees, the difficulty of fitting in to two different worlds has been explored and discussed in the literature (Locust, 1999, 2000; Peterson, 2002; Simon & Hernandez, 2008; Westermeyer, 1979). One study participant described feeling marginalized by both her adoptive and biological families and as a result, does not feel a secure sense of belonging in either one.

Adoptive parents. Adoptive parents play a crucial role in the healthy emotional, psychological, and physiological development of an adopted child. Further, they have an incredible amount of influence on one's identity development. Parental attitudes and behaviors can positively impact the outcomes and psychological adjustment of transracial adoptees (Lee, 2003). Previous research has shown that when adoptive families are able to embrace an adoptive child's racial or ethnic culture and openly

discuss cultural differences (Andujo, 1988; Brooks & Barth, 1999), they are better able to better facilitate the development of the adoptive child's racial or ethnic identity.

In the context of one's adoptive family, the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2008) identified three key challenges that impact transracial adoptees. These challenges are: 1) some transracial adoptees experience difficulties with their physical appearance in that it is different from their adoptive family; 2) some transracial adoptees struggle with issues related to their development of a racial or ethnic identity; and 3) one of the important skills a transracial adoptee must learn is the ability to cope with potential discrimination in a variety of settings.

Participants involved in this study described a wide range of both positive and negative adoptive parental and extended family support available to them throughout their lifespan. Their experiences varied from adoptive parents who made efforts to keep the participant connected to her racial heritage to adoptive parents who denied access to any information about the Native American status of the participant. Despite the range of experiences in their respective adoptive families, all but one of the participants has developed a self-described strong racial identity as a Native American. One of the reasons that one participant has not developed a strong racial identity as a Native American is due to, in part, to the fact that she did not learn about her Native American heritage nor become an enrolled member in her tribe until her early adult years. She has and continues to struggle with trying to incorporate this significant piece of information into her overall understanding and sense of self.

Recognizing the trauma and loss experienced by an adopted child, in that she experiences a separation from her biological family, is also important. Adopted children are part of a genealogical family that is different from the adoptive family. While research indicates that many adoptive families try to minimize differences between them and their transracially-adopted child (Andujo, 1988; Lee, 2003; McRoy et al., 1984), study participants highlighted the importance of acknowledging the differences and providing opportunities for adoptees to learn about or reconnect with their cultural heritage. This can be achieved through open and honest communication through sharing of adoption-related records, learning about and educating adoptive family members about specific Native American cultural practices, teachings, and traditions, and valuing the unique contributions of the adoptee.

While parents who adopt a child(ren) of a different racial or ethnic background are able to provide nurturing and safe environments that promote healthy adjustment, development, and well-being, extra effort should be made by these adoptive parents to connect the child with her racial or ethnic heritage. This may include participating in racial or ethnic activities, getting involved in an adoptive parent support group to build connection with other parents who have transracially adopted, attending culturally relevant parenting classes, finding a mentor for the child who has the same tribal heritage, and as appropriate and feasible, helping the adopted child reconnect to his/her birth family. Others (de Haymes & Simon, 2003; Vonk, 2001) have identified a number of suggested resources and supports for adoptive families that involve the development and delivery of meaningful pre- and post-adoptive services and activities.

A key life skill for transracial adoptees that can be learned within the context of one's adoptive family is how to cope with prejudicial remarks, racism, and discrimination that a transracial adoptee may potentially experience throughout his/her life. Preparing transracial adoptees to cope with potential racist or discriminatory experiences in society requires the adoptive parents to acknowledge, understand, and to some degree embrace racial/ethnic differences between them and their adoptive child in order to fully help their child navigate through the identity challenges they will face as a result of their transracial adoptive status.

Parental attitudes and behaviors toward race matters. Many of the participants involved in this study described experiences of racism and prejudice from members of the dominant society in different contexts throughout their lifespan. For some, adoptive families were a source of positive support because their families acknowledged what had occurred and provided the necessary information or interventions to help the adoptees better understand and work through their negative experiences. For others, their adoptive family offered little by way of support or guidance in helping them to cope with these difficult encounters. In part, this was due to the adoptive families' lack of awareness or acknowledgment of potential racial difficulties. For two participants, racial prejudices perpetuated by adoptive family members resulted in severe emotional distress. While some adoptive parents understand these issues and are able to address them with their child(ren), others may lack awareness unless adoption professionals bring it to their attention.

