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2-7-2016

## Displacement, Identity and Belonging for Ibyangin: The Personal Journey of Transracial Korean-Born Adoptees

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### Recommended APA Citation

Reynolds, J. D., Ponterotto, J. G., & Lecker, C. (2016). Displacement, Identity and Belonging for Ibyangin: The Personal Journey of Transracial Korean-Born Adoptees. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(2), 228-251. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2016.2197>

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## Displacement, Identity and Belonging for Ibyangin: The Personal Journey of Transracial Korean-Born Adoptees

### Abstract

The present study examined the lived experience (erlebnis) of adult transracial, Korean-born adoptees (Ibyangin; Yngvesson & Coutin, 2006) raised in the United States by White families. Long interviews (McCracken, 1988) were conducted with fourteen young adult (age 26-30) Korean-born adoptees in-person or by phone. The study was anchored in the constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005) and utilized the phenomenological inquiry model (Moustakas, 1994) to explore the essence of the international transracial adoption experience. Two major clusters of meaning with additional subthemes were related to a) identity development, and b) decision to return to Korea. Limitations of the study are reviewed, implications for follow-up research are presented, and clinical applications are addressed.

### Keywords

Ibyangin, Transracial Korean-Born Adoptees, Transracial Adoption, Identity, Belongingness, Qualitative Research

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### Acknowledgements

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to the fourteen adoptees who participated in this study. It was such a privilege to hear about each individual's adoption story and share in the meaning making process with them. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the supportive editorial review team at The Qualitative Report.

# **Displacement, Identity, and Belonging for *Ibyangin*: The Personal Journey of Transracial Korean-Born Adoptees**

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The diaspora of Korean-born adoptees raised in the U.S. has led to a wide range of research into the experiences of *Ibyanga* and *Ibyangin* (Romanized Korean words for adopted children and adopted persons; E. Kim, 2010) including cultural and racial identity development, socialization, acculturation, self-esteem, and overall psychological well-being and adjustment (Baden, 2002; Baden & Steward, 2000; Friedlander et al., 2000; Hoffman & Peña, 2013; Shiao & Tuan, 2008). The present study advances the psychological study of transracial Korean adoptees through meaning making guided by qualitative interviews with 14 transracial Korean-born adoptees raised in the United States by White families. Our discussion begins by providing a socio-historical context on the Korean-born transracial adoptee diaspora, followed by an overview of identity and identity development constructs, the authors' horizon of understanding, the methods of the study, an integrated results and discussion section, and finally the conclusion and clinical implications.

## **Historical and Political Context**

### **Geopolitics of Adoption Following the Korean War**

Originally a "social experiment" (Gathering of the First Generation of Korean Adoptees, 1999, p. 6), international adoption was considered a temporary solution to the upsurge of displaced/orphaned children as a direct result of the geopolitical, social, and economic factors surrounding the Korean War (1950-1953). In their efforts to rebrand themselves from colonizer and occupier to rescuer and relief worker, the US government and military (and later missionaries and relief organizations) worked steadfastly to solve the orphan crisis following the Korean War by funding and constructing over 400 orphanages (Pate, 2014). Without the US military presence and intervention prior to, during, and following the Korean War, Korea's social welfare system may never have adopted the western model of what is known today as international transracial adoption (see Pate, 2014, for a complete review of geopolitics).

As a result of the significant social and economic hardships Korea experienced following the Korean War, the US government and military recruited middle-class families through strategic marketing, painting a picture that Korean orphans (those who had lost their parents due to the war, as well as those abandoned) needed first their financial help and soon thereafter their commitment as parents to Korean children (Pate, 2014). Since this occurred while the Immigration Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson-Reed Act, which allowed immigration for 2% of each nationality into the US, excluding immigrants from Asia completely; Ngai, 1999; U.S. Department of State, Office of the Historian, 2015) was still in place in the US, and mixed race marriages were illegal in some states (in 1967 anti-miscegenation laws were deemed unconstitutional), special amendments and laws were passed in order for American parents to legally adopt Asian/Korean children (for example, the 1953 Refugee Relief Act and the 1957 Orphan Bill; see Pate, 2014).

This US adoption initiative led to a continual stream of orphaned children available for adoption following the Korean War and throughout the Cold War era. Pate (2014) suggested that international transracial adoption of Korean children was one of the precursors to mixed race American families, but only with the dominant White individuals situated as parents/saviors of the minority Asians/Koreans, a striking parallel to the US's parental and colonizing role over Korea.

According to the Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare (as cited in the Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009), approximately 160,247 children have been adopted from South Korea to western nations (US, Canada, and European countries); 107,145 children were placed with families in the United States between 1953 and 2007, representing an estimated 10% of the Korean-American population currently residing in the US, and 54,068 were placed with European families. Many Korean adoptees were adopted by families in Australia and New Zealand as well. E. Kim (2010) reported that since the 1990s, approximately 2,200 children were adopted overseas from Korea annually. In the last decade a marked decline in the number of adoptions has resulted from the interaction among Korean lawmakers, Western adoption agencies, and the increasing presence of Korean adoptees who have returned to Korea to advocate for adoptee rights and changes in policy.

### **Adoptees Returning to Korea**

Since the late 1980's the accessibility of visas and social programs for adoptees has increased significantly (e.g., first trip home, motherland tours, birth family search, language and cultural lessons, educational scholarships, etc.). The passing of the Overseas Korean Act in 1999 gave the population of transnational Korean-born adoptees, as well as Koreans with nationalities other than Korean (i.e., *gyopos* [e.g., Korean Australians, Korean Americans, Korean Europeans, etc.]), the opportunity to return to South Korea to live and work indefinitely. Additionally, the Nationality Law of 2010 provided Korean adoptees the opportunity to reclaim citizenship/exercise dual citizenship if their adoptive country allows.

Over the last several decades, Korean-born adoptees (as well as other international transracial adoptees) have sought to counterbalance the plenary nature of their adoption through return trips to Korea in search of cultural, racial, and familial/blood connections. Korean based adoption agencies now have divisions or departments dedicated to "post adoption services" and organizations such as KoRoot (House of the Korean Root), Global Overseas Adoptees' Link (GOA'L) and International Korean Adoptee Service Inc (InKAS) have been influential in transracial Korean adoptees returning to Korea by providing motherland tours and language scholarships. Additionally, these organizations help adoptees search for birth families, secure F4 work visas (renewable indefinitely), and most recently obtain dual citizenship.

E. Kim (2010) added that these return trips to Korea are more regularly being considered an expected stage in the adoptee lifecycle. Baden, Treweeke, and Ahluwalia (2012) postulated that some transracial and international adoptees purposely and actively re-acculturate to their heritage and country of birth culture, in essence reclaiming their original heritage through trips to their birth country as an adolescent or adult. This introduces *returning to the birth country* as an important factor in the lives of Korean adoptees as it relates to their sense of belongingness and identity (Kim, Suyemoto, & Turner, 2010; Lee, 2003; Lee & Quintana, 2005).

