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Ethnic Identity and Psychological Well-Being of International Transracial Adoptees: A Curvilinear Relationship

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Abstract

Research in general has shown a beneficial effect of ethnic identity on adoptees' psychological well-being. However, studies also indicate that overemphasis on birth culture and racial/ethnic differences may negatively impact adoptees' overall adjustment. Using Rojewski's (2005) and Brodzinsky's (1987) propositions of a balanced approach to adoption and culture issues, this study examines the curvilinear relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being of international adoptees (i.e., psychological well-being will be high when ethnic identity is moderate instead of either low or high). Using data from a study on identity development and psychological well-being in international adoptees, the hypothesized relationship was examined among 100 internationally adopted Asian adolescents and young adults placed with White parents in the United States. Results indicated that a moderate level of ethnic identity was associated with positive esteem, whereas low and high levels of ethnic identity were related to low self-esteem. Implications for practice and research are discussed. © 2015 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Introduction

Recognizing the cultural needs and rights of international adoptees, the *Guide to Good Practice* (Hague Conference on Private International Law, 2008) on international adoptions advocates the provision of support to international adoptees in maintaining cultural links with their countries of origin and in helping adoptive parents understand the importance of ethnic identity to their children's well-being. The importance of ethnic identity on the psychosocial development of transracial international adoptees has become a central research focus. The prevailing view in the literature is that a strong sense of ethnic identity relates to positive well-being in minority children in general (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999; Smith & Silva, 2011) and particularly among internationally adopted transracial adoptees (Basow, Lilley, Bookwala, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2008; Lee, Yun, Yoo, & Nelson, 2010; Yoon, 2004). However, a recent meta-analysis found only a modest relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being among nonadopted minority youths ($r = .17$) (Smith & Silva, 2011); other studies found a negative or no relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being among nonadopted minority youths (Romero & Roberts, 2003) and among adopted Korean American adults (Lee & Yoo, 2004). Regarding transracial adoptees, a critical review of the literature (Castle, Knight, & Watters, 2011) indicated no clear evidence for a relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being. Considering the inconsistent findings on the relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being, and given that a recent study conducted in Italy highlighted the psychological vulnerability to adoptees who identify strongly with their ethnic origin but weakly with Italian culture and society (Ferrari & Rosnati, 2013), the current study examines whether the relationship between these two constructs is in fact curvilinear rather than linear for international transracial adoptees.

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review. In the adoption literature, several models predict a curvilinear pattern in children's adjustment based on adoptive parents' rejection, acknowledgment, or insistence in addressing family differences. For example, Brodzinsky (1987) proposed a curvilinear relationship between parental acknowledgment of differences in adoptive family life and the psychological well-being of adopted family members. He suggested that rejecting or insisting on differences may accentuate adoptees' feelings of isolation and disconnectedness from the family (Brodzinsky, 1987). Using Brodzinsky's (1987) model of adoptive family coping, several studies have provided support for the beneficial effect of acknowledging adoption-related differences and communicating openly about adoption (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2006; Le Mare & Audet, 2011). A recent study (Anderson, Lee, Rueter, & Kim, 2015) indicated that family acknowledgment of ethnic and racial differences was related to less delinquent behavior by Korean adoptees.

Other models focus on parental efforts in acknowledging cultural differences in adoptive families. For example, both Tessler, Gamache, and Liu's (1999) alternation model of bicultural socialization in Chinese adoptees and Rojewski and Rojewski's (2001) combined model describe a balanced approach whereby parents both emphasize and deemphasize the child's cultural heritage. Rojewski and Rojewski (2001) concluded that adoptive parents should take a balanced approach by supporting a child's ethnic uniqueness, but should not "stress differences to the point of isolating the child from other family members or segments of the community." DeBerry, Scarr, and Weinberg (1996) found that when adoptive families emphasized the importance of cultural and racial issues and consistently tried to teach their transracial adoptees about their African American heritage, the adoptees were less adjusted at adolescence.

