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Ethnic Identity, Bicultural Identity Integration, and Psychological Well-Being Among Transracial Adoptees: A Longitudinal Study

Laura Ferrari, Rosa Rosnati, Claudia Manzi,
Verònica Benet-Martínez

Abstract

The ethnic identity development plays a crucial role in adolescence and emerging adulthood and may be more complex for adoptees who do not share their ethnic identity with their adoptive families. Evidence from the studies was mixed, with strong ethnic identity not always found to be indicative of improved psychological adjustment. Recently research carried out on ethnic minorities has highlighted that the relation between ethnic identity and well-being could be influenced by Bicultural Identity Integration (BII) (Benet-Martínez et al., 2002): It reflects how individuals who experience more than one culture organize and combine their dual cultural backgrounds. These results are consistent also among adoptees (Manzi, Ferrari, Rosnati, & Benet-Martínez, 2013) but need to be further explored. A longitudinal study was conducted to investigate whether and the extent to which ethnic identity, national identity, and BII are protective factors for adoptees' psychological well-being. A self-report questionnaire was administered to 79 Italian transracial adoptees, aged between 15 and 25, at two time points, one year apart. In line with predictions, longitudinal analyses showed the crucial role of BII that turned out to increase higher levels of well-being one year later. Results are discussed in relation to implications for intervention with adoptive parents and children. © 2015 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Introduction

In recent years in the adoption literature, a new research trend has emerged aimed at analyzing the factors that can promote adoptees' adjustment (Brodzinsky & Palacios, 2005). Within this specific literature, the adoptees' definition of their ethnic identity (i.e., the construction of one's sense of self in terms of ethnic group membership; Phinney, 1990) emerges as an important protective factor. Developing an ethnic identity is a highly complex task for transnational adopted children, as their ethnic identity is often different from that of their adoptive family members (Rosnati, 2015; Scherman, 2010). Like other types of bicultural individuals, transracial adoptees face the unique experience of being potentially connected to two cultural backgrounds: the heritage culture (associated with the ethnocultural birth background) and the host-country culture (associated with the country of adoption). However, adoptees may not have equal access to both of these cultures: Whereas exposure to the host country culture comes about through intrafamilial transmission, access to the heritage culture occurs first through the adoptive family's efforts to give access to this heritage and over time through the adoptee's commitment. As a consequence, the birth culture inevitably becomes a secondary culture (Scherman, 2010). Although the process of integrating this dual belonging seems to play a crucial role in transracial adoptees' development, nonetheless there is a paucity of studies exploring this process and its relationship to the adoptees' psychological adjustment (exceptions are Ferrari, Ranieri, Barni, & Rosnati, 2015; and Manzi, Ferrari, Rosnati, & Benet-Martínez, 2014).

The present longitudinal study, which focuses specifically on adolescents and emerging adults internationally adopted by Italian families, is aimed at analyzing the transracial adoptees' identity process and in particular examining the association among adoptees' ethnic identity, national identity, bicultural identity integration (BII), and psychological well-being.

Ethnic Identity, National Identity, and Bicultural Identity Integration of Transracial Adoptees. Thus far, research examining the connection between ethnic identity and psychological well-being among transracial adoptees has yielded inconsistent results (for a review see Castle, Knight, & Watters, 2011): A few studies have found that ethnic identity is a significant predictor of low levels of emotional and behavioral problems as well as of higher levels of self-esteem (e.g., Basow, Lilley, Bookwala, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2008; Manzi et al., 2014; Mohanty, 2013), whereas others have revealed no significant differences between transracial adoptees who mostly identified themselves with the host culture and those who identified themselves more strongly with their own heritage culture in terms of behavioral adjustment (e.g., Cederblad, Höök, Irhammar, & Mercke, 1999).

It is possible that these inconsistent findings derive from the fact that, by focusing on ethnic identity exclusively, these studies failed to acknowledge the bicultural experience of most transracial adoptees. In the literature

on identity process of immigrants and ethnic minorities, it has been underlined that the analysis of the individual enactment of ethnic identity should benefit if the process of identification to the larger host society is taken into account. Therefore, in order to analyze adoptees' identity process, it should be worthwhile to consider also national identity, which reflects individuals' incorporation of membership in the broader national-country culture into their sense of self and how an individual fits into the larger society (Rodriguez, Schwartz, & Whitbourne, 2010).