Extant transracial adoption literature has explored the value of adoption as a societal intervention (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn, 2007), the cultural socialization of adoptees and their experiences with racial identity, discrimination, and prejudice, as well as the resultant clinical implications for the growing number of multiethnic and multiracial families (Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, Gunnar, & The Minnesota International Adoption Project Team, 2006). Numerous scholars have expressed clinical and theoretical concern over transracial adoption and the ability of majority culture (White) parents to raise minority (Korean) children/persons of color in a society where racial discrimination and marginalization are still operant (Andujo, 1988; Docan-Morgan, 2010; Hollingsworth, 1997; Townsend, 1995). Research has explored the identity development of racial and ethnic minorities (Friedlander et al., 2000), coping with negative myths and stereotypes (Zamostny, Wiley, O'Brien, Lee, & Baden, 2003) and the implications for adoptees with their partners and children (Baden & Wiley, 2007).

E. Kim (2010) reported many adoptees were happy to have been adopted and acknowledged experiencing certain privileges and freedoms living in the US; however, there was often a denial of loss or an indication that adoptees felt the benefits of their transracial adoption outweighed the loss and misfortune they experienced. E. Kim (2010) described this as a dialectic that many adoptees experience; on the one hand they are thankful for their families and experiences, but on the other hand many adoptees feel some sadness linked to a sense of loss of birth family and a longing to fill the void in their identities, even if they struggle to express these feelings. Feeling happy about one's adoption is distinct from having a sense that one was "lucky" to have been adopted, which is an experience some adoptees have faced growing up when other well-intentioned individuals state "you should feel lucky to be adopted" (see Pine, 2015).

An important goal of the present study was to explore the *erlebnis* (lived experience) of adult transracial, Korean-born adoptees raised in America by White families. The researchers aspired to understand the multiple realities that participants constructed based on their personal interpretations and meaning-finding of their experiences and interactions within a sociopolitical and historical context. The existing literature reveals a lack of attention to adult meaning finding directly from Korean adoptees themselves, as historically the voices of transracial Korean adoptees have been filtered through the perspectives of adoptive parents, social workers, and journalists/writers (see Jones, 2015).

## Identity

Identity and identity development remain complicated constructs to research and explore due to the intersecting and multivariate nature of one's identity (i.e., race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc.). While race and ethnicity are both socially constructed, race typically refers to skin color and physical characteristics (Omi & Winant, 1994) whereas ethnicity refers to cultural patterns and beliefs, typically from a common national group (Root, 1998). Both racial and ethnic identity are continuously constructed and co-constructed based on an individual's sense of acceptance/rejection or belonging/exclusion, or in other words an individual's psychological orientation to belonging to a group (Kim, Suyemoto, & Turner,

2010). These identities evolve and mature throughout the course of life, often during key developmental periods or as a result of unexpected experiences (e.g., racism). In addition, they are affected by social reference points as well as group acceptance, and have implications for psychological well-being. Basow, Lilley, Bookwala, and McGillicuddy-DeLisi (2010) found that increased levels of ethnic identity and a more positive adjustment to adoption were directly related to greater psychological well-being for Korean American adoptees.

Tashiro (2002) termed *ascribed identities* to refer to the identities that society assigns to an individual. For transracial Korean adoptees, an ascribed identity is often an incorrect or mislabeled identity. Korean adoptees, who racially are Asian, may not identify as Asian, despite their ascribed racial identity as Asian. In addition, away from their parents or in other contexts, it may be assumed that an adoptee's ascribed ethnic identity is Korean (or some other east Asian ethnicity), despite the lack of cultural awareness, social reference point(s), and sense of ethnic belonging or group acceptance early in life. For some adoptees, their declared racial and/or ethnic identity may not be consistent with their ascribed identity, or they may experience shifts over the course of their lives that accentuate the dissonance between their ascribed and declared identities. The following three identity models will be used to conceptualize the identities of the 14 participants.

### **Identity Development Models**

J. Kim's (1981) pioneering Asian American Identity Development (AAID) model provided insight into Asian American identity theory from a linear perspective. This seminal dissertation found that Asian American (specifically, third generation Japanese American women) identity often develops sequentially through five stages (ethnic awareness; white identification; awakening to social political consciousness; redirection; incorporation), culminating in an integrated, healthy conception of personal identity and an appreciation for one's worldview with an understanding of how dominant discourse deleteriously affects minority experiences and beliefs about oneself.

Grotevant (1997) extended his work in developmental and multilevel identity formation for adolescents (Grotevant, 1987) to adoptees, purporting that the most relevant aspects of adoptee identity are self-definition, coherence of personality (i.e., how personality traits unify), and sense of continuity over time (i.e., the connections from past, present, and future that transcend location and context). He suggested that adoptees move through four identity statuses, namely: Unexamined Identity (i.e., adoptees had neither thought about adoption issues nor reflected on adoptee identity); Limited Identity (i.e., adoptees were willing to think and talk about adoption but were not concerned and had not explored adoptee identity); Unsettled Identity (i.e., reported moderate salience of adoptee identity and low to moderate positive affect); Integrated Identity (i.e., had moderately or significantly explored adoptee identity and exercised strong positive affect).

Baden and Steward (2000) and Kim et al. (2010) proposed that racial and ethnic identity are distinct for transracial Korean adoptees. While an individual may be at a later stage in one dimension of identity (race or ethnicity), simultaneously they may be at a previous stage in another dimension of identity (e.g., an adoptee identifying with Korean or Korean American while not identifying with Asian or Asian American, or vice versa). For adoptees, there is also the factor of their adoptive parent or parents' cultures. From a visual standpoint, this creates a dimensional, rather than linear, model that accounts for both the adoptee's racial group, the adoptive parents' racial group, the adoptee's culture of origin, and the adoptive parents' culture, which results in 16 distinct cultural and racial identity combinations (Baden, 2002; Baden & Steward, 2000). The age at which an individual is adopted, as well as the degree to which an individual explores her or his culture of origin, may impact one's sense of bicultural identity

(Baden, 2000). An extension of this identity conceptualization might illuminate an adoptee's stage of racial, ethnic, and national identity using a three-dimensional axis. These myriad topics and directions for future study inform the perspectives of the researchers in the present study and the initial framework for the interview protocol.

### **Authors' Horizons of Understanding**

Guided by methodological guidelines in the constructivist research paradigm, the authors present our horizon of understanding and the bracketing of expectations for the study (Morrow, 2005; Rennie, 1984).

I (senior author) am a 32-year-old transracial international adoptee who was born in Seoul, Korea. My birth mother put me up for adoption and I was placed with my foster mother for four months before being adopted by my American parents in December 1983. I was raised in Lakewood, NY, a small town southwest of Buffalo. As a person of color, specifically of Asian descent, growing up in a predominantly White town in the US in the 1980s and 1990s was challenging for a variety of reasons. Similar to many transracial adoptees, I lacked an awareness of race, ethnicity, power and privilege, and the systems in place that maintain the status quo. As an adult I have had the privilege of returning to Korea six times which has helped me explore my identity and sparked an interest in understanding the transracial Korean-adoptee experience. During a recent visit in 2013, I became a dual citizen of Korea and the US.

I (second author) am a 57-year-old Italian American man born and raised in the Bronx, NY. I spent part of my childhood and adulthood living in Italy and I have always been interested in issues of immigration, acculturation, biculturalism, and returning to one's ancestral land. I have been engaged in multicultural counseling research, teaching, and practice since the early 1980s. Coming into this study I knew little about Korean adoptee experience and the *Ibyangin* cohort. I held no particular expectations for findings in this study save for a heightened awareness of transracial adoptee issues shared by the senior author over the past four years of our collaborative work.