The *CWLA Standards of Excellence for Adoption* (2000) discuss the importance and right of every child to be raised in a family that respects their cultural heritage and demonstrates an awareness of and sensitivity to the cultural resources that may be needed after adoptive placements are made. Vonk (2001) operationalizes these standards by defining three areas of cultural competence for adoptive parents who chose to adopt a child of a different racial or ethnic background. These are: 1) developing a racial awareness that is sensitive to issues of racism and discrimination; 2) planning for activities that are multi-cultural and providing opportunities for a transracial adoptee to participate in appropriate cultural events based upon her heritage; and 3) teaching transracial adoptees life skills that will enable them to cope with issues surrounding racism and discrimination. Clinicians working with adoptive parents need to be aware of the multi-cultural implications of transracial adoption.

Implications for Policy

The Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 provides Native Americans adoptees who are 18 years of age and older an avenue by which they can access information relating to their adoption for purposes of establishing tribal enrollment or membership. Under the Act, access to such records is granted to Native Americans who were adopted prior to the passage of the Act. According to 25 U.S.C. 1917,

Upon application by an Indian individual who has reached the age of eighteen and who was the subject of an adoptive placement, the court which entered the final decree shall inform such individual of the tribal affiliation, if any, of the

individual's biological parents and provide such other information as may be necessary to protect any rights flowing from the individual's tribal relationship.

If a Native American adoptee does not know the court in which his/her final adoption decree was entered, the adoptee can contact the Secretary of the Interior, through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, to request such information. Section 1951(a) of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 requires the Secretary of Interior to maintain a central registry of all adoptions involving Native American children since November 8, 1978. The central registry should include the following information: 1) the name and tribal affiliation of the child; 2) the names and addresses of the biological parents; 3) the names and addresses of the adoptive parents; and 4) the identity of any agency having files or information relating to such adoptive placement (Native American Rights Fund, 2007).

Section 1951(b) of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 states:

Upon the request of the adopted Indian child over the age of eighteen, the adoptive or foster parents of an Indian child, or an Indian tribe, the Secretary shall disclose such information as may be necessary for the enrollment of an Indian child in the tribe in which the child may be eligible for enrollment or for determining any rights or benefits associated with that membership.

Essentially, both provisions within the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 serve to assist Native American adoptees that request information related to their biological families for enrollment purposes. Interestingly, none of the Native American adoptees that participated in this study made reference to the use of such provisions within the law to gain access to information about their biological families.

The Native American Rights Fund (2007) offers practical guidance to both Native American adoptees and practitioners who may be assisting such adoptees in gaining access to their birth and/or adoption records. One of the issues that may be challenging for Native American adoptees in using these provisions under the law is that if they do not have any documentation in adoption-related records in their possession that verifies the individuals are Native American. Without such evidence, a court may be reluctant to open an adoption record.

A broader policy consideration that is worth noting that would impacts not only Native American adoptees but also adoptees in general is that of open records. The policy debate over the granting of access to adoptees to their original birth certificates, adoption records, and/or adoption court records has been controversial with strong arguments both in favor and against the granting of such access. Much of the controversy stems from the fact that through the provision of such access, adoptees would have identifying information about their birthparents. Opponents of open records typically argue that granting such access to adoptees would violate the biological parents' right to confidentiality (Brodzinsky, et al., 1992, Freundlich, 2007)

To date, only eight states (i.e., Kansas, Alaska, Alabama, Delaware, Maine, New Hampshire, Oregon, and Tennessee) have passed laws that provide adoptees with direct access to their original birth certificates and/or adoption records (Freundlich, 2007). Other states have considered such legislation; however, it has failed to receive the necessary support to become law. For example, the Minnesota State Legislature passed legislation during the 2008 legislative session that would have granted the following:

Any adult adoptee (age 19 or older) who was born in Minnesota, upon request, shall receive a photocopied copy of their original birth certificate from the Minnesota Health Department of Vital Statistics unless their birthparent previously signed an Affidavit of Non-Disclosure stating they do not want the information disclosed. (Minnesota Coalition for Adoption Reform [MCAR], n.d.)