Furthermore, focusing on the levels of identification with the national and the ethnic identities is not enough to understand how the identity processes occur among the bicultural individuals and how they are related to their adjustment. Recently, research on biculturalism by Benet-Martínez and colleagues (e.g., Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Huynh, Nguyen, & Benet-Martínez, 2011) goes beyond the issue of how much individuals with dual cultural backgrounds identify with each of their cultural groups, to examine how much these cultural identities and attachments are experienced as compatible versus antithetical or hard to reconcile with one another. Specifically, the construct of bicultural identity integration (BII) was proposed to describe bicultural individuals' feelings and thoughts about the intersection of their two cultural orientations: ethnic and mainstream.

Accumulated research on BII shows that this construct includes two relatively independent dimensions or facets—cultural harmony versus conflict and cultural blending versus dissociation between one's two cultural identities or orientations—each representing unique and separate aspects of the dynamic intersection between mainstream and ethnic cultural identities within bicultural individuals (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Huynh et al., 2011). Cultural conflict is defined as feeling torn between one's two cultural identities (vs. feeling that they are compatible), and cultural distance is the perception that one's two cultural identities are separate and dissociated (vs. fused). Thus, bicultural individuals having high BII are those who identify with both cultural systems—although not necessarily to similar degrees—without internalizing their dual cultural engagement as conflictual or requiring dissociation. BII is a significant predictor of psychological adjustment (e.g., self-esteem, life satisfaction, lower levels of depressive and anxiety symptoms) among multicultural individuals (Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Bond, 2008; Chen, Benet-Martínez, Wu, Lam, & Bond, 2013; Downie, Koestner, ElGeledi, & Cree, 2004; Downie, Mageau, Koestner, & Liodden, 2006; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013) and predicts social outcomes associated with behavioral adjustment, such as having social networks that are more culturally diverse and dense (Mok, Morris, Benet-Martínez, & Karakitapoglu-Aygun, 2007) and perceiving prototypical members of the ethnic and dominant cultures as more similar to each other and to oneself (Miramontez, Benet-Martínez, & Nguyen, 2008).

BII was recently applied to the study of adoptees' identity processes. In their cross-sectional study, Manzi and colleagues (2014) found that

adoptees having high BII (i.e., those who perceived their two cultural identifications as harmonious and overlapping) reported higher levels of emotional and behavioral adjustment. The authors undertook longitudinal studies to verify the causal links and estimate the influence of BII on adoptees' psychological well-being.

The present study, following a longitudinal design, is firstly aimed at analyzing the causal link between BII and adoptees' psychological well-being. A second goal is to test whether the unclear relationship between ethnic identity and adoptees' psychological well-being could be clarified by examining whether BII mediates the link between ethnic and national identity on the one hand and the adoptees' adjustment. This mediational role was recently theoretically and empirically tested in two studies. In the first study with a large multiethnic sample of immigrants and ethnic minorities, Huynh (2009) found that identification with ethnic culture and identification with American culture were both significant predictors of BII, and that BII in turn influenced psychological well-being. The second study was carried out on international transracial adoptees by Manzi and colleagues (2014), who found that a strong identification with both ethnic and national identities predicted higher levels of BII, which in turn played a mediational role in the relationship between ethnic and national identification and behavioral adjustment.

In the present study, the focus was shifted from behavioral adjustment to psychological well-being following the recent research trend. Adoption research has generally considered the child's adjustment assessed in terms of a lack of behavioral and emotional problems only (Rosnati, Montiroso, & Barni, 2008; van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006). But, over the past few years, attention has progressively moved toward the positive psychological functioning, in accordance with the resilience paradigm (Brooks, Simmel, Wind, & Barth, 2005). Therefore, in the present study, we applied Ryff's multidimensional model of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989). In this model, psychological well-being is not considered as a monolithic construct, but rather as a multifaceted and dynamic concept that includes several aspects of well-being and reflects the different challenges that individuals face: a positive attitude toward their current and past lives, a sense of directedness and life goals, a feeling of continued development, a sense of mastery and competence in managing the environment, the perception of their relations with significant others as close and valuable, and independence (Ryff & Keyes, 1995; Ryff & Singer, 2008). In the currently available adoption literature, studies applying this theoretical and empirical background are limited in number (Basow et al., 2008) and focus mainly on adult adoptees.

Adoptees' Age at Adoption and Gender. Age at adoption is generally considered a crucial variable, significantly related to the subsequent adjustment, cognitive development, and attachment relationships (e.g., van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006). It is still unclear whether the age at adoption would affect ethnic identity, and the available findings are heterogeneous.