I (third author) am a 33-year-old woman of French and German heritage, with dual American and British citizenship. I was born in Panama and raised in Panama, Israel, and the US by parents who lived abroad for work. When I was 19 years old, I moved to the UK and spent my twenties living and working in London, and then became a naturalized UK citizen. Being raised as a third culture child, and spending formative periods of my life abroad, I have been fascinated by issues of identity development, immigration, belonging and multiculturalism. Embarking on this study, I had limited knowledge about transracial adoption and the *Ibyangin* experience. I had no particular expectations for the findings of this study aside from increased theoretical sensitivity I gained from the literature and my collaborative work with the first author.

## **Method**

### **Research Paradigm and Inquiry Approach**

This study utilized a constructivist-interpretivist research paradigm (Creswell 2009; Morrow, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2005). Psychological phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994), was chosen as the mode of inquiry for its focus on the description of the subjective lived experience of participants in relation to a psychological concept or construct, in this case exploring the essence of what it means to be a transracial Korean American adoptee.

Consistent with the constructivist paradigm and phenomenological method, the researchers worked to bracket out their preconceived expectations or biases (Creswell, 2007).

Furthermore, to promote trustworthiness of data collection and interpretation, the researchers memoed throughout the interview process. These memos served as a source of data triangulation when extracting themes and selecting representative participant quotes (see Morrow, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005).

In an effort to more clearly communicate the findings of the 14 constructivist-interpretivist interviews, the results and discussion section were integrated into one combined section. While this practice is less common in research articles, it is at times recommended in constructivist-oriented studies following the iterative analysis model (see Morrow, 2007; Ponterotto & Grieger, 2007). In the present case, this combined section enabled a more fluid integration of present study results with existing literature.

## **Recruitment and Sampling**

This study was approved by the authors' home Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects. The theoretical sampling (Morrow, 2005) was based on the experiences of Korean-born, transracial adoptees raised in the US by White parents. The researchers initially narrowed the participant sample with the criteria that participants were adopted at two years old or younger with the hope of securing a somewhat homogeneous sample of Korean-born adoptees in regards to demographics, while simultaneously capturing variation in participant experience (Patton, 1990). Participants were recruited using Patton's (1990) qualitative snowball sampling procedure. Participants were screened through a demographic form that was filled out prior to the interview. Interested individuals who met inclusion criteria were interviewed in-person (eight participants) and via the phone due to geographic location (six participants). Participants were not provided any form of compensation for their time. Six of the in-person interviews occurred at the host institution's campus in a private room. Two interviews occurred in-person in Korea in a private room at the Guesthouse KoRoot. The remaining six interviews occurred over the phone due to geographic distance from the researchers. No marked differences were observed based on the interview format (in-person versus over the phone); however, it is possible participants interviewed via the phone may have felt added anonymity. Conversely, individuals who participated in-person may have felt added safety due to the warmth established through human connection and attunement.

After five interviews were conducted, a sixth participant was identified who was adopted at the age of four. The researchers agreed that this particular individual might shed light on other variables (e.g., the impact of: language acquisition; memories of Korea, Korean culture, birth family, and departure from Korea; varied assimilation and acculturation experiences) impacting identity and the decision to return to Korea.

## **Participants**

In total, 14 participants were interviewed, 13 of whom were adopted before the age of two, comprising nine women and five men (including the male researcher-participant) between the ages of 26 and 30, with a mean age of 27.6 years. Of the 14 participants, six had returned to South Korea as adolescents or adults and eight had not returned at the time of the interviews. Among the six who had returned to Korea, three were female and three were male. Of the six participants who had returned to Korea, five had returned two or more times and four had searched for their birth families (of which three had been reunited with their birth mothers/families) and one participant was unsuccessful in their attempt. Additionally, one participant who had not returned had attempted the birth family search but had been unsuccessful in their attempts at the time of the interview. As the researchers learned about the

lives of the participants, it became clear that there were demographic characteristics that united the participants and others that revealed marked differences between them, creating distinct cohorts within the pool.

**Similarities.** All of the participants were college graduates and ten of the 14 participants were pursuing or had completed graduate studies. Ten participants were either working or studying at the graduate level in human service fields (e.g., psychology, social work, nursing, or education). Five of the adoptees grew up in the same northeastern community and all but two of the participants (one grew up in the state of Louisiana and one grew up near Seattle, Washington) grew up in the Northeast (Western New York, the suburbs of Philadelphia, and New England). Two participants were living in San Francisco and two participants were living in Seoul, Korea at the time of the interviews. The relative narrowness of career choice, education level and location may be a reflection of our snowball qualitative sampling procedure (Patton, 1990).

**Differences.** The participants grew up in families ranging in socioeconomic status from lower-middle class to upper-middle class. The family constellations, interactions, and associated meaning that each participant ascribed from childhood and adolescent experiences also varied including death of a parent (3), parental divorce (2), and the race and biological relationships of siblings to the participants and to the adoptive parents. Eight participants had at least one other Korean adopted sibling, and of these eight participants there were two biological adopted sibling groups (one participant had an adopted biological twin sister who was adopted into the same adoptive family but did not participate in the study); two participants were adopted into families in which the adoptive parents also adopted multiple children domestically from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, but both participants were the only Korean adoptee; two participants were an only child (both male); two participants had siblings who were biological children of the adoptive parents; two participants (who were siblings) had an adopted sister who was biologically their adoptive parents' niece; and one participant had step-siblings. Additionally, four participants were married, four were in committed relationships, and six were single at the time of the interview.

## Procedure

Using the framework of an initial interview protocol, researchers conducted one hour to two and a half hour interviews either in-person or over the phone. Interviews were conducted by the senior author and one co-author, but the whole team reviewed transcripts. Additionally, the researchers transcribed the recorded interviews prior to the next interview, which facilitated the iterative process, theoretical sampling, and intimacy with the data (see Morrow, 2005; Polkinghorne, 2005; Ponterotto, 2005). All of the authors analyzed the interviews to increase trustworthiness of the findings.

The researchers encouraged the use of alternative forms of communication in the form of sketching/drawing for the in-person participants. Given the exploratory nature of the research question, the senior researcher, himself an *Ibyangin*, was also able to participate in the study consistent with Patton's (1990) Heuristic research model. He was interviewed by the third author. As an interviewee, this co-researcher helped guide the qualitative study heuristically with his intimate personal experience of adoption.

Before the interviews were scheduled, the researchers were in contact with the potential participants about the nature and focus of the study and explained the informed consent process. After the interviews, the researchers asked the participants for feedback and followed-up via email with the participants a week later to ensure that there were no delayed negative responses to the in-depth interview process.

Once interviews were completed and transcribed, data was analyzed, which consisted of horizontalization (i.e., highlighting “significant statements;” [Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994]) with the assistance of *Dedoose*, a software program designed to facilitate the analysis of qualitative and mixed methods research through isolating and categorizing potential theme areas within text by labeling and color-coding excerpts while allowing for easy reference to the codes.

**Interview Protocol**

The participants were asked to fill out brief demographic questionnaires prior to the interview to both act as a screening device as well as aid the researchers in interpretation of the descriptive data and clarification of the findings. Demographic questionnaires consisted of date of birth, age of adoption, placement between birth and adoption, childhood city, current city, parents’ marital status, presence of siblings (adopted, older/younger), attendance at Korean cultural activities as a child, and whether or not participant had visited Korea and if so, age at time of visit(s) and number of visits.

