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EVAN B. DONALDSON

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# Beyond Culture Camp

Promoting Healthy Identity Formation in Adoption

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*Cover photo: Children at the Catalyst Foundation's Annual Vietnamese Culture Camp in Minnesota*

## Executive Summary

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*I realized I never could change my ethnicity/race. I also developed a pride in being Korean and Asian. I reviewed things I liked about being Asian that European Americans did not have. I also grew comfortable with things I did not like about being Asian. As an adult I learned how to deal with racism/stereotypes in a way that makes me feel OK about being a “border person” and a minority (Study respondent).*

Transracial adoption is a reality of contemporary American life. Since 1971, parents in this country have adopted nearly a half-million children from other countries, the vast majority of them from orphanages throughout Asia, South America and, most recently, Africa. Additional tens of thousands of multiracial families have been formed during this period with boys and girls adopted from foster care, with the rate of such adoptions from the domestic system growing from 10.8 percent in Fiscal Year 1995, when there were about 20,000 total adoptions, to 15 percent in 2001, when there were over 50,000. In the vast majority of these cases – domestic and international – children of color have been adopted by Caucasian parents.<sup>1</sup>

The consequences of this historic phenomenon have been profound, both for the tens of millions of Americans into whose families these children have been adopted, as well as for a society in which our understanding of what a family looks like is being altered every day. Yet we know very little about the impact of this change – most pointedly about its effects on the Asian, Hispanic and African American boys and girls at the core of it. How do they develop a sense of racial identity when raised by White parents, most often in predominately White communities? How do they incorporate an understanding of both being adopted and of having parents who are of a different race or ethnicity than themselves? How do they learn to cope with racism and stereotyping? What experiences are beneficial to them in developing a positive sense of self?

This ground-breaking study by the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute constitutes the broadest, most extensive examination to date of identity development in adopted adults. It does so not only by reviewing decades of research but also, most importantly, by asking the experts – adult adoptees – about the experiences and strategies that promote positive identity development. Too often, our understanding of identity, particularly of those adopted across race/ethnicity, has been formed through research involving children and youth. Similarly, conclusions about identity in transracial adoption too often have come from the perspective of parents, not adoptees themselves. The Institute’s study focuses on adult adopted persons, gaining their understanding of how they have integrated “being adopted” and their race/ethnicity with other aspects of themselves that, together, form an identity.

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<sup>1</sup> TRANSRACIAL Adoption (TRA) is defined as the adoption of a child of one race by one or two parents of a different race (domestic or international). In this study, TRA adoption is limited to the adoption of a racial minority child by two Caucasian parents. TRANSCULTURAL (TRC) in this paper is defined as the adoption of a child (either domestically or internationally) who may be racially similar but ethnically different from the parents (i.e. an Ethiopian child adopted by African-American parents). INTERCOUNTRY ADOPTION (ICA), INTERNATIONAL or TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTION (TRN) in this study is defined as the adoption of a child born abroad. An intercountry adoption may be transracial, in which case it is almost always also transcultural (a Chinese child adopted by Irish-Americans) or may only be transcultural (a Russian child adopted by European-Americans).

Although 468 adopted adults completed the online survey at the heart of this research (making it, to our knowledge, the largest study ever conducted of adopted adults in the U.S. to focus on identity), for the purposes of comparison, this paper concentrates on the 179 respondents born in South Korea and adopted by two White parents, and the 156 Caucasian respondents born in the U.S. and adopted by two White parents. For this analysis we chose these two groups, who constituted over 70 percent of our respondents, to make the cohorts as homogeneous as possible for comparison purposes. It is also noteworthy that South Koreans comprise the largest group of internationally adopted persons in the U.S., and adoption from South Korea into this country has a longer history than from any other nation; indeed, 1 in 10 of all Korean American citizens came to the United States through adoption.