For example, Wickes and Slate's study (1996) suggested that late-adopted adolescents showed a higher degree of ethnic identity than did adolescents adopted by the age of 1 year: Those who spent a longer time in their birth country might have more opportunities to learn their cultural behaviors (language, food, customs, celebrations, etc.). Nevertheless, the findings by Manzi and colleagues (2014) revealed no significant association between age at arrival and ethnic identity.

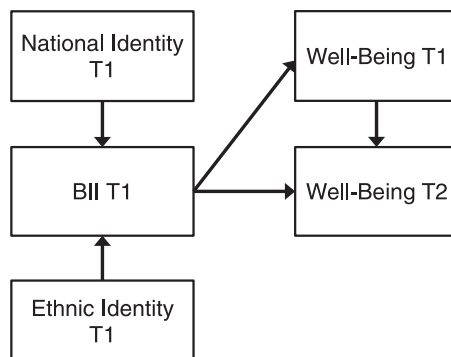
Another important structural variable relevant to adoptees' adjustment is gender. Bimmel and colleagues' meta-analysis (Bimmel, Juffer, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2003) comparing internationally adopted adolescents with nonadopted adolescents found that adopted girls are more likely to show behavioral problems than nonadopted ones, but there were no significant differences among boys. As far as psychological well-being is considered, Basow et al. (2008) found among adult Korean-born adoptees that women scored significantly higher on eudaimonic well-being than men, whereas no gender differences turned out to be significant between male and female adolescents on ethnic identity and BII (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Manzi et al., 2014).

In the present study we controlled for age at adoption and gender in order to better understand these discrepant findings.

Aims. In accordance with the theoretical background and empirical evidence presented thus far, this longitudinal study had two aims:

1. Test the causal effect of BII on adoptees' psychological well-being.
2. Investigate whether the protective effect of ethnic identity and national identity on adoptees' psychological well-being could be better explained by the mediational effect played by BII (see Figure 6.1), controlling for the effect of gender and age at adoption.

Figure 6.1. The Theoretical Model



Method

Participants. Participants were recruited through the help of professionals and agencies working in the field of international adoption, and were informed by letter about the main objectives of the study. Adolescents were advised that participation would be free and voluntary. For those who were younger than 18 years, parents were asked to give their consent. Participants filled out a questionnaire and after 1 year were contacted to fill out a second questionnaire.

The final sample of this study consisted of 79 transracial adoptees who provided data for both time points. The participants were aged between 15 and 25 ($M = 19.08$, $SD = 3.36$; 46.7% males), and the mean age at adoption was 5.81 years ($SD = 4.40$). Adoptees were born in Latin America (73.7%), Eastern Europe (12.3%), Africa (8.8%), or Asia (5.3%); their adoptive parents were White and born in Italy. Most adoptees (80%) were students (16.7% middle school, 47.9% high school, 14.6% undergraduate, 16.7% postgraduate, 4.2% doctoral program). The majority (99.0%) of adoptees lived at home in two-parent families, and 78.3% had siblings (not included in the sample).

Paired *t*-tests as well as chi-square tests indicated that adoptees who provided data for both waves did not differ from those who provided data only for the first wave in terms of initial scores of the variables investigated and the demographic data, with the exception of age at adoption ($M = 4.35$ for participants at Time 1 only; $M = 5.81$ for participants at both Time 1 and Time 2; $T = 2.176$, $p < .05$).

Measures. Self-report information was obtained from adopted children who filled out a questionnaire containing questions about their socio-demographic characteristics and several measures regarding identity and well-being. The specific questionnaire scales used are described below.

Ethnic Identity. The Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Roberts et al., 1999) was used to measure ethnic identity. The MEIM is a 14-item scale measuring ethnic identity that emphasizes cognitive clarity, affective pride, and behavioral engagement in one's ethnic group. In this study we used a modified 10-item version adapted for adoptees by Lee and Yoo (2004). Participants indicated their responses on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree); an example item is "I have a strong sense of belonging to my ethnic group." The scale was translated by the research team into Italian following the back translation procedure (Hambleton, 1993). Cronbach's alpha for the scale was .90 at both Time 1 and Time 2.

National Identity. National identification was assessed by adapting the 10-item scale used for ethnic identity: the term "Ethnic Group" was changed to "the Italian people" (e.g., "I have a strong sense of belonging with the Italian people"). Participants responded to each item using a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .92 at both Time 1 and Time 2.