Participants were first asked to share their life story. This led to a detailed narrative focused on many broad theme areas largely surrounding the phenomenon of international transracial adoption. If not shared in their life story, participants were asked about their identity and identity development over time; childhood and upbringing; and decision to return to Korea and birth family search as it affects their family, partners and friends. In the initial design of the protocol (which was iterative in nature), the researchers agreed that these topical areas would guide the interviews.

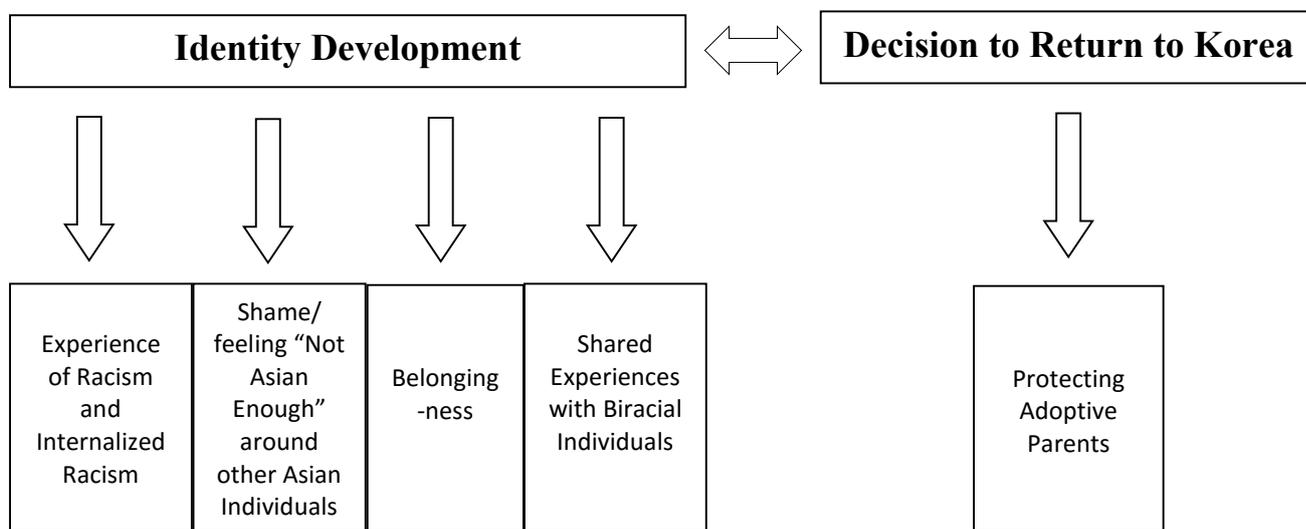


Figure 1. Major Clusters of Meaning and their subthemes

**Integrated Results and Discussion**

Analysis of the transcripts and memos yielded an initial pool of 32 clusters of meaning. These initial clusters were reduced to two major themes and various subthemes: identity development (subthemes: experience of racism and internalized racism; shame/feeling “not Asian enough” around other Asian individuals; belongingness; shared experience with biracial individuals), and the decision to return to Korea (subtheme: protecting adoptive parents). One additional finding that was initially overlooked came to light during a discussion of participant

transcriptions between the research team. Participant intellectualization and distancing from feelings when discussing one's adoption was brought to light, which was a common thread connecting experiences across the participants. The two major clusters of meaning and their subthemes are presented in Figure 1 (See Figure 1).

Below findings are discussed in relation to extant literature, participant experience, and emerging theories on identity, international transracial adoption, and the Asian American minority experience.

Identity development has been extensively researched in the psychological community; however empirical research specific to the transracial Korean adoptee experience continues to be limited in scope and depth. E. Kim (2010) described identity as a place of belonging made out of bits and fragments, often linked to one's blood or genetics. For international transracial adoptees, one's "foreign origins are racially marked" (D. Kim, 1978, p. 11). This is often something adoptees may grapple with over the course of their lives, in part due to the fact that there is no blood or genetic link for transracial adoptees (unless birth family is searched for and found). Hoffman and Peña (2013) indicated that racial and ethnic identity development is affected by factors such as the intersection of one's environment, the systems in place, and nuanced experiences over the course of one's life. Thus negotiating identity and processing the experience of adoption may be a challenging lifelong endeavor, a relationship adoptees must continually navigate and renegotiate.

All 14 participants expressed a struggle in dealing with the expectations and opinions of outsiders related to their racial and ethnic identities. Participants indicated that at various points in their lives (and in some cases up to and including the time of the interview) they did not feel fully accepted either as an American or a Korean/Asian American, regardless of how they self-identified. Participants indicated that others often made inaccurate assumptions about how they would identify or label themselves (assuming that they are culturally Asian/Korean, or assuming that they are culturally White once adoptee status is declared), in part due to the invisible nature of their adoption status (ascribed identity; Tashiro, 2002).

Responses regarding how participants self-identified and how that shifted over the course of life were compared with J. Kim's (1981) Asian American Identity Development Model as well as Grotevant's (1997) adoptee identity statuses. All participants endorsed experiencing a semi-linear, sometimes multidirectional progression in their identity development, which was similar to J. Kim's five-stage model (see Figure 2). However, there were marked distinctions in adoptee experiences that deviated from J. Kim's model, namely that adoptees skipped (or experienced later in life) the Ethnic Awareness Stage (stage 1) and proceeded directly to the White Identification Stage (stage 2), in a few instances believing as children that they were White.

The majority of participants reported that they identified as American as children, but as they developed into adolescence and into adulthood, a shift occurred in their declared identity; participants eventually shifted their identity to Korean, Korean American or Asian American (sometimes "Adopted"). In regards to Grotevant's (1997) adoptee identity statuses, there were no adoptees that resembled the Unexamined Identity status; one adoptee appeared to be in the Limited Identity status; the remaining 13 participants were at various points along the continuum bearing resemblance somewhere between an Unsettled Identity status and an Integrated Identity status.

**KOREAN ADOPTEES OFTEN EXPERIENCE A SEMI-LINEAR PROGRESSION:**

<b><u>Phase:</u></b>	Childhood	→	Adolescence	→	Emerging/Early Adulthood	→	Adulthood
<b><u>Identity:</u></b>	American (sometimes White)	→	American	→	Asian American Adopted	→	Korean/Korean American/Korean American Adoptee Asian/Asian American
<b><u>Kim's Stage:</u></b>	<del>Ethnic Awareness</del> White Identification	→	Ethnic Awareness  Awakening to Social  Political Consciousness	→	Redirection	→	Incorporation
<b><u>Grotevant's Status:</u></b>	Unexamined Identity	→	Limited Identity	→	Unsettled Identity	→	Integrated Identity
<b><u>Critical Moments:</u></b>	Bullied in school/community Embracing White values	→	University; Trips to Korea Exposure to Asian/Korean culture	→	Asian/Korean pride		

**KOREAN ADOPTEES WHO MAY DECIDE NOT TO RETURN TO KOREA OR EXPLORE HERITAGE:**

<b><u>Phase:</u></b>	Childhood	→	Adolescence	→	Emerging/Early Adulthood	→	Adulthood
<b><u>Identity:</u></b>	American (sometimes White)	→	American	→	Asian American Adopted	→	Korean/Korean American/Korean American Adoptee Asian/Asian American
<b><u>Kim's Stage:</u></b>	<del>Ethnic Awareness</del> White Identification	→	Awakening to Social Political Consciousness (?)	→	<del>Redirection</del>	→	<del>Incorporation</del>
<b><u>Grotevant's Status:</u></b>	Unexamined Identity	→	Limited Identity	→	Unsettled Identity	→	<del>Integrated Identity</del>
<b><u>Critical Moments:</u></b>	Bullied in school/community Embracing White values	→	University; Trips to Korea Exposure to Asian/Korean culture (?)	→	<del>Asian/Korean pride</del>		

Figure 2. Korean American Adoptee Identity Development Model adapted from Kim, J. (1981) and Grotevant (1997).