It is important to add that, while one cohort of transracial adoptees is at the core of this study, an extensive review by the Adoption Institute of decades of relevant literature (Appendix I), as well as the Institute's examination of transracial adoption in comparable areas (see "Finding Families for African American Children: the Role of Race and Law in Adoption from Foster Care" at [http://adoptioninstitute.org/research/2008\\_05\\_mepa.php](http://adoptioninstitute.org/research/2008_05_mepa.php)) make clear that many of the key observations and conclusions in this paper also may be applicable to other domestic and internationally adopted persons and families.

Through this study we sought to learn about identity development in adopted persons generally, but also about the impact of racial/ethnic difference from one's parents. Respondents completed a range of standardized measures<sup>2</sup>, questions about background, challenges in identity formation, and experiences or services that are most helpful in developing a positive adoption identity. Like many other studies of adoption, this one involves a self-selected sample of respondents, so we cannot know to what extent they are representative of all adoptees. We title this study *Beyond Culture Camp* because we recognize that parents adopting across race and culture, and the professionals who guide them, have developed strategies such as camps and festivals to introduce or strengthen children's connection to their cultures and countries of origin. Yet, as this study found, such activities – while important – are insufficient in helping children adopted across racial and national boundaries develop a healthy, positive sense of self.

The central findings of this study include:

- ***Adoption is an increasingly significant aspect of identity for adopted people as they age, and remains so even when they are adults.*** A primary contribution of this study is the understanding that adoption is an important factor in most adopted persons' lives, not just as children and adolescents, but throughout adulthood. Adoption grew in significance to respondents in this study from early childhood through adolescence, continued to increase during young adulthood, and remained important to the vast majority through adulthood. For example, 81 percent of Koreans and over 70 percent of Whites rated

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<sup>2</sup> The Family of Origin Scale (FOS) to measure adult retrospective perceptions about global family functioning, the Multi-Group Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) to assess the strength of ethnic identification, a Cultural Socialization Scale, assessing the degree to which adoptive parents engaged in cultural socialization practices, the Adoptive Parent-Child Relationship Scale, and two measures of current psychological well-being -- the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and the Satisfaction with Life Scale.

their identity as an adopted person as important or very important during young adulthood. This new insight has profound implications for policy, law and practice relating to adoption.

- ***Race/ethnicity is an increasingly significant aspect of identity for those adopted across color and culture.*** Racial/ethnic identity was of central importance to the Korean respondents at all ages, and continued to increase in significance into young adulthood. Sixty percent indicated their racial/ethnic identity was important by middle school, and that number grew during high school (67%), college (76%) and young adulthood (81%). Based on their overall scores on the Multi-group Ethnic Identity Measure, Korean adoptees had a stronger sense of ethnic identity than did White respondents, but with caveats. While being equal to Whites in agreeing they were happy about being a member of their ethnic group and feeling good about their ethnic background, they were less likely to have a strong sense of belonging to their ethnic group, despite identifying more strongly with it. They also were less likely than Whites to feel welcomed by others of their own race.
- ***Coping with discrimination is an important aspect of coming to terms with racial/ethnic identity for adoptees of color.*** The Korean respondents in our research were less likely than Whites to face discrimination based on adoption status, but more commonly confronted racial discrimination. Eighty percent reported such discrimination from strangers and 75 percent from classmates. Nearly half (48%) reported negative experiences due to their race in interaction with childhood friends. A notable finding was that 39 percent of Korean respondents reported race-based discrimination from teachers. It is clear that adoption professionals, parents and others – including schools – need more effective ways of addressing these realities.
- ***Discrimination based on adoption is a reality, but more so for White adoptees – who also report being somewhat less comfortable with their adoptive identity as adults than do their Korean counterparts.*** Adopted people of all backgrounds reported that they experienced bias based on how they entered their families, in all settings of their lives – from classmates to employers to strangers. Most Americans probably do not perceive that adoption discrimination exists, per se, but this finding makes clear that stigmas and negative stereotypes linger in our culture and adversely affect adopted children and adults. When asked to identify the context of adoption-related bias, White respondents identified extended family as the most frequent source (for 40%). For Koreans, adoption-based discrimination was most common by strangers (31%) and classmates (25%).
- ***Most transracial adoptees considered themselves White or wanted to be White as children.*** Of those adopted from Korea, 78 percent reported that they considered themselves to be or wanted to be White as children – although the majority grew to identify themselves as Korean Americans as adults. Analysis of their responses to open-ended questions demonstrated that integrating race/ethnicity into identity can be a complex process. While the most common reason cited for the shift was simply maturity, access to a more diverse community and affiliation with people of Asian background also facilitated the shift. For others, negative experiences such as racism or teasing led to reconsidering their