Governor Tim Pawlenty later vetoed this legislation; however, it has been revived during the 2009 legislative session and some members who were opposed to the legislation in 2008 have signed on in support of the effort this effort (MCAR, n.d.). For the past 20 years, the activities of the Minnesota Coalition for Adoption Reform have been guided by the following beliefs about adoption:

- All adopted persons should be able to directly access truthful, identifying information about their birth and origins.

- Adoption is not a one-time legal event but encompasses a lifelong human process for all members of the adoption kinship network.
- The system of adoption should be focused on the needs of the adopted person who benefits by having genetic information both in childhood and in adulthood.
- Adopted persons have a dual family identity that should be recognized and respected.
- The act of searching for one's birth origins is not pathological but rather a natural human need in the lifelong quest for identity.
- Knowledge of the past empowers all humans to make healthy decisions for today and tomorrow (MCAR, n.d.).

Freundlich (2007) summarizes the arguments that both proponents and opponents have used to fuel the adoption records debate for several decades. In her report, she makes a strong recommendation for the amendment to all state statutes governing adoption that would allow adoptees unrestricted access to their original birth certificates (Freundlich, 2007). The granting of such access to all adoptees would allow them, if they choose, to seek out additional information about their biological past and perhaps ease the psychological distress that some adoptees experience as a result of their disconnection from their genetic past. Further, having access to information about one's biological family may help adoptees that are struggling with identity formation issues.

Implications for Future Research

This study provided an in-depth exploration of the contextual factors that influenced the identity formation from the retrospective viewpoint of the participants. It did not examine or measure overall social, psychological, and behavioral health and well-being among the transracial adoptees. Some authors (Bagley, 1991; Berlin, 1978; Feigelman, 2000; Hollingsworth, 1997; Locust, 1999, 2000; Weinberg, et al., 2004; Westermeyer, 1979) argue that transracial adoption leads to long-term psychological issues for transracial adoptees, while others (Brooks & Barth, 1999; Feigelman & Silverman, 1984; Grow & Shapiro, 1974; Shireman, 1988; Shireman & Johnson, 1975, 1980, 1986; Silverman, 1993; Vroegh, 1997) suggest that individuals who are transracially adopted grow up to be socially and psychologically well-adjusted.

Simon, Alstein, and Melli (1994), in their concluding remarks about their 20-year longitudinal study of transracial adoptees, state, “but we found that, both during adolescence and later as adults, the [transracial adoptees] clearly were aware of and comfortable with their racial identity” (p. 115). Findings from this study suggest that transracial adoptees are able to develop strong racial identities despite some of the challenges they face throughout their lifespan in integrating various aspects of self in a cohesive manner. This study highlighted some of the contextual factors that were influential in the development of participants’ understanding and sense of self over time.

Much of the research on transracial adoption to date has included samples of pre-adolescent transracial adoptees and has relied heavily on reports of adjustment

through the lens of adoptive parents and other professionals rather than on personal accounts from the adoptees themselves. Research that is inclusive of the voice of transracial adoptees at later stages of development would contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

Future research involving Native American transracial adoptees should also take into consideration the influence of a number of variables associated with adoption that may in isolation, or combination with one another, influence overall psychological and behavioral adjustment and identity formation. These variables include, but are not limited to the participants' age at the time of adoption, the pre-adoptive history of the adoptee, the number of pre-adoptive placements experienced by the adoptee, type of adoption (i.e., open vs. closed), gender, socio-economic status of the adoptive family, motivations of the adoptive family to adopt, the presence of biological siblings or same-race siblings in the adoptive family, and impact of contextual influences outside of the adoptive family (e.g., community, educational system, organized religion or other spiritual practices, access to culturally relevant activities and organization, housing stability, etc.).