However, all of these models focus on parental efforts in addressing differences in adoptive family life and do not necessarily explain how transracial international adoptees cope with adoption-related differences, including those pertaining to ethnic identity. Ethnic identity is defined as "one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one's thinking, perceptions, feelings, and behavior that is due to ethnic group membership" (Rotheram & Phinney, 1987, p. 13). In examining ethnic identity development in international adoptees, extant studies generally support a linear relationship between ethnic identity and psychosocial adjustment. For example, using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992), studies have found a positive relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being among Korean-born adoptees (Basow et al., 2008); global self-esteem in adopted Chinese girls (Tan & Jordan-Arthur, 2012); and positive affect in Korean adult adoptees (Lee et al., 2010). Studies using other measures of ethnic identity have also demonstrated the importance of a positive sense of ethnic identity to psychological well-being in Korean-born adolescent adoptees (Yoon, 2004) and self-esteem in Asian adult adoptees (Mohanty, Koeske, & Sales, 2006). However, other studies using MEIM have shown a weak relationship (Adoption Institute, 2009) or no relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being in Korean-born adoptees (Sarubbi, Block-Lerner, Moon, & Williams, 2012).

These somewhat inconsistent findings may indicate that the development of ethnic identity may be more complex for international adoptees. Not all international transracial adoptees explore their ethnicity (Shiao & Tuan, 2008). Some transracial adoptees may deny their heritage and therefore experience vulnerability to their adjustment (Shireman & Johnson, 1986), others may feel a positive sense of ethnic pride and therefore subjective well-being (Basow et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2010; Yoon, 2004), and still others may overemphasize their ethnic culture with low levels of national identification and therefore experience low self-esteem (Ferrari & Rosnati, 2013).

The various models that purport a balanced approach to adoption-related differences in adoptive families (Brodzinsky, 1987; Rojewski & Rojewski, 2001; Rojewski, 2005; Tessler et al., 1999) provide an adequate theoretical framework for exploring the curvilinear relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being among international adoptees. Compared to those who have low levels of ethnic identity, strong ethnic identity may prepare adoptees to deal with racial discrimination and prejudice in a race-conscious society. It may also help adoptees feel less marginal and experience better well-being (Tan & Jordan-Arthur, 2012). However, after a certain point, high levels of ethnic identity may not be beneficial to adoptees. Those who excessively stress ethnic identity issues may expend time and energy in making friends with people from their ethnic origin, learning their birth language, visiting their birth country, thinking about their biological family or adoption, and reading books and newspapers about the country of origin; engaging in these identity questions has been found to be related to more behavioral problems in Swedish international adoptees (Cederblad, Höök, Irhammar, & Mercke, 1999). While the overemphasis idea has not been empirically demonstrated in international adoptees in the United States, it is expected that stressing ethnic identity issues may be counterproductive to adoptees' overall psychological well-being.

Hypothesis. Ethnic identity and psychological well-being will be related in a curvilinear fashion such that (a) psychological well-being will be lower among adoptees who emphasize or minimize the meaning of their ethnic background, and (b) psychological well-being will be highest among adoptees who maintain a balanced approach to ethnic identity.

Methods

This study was a secondary data analysis of cross-sectional data collected through online surveys from adolescent and young adult Asian adoptees residing in the United States. Potential participants were recruited through web-based support groups for adoptive families and on various Internet e-mail listservs for adoptees.

Sample Characteristics. The sample consisted of 100 internationally adopted Asian adolescents and young adults residing in the United States. The average age of the sample was 20.09 years ($SD = 3.21$; range = 14 to 26 years old), and the majority of participants (61%) were female. The median age at adoption was 5 months (range = 1 to 119 months). The majority of participants (70%) were adopted from South Korea. Participants' preadoption living situations were foster families (41.5%), orphanages (34.1%), biological families (6.1%), and other/don't know (18.3%). Ethnic self-labels from the Suinn-Lew Asian Self-Identity Acculturation Scale (SL-ASIA) (Suinn, Ahuna, & Khoo, 1992) were used to assess adoptees' ethnic identification. Approximately 27% reported that they viewed

themselves as American; 22.5% identified as Asian American, but American first; 33.7% identified as Asian American, indicating that they possessed a blend of American and Asian characteristics; 13.5% identified as Asian American, but indicated that they would always know that they were Asian; and only 3.4% identified as Asian.

Ethnic Identity. The ethnic identity of international adoptees was measured using the 12-item revised Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999). The items are presented in grid format and range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Sample questions are: "I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs"; "I have a strong sense of belonging to my ethnic group"; "I feel good about my cultural or ethnic background." The MEIM scale has good psychometric properties, with an alpha coefficient of .80 or higher across different racial/ethnic groups (Phinney, 1992; Roberts et al., 1999). In this study, the Cronbach's alpha was .89. The mean score was computed by summing across all individual items and averaging, with higher scores on the scale indicating a more positive ethnic identity.