\*Crossed-out text implies participants may not have experienced this phase

**KOREAN ADOPTEES WHO MAY EMBRACE ASIAN VALUES AND FAIL TO IDENTIFY WITH WHITE CULTURE:**

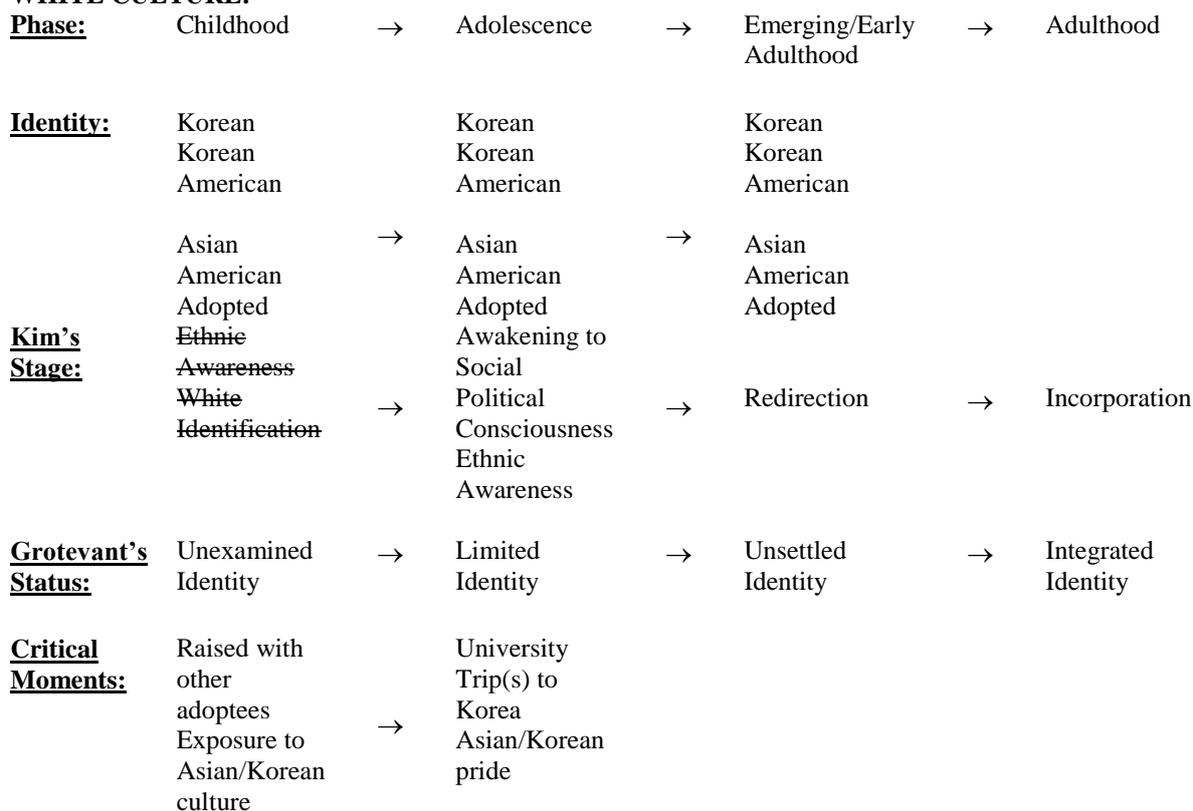


Figure 2 cont. Korean American Adoptee Identity Development Model adapted from Kim, J. (1981) and Grotevant (1997).

\*Crossed-out text implies participants may not have experienced this phase

Such shifts commonly occurred at or during important transition points in participants' lives (e.g., entering high school, attending college, traveling or visiting other countries, returning to Korea). All participants reported that they currently identify as Korean, Korean American, and/or Korean American Adopted and in most cases, also Asian American. One exception was a participant who identified as Korean, adopted, and ethnically Italian (see Baden & Steward, 2000 for a review of alternative adoptee racial-cultural identities). In some situations, adoptees had not grasped a sociopolitical awareness, did not describe or discuss experiences of racism, discrimination, or marginalization, and may not have visited or expressed any desire to visit Korea (somewhere between a Limited Identity status and an Unsettled Identity status). There was an obvious and perhaps purposeful distancing that some participants demonstrated. For these participants, it seemed that their connection to their Korean heritage was not a priority, as is displayed in the second iteration of J. Kim's (1981) model adapted for adoptees. Alternatively, this may have been an adaptive response to their given life circumstances and feelings about Korea.

A third iteration of J. Kim's (1981) model shows a lack of ethnic awareness, a lack of embracing White values, an earlier awakening to sociopolitical consciousness, and subsequently an earlier incorporation of one's identity. These participants displayed a more consistent identity across the lifespan and throughout key developmental transitions. Several participants described this type of identity development, notably a participant raised in a multiethnic family with adopted children from various backgrounds and another participant raised outside of Seattle in a Korean adoptee community of approximately 15 adoptee families.

These individuals exhibited more traits of Grotevant's (1997) Unsettled and Integrated Identity statuses.

A more diverse sample of Korean adoptee participants may yield additional iterations of J. Kim's (1981) and Grotevant's (1997) identity model, but generally there seemed to be linear consistency in the way in which Korean adoptees identify once they reach adulthood: as Korean; Korean American; Korean adoptee; and in many cases Asian/Asian American. Further exploration of racial as well as cultural identities of adoptive parents may allow for application of Baden and Steward's (2000) cultural-racial identity model for transracial adoption. Taken together, the transracial Korean adoptee identity development experience appears to shadow J. Kim's theory of Asian American Identity Development as well as Grotevant's adoptee identity statuses model.

An alternative to this linear identity development was coined *planar time* by Yngvesson and Coutin (2006). *Planar time* was described as "traveling such a temporal path entails multidirectional movements, not simply from present to future, but sometimes from one present to another" (p. 184). While adoption itself can transcend space and time for an individual, the process of returning to one's place of birth can, for adoptees, send one figuratively and almost literally back in time to experience these early yet perpetuating wounds in their place of origin. The adoptee may be moving forward in search of one's birthright or heritage, while simultaneously regressing back to the past, to the moment of abandonment and separation (Malhotra, 2013). The idea that once an identity is integrated and solidified, it cannot be altered or amended does not seem generalizable to adoptees, especially when adoptees return to Korea.