While there are common experiences that transcend adoptees' experiences, there are also unique factors that influence development, and they should also be accounted for in future research. A mixed method research methodology would provide a richer and more complete understanding of the complexities of transracial adoption, in particular, on the psychological, behavioral, and health outcomes of the adoptees.

Quantitative studies using clearly defined constructs of racial, ethnic, and cultural identity, standardized measures of social and psychological well-being, and samples of adults who were transracially adopted would provide additional information on the long-term impacts of such adoptions. Continued research on identity development among Native American adults who were transracially adopted is important because it allows for the exploration of identity issues post-adolescence when aspects one's identity have been more fully explored and integrated into one's overall sense of self.

Further, longitudinal studies would help to illuminate the various emotional, psychological, and behavioral challenges transracial adoptees may encounter during various stages of development. Longitudinal research could begin during adoptees' adolescent years when issues of identity development become salient and then continue into adulthood to gain a more thorough understanding of contextual factors influencing identity formation as well how adoptees integrate adoptive information into their overall sense of self. Such research could contribute to the development of a comprehensive model that examines the psychosocial lifespan of transracial adoptees to better understand and document their unique experiences. In conducting longitudinal research with transracial adoptees, attention must be given to the representativeness of the sample, the ability to engage and maintain participants over time, and the identification of culturally relevant tools and methods for evaluating the constructs under study.

An identity model that has been empirically-tested with transracial adoptees (Baden, 2002) could be used in future studies involving Native American adults who were transracially adopted. Developed by Steward and Baden (1995), the Cultural-Racial Identity Model is the first theoretical model that accounts for differences in identity statuses among transracial adoptees.

Briefly, the model, consisting of two axes, one that explores cultural identity and the other that examines racial identity, produces 16 potential cultural-racial identities (Baden, & Steward, 2000; Steward & Baden, 1995). This model assesses the degrees to which adoptees “have knowledge of, awareness of, competence within, and comfort with their own racial group’s culture, their parents’ racial group’s culture, and multiple cultures as well as the degree to which they are comfortable with their racial group membership and with those belonging to their own racial group, their parents’ racial group, and multiple racial groups” (Baden & Steward, 2000, p. 309). In addition, this model takes into consideration the roles and influences of adoptive parents, extended family members and social and environmental contexts on cultural and racial identity development among transracial adoptees (Baden & Steward, 2000).

Existing transracial adoption research has largely been focused on supporting or negating the viewpoints of transracial adoption proponents or opponents by emphasizing the significance of the racial differences between transracial adoptees and their adoptive families. Research is also needed to better understand the complexities of identity formation among transracial adoptees from a clinical perspective. Such research, coupled with the literature on multi-cultural counseling, could help

psychiatrists, psychologists, and clinical social workers that are providing therapeutic services and supports to transracial adoptees. With an increased understanding of the unique experiences and contextual influences on identity development among transracial adoptees, therapeutic interventions that are culturally relevant and competent could be developed, adapted or tailored that truly meet the needs of transracial adoptees seeking professional help related to their adoption experiences.

In addition to the clinical implications of developing a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding identity development among transracial adoptees, there is also a growing body of evidence that suggests adoptees, whether they are intracially, transracially, or internationally adopted, experience emotional and psychological difficulties related to the trauma and loss associated with their adoption (Berlin, 1978; Brodzinsky, et al., 1992; Lifton, 1998, 2003; Locust, 1999, 2000; Patton, 2000; Peterson, 2002; Simon & Hernandez, 2008; Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006). Much of the loss associated with adoption is difficult to understand because it is steeped in many unknowns. The field of psychology has developed a body of research and accompanying therapeutic strategies to help individuals identify, cope with, and overcome the type of ambiguous losses that are associated with being adopted (Boss, 2006).