Bicultural Identity Integration. BII was measured by the Bicultural Identity Integration Scale–Version 1 (BIIS-1; Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). This eight-item scale was translated in Italian following the back translation procedure. The scale assessed two components of BII: cultural conflict (i.e., feeling torn between one's two cultural identities vs. feeling that they are compatible) and cultural distance (i.e., perceiving the two cultural identities as separate and dissociated vs. hyphenated or fused). Each subscale in the BIIS contains four items. Example items are: for the cultural conflict scale, "I feel caught between two cultures"; for the cultural distance scale, "I am simply a person belonging to another ethnic group who lives in Italy." Respondents rated their agreement with each item on a scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Following the procedure proposed by Manzi et al. (2014), the total BII index was computed as the product of the cultural conflict subscale mean score and the cultural distance subscale mean score: A low level on the BII index indicated participants' perception of high conflict and high distance; a high level indicated low conflict and low distance; medium levels indicated either medium distance and conflict, high distance and low conflict, or low distance and high conflict. Cronbach's alpha coefficients for the total scale were .82 at Time 1 and .81 at Time 2.

Psychological Well-Being. Participants filled out the 18-item short version of the Psychological Well-Being Scale (PWB; Ryff & Keyes, 1995) using a 6-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The scale has been previously translated into Italian and validated by Ruini and colleagues (Ruini, Ottolini, Rafanelli, Ryff, & Fava, 2003). An example item is: "Life for me has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth." Cronbach's alpha coefficient was .78 at Time 1 and .79 at Time 2. Negative items were reverse coded, so that higher scores of the index reflect more psychological well-being.

Data Analyses. In order to test our hypotheses, structural equation modeling analyses were conducted in SPSS AMOS Version 16.0 (Arbuckle & Wothke, 2006; Byrne, 2001). Parameters were estimated using Full Information Maximum Likelihood (FIML). We examined the models according to multiple fit indexes: chi-square, comparative fit index (CFI), and the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) to account for the model's parsimony (McDonald & Marsh, 1990). Although there is no agreement in literature with regard to cutoff values for the CFI and RMSEA, in accordance with Hu and Bentler (1999) and MacCallum, Browne, and Sugawara (1996), CFI of 0.90 or above and RMSEA of 0.08 or below were considered acceptable.

Results

Preliminary Analysis. Descriptive statistics were computed for all considered variables, and the covariance matrix was calculated. Data analyses were conducted in order to assess the statistical distribution of the

Table 6.1. Mean and Standard Deviation of Variables in the Model

	<i>Minimum</i>	<i>Maximum</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Ethnic identity	1.20	4.00	3.04	.646
National identity	1.00	4.00	2.93	.676
BII T1	1.00	25.00	15.11	7.346
BII T2	3.50	25.00	15.70	6.897
Well-being T1	1.94	6.00	4.40	.734
Well-being T2	3.22	5.83	4.49	.635
Age at adoption	0 months	14 years	5.81	4.40

Table 6.2. Pearson’s Correlation Among Variables in the Model

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
1. Ethnic identity	1							
2. National identity	-.110	1						
3. BII T1	.164*	.237**	1					
4. BII T2	.274*	.193	.426**	1				
5. Well-being T1	.040	.371**	.301**	.282*	1			
6. Well-being T2	.039	.167	.362**	.300*	.449**	1		
7. Age at adoption	.061	.081	-.091	-.032	-.012	-.235	1	
8. Gender	.011	.097	-.045	.054	-.052	.001	.103	1

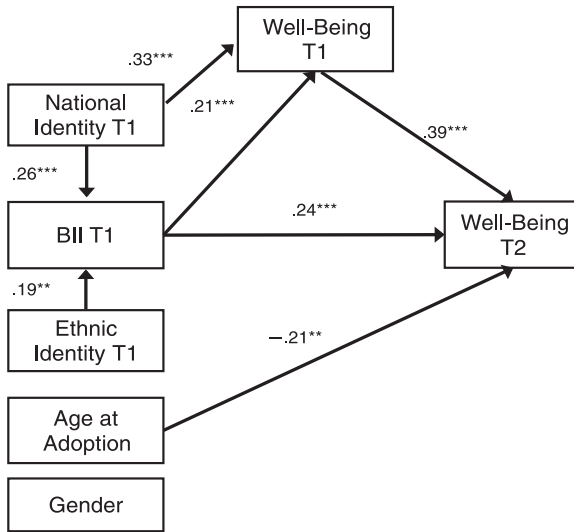
* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