Psychological Well-Being. The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; 1965) and the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI) were used to measure the psychological well-being of internationally adopted adolescents and young adults.

Self-Esteem. Self-esteem was measured using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; 1965). The RSE consists of 10 items that are rated on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), with higher scores representing higher self-esteem. The scale has an equal number of positive and negative items. After reverse-scoring the negative items, the total score is computed by summing and averaging the individual 4-point items. Sample questions are: "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself"; "At times, I think I am not good at all"; "I feel that I am a person of worth"; "I wish I could have more respect for myself." The scale has been shown to be reliable and valid in diverse populations (e.g., Mexican, Asian, White, and Native American adolescents), with coefficient alphas ranging from .58 to .88 (Bracey, Bamaca, & Umana-Taylor, 2004; Lee, 2003). The coefficient alpha for the current study was .89.

Brief Symptom Inventory. The Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), a 53-item self-report measure developed by Derogatis and Melisaratos (1983), assesses psychological symptoms and distress among adolescents and adults. The data set contained data on seven of the nine symptom dimensions (somatization, obsession-compulsion, interpersonal sensitivity, depression, anxiety, hostility, and phobic anxiety), which included 39 items. In the current study, an overall symptom score was used. Items were rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (extremely), with higher scores indicating greater psychological distress. Sample BSI items are: "Feeling easily annoyed or irritated," "Feeling of worthlessness," "Trouble remembering

things," "Feeling fearful," "Feeling nervous when you are left alone." The BSI was chosen for this study because it has been used among international adoptees (Cederblad et al., 1999), and the BSI can be used among adolescents as young as 13 years of age (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983). The alpha coefficient for the BSI in this study was .96.

Sociodemographic variables were age, age at adoption, gender, ethnicity, preadoption setting, living arrangement, marital status, education, and income.

Statistical Analysis. To examine the curvilinear relationship between ethnic identity and psychological well-being (in other words, self-esteem and psychological distress), hierarchical polynomial regression analysis was conducted. Analyses were conducted separately for self-esteem and psychological distress and regressed onto the ethnic identity score. In order to avoid multicollinearity, ethnic identity scores were first mean-centered (Aiken & West, 1991), and then squared to create the quadratic term. Because of the small sample size, covariates were selected based on their statistical relationship with the dependent variables. Only one variable, age, was related to test variables. Linear and quadratic relationships between ethnic identity and self-esteem and psychological distress were tested. In the first step, age was entered as a control variable. In the second step, the mean-centered ethnic identity scores were entered as predictors of self-esteem and psychological distress. In the third step, the squared term for ethnic identity was entered, and the change in R^2 was evaluated to examine the significance effect of the quadratic term. A negative quadratic term for self-esteem and a positive quadratic term for symptom severity would support the hypothesis.

Results

The bivariate correlations and descriptive statistics for the key variables, including the means, standard deviations, and skewness, are summarized in Table 4.1. The mean scores for self-esteem ($M = 3.19$, $SD = .54$) and BSI ($M = 1.76$, $SD = .71$) indicated that adoptees did not seem to have self-esteem and psychological problems (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007).

Table 4.1. Bivariate Correlations and Means, Standard Deviations, and Skewness for Study Variables (N = 100)

Variable	Mean	SD	Skewness	1	2	3
Self-esteem	3.19	.54	−.57			
BSI	1.76	.71	1.42	−.70***		
Ethnic Identity	2.77	.58	−.17	−.00	.06	
Age	20.09	3.21	−.07	−.13	.21*	−.08

Note: BSI = Brief Symptom Inventory.
*$p < .05$. ***$p < .001$.

Bivariate correlation analysis (see Table 4.1) showed that ethnic identity was not associated with self-esteem ($r = -.003$) or BSI score ($r = .06$). As expected, high self-esteem was strongly correlated with low symptoms ($r = -.70, p < .001$). Age was significantly correlated with BSI score ($r = .21, p = .040$) but not with self-esteem ($r = -.13$) or ethnic identity ($r = -.08$).

A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs) were conducted to test the mean difference between ethnic self-labels and other key variables. Because of the lower number of respondents in the "Asian" category, the category "Asian-American but internally Asian" and "Asian" categories were collapsed into "Asian," and four categories of self-labels were created. There was a significant mean difference between ethnic self-labels and ethnic identity scores, $F(3, 95) = 12.98, p < .001$, but not between self-esteem or BSI scores. A post hoc pairwise comparison using Tukey's test showed that adoptees who identified as Asian had significantly higher ethnic identity scores ($M = 3.16$) than did adoptees who identified as American ($M = 2.34, p < .001$) and as Asian American but American first ($M = 2.66, p = .006$).

