
The transnational adoption paradox: Thinking about family as a normative experience

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Abstract

The transnational adoption paradox involves the simultaneous loss of birth culture heritage and biological family connections and the assimilation into a new family and culture. Negotiating this paradox is a normative experience for internationally adopted persons that involves thinking about birth family. I discuss how the wondering and yearning for birth family information contributes to a sense of identity and well-being.

Modern Adoption

Assimilation

Orphan trains

Boarding schools

Nurture over nature

Nuclear Family

“The doctrine of the best interest of the child was redefined in the postwar years to mean a home in a nuclear family, rather than support for a biological mother” (E.. Tyler May, 1988)

Melting Pot

Nuclear families settled into suburbs, “the new *melting pot*, where migrants from ethnic working-class neighborhoods in the cities moved into the middle class. In the process, they lost much of their identity as ethnic outsiders, and became simply ‘*white*.’”

Korean War

Adoption of Biracial children of US servicemen

US as a progression place of liberation

Korea as a backward thinking country

Nuclear Family

Melting Pot

Korean War

Transnational Adoption Paradox

Simultaneous loss of birth culture heritage and biological family connections and the assimilation into a new family and culture.

Not My White Savior

To my Korean mother
I don't know who you are
I don't know your name
I don't know your face, your history
... I don't know if you think about me
but I know I think about you
(Lee, 2018, p. 40-41)

Confused

Angry

Ungrateful

Birth Family Thoughts

The natural curiosity and questions about the origin of personal characteristics, heritage, physical appearance, and an imagined life.

Integration of the psychological presence of birth family into one's sense of self and identity

BFT as Normative

Relatively stable but fluid

Varies over life course and contexts

Life events as precipitator

Birth Family Thoughts Scale

How much do adopted persons think about birth family

Think about birth parents, birth parent appearance, birth family siblings, imagined life with birth family, birth name

Study Samples

Four studies (N = 571)

359 adolescents (13-20)

212 adults (18-57)

Adopted before age 3 from S Korea

Increasing Birth Family Thoughts

Adolescents think “a little” to “some”

Adults think “some” to “a lot”

Birth Family and Identity

Correlated with ethnic identity
(exploration and commitment)

Correlated with adoptive identity
(acceptance and appreciation)

Birth Family and Family

Not correlated with parent involvement and parent-child conflict

Correlated with ethnic socialization (incl. peer socialization)

Birth Family and Korea

Not related to travel to Korea, but related to orphanage visit and birth family search

Above and beyond ethnic and adoptive identities

Birth Family and Mental Health

Correlated with internalizing,
sometimes with externalizing,
reflective and brooding

Uncorrelated with peer social
development, satisfaction with life,
depression/distress

Confused

Clarity

Angry

Adjusted

Ungrateful

Reflective

Birth Family Thoughts

Natural curiosity - increases with age

Part of one's understanding about ethnic heritage and adoption

Nurtured by parents and peers

Reflective, introspective

Sadness, loneliness over loss

Next Steps

Search

Activism

Parenting

Thank You

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