While little is known about the outcomes for transracially adopted Native American children throughout their adulthood, even less is known about the outcomes and experiences of the birth families from which the children were adopted. Future research involving Native American families whose children were adopted would

provide a deeper understanding of the impact of the adoption policies and practices initiated by the Indian Adoption Project. The inter-generational legacy of the adoption era can only be understood by gathering information from those families who were impacted by the separation. In the words of Byler (1977), “The wholesale separation of Indian children from their families is perhaps the most tragic and destructive aspect of American Indian life today” (p. 1). According to White Hawk (2001), “many mothers and fathers of these lost or stolen children still grieve their loss” (p. 5).

The removal of tribal children from their familial networks may have left many parents feeling lonely, demoralized, and even further disenfranchised from the systems that were meant to support them in their role as parents. According to Byler (1977) “assaults on Indian families help cause the conditions that characterize those cultures of poverty where large numbers of people feel hopeless, powerless, and unworthy” (p. 8). In essence, the termination of parental rights through adoption hearings “effectively kills more Indian people through the smothering arms of the helping process” (Blanchard, 1977, p. 60). The transracial adoption of Native American children severed their ties with their parents, siblings, and extended family and kinship networks, essentially all that was familiar to the child. This left parents, grandparents, siblings, and other members of the extended kinship network with a legacy of grief complicated by the circumstances surrounding the adoption (e.g., nature of the removal and subsequent adoptive placement, lack of due process, and misunderstandings about the child welfare system).

In addition to examining the impacts of transracial adoption at the individual and family level, it must also be understood in terms of the loss experienced by tribal communities. As mentioned earlier, the adoption rates for Native American children during the late 1960's and 1970's alarmed many tribal communities. According to Robin, Rasmussen, and Gonzales-Smith (1999), "The removal and separation of generations of children not only has affected the lives of individuals, but has had tremendous consequences for the cohesion and well-being of entire tribal communities" (p. 87).

The weakening of tribal communities was done through the removal of tribal children and placement into non-Native homes. In doing so, the viability of many tribal communities was hindered because they lost their next generation. Without a next generation, communities would not be able to pass on important cultural and spiritual teachings, traditions, and lessons. To fully understand the impact of the adoption-related policies and practices, it is important to also develop research methodologies that include the voice of tribal members. While the true costs of the transracial adoption of Native children on their communities may never fully be known or understood, the testimonies provided by tribal leaders and advocacy organizations in support of the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 give some indication of the importance of tribal children to their communities and the continued existence of tribal life.

Researcher's Reflections

The experiences related to completing the qualitative study have had a significant positive influence on me both personally as an adoptee and professionally, as a social worker that is interested in Native American child welfare issues. As an adoptee, I was emotionally moved by the adoptive stories and experiences shared by participants. I am truly honored to carry their voices forward so that others may learn from their experiences. So often I saw pieces of my adoptive experiences, thoughts, and feelings expressed in their narratives (e.g., issues of grief and loss, desire and motivation to search for my biological parents, questions and curiosities about where I came from insecurities surrounding my senses of belonging in my adoptive family, and struggles with interpersonal relationships).

This study has reaffirmed my beliefs that there are unique issues and challenges faced by adoptees, in general, as they traverse their journeys through life. In particular, the piecing together and defining one's self absent a connection to a major reference point, that is, more detailed information about one's biological heritage. As an insider who has intimate knowledge of the realities of being adopted, I was comforted in knowing that there are other adoptees that faced similar experiences and struggles along their identity development journey. As an outsider to the unique issues faced by transracial adoptees, I was amazed at the tremendous amounts of strength and resiliency expressed in both the telling of their life story as well as the overcoming of adversity along their journeys. The insider/outsider perspective that I brought to this study allowed me to gain insights and understanding of the adoption-related

experiences expressed by the study participants that a non-adopted researcher might not have.