Curvilinear Effect of Ethnic Identity on Self-Esteem and Psychological Distress. Polynomial regression analysis examined whether the quadratic component of the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem and psychological distress predicts over and above the linear effect. The result showed that there was a significant quadratic effect of ethnic identity on self-esteem, $\beta = -.29$ $\Delta R^2 = .08, p < .005$ (see Table 4.2). The negative signs in the quadratic term indicate an inverted-U-shaped relationship, suggesting that a moderate level of ethnic identity is associated with positive esteem, whereas low and high levels of ethnic identity are related to low self-esteem. For psychological distress, the quadratic term for ethnic identity was close to significant, $\beta = .19$ $\Delta R^2 = .03, p = .073$, and the

Table 4.2. Curvilinear Test of Ethnic Identity on Adoptees' Self-Esteem and Psychological Symptoms

	Self-Esteem (N = 100)			Psychological Symptoms (N = 94)		
	β	R^2 (ΔR^2)	F	β	R^2 (ΔR^2)	F
Step 1		.02	1.61		.04	4.33*
Age	−.13			.21*		
Step 2		.02 (.00)	.80		.05 (.00)	2.44
Age	−.13			.22*		
Ethnic identity	−.01			.08		
Step 3		.09 (.08**)	3.35*		.08 (.03)	2.77*
Age	−.05			.17		
Ethnic identity	−.03			.09		
Ethnic identity squared	−.29**			.19		

*$p < .05.$ **$p < .01.$

sign was positive, indicating a U-shaped relationship. Ethnic identity was negatively related to psychological distress at first, but the relationship diminished as the level of ethnic identity increased.

Discussion

Contrary to the prevailing view of a linear progression of ethnic identity on adoptees' psychological well-being (Basow et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2010; Yoon, 2004), the present findings strongly support a curvilinear relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem and marginally support the curvilinearity of ethnic identity with regard to psychological distress. Taken together, these results indicate that a curvilinear interpretation best explains the relationship between these two constructs. This raises the pertinent question of whether too much of a good thing can actually be bad.

Possible explanations for the present findings may emerge through examination of what it means to be a member of a social group for international adoptees. International adoptees are members in their ethnic heritage and adoptive cultures, as well as of the adoptee group. Although international adoptees are born into their heritage culture, they are often socialized into their adoptive parents' culture. While a certain degree of affirmation and commitment to heritage culture is positive, those who excessively focus on heritage culture may deny their membership in their adopted country's and parents' culture. Conversely, those who overemphasize their adopted country's culture may underemphasize the heritage culture. A recent study suggests that international adoptees who maintain a bicultural identity, including their heritage culture and adopted country culture, fare the best (Manzi, Ferrari, Rosnati, & Benet-Martínez, 2014). Further, excessive emphasis on maintaining heritage culture may create separateness from their adoptive family culture and from the group in which they desire to belong because of the lack of shared immigration history, language, and cultural practices.

As international adoptees explore and eventually attempt to identify with a particular nondominant minority group, other immigrants may not accept them as in-group members because of their different immigration histories. As they try to gain membership, some adoptees may feel less welcome or may face stigma from their own ethnic/racial group (Adoption Institute, 2009; Samuels, 2009). Shiao and Tuan (2008) found that Korean adoptees who explore their ethnicity experience ambivalence about interacting with other Asians. Perhaps such exploration creates confusion and ambivalence regarding their birth and adoptive culture, which may ultimately lead to compromised psychological well-being (Mohanty & Newhill, 2011; Tan & Jordan-Arthur, 2012).

Another explanation might be differences in socialization support provided by same-race immigrant parents and transracial adoptive parents. For immigrant adolescents, the process of ethnic identity development entails a