Several participants described a transcendental moment, in which the act of returning to Korea and to one's place of birth allowed them to experience what things might have been like (an alternative present or reality) and created a departure in their established and secure sense of identity. Suddenly, they were faced with negotiating what it means to be Korean or in Korea, possibly regressing to their past and searching for biological relatives. These may have been long-lost childhood fantasies that had been bandaged, scarred and even forgotten until the wound was completely reopened upon setting foot in Korea. One male participant shared:

**Participant:** It's a real, hard tangible place. You see Holt Orphanage every time you go to Hapjeong. Just always these little reminders. I feel like I've coped very well with the situation. But I can't work magic and I can't erase it and I can't put myself in a place where I can fully absolve from it and function without it being a part of my day to day life, because everything to do with my relationship with Korea is colored by that. I can't exist here without it weighing on my day, because it's too big, it's too powerful, it's too important. It has shaped my whole reason for being here, like the way I've come back to it, the reason I don't speak, the reason I'm not acculturated, and the reason why there's the push-pull of all those things. That's where it begins and ends."

**Experience of Racism and Internalized Racism.** Many adoptees described experiencing racism and discrimination throughout their childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood. One male participant stated:

"When I was younger...I'd just say where I was from-I'd say New York. That's not a good enough answer for people, because when they see me they see a foreigner, they do not see an American. So I just got sick of this feeling and I think we all get sick of this feeling that we can't say we're American or we can't just say we're from a state in the US."

This response highlights the Korean adoptee experience as being similar to the racial minority experience, specifically the Asian American microaggression of perpetual *Alien in one's own land* (Sue et al., 2007). Another male participant shared:

“It was definitely rough at first in the elementary school years. Kids that age can be tough. Strange, racist gestures. Blatantly offensive. Making their eyes look like mine and just making me feel like I don't belong. And that kind of stuff really affected me in a negative way. It made me feel like I wasn't the same as everyone else. It took me a very long time to get past that...it definitely had effects on the way I looked at things.”

This depicts a common challenge and hardship that many transracial Korean adoptees experience as children growing up in areas that lack diversity, which is a shared experience with biracial and persons of color, specifically other individuals of Asian descent. The nuance for transracial Korean adoptees is that they lack the social reference point and ethnic awareness that having minority parents in the home or community may provide, in a similar way that biracial individual experiences are different from their parents.

One participant shared her experience:

“But for me, I internalized it so much. And it came up for me where I just wanted to hide any type of Asianness I was. And really made myself believe that I'm not Korean, I'm just as White as everyone around me. I act like them, you know...subconsciously in my head, without doing it on purpose, de-Koreanized myself...I think with all this early age internalization of being ashamed and also dealing with this feeling of being abandoned, dealing with feelings of trying to be perfect so I wouldn't be abandoned again, really manifested. It manifested in me at a pretty early age, I struggled with depression and anxiety...When we got our citizenship, it was about a year after we came here we went to the actual ceremony. My parents took us out of pre-K...we went downtown, we got literally sworn in, they were holding both of us, right arms were up, we had to repeat everything. I remember, they took us back to school that afternoon...I remember whispering to my teacher, I'm an American now,' and she said to me, You're an American now, I'm so happy for you, congratulations. I remember saying to her, I'm American now, does that mean my eyes are going to look like yours?”

In this participant's memory, she remembered her intentional concealment of her racial/ethnic appearance and heritage as well as her learned internalized racism for looking phenotypically different and her fantasy that finally being “American” meant having eyes shaped like the dominant White group. Similar experiences were common among other adoptee participants around being Asian and Korean, moreover feeling atypical, othered, and less important.

**Shame/feeling “Not Asian Enough” around other Asian Individuals.** Shame distorts one's view of oneself and is often a feeling that one is a mistake or is bad, rather than she or he made a mistake or acted badly (Graff, 2011). Gump (2000) described shame as the destruction of one's subjectivity and a feeling that one is insignificant. Thandeka (1999) discussed shame from being misinformed about one's racial reality, which when discovered, yielded feelings of shame. Korean adoptees raised by White families are uniquely situated in society. As Asian Americans, racial minorities and persons of color raised in mainstream, dominant culture, they may experience confusion early on as to what dimensions of themselves

to embrace and how being part of a mixed race family with White parents affects their level of privilege while simultaneously impacting their beliefs about their group. While being in the presence of diverse individuals was often a protective factor for participants, being in the presence of other individuals from culturally Asian backgrounds also activated feelings of inadequacy and stimulated rejection among participants. One participant shared her experience:

“Especially around other Asians because I always felt I was letting them down or disappointing them. I remember one time I went into a store to buy a curling iron. The guy behind the desk was Korean. He saw me and I came up to pay and he started talking to me in Korean. I’m like, I can’t answer you. He looked so disappointed...”

One participant shared her experience of feeling rejected or “not Asian enough” around other Asian individuals. She stated:

“I think I pretty much just felt...I think I felt rejected. And I just sort of took it as, ok I’m not Korean and I’m not really Asian. It’s something I sort of skipped over when I was growing up. I really felt a lot of the time I was White, so I would forget that I looked different.”

**Belongingness.** Psychologists including Freud (drives; 1930), Bowlby (attachment theory; 1969, 1973), and Maslow (hierarchy of needs; 1968) have written about the human need to belong. Baumeister and Leary’s (1995) belongingness hypothesis states that “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497), which involves a need for frequent interactions with others that are pleasant in nature and stable over time, whereby there is a framework of affective concern for the welfare of one another. This need may have an evolutionary basis, namely in the establishment of social groups and lasting relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). These social bonds are often readily established between people who share common experiences or are exposed to one another frequently. While high levels of belongingness should produce an abundant level of positive affect, the absence of a sense of belongingness may cause a variety of ill effects including increased negative affect, chronic stress and decreased health, happiness and adjustment; thus human behavior, emotion and thoughts are affected by belongingness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In either case, the majority of humans spend significant time thinking about belongingness, which has the ability to shape emotion.

Adoptees shared challenges to belonging as straddling multiple groups or locations but not feeling that they fully belonged to any. One male participant shared:

“...yeah there is no longer a necessity to maintain these active channels back in, so the idea of trying to find home here [Korea] is gone. I’ve divorced myself, and not just here, but almost everywhere in the world. The idea of finding home, which is very much a part of it for many people, like finding where you belong. I’ve let go of that...I’ve divorced myself completely from it because it’s not something that’s going to happen. I perceive it as something that is not available to me. I exist in the world differently, and I have to be OK with it because it’s never going to change. As long as I continue to fight it, it’s going to continue to make me miserable. So in my own self-interest, I’m going to choose not to be miserable if I can help it, at least in that respect. So I’m going to let go of that

question, let go of the necessity for belonging for home, because it's never going to come."

Another male participant shared:

"You know that's all that I think that kids want is to feel like they belong...But if I had grown up in LA or New York City, or Minnesota where there was like a large population of Asians, being Asian, being called Asian would have meant something entirely different than being called Asian in my area...There is this belongingness piece that I think a lot of adoptees struggle with, whether that means they have to hold on strong to White culture to feel belonging, or they have to jump on the Asian boat, metaphorically. Either go to one side or the other."