Professionally, it was interesting to revisit my beliefs and assumptions that helped to define this study over two year ago. Over the course of the study I was able to broaden my knowledge of issues facing Native American transracial adoptees as well as issues facing other populations of adoptees. This was accomplished through reading a variety of published studies pertaining to this subject matter. While I still hold beliefs and assumptions about the process of identity formation among transracially adopted Native Americans, my views have been tempered by my experiences through conducting all phases of this study. That is, I have come to realize that not all transracial adoptions are necessarily bad and there are a number of contextual influences that shape the holistic experiences of transracial adoptees. In addition, I had a significant career change during the course of this study that resulted in my departure from working in Indian Country to a position in state government. This change in careers allowed me to step out of my advocacy role and open my eyes and thinking to the possibility that not all Native Americans that were transracially adopted have fared poorly as a result of their adoption.

Conclusion

Transracially adopted Native American adults exhibit a range of experiences across their lifespan that both positively and negatively contribute to their identity formation in multiple constructions of self. Some are able to successfully mitigate life's challenges that result from being a transracial adoptee (e.g., emotional and

psychological difficulties, experiences of racism, differences in physical appearance from adoptive family, struggles to fit in within their adoptive family, social environment or culture of origin, etc.) and are able to develop a healthy and strong racial identity. Others struggle as they try to resolve the identity-oriented developmental tasks associated with adolescence and early adulthood because of compounding factors, influences, and experiences connected to their status as a transracial adoptee.

As demonstrated through the life story interviews with seven transracially adopted Native American adults, the process of identity formation is profoundly complex and for some, it is a lifelong journey. Even though each participant's adoption story was unique, in combination, they provided greater insight into the complex processes and interdependent contextual factors influencing identity development.

Common themes across the participants' lives transcended the individual narratives. While each adoptee shared stories about his/her personal journey of creating a sense of self, commonalities across the stories emerged and included episodes of joy and loss, confusion and clarity, reunion and rejection, discovery and rediscovery, immersion and exclusion, denial and acceptance, and connectedness and disconnectedness. As information about the participants' past, present, and future became more apparent, additional aspects of their identities became unveiled and integrated into their sense and understanding of self.

The focus of the study was not to question the merits of the policies and practices surrounding the transracial adoption for Native American children prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978; rather, it was to highlight some of the challenges, needs, and strengths of Native American adults who were transracially adopted as children as identified by the adoptees themselves. In doing so, this study gave voice to a generation of Native American transracial adoptees that have typically been excluded from research studies focused on transracial adoption and the controversial debate that surrounds transracial adoption. Life story interviews provided a culturally relevant vehicle to discuss and capture the unique adoptive experiences through the lenses of the individuals involved in this study. The interviews provided an avenue to gain a richer level of insight and deeper understanding of their lived experiences.

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Appendix A

Sampling Spreadsheet

Contact Info.	Gender	Age	Age at Adoption	Search Process*	Tribal Affiliation	Interview Preference

* NS = have not searched, IP = in the process of searching, SR= have searched and been reunited with tribal heritage

Appendix B

Recruitment Materials

Greetings!

My name is Jody Becker-Green and I am an adoptee. My personal and professional interests in Native American child and family issues have driven me to live and work in Indian Country for over 10 years, including working at the National Indian Child Welfare Association located in Portland, Oregon for the past seven years. My work in Indian Country coupled with my own adoption journey has driven me to try and better understand the long-term impacts of adoption on identity development among Native American adults who were transracially adopted.

I am currently a doctoral student in Social Work at Portland State University. One requirement for my PhD is completing a dissertation research study. I am writing my dissertation on identity formation among Native American adults who were transracially adopted prior to the passage of the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 from the perspective of the adoptee. Specifically, I am interested in learning about the lived experiences of transracially adopted Native American adults as told through their personal adoption stories.

In completing this study, I am looking for study participants a) who are self-identified Native American adult transracial adoptees between the ages of 28 and 48; b) who were adopted at birth or prior to their first birthday; c) who live in the Pacific Northwest; d) who have been reconnected with their tribal heritage; and d) most importantly, who are willing to share their adoption story through in-person interviews. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and steps will be taken to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Each participant will be interviewed approximately 1-3 times in-person at a mutually agreed upon location and each interview may last up to two hours. Interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants will have an opportunity to review their interview transcriptions and offer changes based on their review.

