



## Ethnic and racial socialization and self-esteem of Asian adoptees: The mediating role of multiple identities

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### A B S T R A C T

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Positive identity development during adolescence in general is a complex process and may pose additional challenges for adolescents adopted from a different culture. Using a web-based survey design with a sample of 100 internationally adopted Asian adolescent and young adults, the present study examined the mediating role of multiple identities (i.e., ethnic, adoptive and interpersonal ego identities) in explaining the relationship between ethnic and racial socializations, ethnic neighborhood, and self-esteem. The results showed that (a) adoptive identity mediated the influence of racial socialization on psychological well-being, and (b) ethnic affirmation mediated the influence of ethnic socialization on adoptees' well-being. This study illustrates the importance of providing supportive counseling services for adoptees who are exploring their adoptive identity.

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Identity formation is a major developmental task and a desired outcome for all adolescents (Erikson, 1963). The development of a positive sense of identity in adolescents is a complex process in itself; however, it may pose additional challenges for a person adopted from a different culture. Grotevant (1992) states that the identity development process in international/transracial adoptees involve negotiating multiple identities into a coherent sense of self. These multiple identities may involve assigned components of identity, in which individuals have less choice (e.g., adoptive and ethnic identities), and chosen components of identity (e.g. interpersonal ego identity) (Grotevant, 1992).

Research suggests that a positive sense of ethnic identity plays an important role in the development of positive self-esteem and overall psychological adjustment of transracial adoptees (Basow, Lilley, Bookwala, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2008; Yoon, 2000). Further, coming to terms with one's adoptive status has been found to be related to how adoptees feel about themselves (Adoption Institute, 2009). Grotevant (1997) suggested for adolescent adoptees, interpersonal identity may be more relevant as they explore roles in the domains of friendship, dating, recreation and intimate relationship with the opposite sex. Extant studies have indicated that adoptees face problems relating to dating because of race and adoption status (Adoption Institute, 2009) and establishing good peer relations (Westhues & Cohen, 1997). Therefore, the well-being of international adoptees may rest on the successful formation of ethnic, adoptive, and interpersonal ego identities. However, no studies have yet examined the relationship between ethnic, adoptive, and interpersonal ego identities and how understanding the multiple domains of identity development affect the psychosocial well-being of international adoptees.

One of the antecedent factors in identity formation is family socialization. Identity formation is contextual (Grotevant, 1987) in the sense that the family and its broader environment such as the neighborhood influence adolescents' developmental processes and outcomes. International/transracial adoptees may find it difficult to process both ego and ethnic

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identities while facing adoptive identity issues during adolescence (DeBerry, Scarr, & Weinberg, 1996). Adoptive parents may help children to resolve the dynamics of complex developmental issues through socialization processes that may include consciously embracing the child's ethnic culture and its values and promoting these values to their children. However, little is known about the ways in which such family socialization processes and the neighborhood context relate to international adoptees' identity development and psychological health.

In our previous article (Mohanty & Newhill, 2011), we showed how transracial adoptive family socializations relate to adoptees' psychological well-being through feeling of less marginality. In an attempt to gain further insight into the role of developmental contextual factors, in this paper, I focused on how multiple identities (i.e., ethnic, adoptive, and interpersonal ego identities) mediate the relationship between family and neighborhood contextual factors and adoptees' self-esteem and what aspect of identity is salient for Asian adolescent and young adult adoptees' self-esteem. Using various theoretical perspectives on social context and identity development, this paper makes a unique theoretical and empirical contribution in understanding the identity development of transracial Asian adoptees. This article is based on a study first published in Mohanty (2010) and Mohanty and Newhill (2011).

### **Interpersonal ego identity, ethnic identity, adoptive identity, and psychological well-being**

Studies have suggested that achieved interpersonal ego identity may have positive effects on adolescents' psychological well-being. For example, Stein and Hoopes (1985) found a positive relationship between overall ego identity and self-esteem among 91 white adolescents, both adopted and nonadopted. However, to my knowledge, Stein and Hoopes (1985) is the only study that examined ego identity formation among adoptees. Among the general population, studies have reported a significant and positive relationship between interpersonal forms of identity achievement and self-esteem in a group of primarily Jewish adolescents (Markstrom, Berman, & Bruschi, 1998) and interpersonal achieved identity scale and individual coping styles among college students (Grotevant & Adams, 1984). However, most of the aforementioned studies included white samples and little empirical evidence exists regarding interpersonal ego identity development in adopted minority children.

For minority children, ethnic identity is an important component of ego identity development and is considered desirable for healthy development (Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Phinney & Rosenthal, 1992). Aries and Moorehead (1989) suggested that research examining the process of ego identity formation for minority youths should investigate ethnic identity as a domain of ego identity formation. Various studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem, and healthy psychological functioning of adolescents and young adults of color (Phinney, 1992; Phinney & Alipuria, 1990; Roberts et al., 1999; Smith & Silva, 2011; Yuh, 2005). With transracial adoptees, there is also emerging evidence that positive racial and ethnic identity contributes to psychological adjustment (Basow et al., 2008; DeBerry et al., 1996; Lee, Yun, Yoo, & Nelson, 2010; Yoon, 2000).

Recently, some attempts have been made to study adoptive identity. For example, Basow et al. (2008) studied adjustment to adoption, ethnic identity, and psychological well-being among 83 Korean-born adult adoptees. The study found that adjustment to adoption, an indicator of adoptive identity, predicted the adoptees' psychological well-being in terms of self-acceptance and positive relations with others. Similarly, the Adoption Institute (2009) found comfort with adoptive identity to be positively related to the self-esteem and life satisfaction of transracial adoptees. Von Korff and Grotevant (2011) found that family conversations about adoption and parents' contact with children's birth relatives are related to narrative adoptive identity. However, their study considered narrative adoptive identity as a criterion variable, and we know little about how narrative adoptive identity relates to adoptees' psychological well-being. Furthermore, their study used an interview protocol to assess narrative adoptive identity, and no standardized self-reporting measure has yet been developed to assess adoptive identity.

In general, adoption research is not clear about the relationship between ethnic, adoptive, and interpersonal identities, with the exception of Grotevant's (1992) theoretical assumptions. Grotevant (1992) conceptualized that the successful resolution of the assigned components of identity, such as ethnic and adoptive identities, may impact chosen components of identity. In addition, for an individual adopted across national and cultural lines, ethnic and adoptive identities are in fact related concepts (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2010). Further, little information is available about the aspect of identity that is most salient for internationally adopted adolescent and young adults. Such information can facilitate a much more targeted approach to provide interventions that support strengthening that specific aspect of identity for international adoptees.

### **Ethnic and racial socializations, ethnic neighborhood, and adoptees' psychological well-being**

A leading theoretical framework (Boykin & Toms, 1985) considers three socialization processes for minority children: socialization to mainstream American society, socialization to the child's ethnic culture, and preparation of children to be aware of racial bias and prejudice. While socialization to mainstream American society is considered a constant among white adoptive parents, *ethnic socialization* involves providing the adopted children with opportunities to participate in cultural activities to assist them in developing their unique racial/ethnic identities. *Racial socialization* comprises preparing children to develop coping mechanisms to deal with racial prejudice and discrimination. Hughes et al. (2006) suggest that even though both concepts share some common components, they are distinct constructs.

The empirical research on family socialization experiences of international adoptees has, for the most part, applied ethnic cultural orientation. Previous studies have provided evidence in support of the relationship between ethnic socialization, ethnic identity, and psychological well-being among international adoptees (Adoption Institute, 2009; Basow et al., 2008;

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