identities and coming to terms with being Asian. A minority of respondents classified themselves as “unreconciled” – that is, even as adults, they still long to look like their parents or members of the majority culture.

- ***Positive racial/ethnic identity development is most effectively facilitated by “lived” experiences such as travel to native country, attending racially diverse schools, and having role models of their own race/ethnicity.*** Many Korean adoptees were active agents in resolving identity struggles related to race/ethnicity, with 80 percent reporting that they tried to learn more about their ethnic group. Most had visited Korea (61%) and participated in adoption-related organizations or Internet groups. Korean adoptees offered practical suggestions to adoption professionals about actions that would have helped their shift in identity from White to Korean American; travel to the country of their birth topped the list. They also noted the importance of attending racially diverse schools and having child care providers, teachers and other adult role models of their own race/ethnicity. One respondent poignantly described the loneliness of being in an all White community this way: “*I was the diversity in my high school.*”
- ***Contact with birth relatives, according to the White respondents, is the most helpful factor in achieving a positive adoptive identity.*** When asked to name the experiences or services that are most helpful in achieving a positive identity as an adopted adult, White adoptees rated contact with birth relatives as the most important. The vast majority of respondents – 86 percent – had taken steps to find their birth families. An unexpected finding was that a high percentage (49%) of the Korean adoptees had searched as well, and 30 percent had experienced contact with birth relatives, despite the common assumption that those adopted from Korea have little access to information about their families of origin. For Whites, 45 percent reported having contact with birth relatives. Like the one in the preceding bullet point, this finding underscores the essential fact that adoptees, like their counterparts raised in their families of birth, want to know (as the cliché puts it) “who they are and where they come from.” A deeper understanding of this reality has broad implications for adoption law, policy and practice.
- ***Different factors predict comfort with adoptive and racial/ethnic identity for Korean and White adoptees.*** This study sought to identify the factors that predict adopted adults’ comfort with their adoptive identity, as well as with their racial/ethnic identity. The strongest predictor of comfort with one’s adoption identity for White respondents was life satisfaction. For Korean adopted adults, three factors predicted comfort with adoption identity: gender (females were more comfortable with their adoption); satisfaction with life (higher satisfaction predicted greater comfort with adoption); and self-esteem (higher self-esteem predicted greater comfort with adoption).

While most Korean respondents reported achieving some level of comfort with their race/ethnicity as adults, a significant minority (34%) remained uncomfortable or only somewhat comfortable. Two factors were significant predictors of their comfort with racial/ethnic identity: self-esteem (those having higher self-esteem felt more comfortable with their race/ethnicity) and their scores on the MEIM (stronger ethnic identification predicted greater comfort with

their race/ethnicity). Also, experiencing less racial discrimination and having higher life satisfaction were associated with greater comfort with their racial/ethnic identity. For Koreans, experiences of racial teasing – which were prevalent – also were associated with lower life satisfaction and lower self-esteem.