If you are interested in participating in this study or would like to receive more information, please do not hesitate to contact me. I can be reached by email at jody@pdx.edu or by telephone at (360) 264-2536. Thank you for your consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

Respectfully,
Jody Becker-Green, MSW
Graduate School of Social Work
Portland State University

Study Participants Needed



Study Title: Developing One's Self - Adoption and Identity Formation through the Eyes of Transracially Adopted Native American Adults

- ✦ Are you a self-identified Native American adult transracial adoptee between the ages of 28 and 48?
- ✦ Were you adopted at birth or prior to your 1st birthday?
- ✦ Do you live in the Pacific Northwest?
- ✦ Have you been reconnected with your tribal heritage?
- ✦ Are you willing to share your adoption story through in-person interviews?



Participation is voluntary and your confidentiality and anonymity will be protected

Time Commitment

Approximately 1-3 interviews with each interview lasting up to 2 hours

Interview transcript review and feedback

To participate in this study
or to learn more contact:

Jody Becker-Green
jody@pdx.edu
360) 264-2536

This study is being completed in partial fulfillment of PhD requirements at Portland State University Graduate School of Social Work.

Appendix C

Interview Guide

The purpose of this interview is to listen to your personal adoption story and how different experiences as a transracial adopted helped to shape your identity. Your story will add valuable information about the experiences of Native American adults who were adopted into non-Native homes and how this type of placement influenced who you are today. Your story, combined with the stories of other Native American adults who were adopted into non-Native homes may help future children who are adopted into families of another culture and may assist families who are considering adopting a child from a different racial or ethnic background.

Life Story Topic Guide

1. Where would you like to begin with your adoption story?
2. What are some of your earliest memories of being adopted?
3. What kind of stories were you told about being adopted and how did these stories influence you?

Adoptive Family Identity

Now I would like to ask you a few questions about your adoptive family, how family members have influenced who you are over time, and your sense of belonging in your adoptive family.

1. What is it like for you being a Native American adult who was raised in a non-Native family?
2. Tell me a little bit about the people in your adoptive family.

Prompts:

- ❖ *What kinds of influences did various family members (e.g., adoptive parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, etc.) have on you?*

❖ *What kind of messages did you receive about yourself from your adoptive parents or other family members?*

3. How would you describe your sense of belonging in your adoptive family?

Cultural Factors Influencing Identity

The next area that I would like to talk with you about is your cultural background. As an adoptee it seems that we take on cultural influences of the family and community in which we are raised yet also have cultural influences that are more biologically based.

1. Tell me a little bit about the community that you grew up in. What was it like growing up in your neighborhood or community as a Native American child?

2. What have been the major cultural (e.g., familial background, religion/spirituality, etc.) influences in your life?

Probes:

❖ *What were the major cultural influences during your high school years?*

❖ *What were the major cultural influences when you were a young adult?*

❖ *What are the major cultural influences in your life now?*

3. How have these cultural influences helped shape who you are today?

Social Factors Influencing Identity

There are many social factors and experiences that help to shape who we are and I would like to ask you about some of social influences in your life.

1. What have been the major social influences (e.g., social groups, athletic teams, employers, organization, etc.) in your life? How have they helped shape who you are today?

2. Tell me a little about the friendships you have had in at different times in your life and how they influenced who you are as a person?

Educational Factors Influencing Identity

Most of us receive some form of education during our lifetime and I would like to ask you a few questions about your educational experiences and how they helped to shape who you are today.

1. Tell me a little bit about your educational experiences.

Prompts:

- ❖ *Did other Native American children attend your school?*
- ❖ *How were you treated as a Native American in your school?*

2. What did you learn about yourself in the different schools that you attended?

Sense of Self

As an adoptee there are many influences that help to shape our understanding of who we are. I would like to ask you some questions that will help me to understand how you view yourself as a transracial adoptee that will help to get at the core of who you are and how you see yourself.

1. What have been the biggest challenges for you as a transracial adoptee?
2. What have been some positive aspects about being a transracial adoptee?
3. Tell me a little bit about your desire to search for your tribal heritage.