period wherein parents play a large role in answering questions relating to the child's minority status. In the case of international adoptees, parents and children do not share the same racial heritage (Samuels, 2009), and therefore parents may not be able to give their children firsthand accounts of life within the children's native culture, as would their immigrant counterparts. While some parents adopt racial color blindness, disregarding racial issues and the child's birth culture or ethnicity (Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, Gunnar, & Minnesota International Adoption Project Team, 2006) in their approach to the child's racial heritage, others take a "child-choice" approach (Tessler et al., 1999), exposing the child to his or her heritage culture as the child desires. Both of these parenting approaches may deny the developmental need of transracial adoptees to feel proud of and comfortable with their race and ethnicity. Adoptive parents often struggle with the question of to what extent they should socialize their adopted children with their birth culture (Tessler et al., 1999; Rojewski & Rojewski, 2001). Therefore, many children address issues related to ethnic identity in "social and psychic isolation" (Eng & Han, 2006, p. 142), and this might result in a preoccupation with ethnic identity issues. Furthermore, families who reject the importance of their child's heritage culture may not have prepared the child to accept adoption-related thoughts and feelings, which could also lead to a preoccupation with ethnic identity issues. However, the present findings need to be replicated in different transracial adoptee groups before any conclusions regarding this can be reached.

The other possible explanation for the curvilinear effect of ethnic identity may relate to Phinney's Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) scale (1992). The MEIM is used to measure ethnic identity development in minority adolescents and young adults of same-race parents. In the case of international adoptees, children and parents do not share the same heritage culture. Furthermore, the MEIM is based on the universal model where the processes of ethnic and racial identity development are similar across various ethnic groups. Schwartz et al. (2014) suggested that researchers need to consider using group-specific models and measures of ethnic identity if the group of interest shares its own unique identity concerns. All internationally adopted transracial adoptees share a common history; this history involves relinquishment by the birth parents, loss of birth country/culture, and the experience of transracial placement. Therefore, international adoptees may be conceptually considered a separate group toward which the universal model and measure of ethnic identity may not be applicable. In most studies of ethnic identity development in international adoptees, the MEIM has been used and has yielded inconsistent findings. Therefore, it is necessary for future studies to employ other measures of ethnic identity (e.g., the Ethnic Identity Scale; Umaña-Taylor, Yazedjian, & Bámaca-Gómez, 2004) to come to a conclusion about whether the curvilinear assumption is a conceptual or a measurement issue. Moreover, future studies should use an ethnic identity measure developed specifically for transracial

adoptees, and when such scales are not available, novel scales should be developed.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. Because this study was cross-sectional, it is impossible to infer causality in the relationship between ethnic identity and self-esteem. Furthermore, as the study participants were Asian international adoptees, these results may not be generalizable to other adoptee or immigrant groups. Furthermore, the study is limited by sampling bias. More than half of the study sample is female. Studies have indicated that adolescent females and males relate differently to ethnic identity development (Rotheram-Borus, 1989). Therefore, the findings may be influenced in part by gender differences. Although the preliminary analyses did not indicate such differences, future research with a large sample size is needed to further explore this issue. Last, the study focused on birth culture ethnic identity and there is lack of consideration of the adopted country's culture. However, there is a need to develop a clear conceptual definition of what ethnic identity means to transnational adoptees.

The study contributes to the existing knowledge base in a significant way by illustrating the curvilinear nature of the relationship between the ethnic identity and self-esteem of international adoptees. The evidence for curvilinearity may explain the inconsistent findings observed in the extant literature between these two constructs. Therefore, future researchers need to reevaluate the assumption of linearity before selecting statistical models. It is important for future research to identify subgroups of adoptees based on their ethnic attitudes and behaviors using latent class analysis, so that targeted interventions can be developed. Furthermore, longitudinal research needs to examine the developmental course of ethnic identity for internationally adopted adolescents and young adults. Qualitative research will yield a deeper understanding of how international adoptees develop ethnic identity.

The findings thus have important implications for adoption practice. In the past decade, the linear assumptions of the ethnic identity–psychological well-being model have resulted in interventions designed to increase adoptees' exposure to their heritage culture. However, the current findings suggest that a moderate level of ethnic identity is optimal for self-esteem in adoptees. When experiencing discrimination, adoptees with a moderate level of ethnic identity may derive a sense of security from being a member of their parents' culture. While rejecting one's heritage culture may not be positive for transracial adoptees, a preoccupation with heritage culture is also not positive. The challenge for adoption social workers is to help international transracial adoptees develop the level of ethnic identity that is optimal for their self-esteem. Furthermore, adoptees may benefit particularly from an integrated sense of ethnic identity, in which they are proud of their heritage culture as well as their adoptive culture (Baden, 2002). Adoption professionals may need to encourage parents to provide their children with opportunities to feel comfortable with both their

ethnic and their adoptive identities. Furthermore, practitioners working with adoptees to promote ethnic identity should also be aware of the circumstances wherein ethnic identity is detrimental.

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