variables for univariate and multivariate normality. No issues emerged in regard to skewness or kurtosis: Skewness ranged from -0.53 to 0.30 while kurtosis ranged from -1.31 to 0.17 . We found normalized estimates of Mar-
dia’s coefficient to be acceptable (<3). Table 6.1 summarizes sample means for considered variables. As can be observed, participants scored somewhat higher on measures of ethnic identity and national identity than they did on measures of BII. The level of BII measured at T2 was significantly higher than BII reported at T1. Participants also reported medium to high levels of psychological well-being. Specifically, analyses highlighted a significant increase in psychological well-being in T2. Table 6.2 summarizes the bivariate correlations between the variables under study.

Cross-Lagged Model Testing. In order to address our first aim, we employed a cross-lagged longitudinal design. This procedure entailed testing cross-lagged relationships between BII (Time 1 and Time 2) and psy-
chological well-being (Time 1 and Time 2).

Autoregression effects were included in order to control for baseline levels for each endogenous variable. Moreover, as is usual in longitudinal structural equation models, the error terms of each indicator at T1 were allowed to covary with the corresponding indicator at T2.

The model confirmed the significant path between BII at Time 1 and Time 2 ($|\beta| = .38, p < .01$) and between psychological well-being at Time 1

Figure 6.2. Results of Structural Equation Model

Note: Numbers are standardized regression weights. ** $p < .05$; *** $p < .01$.

and Time 2 ($|\beta| = .38, p < .01$). Moreover, results showed that BII (Time 1) had a direct cross-lagged effect on psychological well-being (Time 2) ($|\beta| = .26, p < .01$), whereas psychological well-being (Time 1) was not directly associated with BII (Time 2) over time ($|\beta| = .17, p > .05$).

Globally, the model tested showed that BII was a significant longitudinal predictor of adoptees' psychological well-being.

Tests of Mediating Effects. To investigate whether the relationship between ethnic identity, national identity, and adoptees' psychological well-being is mediated by BII (see Figure 6.1), we developed a series of structural equation models with psychological well-being as the outcome variable (West, Finch, & Curran, 1995). All variables of this model were observed variables.

As a first step we tested our theoretical model. In this model, adoptees' age at adoption and gender were used as control variables. Figure 6.2 shows the estimated significant parameters of this model. The model test showed good fit to the data [$\chi^2(5) = 6.100, p = .297, CFI = .990, RMSEA = .04$], and the estimation of variance for psychological well-being was 29.0%. Modification indexes did not suggest any additional modification to the model that might improve the model fit. The model also showed a significant negative path between age at adoption and psychological well-being measured at Time 2 ($\beta = -.21, p < .01$), albeit not with other variables in the model. Gender was not significantly associated with any variable in the model.

We further estimated the strength of indirect effects in order to test the significance of the mediation effect (MacKinnon, Lockwood, Hoffman, West, & Sheets, 2002). The estimation of the indirect effects confirmed that the indirect paths from the ethnic identity and the national identity through BII to psychological well-being were significant ($|β| = .25, p < .01$; $|β| = .17, p < .05$).

Finally, the estimation of competing models was carried out to evaluate models with different causal flows, to see whether these alternative models provided better or worse fit to the data than the model presented in the study. We estimated two competing models in the current set of analyses: (A) a first model in which the ethnic identity, national identity, and BII directly influence psychological well-being, and (B) a second model in which we examined ethnic identity and national identity as mediators of the relationships between BII and well-being.

Alternative models were compared using the model fit index (χ^2/gdl ; CFI; RMSEA) and by the Akaike Information Criterion (AIC; Burnham & Anderson, 2002), where lower AIC values correspond to a better fitting model. The first model evaluated (A) presented lower global fit [$\chi^2 (8) = 25.833, p = .001, \text{CFI} = .834, \text{RMSEA} = .11; \text{AIC} = 79.833$], as did the second competing model (B) [$\chi^2 (25) = 59.109, p = .000, \text{CFI} = .544, \text{RMSEA} = .17; \text{AIC} = 109.109$]. Therefore, the model originally proposed obtained a better fit to the data [$\chi^2 (5) = 6.100, p = .297, \text{CFI} = .990, \text{RMSEA} = .04; \text{AIC} = 56.786$] than did all the competing models. Based on these results, the alternative models could be rejected, and the model shown in Figure 6.2 turned out to provide the best and most parsimonious explanation of the data.