The first participant described a sense of not feeling he belonged to any particular place or group in this world, that the very concept of belonging is something unattainable for him because of his lived experience and lack of a sense of home. The second participant felt that belonging was a common human want and need, which for this adoptee meant sharing common lived experiences, but that may perhaps have meant assimilating into dominant group cultural norms. This participant also inferred that there was an underlying subtext or connotation (perhaps negative/pejorative but certainly biased) with being called or referred to as Asian growing up in his hometown.

**Shared Experiences with Biracial Individuals.** Bettez (2007) explored the construct of hybridity and how biracial individuals navigated their identities fluidly across social and cultural structures. Bettez's study found that all 16 of her female biracial participants identified as people of color. On the one hand, transracial Korean adoptees are without doubt racial minorities, but being raised in a White household with White parents in mostly White schools and communities often produces a complicated identity, in some cases flexible, adaptable and fluid to its environment, while in other instances a blurriness or lack of understanding around the concept of race and in some cases delayed identity development. The experience of feeling "othered" existed for most Korean adoptees, yet most adoptees latched onto aspects of a White identity, perhaps because it was taught to them, they received some benefit from it (e.g., White privilege even though they technically do not truly receive White privilege), and/or they are considered the exception to the rule ("not really" a racial minority because they are raised in a White home or friends and family fail to see race).

Similar to biracial individuals, adoptees may experience racism for being Asian and simultaneously feel discriminated against by the Asian/Asian American community. Participants shared that their experiences were often confusing because the dominant and Asian communities both were rejecting of adoptees, and adoptees were often seen as "not really Asian" or "not Asian enough" ("Too Korean to be White and too White to be Korean;" Hoffman & Peña, 2013). Bhabha (1994) wrote of the interdependence of hybrid parts (e.g., the colonizer and the colonized) and discussed a hybrid space or zone that combined certain aspects of both the colonizer and the colonized worlds. One male participant described this experience:

"You know Asians are already othered in American society, but you're othered within the Asian community, in that you're too Americanized, you grew up too American to be one of them, but you're also not American because you were born somewhere else, so you're left out of all categories. You're stuck out there on your own...It's very akin to the biracial experience, and it's like their

division manifests itself on their face. Their life is spread across two worlds on the surface, whereas ours is subsurface.”

### **Decision to Return to Korea**

International adoption is most popular in its plenary form where the child's connection to kinship is dissolved, the adoptee in effect becoming a full member of the adoptive family and a stranger to her or his birth parents and birth family, and oftentimes the birth country and culture (Ouellette, 2009).

The decision to return to Korea is often emotionally charged, eliciting strong reactions from an individual's community and impacting her or his sense of commitment to the adoptive family and culture, sometimes years or decades in the making. Returning to one's birth country may cause psychological stress, however it may play a profound role in the adoptee's racial identity development (Wilson & Summerhill-Coleman, 2013).

Of the 14 participants in this study, feelings about returning to Korea and searching for one's birth family varied remarkably. One participant's dialogue is below:

**Interviewer:** “So have you had thoughts about returning to Korea?”

**Participant:** “No, not really. I can't predict the future, so it's possible. It's not that I'm unsure about it, it's no different I guess than going anywhere else. I don't treat it as any better or any worse than traveling to any other foreign country I guess. I don't want to not go but I don't have any reason to go.”

This participant has placed distance between himself and his birth country; while he may not feel compelled to return to Korea, adoption seems to be plenary for this participant. His statement that [Korea] “is not any better or worse than traveling to any other foreign country” was a powerful statement, given Korea was his birthplace where he spent several of his first few months. One might submit that given the context, Korea is different from other foreign countries for this Korean adoptee participant. However, maintaining this stance may be quite adaptive for this individual based on his life circumstances and his lived experiences.

Another participant who had not returned to Korea but had initiated the birth family search described her situation:

“I haven't visited Korea ever. It's something I really, really want to do, but I guess in my head I kind of always said, well I'm not going to visit unless I'm visiting my birth mother, like that was my draw to the country for so long. Then I might have a real chance to meet her. The search has been up and down a lot... But basically they had delivered a letter to who they thought was my birth mother, and they got a call back from her. And she said, basically ‘I'm not that person, I don't know who that is.’ I went home that night and was just really, really sad about it. I think because it felt like a dead end to me. If the name that's on the papers isn't her, how will I ever find who it is? ...But really what I needed to do was to face the idea that I may not find this person and be OK with that.”

This participant's felt sense of loss with Korea and her birth mother are deeply poignant. Her entire connection with Korea is her blood relation to her birth mother; at the time of the interview she seemed unsure if she would ever return without that connection or the possibility of making that connection. Another male participant who had returned to Korea and was unsuccessful in the birth family search stated:

“About six months later after coming back from Korea the first time, I initiated that [birth family search]. And that took over the next six months of my life, most of which was just waiting. I’d make a call, I’d wait, then I’d fill out a form and wait, then I’d fill out another form and wait, just long waiting periods of the bureaucracy to inch its way through it, in what was ultimately an inconclusive and unsuccessful search. Because again, the file has no information on it. There’s no evidence to go on, there’s no clues... But that in itself, that became a very devastating moment in my life. Actually, I’ve always known the door, because in the back of my mind the door was never really open, but to know it’s shut, not even the door is shut, the door doesn’t even exist. Like it’s been lost, time and memorial. That was a very difficult thing. That took an enormous toll across the board in my life...for a while I couldn’t get through the day, it became really debilitating... it had an opposing effect on my Korean identity and my relationship to my Korean identity. Up to and leading to really very much the moment we’re in now.”

This participant described the disappointment and deep wounds he experienced from the unsuccessful birth family search, challenging him to renegotiate his identity in a multidirectional way. To experience the loss associated with being an adoptee throughout one’s life can be at best distressing and at worst crippling; but to experience another loss such as reaching a “dead end” in the birth family search can be overwhelming and destructive to one’s sense of self and understanding of one’s place in the world. Several adoptees reported feeling afraid that they would not be able to find their birth mother/family, and actively avoided the search because of the possibility of experiencing additional pain and loss from not finding any answers, finding out the birth parent has passed away, or literally/symbolically being abandoned again if the birth mother/family is not interested in establishing a connection.

Lastly, the experiences of the two participants (male from the west coast and female from the northeast) who had returned to Korea and were successfully reunited with their birth mothers (both around the age of 16 through a tour group for Korean adoptees) are dialogued below.

Male participant described his reunification:

“...my birth mother originally said no...a couple weeks later they said she had changed her mind. A couple days before the actual meeting, the social worker from the agency I was adopted from came to the hotel to visit and she brought a letter and pictures. That was a really emotional moment actually. I remember that really well because I think it was the first time there was a face and the first time there was handwriting. Kind of the first moments that I think a lot of adoptees look for and think about...in that first moment, a face, a voice, handwriting, a letter, like these tangible kinds of things. And that was the moment I think. I totally wasn’t prepared for that... But ever since that [first meeting] the relationship has developed and evolved. And I think it’s part of the reason why I’m able to, or why I’ve sought out to go back [to Korea], because when I do we always meet up again...I think if I had had a very painful experience or disappointing experience, or it hadn’t gone the way I had expected, as a 16-year-old I don’t think I would have taken it well and my idea about Korea and my idea about being adopted would have developed in a very different kind of way.”