Prompts:

- ❖ *What are some of the factors that contributed to your desire to search for your tribal heritage?*
- ❖ *What was that process been like for you?*

4. What have you learned about yourself through the search process?
5. What advice do you have for other Native American transracial adoptees?
6. There are some people who think that transracial adoption does not affect a person's ability to develop a strong racial identity and that children who were transracially adopted do not experience many problems as a result of their adoption. What do you think about those statements?
7. Is there anything that we have not talked about that you would like to share about your adoption experiences?

Generic Probes (for use throughout life history interview)

What did that mean to you?

How did that make you feel?

What was that experience like for you?

Tell me more about that.

What happened next?

Appendix D

Informed Consent Form

You are invited to participate in a dissertation research study that explores your experiences as a transracially adopted Native American adults through life story interviews. Specifically, this study is focused on learning about how Native American adults who were transracially adopted understand and make meaning of their adoption experiences as they relate to their identity development in different areas of their of life. This study is being conducted to fulfill the dissertation requirements for a PhD in Social Work at Portland State University. Findings from this study may be used for possible publications.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to participate in 1-3 interviews about your life. The interview will be conducted in-person at a mutually agreed upon location. The interviews will be tape-recorded and handwritten notes will be taken during the interview to help ensure the accuracy of the information that you share. It is anticipated that your total interview time will be no longer than four hours. You may end your participation in this study at any point in time and your request will be respected. If you decide to end your participation, all information gathered from you will be destroyed and there will be no further attempts to contact you.

Your tape-recorded interview responses will be transcribed for data analysis purposes and will not contain any identifying information. You will be provided with a copy of your transcribed interview for review and feedback and will receive a final copy of your interview transcript. Furthermore, findings from the study will be presented in a manner to maintain your confidentiality. Access to the interview data will be limited to the researcher and a peer reviewer from the National Indian Child Welfare Association. The interview tapes and associated transcriptions will be stored in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer. Upon completion of the study, you may receive a copy of the completed study by providing the researcher with an email or mailing address.

The information that follows explains your rights to confidentiality and the possible risks of participating in this research project. Please read these sections carefully. The researcher will be going over this information with you before the interview starts.

Confidentiality

Your name will not be used in this study. However, it is important that you understand that you may be quoted anonymously in the final report. The findings from this project will be used for publication in print. All information gathered from you during the interview is confidential and will be destroyed when the study is ended. The consent form that you will sign will be kept separate from the study, and will not be linked to the study in any way.

Your right to review what is written. Your story as a transracial adoptee is just that, your story. It is important that you know that whatever is written about your experiences as a transracial adoptee is under your control. When the final draft is completed that pertains to your participation, you will receive a copy for review, input, and approval.

Possible Risks and Discomfort

You will be asked questions about your experiences as a transracial adoptee and how these experiences have influenced who you are today. You may experience some emotional discomfort as a result of reflecting on and sharing your personal experiences related to your development as a transracial adoptee. You may also experience some emotional discomfort if you choose to share this experience with your family members. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. The researcher will provide an opportunity for debriefing with you at the conclusion of the interview and will provide you with a list of community resources in the event that you would like to talk with someone further about your thoughts and feelings related to your adoption.

Compensation

You will receive a small gift in honor of and appreciation for your participation in this study.

Questions

If you have any concerns about your participation in this study or your rights as a study participant, please contact the Human Subjects Research Review Committee, Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, Unitus 6th Floor, Portland State University, 503-725-4288 or 1-877-480-4400. If at any time you have questions about the study itself, contact Jody Becker-Green, doctoral student, by telephone at (360) 264-2536 or by email at jody@pdx.edu.

Agreement

I have read this form (or it was read to me), and I agree to participate in the dissertation study. I know that the interviews will be tape-recorded and that handwritten notes will be taken during the interview. I know I can change my mind and stop my participation at any time without any penalty. I know that my name will not be used in any publication. I give my permission to the researcher to use quotes from me without using my name. I agree to participate in this interview. I will receive a copy of this consent form for my records.

Participant Signature

Date

Interviewer Signature

Date