## Recommendations

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Based on this study, as well as on the examination of theory and previous research that undergirds it (Appendix I), the Adoption Institute recommends a range of changes in adoption practice and policy to promote positive adoptive and transracial/cultural identity, including:

- ***Expand parental preparation and post-placement support for those adopting across race and culture.*** Such preparation should include educating parents about the salience of race across the developmental course, instruction about racial identity development and the tasks inherent in such development, and assistance in understanding racial discrimination and how best to arm their children to combat the prejudice and stereotypes they will face. Preparation also should include the understanding that seeking services and supports is a positive part of parenting – i.e., it is a sign of strength, not failure.
- ***Develop empirically based practices and resources to prepare transracially and transculturally adopted youth to cope with racial bias.*** This study, as well as previous research, indicates that perceived discrimination is linked with greater psychological distress, lower self-esteem, and more discomfort with one's race/ethnicity. Hence, it is essential to arm transracially adopted youth with ways to cope with bias and discrimination in a manner that does not negatively impact their identity.
- ***Promote laws, policies and practices that facilitate access to information for adopted individuals.*** For adopted individuals, gaining information about their origins is not just a matter of curiosity, but a matter of gaining the raw materials needed to fill in the missing pieces in their lives and derive an integrated sense of self. Both adoption professionals and the larger society need to recognize this basic human need and right, and to facilitate access to needed information for adopted individuals.
- ***Educate parents, teachers, practitioners, the media and others about the realities of adoption to erase stigmas and stereotypes, minimize adoption-related discrimination, and provide children with more opportunities for positive development.*** Generations of secrecy, shame and stereotypes about adoption (and those it affects) have taken a toll, as the respondents in this research make clear. Just as discrimination based on color, gender, sexual orientation and religion – all components of people's identity – are broadly considered to be socially unacceptable, adoption-related discrimination also should be unacceptable. Professionals and parents also need to be better informed about the importance of providing diversity and appropriate role models.

- ***Increase research on the risk and protective factors that shape the adjustment of adoptees, especially those adopted transracially/culturally in the U.S. or abroad.*** More longitudinal research that combines quantitative and qualitative methods is needed to better understand the process through which children, teens and young adults progress in confronting transracial adoption identity issues. Additional research is also needed on the identity journey experienced by in-race adoptees – and, pointedly, more of the studies of every kind need to include the perspective of adopted individuals themselves.

## Conclusion

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The findings of this study reflect the need to go “beyond culture camp” to provide children with ongoing experiences and relationships that promote positive racial (and adoptive) identity development. Our respondents valued cultural celebrations and other opportunities to learn about their origins, but such singular events appear insufficient. Instead, the research points to a need to move beyond strategies that promote cultural socialization to experiences that promote racial and cultural identification and comfort. Part of this work is to expand understanding of the importance of learning about one’s origins, whether by traveling to birth country or by seeking out biological relatives in the U.S. Further, there seems no question about the need to provide transracially adopted children with opportunities to be in diverse settings and have diverse role models. Some of our respondents also noted that their parents did not know or understand the impact of being a person of color in a predominately White community or the importance of connecting children to adults of the same racial/ethnic background to serve as sources of information, support and role models. The same can be said for adoption itself; that is, adopted children benefit from interacting with other adopted children, and from having adult role models who themselves were adopted. Adoption professionals and parents, together, can facilitate a broader network of these types of supports and opportunities for adopted children and youth, especially those adopted transracially.

The field of adoption is evolving. Early adoption practice sought to match children with parents who looked like them and had the same temperament or intelligence, in large part to make adoption invisible. Adoption, with its association with illegitimacy and infertility, was seen as a less desirable way to form a family. “Good” adoptive families minimized the importance of adoption. As families formed across racial, ethnic and cultural lines became more common, adoption necessarily became more visible. But until fairly recently in adoption practice, the impact and meaning of transracial/cultural adoption were also minimized. Commitment and love of the adoptive parents, exposure to positive aspects of the child’s culture, and perhaps connection with other families who had adopted from the same country were thought to be enough to support the development of positive identity. As this study demonstrates, the integration of “being adopted,” of one’s racial/ethnic identity and one’s identity as a person adopted from another country is a complex and continually evolving process. This understanding needs to inform the actions of parents, professionals and adopted persons themselves – as well as the laws, policies and practices that impact their lives.