Female participant described her reunification:

“We read the letter over and over and over. This was the first contact with her since we were adopted. And then we had the meeting at the agency. You can’t even get this on Oprah these days...crying, crying, crying...we were just crying and hugging. And after my birth Mom stopped hugging me, the first thing is she looks up to see my Mom [adoptive]...I always get choked up when I talk about this, but I don’t think there’s ever going to be anything more beautiful in my life that I’m going to see, next to my children being born, than seeing my birth Mom and Mom hug for the first time. Their mutual gratitude for each other is the most beautiful thing in the world. It’s really the most beautiful thing in the world because there’s no resentment, there’s no competition, it’s just this mutual gratitude that you just can’t find anywhere else.”

These positive participant experiences with the birth family search and reunification have played a significant role in these participants’ relationships with Korea as adults and allowed them to maintain a positive relationship with Korea and their birth families. Meanwhile, they recognize the power and influence the reunification and motherland tour had on their experience and notions of belonging and connection with Korea. Both participants described strong adoptive family support throughout the process. Other adoptees have had negative experiences impacting them in the opposite direction. If explored, the return to Korea and the birth family search tend to have profound effects with lasting impressions. All 14 participants have had unique experiences and outcomes in their decisions to return to Korea and to pursue the birth family search. These contextual circumstances resulted in a myriad of worldviews and realities about one’s place in this world and how one defines identity, family and home.

**Protecting Adoptive Parents.** The question and decision-making process about *returning to the birth country* introduced a range of feelings and experiences for the participants, with a particular emphasis on protecting their adoptive parents. Ten of the participants reported protecting their parents or not wanting to hurt their parents by avoiding: discussions of adoption, returning to Korea, and searching for birth parents. In the other four participants, the researchers observed the possibility of this as a factor, but it was not explicitly stated. In a participant interview, one female participant shared:

**Interviewer:** “...you just said you didn’t want to go back to Korea when you were in middle or high school, so this shift change must have been in college?”

**Participant:** “Yeah, I guess it was in college because I was open enough to try and join the Asian club. And so I was curious, I think, part of it was this separation from my parents and feeling like I could now explore a little bit more. I think I felt a lot of premature guilt for having feelings of wanting to know about Korea, even though they offered and seemed OK with it. It just, internally I felt very uncomfortable...”

Another female participant recalled her dialogued thoughts on the birth family search:

**Participant:** “I think I would like to [search for birth family] but on the other hand I was thinking if that ever happened I don’t know how I would communicate because I don’t know Korean...unless I find a translator I don’t know how else to really communicate that well, but I think it would be interesting in one aspect, but I know it would hurt my adopted mom deeply...”

**Interviewer:** “So, you do feel like you have that sense from your mom and dad or that your mom at least would take it personally.”

**Participant:** “My mom would definitely take it personally and I still don’t understand why...I was like yea I would like to see what my biological mom’s like and my mom’s always like she doesn’t like it or she feels hurt because I want to see who my biological mom was...I mean I can understand it in one aspect but in the other aspect it is kind of ridiculous for someone to feel like that.”

The researcher and participant co-constructed the participant’s desire to search and explore the decision making process of returning to Korea and searching for birth mother. In both quotes, participants are cognizant that their actions could potentially hurt the feelings of their parents, and feelings of being torn or needing to choose between birth and adoptive family were present. This subtheme of protecting adoptive parents was to varying degrees an obstacle or barrier for most adoptee participants in their decision making process of whether to return to Korea, in some cases to search for birth families, and perhaps acted as a hurdle for adoptee identity development.

### **Conclusion and Clinical Implications**

Given a general discussion was integrated into the Results section, this final discussion focuses on limitations of the present study, clinical implications, and directions for future research.

#### **Limitations**

The data from this study was formally collected over the course of two years. As an “insider,” the principal investigator may have experienced certain privileges in the data collection phase that may have not otherwise been possible for participants outside of the adoptee community (e.g., participants may have been more trusting of the research team’s intentions; the researcher was able to access certain participants, specifically those individuals who participated in Korea while they were residing at the adoptee guesthouse KoRoot). Conversely, the findings may have been filtered through a biased lens. Caution should be exercised when considering the generalizability of this study’s findings, as understanding was prioritized before generalizability (Wolcott, 1994).

Several additional limitations in this study are worth noting. Theoretical sampling, while purposeful for accessibility to participants, led to a moderately homogeneous sample with regard to various participant dimensions, albeit the variability of participant experiences was quite diverse. It would behoove future research to include additional cohorts of adoptees, including diversity with regards to sexual orientation and religious diversity, those born in other countries, those outside of the middle class, adoptees adopted at older ages, and adoptees raised outside the US. Additionally, research might explore gender as a factor impacting the transracial adoptee experience, specific to Asian and Korean adoptees, as gender plays a significant mediating and/or moderating role in the minority experience in America.

The findings of this study are by no means exhaustive with regards to the experiences of Korean American adoptees. Additionally, participants in this study represent narrow parameters in terms of age and generation, education level, chosen career, and childhood geographic location. Future studies might triangulate the data by interviewing adoptive parents, siblings, or holding adoptee focus groups.

## Clinical Implications

The researchers believed that findings could help inform substantive theory by elucidating variation in the transracial adoptee experience and describing the essence of individual experiences, rather than theory generation through reductionist practices. There is much utility in recounting the variance while simultaneously acknowledging the shared experiences based on context and lived experience.

Findings from this exploratory study have potentially strong implications for clinical work with various groups (e.g., biracial children, immigrants, Third Culture Kids) and future areas of research related to identity development, belongingness, shame and coping, parent education, and adoption-related policy. It is important to recognize that adoptees have a unique, nuanced experience that is recognizably distinct from the White and non-adopted Asian American experience, albeit the adoptee experience may in fact have specific overlapping lived experiences with certain groups (Abelmann, 2010). Progress in transracial adoptee research may benefit adoptees by informing the community about issues related to assimilation, acculturation, and identity.

There are more adult transracial adoptees in the US than ever before and the practice of transracial adoption continues to be practiced. It is time for research to focus on services and prevention (e.g., resources and psychoeducation for transracial families; adoptee parental support pre- and post-adoption; mentors of color/Asian descent for adoptees growing up; opportunities for exposure to Korean/Asian culture; and normalization of the Korean adoptee and Asian American experience) for this underserved community.

## Future Directions

Future studies might strive to focus entirely on one cluster of meaning or subtheme uncovered in the present study, perhaps examining it through both idiographic and nomothetic perspectives, such as incorporating self-report scales or assessments (depression, belongingness, and personality) to reach a larger and more diverse sample of adoptees. The researchers recommend that future researchers take a grounded theory approach and act as *bricoleurs* (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), integrating various forms of qualitative methods and analyses in an effort to provide a voice for transracial adoptees, gain clinical insight into implications for service delivery and prevention, and to improve the quality of life for adoptees and their families.

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### **Acknowledgement**

We wish to express our sincere gratitude to the fourteen adoptees who participated in this study. It was such a privilege to hear each individual's adoption story and share in the meaning making process with them. In addition, we would like to acknowledge the supportive editorial review team at *The Qualitative Report*.

### **Article Citation**

Reynolds, J. D., Ponterotto, J. G., & Lecker, C. (2016). Displacement, identity, and belonging for *Ibyangin*: The personal journey of transracial Korean-born adoptees. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(2), 228-251. Retrieved from <http://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr/vol21/iss2/5>

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