Discussion

This study presents the results of a first longitudinal study, focused on Italian internationally adopted adolescents and emerging adults, which analyzed the association among ethnic identity, national identity, BII, and psychological well-being.

First, the descriptive results showed that adolescents and emerging adults reported a medium level of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989) and a significant increase after 1 year.

Moreover, preliminary analyses showed that adoptees reported a medium to high level of both ethnic identity and national identity. This seems to indicate that adoptees generally feel comfortable with their ethnic background and are able to define a sense of belonging to their ethnic group, together with commitment, pride, and positive feelings about that group. Although previous research findings revealed that ethnic identity development is particularly challenging for transracial adoptees, as they are more likely to be exposed to the host-country culture and thus identify themselves with their adoptive parents' culture (Cederblad, Höök, Irhammar, &

Mercke, 1999; Hollingsworth, 1997), the findings of the current study confirmed results from more recent studies, which indicated that transracial adoptees are able to define their ethnic identity in a positive way (Basow et al., 2008; Ferrari & Rosnati, 2013; Mohanty, 2013). These findings are particularly relevant in the Italian context, where the coexistence of people from different races and ethnic groups is a more recent phenomenon than in other, more multicultural, countries.

Most notably, the longitudinal finding registered that psychological well-being in T2 is a function of T1 levels of BII. Specifically, a relative change of adoptees' psychological well-being highlights a positive association between BII and T2 well-being, after controlling for T1 well-being. It does mean that, as BII increases, participants at the lower ranks on T1 well-being moved to higher ranks at T2. These results are consistent with studies that have pointed out the importance of BII, as it plays a significant role in the process of the adoptees' identity development and adjustment, especially during adolescence and the transition to adulthood. BII acts as a protective factor not only against risk behaviors, as illustrated in previous studies (Manzi et al., 2014), but also in promoting adoptees' well-being in terms of self-acceptance, autonomy, and the ability to face life challenges, as assessed in the present study.

This study also provides evidence for the mediational role of BII in the relationship between ethnic identity and national identity with adoptees' psychological well-being: Levels of ethnic and national identity predict BII, which in turn mediates the effect of these variables on adoptees' psychological well-being. This may lead to a better understanding of the previously mentioned inconclusive findings in the literature regarding the role of ethnic identity on well-being. It is only when ethnic identity is achieved that bicultural integration is also achieved, which in turn has a positive impact on adoptees' psychological well-being.

Age at adoption also has a role for adoptees' well-being. In particular, older age at adoption seems to be a risk factor that undermines well-being. This result is consistent with previous research showing that years spent in institutions and in situations of neglect have an inevitable effect on later development, not only in terms of risk (McGinness, Smith, Ryan, Howard, & Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009) but also in terms of well-being, competence, and life satisfaction.

Our findings are based on a small sample, and thus have only limited possibility of extension; therefore, any generalization of these results must be undertaken with caution. Second, this study did not directly address adoptees' ethnic identity or their psychological well-being as a function of the adopted children's country of origin. In the case of transracial placements, more research is necessary to disentangle the specific influence of the particular country of origin and ethnic group on identity development and well-being.

Nevertheless, the present findings shed light on the complex process of identity construction among adoptees, who constitute a unique group exposed in an asymmetric way to two different cultural backgrounds, and future studies may try to replicate these findings on different populations, such as immigrant and ethnic minorities.

These findings could also have important implications for adoption agencies and professionals who support adoptees specifically in postadoption and who can encourage adoptees to recognize the individual bicultural identity organization and to develop skills, motivation, and resources in order to better integrate their national identity with their ethnic identity.

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DR. LAURA FERRARI, PhD, received her doctorate in social psychology and she is a member of the University Centre for Family Studies and Research (Catholic University of Milan, Italy).

PROF. ROSA ROSNATI, PhD, is full professor of psychology of adoption, fostering and family enrichment and member of the scientific committee of the University Centre for Family Studies and Research (Catholic University of Milan, Italy).

PROF. CLAUDIA MANZI, PhD, is assistant professor of social psychology and member of the University Centre for Family Studies and Research (Catholic University of Milan, Italy).

PROF. VERÒNICA BENET-MARTÍNEZ, PhD, is a professor at the Catalan Institute for Advanced Research and Studies (ICREA) and Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain.