A Phenomenological Study of Racialized Experiences of Asian Adopt Adoptees

Cindi Kim
University of Denver

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF RACIALIZED EXPERIENCES OF ASIAN ADULT ADOPTEES

A Dissertation

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the Faculty of the Graduate School of Social Work

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Cindi Kim

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Advisor: Dr. Enid Opal Cox
ABSTRACT

This study examined the nature and meaning of racial and ethnic identity as described by adult Asian adoptees who were transracially and internationally adopted. Particular focus of the study examined the racialization experiences and the relationships between racial and ethnic identity and socialization, and identified key influences on self-perception. The intent of this study was to gain insight into how this particular social group negotiated racial issues during different stages of development, while maintaining a sense of self. This study’s approach took a narrative form, as participants described the essence of their experience contributing to their racial and ethnic identity and self-perception and how meaning was created in the process of identity development in relation to their social environment. This study included 8 participants, age 25-46, from diverse geographic locations, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, gender, marital status, age at adoption, and country of birth. The phenomenological approach was used to ascertain the meaning, structure, and the lived experience of this group by inquiring into the truth and reality of their experience, and examined the nature of this knowledge. It was discovered that adult adoptees conceptualized and negotiated racial and ethnic identity, perceptions of self, essential feelings, and finally, self-acceptance as a result of family practices and social environment, in addition to their racialization and the adoption experience.
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to the participants who took part in this study. I wish to thank all the participants for opening their hearts and mind, and their willingness to share their stories. Without them, this dissertation would not have been possible.

July 2010

Cindi Kim
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CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION

Adoption, considered by many to be merely a concept, is, in fact a traumatic experience for the adoptee. It begins with the separation from his [sic] biological mother and ends with his living with strangers. (Verrier, 1993, p. 16)

Adoption is a concept constructed by social and legal formation that has been developed over time and is shaped by the social, cultural, political, and economic circumstances of a given society (Carp, 2002; Zamostny, O’Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003). Some form of adoption, whether informal or formal, has been practiced since ancient times throughout the world (Adamec & Pierce, 1991; Freundlich, 2007; Huard, 1956). The degree to which adoption has taken place has been dependent on the needs and available resources of a particular society (Adamec & Pierce, 1991; Zamostny et al., 2003). When examined in total context, adoption is a viable and often the only solution (certainly preferable to institutionalization) available for the birth family, adopted child, and the adoptive parent (Brodzinsky, Schechter & Henig, 1992), known as the adoption triad (Javier, Baden, Biafora, Camacho-Ginderich & Henderson, 2007). However, adoption is inevitably a condition where the child is separated from her/his biological parents and culture.

Statement of the Problem

Separation from biological parent and culture causes profound loss and trauma for the child. This separation causes multiple layers of trauma for the adopted child including
(a) separation from the birth mother and biologically related culture, (b) most likely a second separation when the child is separated from the foster family or temporary caregivers prior to adoption, (c) knowledge that she/he is not biologically related to the adoptive parent(s), and (d) the realization that she/he will not likely or never know her/his biological family (Lifton, 2002). This sense of loss can create a feeling of emptiness and void in some adoptees. Some adoptees struggle with feelings of loss and abandonment by the birth family that last a lifetime (Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000). However, most scholarly literature on adoption has focused on placement adjustment, with little regard to recognizing the grief and mourning adoptees may suffer due to this separation. In order to assess the full impact of adoption, the adopted child should be seen holistically in terms of how it has affected her or him. Lifton (2002) described such assessment as follows:

[The ability to] see the adoptee not only as a child who has gained a family, but a child who has lost one. Because this loss is usually unacknowledged by society, adoptees often feel alone on their journey, even when surrounded by a loving adoptive family. They also feel invisible, for an essential part of them is not acknowledged. (p. 208)

Part of this loss includes the loss of birth culture. Perhaps the most dramatic form of separation and loss due to international adoption (IA) and transracial adoption (TRA), which refers to the transfer of children across international borders for the purpose of adoption. In this most extreme form of separation between the child and the biological parent, the child is placed in a different country, typically with parents of a different race, culture, and language from the birth family (Anagnost, 2000; Bartholet, 1993, 2005; Kane, 1993).
Background of the Problem

Initially IA was situated as a humanitarian response due to crises of war and famine, making it impossible for war-devastated countries to care for their own children at home (Bartholet, 1993, 2005; Selman, 2001, 2002). However, since then, IA has become a widely practiced social phenomenon, developed as a direct response to the domestic transracial controversy (R. M. Lee, 2003), as it became socially conditioned practice (discussed further in the next chapter). What is noteworthy is that in the majority of IA adoptions, children are not placed for adoption due to death of a parent but rather abandonment as the result of social and/or economic conditions of the biological family and nation.

Accordingly, subsequent causes have often been due to political, economic, and social upheavals/conditions. Studies revealed that most adoptions from developing nations, including Latin America, Eastern Europe, and Asian countries (except for Korea and China), showed that they relinquished their children due to poverty (Freundlich, 2002). For instance, with the end of the Cold War, market-driven economies, brought into Central and Eastern Europe, eroded the communist-era welfare systems (Kapstein, 2003), which left many Eastern European countries struggling economically and unable to care for their children; the result was a rising number of abandoned children. Similarly, political upheavals in Latin and Central America have left thousands of children abandoned (Engel, Phillips, & Dellacava, 2007). In the case of China, as a consequence of its one-child policy and its preference for boys, an estimated 96% of IAs from there have been girls (Kapstein, 2003). Korea’s patriarchal system is often blamed for the continuation of IA, despite that nation’s gaining economic and social stability (Bartholet,
2005; Choy, 2007; E. Kim, 2007). Overall, the societal response toward all of these relinquished children has been to separate them from their families, nations, language, culture, and ethnic connections.

Thus, what began as a humanitarian effort to save the poor and desperate children affected by war, involving a few hundred children, has grown into the movement of over 30,000 children annually (Lovelock, 2000; Selman, 2001, 2002), representing over 50 countries (McGinnis, 2007). Approximately half have come to the United States (Choy, 2007; Lovelock, 2000). About 60% of these children have come from Asia, and most of them were placed with White adoptive parents (Basow, Liley, Bookwala, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2008). Moreover, a majority of these children have come from Korea (Kapstein, 2003; Sarri, Baik & Bombyk, 1998). Starting in the mid 1950s, Korea became the main source for children being sent to the United States for adoption. It is estimated that more than 160,000 children from Korea were placed in U.S. families from 1953 to 2007; thus Korean adoptees represent the largest number of international adoptees in the United States (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009; R. M. Lee, 2003).

On a global scale, the IA practice is at an historic high level (Selman, 2001, 2002). The annual number of IAs remained relatively small until 1990, with just over 7,000 children adopted internationally that year; but by 1998, the number more than doubled, and by 2003, the number had tripled (Engel et al., 2007; U.S. State Department, 2008a). Moreover, IA is increasing in the United States more rapidly than other non-related adoptions (Hollinger, 1993); in 2001, nearly one out of three adoptions was from outside the country (Shiao & Tuan, 2007).
The common connective threads of the IA discourse are infertility (Deacon, 1997; Herman, 2002) and the limited supply of available children at home (Steltzner, 2003), where family-forming decision-making turns to the international community (Deacon, 1997). IA is disguised as an altruistic act, masked by the privilege of those who can afford to adopt (Quiroz, 2007; Zamostny et al., 2003), whereas young children with no voice are involved in the transnational transaction of human capital in order for the middle class to form interracial U.S. families (Anagnost, 2000). It is especially poignant when poverty is the driving force in making children available for adoption from mostly underdeveloped countries (Zamostny et al., 2003). It should be noted that it is in these same countries that the majority of cases of trafficking and abuse of women and children occur (Kapstein, 2003; Sarri et al., 1998; Selman, 2001, 2002). What is particularly disturbing is when children are made available due to the sending countries’ domestic social policies, as is the case with Korea and China (Bartholet, 1993, 2005; Hübnette, 2005; Shiao & Tuan, 2008).

When IA first began, it was common practice for placement organizations to place children with families without consideration of cultural differences, despite reports of placement problems (Shiao & Tuan, 2008). There was little regard for the child who might suffer loss as the consequence of being separated from his/her birth family and birth culture (Bartholet, 1993), or racial and national communities (B. J. Lee, 2006). In addition, adoption studies have traditionally neglected to consider the child who may feel a sense of loss from her/his separation from the birth family and culture. As Verrier (1993) explained,
This loss is often [not talked about] but we must remember that the child has been irreparably separated from the person to whom she or he is biologically, genetically, historically and perhaps even more importantly, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually connected (Verrier, 1993, p. 10)

And in the case of IA/TRA adoptees, this is particularly true, because these children have also been racially and ethnically separated from their culture.

During the initial period of placement, social workers encouraged IA parents to assimilate the adoptees into society as quickly as possible (Brian, 2007; Quiroz, 2007; Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001; Volkman, 2005). However, during the post-1965 Civil Rights Movement of identity politics, coincident with the increase of IA practice, concerns arose about adjustment in the home; this, in turn, influenced the trajectory of IA practice as research focused on the adoptees’ adjustment (Shiao & Tuan, 2007).

Emerging theories guiding the study of IA have been concentrated on psychodynamic perspectives, social role theory, family systems perspective, attachment theory, and stress and coping theories (Zamostny et al., 2003). Whereas such studies made “only rare or superficial measurements of racial and ethnic experiences, much less ethnic identity, these policy-motivated studies interpreted the relative absence of behavioral and emotional problems as indicating the nonsignificance of race” (Shiao & Tuan, 2008, p. 1033). The lack of any behavioral and/or emotional problems may be due to the “compliant child” syndrome, as discussed by Verrier (1993) and Lifton (2002), where the child becomes the perfect child, eager to please without acknowledging her/his own needs and suppressing feelings of subjugation. Being the “chosen” child may also mean an additional burden to “be good” so as not to lose yet another caregiver (Brodzinsky et al., 1992).
Developing Racial and Ethnic Identity

The search for self is universal and ongoing. For adoptees and nonadoptees alike, an understanding of the self is one of the primary tasks of psychological development. Our sense of who we are is influenced by every experience we have; it’s changed each time our life circumstances change.

(Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992, p. 13)

The essential project of all human subjects is to know oneself and have a sense of self-concept, and having this sense of self gives individuals psychological resources in times of stress (Oyserman, 2004). In the case of IA/TRA Asian adoptees, the disconnected self from the birth mother is further exacerbated through being separated by geographic distance, culture, language, and by something as primal as sounds and smells of the birthplace. Further exacerbating the issue,

[If] the child [is] relinquished at the primal phase of development, when the mother not only plays the role of the child’s Self but actually is that Self, we may be dealing not only with the loss of the “primary love object,” but with the loss of part of Self. (Verrier, 1993, p. 38)

In this regard, most IA/TRA Asian adoptees do not even have access to the most basic information, such as birthplace, birth date, birth family names, and reasons for adoption (Anagnost, 2000; E. Kim, 2007; Zamostny et al., 2003). Not knowing any birth history and connection creates a perception of incomplete sense of self in adoptees, inhibiting identity development. Although sense of loss and trauma may not be felt immediately, it may gradually emerge with the adopted child’s cognitive development and with her/his understanding of the meaning of adoption (Brodzinsky et al., 1992) and as a result of interaction with others (to be discussed in the next chapter).
As human beings, we are not born into an identity, but individual identity is developed over time, mediated by social forces (Chang, 1999). Each individual develops different sets of identity, including racial/ethnic, gender, age, social class, religion, political beliefs, and so on, which make up our social identities. The social identity to which we belong determines her/his status in society and may change as a result of others’ devaluation of our stated identity. For IA/TRA Asian-adopted individuals, the process of gaining a sense of self also includes understanding one’s racial and ethnic identity.

Developing racial and ethnic identity involves a separate psychological process from developing one’s personal identity (Yoon, 2004), as part of developing one’s social identity (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Phinney, 1992). As a person of color in our society, understanding one’s racial and ethnic identity is to appreciate where one fits in the social system in relation to larger society and how to negotiate in that society. Baumeister (as cited in Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000) stated that identities “exist only in societies, which define and organize them. Thus, the search for identity includes the question of what is the proper relationship of the individual to society as a whole” (p. 379). This comprehension provides the psychological survival tools to negotiate a world where racial and ethnic individuals are routinely classified and categorized into a preconceived social system (Grotevant, 1997).

Racial and ethnic identity development and gaining a sense of self for IA- and TRA-adopted individuals occupy a complex space, where the interplay of social conditioning and the politicization of race and ethnicity, created by the social system, along with other salient political identity signifiers, such as sexual orientation, gender,
class, nationality, and so on, have hindered the IA/TRA-adopted person’s ability to gain a positive sense of self. The multiple-identity experiences shared by Asian adoptees are complex by the very nature of the transracial character of the family-forming process, thereby convoluting their (IA/TRA adoptees’) sense of self. Often their identity, especially during childhood, may be a result of being forced or imposed upon by, and mediated through, the adoptive parents, surrounding community, media, social relationships, and sociopolitical conditions (Anagnost, 2000; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008).

Wilkinson (1995) and Shiao and Tuan (2007) described racial and ethnic identity development as a lifelong process. Some scholars suggested that ethnic identity development begins at age 6 and continues to increase with cognitive development (Huh, 2007). Song and Lee (2009) added that ethnic identity also involves feelings of belongingness and having positive feelings about one’s racial and ethnic group. In addition, there is empirical evidence that as children from cultures outside the dominant culture grow older and enter the public sphere, they face racial discrimination as they enter school, jobs, and sociopolitical environments. As a result, they begin to examine their own status in the world (Shiao & Tuan, 2008). Thus, the societal context plays a critical role in defining meaning. The process of the individual’s ability to share meaning and finding recognition and acceptance determines her/his ability to maneuver in the social environment (Andujo, 1988; Carstens & Julia, 2000). Shiao and Tuan (2008) found that most young adult adoptees belonging to a racial/ethnic minority group began to explore their racial identities on some level once they left the relative safety of their adoptive homes.
The process of racial/ethnic identity is developed through what Hollingsworth (1999) described as the symbolic interaction of sharing both a similar heritage as well as a common experience. This commonality assists in creating shared meaning. “Meanings are acquired during a child’s experiences in the group, and these meanings lead to the development of a self or identity” (p. 446). Thus, cultural meaning is developed through the individual’s process of socialization within the group. Culture refers to “behaviors and values that are learned, shared, and exhibited by a group of people.” (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005, p. 127). Nevertheless, research has indicated that most Asian adoptees have little exposure to Asian-American communities, because most grow up in small-town, White, middle-class communities, and this limits their process of developing positive racial and ethnic identity (Dorow, 2006; Meier, 1999; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008; Volkman, 2005). This implies that Asian adoptees are part of the White culture, because they grew up with the values and behaviors of their White family members and community. But at the same time, culture is “frequently represented symbolically through language and can encompass identities around immigration status, gender, phenotype, sexuality, and religion, as well as race and ethnicity” (Yosso & Solorzano, p. 128). Thusly, this cultural dichotomy places Asian adoptees in a type of identity limbo, because they were raised with White cultural values, yet experience racialization as Asians in the United States.

Identity is not fixed but rather malleable with individual understanding, as the individual attempts to understand oneself within the context of the larger society. An important component for IA/TRA Asian adoptees is to develop a sense of racial and ethnic identity by understanding the meaning of their racialization experience in the
United States (Baden & Steward, 2007; Bailey, 2006). However, the process of gaining racial and ethnic identity is different for IA/TRA Asian adoptees compared to the general Asian American population, and this comprehension is key to understanding their full experience, both positive and negative, as they assign meaning to their experiences. This is achieved by making sense of, and giving meaning to their experience. Additionally, developing racial and ethnic identity involves a conscious decision by the individual as to whether or not to engage in such identity-exploring activity (Phinney, 1990).

Further complicating and hindering their (IA/TRA) cultural experience and racial and ethnic identity development is the way in which Asians are racialized in the United States. For example, Asians face conditional acceptance as perpetual foreigners, regardless of their generational status (Ancheta, 1998; Dorow, 2006; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008). In addition, rising anti-Asian sentiment, dependent on economic conditions, hinders Asian adoptees from developing healthy racial and ethnic identities (Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008). Understanding the racialization of Asians is central, because Asian adoptees are not shielded/protected or made distinct because of their adoptive status. Mohanty and Newhill (2006) added that the developing of ethnic pride or a healthy ethnic identity is difficult to accomplish while living in a racialized society, where Asian adoptees face double jeopardy in that they not only lose their biological, cultural identities by the very act of IA/TRA, but subsequently also become potential subjects for discrimination (Varnis, 2001). These realities make the role of the adoptive parents of Asian children especially important in regard to assisting adoptees in constructing their cultural identity (Anagnost, 2000). In this respect, research studies have indicated that adoptive parents exercise varying degrees of cultural activities in the home (Meier, 1999).
Yet, cultural practice involves multiple and varied activities as part of daily life. Song and Lee (2009) found that the type and quality of cultural activities adoptive family engaged in had a profound effect on ethnic identity development. For instance, superficial cultural activities (e.g., food, art, martial arts, and books) had little effect on the racial and ethnic identity development of Asian adoptees.

In addition, the situated debates on race have traditionally centered on a Black/White paradigm wherein the transracial adoption controversy was focused on the adoption of African American children by White families in the United States (R. M. Lee, 2003; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008). In general, debates on race are seen in a Black-White binary system (Chang, 1999), with binary referring to the “two dimensional limit that is placed on discussions about race and racism” (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005, p. 121). Although the transracial discourse has historically been discussed in this context of Black-White binary, the majority (85%) of transracial adoptees in the United States come from international adoption (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009).

On the other hand, the adoption of Asian children has been historically established as transcultural in nature without recognizing the transracial component, thus placing Asian adoptees in a type of cultural vortex. In other words, they become lost in the broad categorization of culture, and their racialization experience becomes meaningless (Louie, 2003), as their experience becomes negated and minimized (Dorow, 2006; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008; Volkman, 2005). This labeling of Asian adoptees as transcultural may harm the adoptees’ ability to develop an understanding of their racialization in the United States, and at the same time, may contribute to the separation of their experiences from other Asian American communities (Anagnost, 2000). In
addition, examining Asian adoptions only as transcultural eases the White parents’ burden of viewing the Asian adoption also as a transracial adoption and, in turn, their adequacy in dealing with issues of race and discrimination, because it is often easier to emphasize the cultural origins of the adopted child (Anagnost, 2000; Ishizawa, Kenney, Kubo & Stevens, 2006). Accordingly, for adoptive parents and professionals alike, the issue of race has been historically absent from the IA/TRA discourse, because racialization of Asians is not considered a serious phenomenon when compared to other racial groups. Nevertheless, when discussing from a holistic perspective, the total loss experienced by IA/TRA Asian adoptees, one must also include the loss of racial and ethnic connections (Henderson, 2002), given that as a result of this loss, adoptees inexplicably suffer varying degrees of psychological distress. Despite these factors, little research has been done on the racialization experiences of Asian adoptees who are IA/TRA adopted.

Part of the adoption discourse should also include the loss and separation from biological culture, and racial and ethnic connection, and how the racialization of Asians impacts the racial and ethnic identity of IA/TRA Asian adoptees. As part of this discussion, I have examined the context of the racialization experience for Asian Americans.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to understand the nature and meaning of racial/ethnic identity as described by adult Asian adoptees who were internationally and transracially adopted. To this end, the study has situated race and racialization of Asian adoptees at the center of analysis. In doing so, this study aims to fill a missing voice in research—the
missing voice of adoptees in regard to telling their racialization experiences. In order to capture this subjective experience, there is a need for a phenomenological viewpoint. Hence, the study specifically focuses on racial issues by examining the first-hand experiences of adoptees in terms of past and present accounts of racial experiences during different stages of development, as reported directly by Asian adult adoptees. Furthermore, attention is given to the examination of (a) the relationship between racial identity and socialization, (b) how identity has been negotiated during different life stages, and (c) the impact of key influences on this identification process, as described by participants with respect to racialization experiences.

In that vein, this study utilized the qualitative method of research, specifically guided by the phenomenological approach and grounded in critical race theory, to explore the subjective, racialized experiences of Asian adult adoptees as they ascribe meaning to their experiences. This study utilized the phenomenological approach to extrapolate a deeper understanding of perception and feelings about racial/ethnic identity and self-concepts in adoptees. Critical race theory (CRT) provides the framework for examining the intersection of race, gender, and social class in the marginalized experiences of certain social groups (Mahalingam, 2007), and in the case of this study, the multiple identities of Asian adoptees. CRT is valuable in studies such as the present one, because according to Ladson-Billings (2000), it attempts to describe the meaning associated with differing social group membership and inform the methodological approach by attempting to uncover the complexities of differences and experiences. Asian adoptees have traditionally been overlooked in studies of race and discrimination within the Asian American studies (E. R. Cole, 2009). Thus, I have used CRT to create a
space for Asian adult adoptees’ epistemology by affording adoptees to voice their own experiences and perspectives without imposing any set social constructs on their adoption experience.

**Concept of Race**

The term *race* can be traced to antiquity (Smedley, 2007); however, today’s usage of the term came about in the 16th century (Sollors, 2002), coinciding with some European nations’ colonial expansion projects throughout the world, in order to classify and denote categorization of peoples they encountered (Smedley, 2007). The term’s usage and definition have changed over time, but at the most basic level, race refers to common ancestry or origin (Isaac, 2004).

However, the concept of race is merely a social construct, because there is no biological basis (Banton, 2002); it is simply a “construct invented to establish a hierarchy of human groups and to delineate between them” (Isaac, 2004, p. 33). Therefore, the concept of race superimposes a false consciousness, because “[the] vast majority of people equate visible biological variations” (Smedley, 2007, p. 14) with belonging to a different race. Accordingly to Yosso and Solorzano (2005), race “can be viewed as an ‘objective’ phenomenon until human beings provide the social meaning and the social meaning applied to race is based upon and justified by an ideology of racial superiority and White privilege” (p. 117).

The term, race, slowly began to be replaced by the term *ethnicity* to encompass more diverse groups of Whites in the United States; however the term, race, did not completely disappear, because the usage of the term is still commonly used to differentiate phenotype variations in people (Smedley, 2007). The term *ethnic* more
accurately refers to the “critical attribute of race in that it is a basis of diversity within and between racial categories” (Stanfield, 1994, p. 175). However, this more inclusive term, ethnic, does not accurately depict societal treatment of racially categorized groups.

**Definition of Terms**

The term, *Asian American*, “inspired by the civil rights movement, was forged in the 1960s to empower heretofore disparate Asian American communities. Any construction of identity requires a reconfiguration, sometimes rather violently, of one’s psyche and history” (Ma, 2000, p. xi). In other words, the Asian American identity was created in reaction to “Orientalism.” Before the unifying term, *Asian American*, it was common practice—and is, even today—to use the term, *Oriental*, when referring to Asian American individuals. This term, invented in the West as a way to objectify and subjugate people from the East, created a false identity of Asian Americans. In addition, the forever foreigner status, no matter their generational history, has threatened Asian Americans with implications of being rejected from the American (U.S.) culture. Consequently, Asian images are mediated when there are national debates regarding immigration and its associated problems (Wu, 2002).

In addition, despite the fact that various Asian groups in the United States represent at least a dozen distinct cultures and languages, a dominant tendency in this country is to group all Asians into one category, as sharing a common experience (Chang, 1999; Hess, Markson, & Stein, 2001; Ladson-Billings, 2000). The grouping of Asian Americans into one category has perilous consequences, because they are viewed as both outsiders and the “other” in the sociopolitical system (Ladson-Billings). However, the benefit of the term is that it attempts to unify the Asian American community by
strengthening political unity. According to Chang (1999), applying the term, ethnic, to Asians in the United States is questionable, because Asians comprise so many ethnic Asian groups in this country. Further, Omi and Winant (1986/2001) contended that the inclusive nature of the term, ethnic, does not recognize the varying historical experiences of Asian American people, including historical oppression.

For the purpose of this study, adoption refers to the social and legal procedure wherein a permanent family is created for a child whose biological parents are either unable or unwilling to care for that child. On the other hand, international adoption refers to the process of transferring children across international borders for the purpose of adoption, and transracial adoption refers to placement of children who are racially and ethnically different from their adoptive parents. Asian adult adoptees refer to those individuals who are 25 years of age or older, are racially and ethnically Asian, and were born in Asia and brought into the United States for the purpose of adoption. Racialization refers to social practices related to assigning racial and/or stereotypical categories to an identified racial/ethnic group.

Identity refers to how the individual describes the comprehension of her/himself as a discrete and separate entity and the understanding of where she/he belongs in the social system in relation to the larger society; and racial/ethnic identity refers to an individual’s self-affiliation, and her/his perception and self-concept towards her or his own racial/ethnic group membership as well as the individual’s relationship to ideas of race and ethnicity, and culture. Conversely, stereotype refers to preconceived notions that are commonly held, public beliefs about a specific social group in the form of simplified
conceptions of that group, based on widely held assumptions. For the purpose of this study, the term *racial* and *ethnic* identity will be used jointly.

*Discursive or discourse* is defined as either written or spoken communication, including debates, either formal or informal. Moreover, *discourse* is a system of representation of rules and practices that produce meaningful statements and regulate discourse in different historical periods (Hall, 1997). And finally, the term *social construction* or *social construct* refers to a particular phenomenon that participants in a society or culture develop; and over time, such constructs become part of a conventional norm (Rothenberg, 2001).

Although the concepts of loss, separation, and trauma were briefly discussed in this chapter, it is beyond the scope of this study to explore these concepts comprehensively. They have merely been introduced to highlight the varying issues accompanying the multi-faceted IA/TRA adoption experience.

**Relevance to the Social Work Profession**

The current research holds paramount interest for the social work profession in regards to practice, education, and research. As mentioned earlier, IA is an extensively practiced social phenomenon. For instance, between 1989 and 2005, some 234,358 children were adopted internationally—a 180% increase in IA during a 16-year period (Child Welfare League of America, 2007). Research on adoptees’ adjustment has shown that adoptees often struggled with their racial and ethnic identity and suffered discrimination (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009; Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000; Mohanty, Keokse, & Sales, 2006; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008), however, their experience was rarely recognized or was minimized by their family and friends (Brooks
& Barth, 1999; Feigelman, 2000). Additionally, research has suggested that parents are often unprepared to deal with the issues of racism faced by adoptees (Mohanty et. al., 2006).

Social work’s primary mission is to work on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed peoples, and the fundamental principle lies in understanding the social and political systems that contribute to conditions creating social injustice (National Association of Social Workers, 2010). In doing so, social work practice needs to recognize that the IA/TRA population is especially vulnerable due to geographic separation and disconnection from their birth culture.

B. J. Lee (2006) suggested that IA practice should include maintaining the child’s ethnic/cultural heritage so that the child can develop a positive self-image, in addition to providing for the child’s material needs. IA children are inexplicably tied to their cultural origins (Dorow, 2006; Riley, 1997), and empirical evidence would suggest that Asian adoptees are left struggling with identity issues and lack skills to cope when faced with discrimination (Mohanty & Newhill, 2006; Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008).

Cultural socialization helps the adoptees feel more connected to the family as well as to the larger society. Research findings have served to encourage social workers and counselors to work with adoptive parents on the importance of cultural continuity throughout the child’s upbringing (Mohanty et al., 2006), including assisting the child to acquire racial and ethnic identity. Social workers need to incorporate culturally competent services and appropriate placement assessment into their practice, including proper preparation of the adoptive parents. “Social workers should raise awareness and
knowledge of adoptive parents to the cultural continuity in the child’s upbringing and ethnicity developmentally and provide age appropriate information to adoptees for their successful adjustment” (Mohanty et al., 2006, p. 169). Adoption social workers need to provide pre- and post-adoption services to parents, including training parents on cultural competence (Noordegraaf, Nijnatten, & Elbers, 2008), as well as recognize Asian Americans as subjects of racism in the United States (Simmons, Diaz, Jackson, & Takahashi, 2008). In addition, working with the IA/TRA Asian population should be incorporated into social work education as part of culturally competent practice. “Cultural competence in social work practice implies a heightened consciousness of how clients experience their uniqueness and deal with their differences and similarities within a larger social context” (Simmons et. al., 2008, p. 8).

The social work profession needs to intervene on behalf of the IA/TRA Asian adoptee population by recognizing the dual existence of growing up in a White culture (and as a result, being disconnected from their racial and ethnic membership group), while facing discrimination from the wider society (R. M. Lee, 2003). It is essential for social work practice to develop services grounded in IA/TRAs’ culture by acknowledging the unique experience of this community.

Findings from this research potentially challenge educators to prepare social work students to understand the multiple issues facing the IA/TRA community as well as the sociopolitical conditions that contribute to the IA/TRA phenomenon, by cutting through the ideological discussions and debates of TRA and being sensitive to the power difference/structure between groups and how socialization by the media affects individual development (van Voorhis, 1998). In addition, the findings of this research could
potentially be incorporated into the social work curriculum in developing culturally relevant services and recognizing the IA/TRA community as part of a unique social group.

Research on IA has traditionally been concerned with family social adjustment and other developmental issues (e.g., physical, language-related, cognitive, self-esteem, and psychological issues) as a way to assess placements (Bergquist, Campbell, & Unrau, 2003; Feigelman, 2000; Howard, Smith, & Ryan, 2004; W. J. Kim et al., 1998; Wickes & Slate, 1996). According to Shiao and Tuan (2007),

This is an important point to keep in mind, since it shapes how researchers in the field approach race, ethnicity, and identity. In effect, researchers tend to operationalize racial and ethnic identity as an adoptee’s relative comfort with being racially different from her or his parents and family. (p. 159)

In other words, research has been more concerned with policy debates than the racial and ethnic identity development of IA/TRA Asian adoptees.

Research on racial and ethnic identity development in relation to psychological adjustment has shown that placement has been inadequate in providing coping skills to these adoptees (Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008). Mohanty et al. (2006) suggested that social workers should advocate for policies that stress the importance of racial and ethnic issues for adoptees and ensure that adoption agencies provide those services.

Current research can inform social work practitioners to facilitate services on behalf of families by educating parents of potential issues that may arise from IA/TRA adoptions, especially regarding issues of race and racialization. It is vital that parents have certain skills, attitudes, and knowledge to help their children cope with racism and
discrimination as well as develop a sense of belonging to a birth culture. As Vonk, Yun, Park, & Massatti (2007) explained,

Such competence includes racial awareness, including (1) awareness of how race, ethnicity, and related power status affects parents’ and children’s lives; (2) multicultural planning, the creation of avenues for the child to participate in his or her ethnic culture; and (3) development of survival skills and strategies to cope with prejudice and racism. (p. 100)

Social workers need to advocate on behalf of this population, including issues and/or concerns prospective adoptive parents should be aware of when pursuing international adoption.

And finally, this study can be used as a foundation for future studies in the IA/TRA adoptee community: This study provides critical information for those involved in developing culturally relevant policies and services by calling attention of the wider community to the issues facing the IA/TRA community. In addition, this research can inform social work professionals of appropriate and relevant information and/or services, help them gain general knowledge, and enhance social work education, practice, and research.

**Chapter Summary**

In this chapter, I introduced the concept of adoption, provided the background of the problem, and stated the purpose of my study. I provided a brief rationale for using critical race theory as a guide to the study of the racialization experience of Asian adoptees. In addition, I discussed the concept of race and defined key terms. And finally, I presented how the present study is relevant to the central interests of the social work profession.
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter expands on the topics discussed in the previous chapter. The first part of the chapter discusses the historical development of IA by providing a general overview of domestic adoption debates that opened the door to international adoption. For instance, the transracial controversy and the political and social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, directly led to the IA phenomenon. The historical development of IA provides a general framework for how IA grew into the phenomenon it is today, because it expanded the definition of the “adoptable child,” due to both the perceived shortage of available children as well as “rescue” narratives to save the poor and abandoned children worldwide.

The second part of this literature review discusses how IA has been socially constructed through social conditioning and discursive practices for the past 60 years, becoming an ingrained part of social practice. The rationalization of IA has been supported by not only research studies that consistently showed that children were adjusting well in their new homes but also discourses of saving children who otherwise had limited opportunities in their homeland. This section also discusses the problems of IA that led to domestic and international policies regulating IA. In addition, I discuss how IA changed immigration policies in order to make exceptions to allow entry of formally deemed “undesirable” immigrants, especially children.
In the third part of the chapter, I present a discussion of critical race theory and a justification of how it applies to this study, providing a brief history of the development of critical race theory and the relevance of the theory to a discussion of the racialization experience of Asian adoptees. Further, I describe how Asians are racialized in the United States and how this racialization has directly affected the IA/TRA practice of adopting Asian children. In the fourth section, I provide an integrative research literature review on IA/TRA Asian adoptees. Additionally, I present how the societal context affects racial/ethnic identity development in Asian adoptees. And finally, I identify gaps in the knowledge base, concluding with a summary of what was discussed.

**History**

In this section, based on a review of the literature, I highlight how IA has developed over time and how the changing landscape of domestic adoption practices opened the door to the IA phenomenon. Furthermore, I describe the changes in U.S. immigration legislation that allowed admission of Asians as part of the Cold War campaign.

**Domestic Adoption in the United States**

There are several factors that opened the doors to IA practice in the United States. The interplay of the Civil Rights Movement and the women’s movement changed the social and political tide of the country (Satz & Askeland, 2006). These movements changed the collective mindset about the traditionally held notion of illegitimacy and single motherhood (Kahan, 2006). Prior to this period, unwed mothers were routinely pressured to give up their babies for adoption due to the continued societal stigmatization of illegitimacy (Ashby, 1997). Changes in family structure, including increase in divorce
rates, made single motherhood more acceptable and also allowed for single-parent adoptions (Freundlich, 2007; Howe, 1983). Additionally, the introduction of several birth control methods, especially “the pill” in 1960, and the legalization of abortion in 1973 gave women more control over their bodies on deciding when and if they wanted to have children. In addition to more acceptance of single motherhood with the changes in sexual mores, there were fewer stigmas for unwed mothers to keep their babies and their ability to financially support them, due to the shift in economic, social, and political trends, as more women entered the workforce (Satz & Askeland, 2006).

The Civil Rights Movement also gave rise to progress on child welfare rights, including placement and adoption of children in institutions and foster care (Ashby, 1997; Satz & Askeland, 2006). Furthermore, child advocates began to challenge the labeling of “adoptable” versus “unadoptable” children and demanded more control over adoption issues, which included opening up adoption records and making the termination of parental rights more difficult. Finally, changes in legislation provided for federal intervention that required agencies to become more aggressive with permanency planning for children in foster-care placement by either returning them to their parents or finding adoptive homes (E. S. Cole & Donley, 1990).

All the above contributed to the decline in White infants available for adoption. Thereby, the definition of the adoptable child was expanded to include children of color, older children, and children with special needs. Social workers actively began to recruit families to adopt African American children; and as a result, transracial adoption reached its peak in 1971 (Curtis, 1996; Howe, 1983; Leiby, 1978). However, the adoption of African American children by White parents drew criticism from the National
Association of Black Social Workers (NABSW), who called the practice an act of cultural genocide (R. M. Lee, 2003) and advocated denouncing this policy in 1972. In reaction to this criticism, transracial adoption decreased by 39% that same year (Freundlich, 2007; Leiby, 1978; Shiao & Tuan, 2008).

In addition to NABSW criticism, in 1978, Congress passed the Indian Child Welfare Act, mandating placement of native children with native families. This legislation was developed in response to criticism from the Native American communities. Explaining the basis for their criticism, R. M. Lee (2003) stated,

> [The cause of] intentional domestic transracial adoption was the Indian Adoption Project, which occurred between 1958 and 1967. The project was a collaboration between the Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and was designed to remove Indian children from their families on reservations in an effort to assimilate them into mainstream society. (p. 712)

Prior to this legislation, 90% of Native children were placed in White homes. These critics argued that the transracial placements were an act of cultural and legal genocide of communities traditionally subjected to American racism (Kahan, 2006). All these factors contributed to a shortage of adoptable children in the United States. Frustrated by long waiting lists, adopters began to turn to the international community for adoption (Adamec & Pierce, 1991; Kahan, 2006).

**Start of International Adoption**

As previously discussed in Chapter 1, IA began as a response to countries devastated by war, and the significant practice of IA began soon after the Korean War. The Korean War left 80% of that nation’s infrastructure destroyed (Shiao & Tuan, 2008). Before the start of the war, in June 1950, an estimated 8,908 orphans were living in institutions in Korea; but by the end of the conflict in July 1953, the number of
institutionalized orphans had increased to 53,963 (Wilkinson, 1995). Other sources estimate that one year into the Korean War, in 1951, there were an estimated 100,000 orphaned children, and by 1954, there was a total of 2 million displaced children under the age of 18 (Hübinette, 2004; McGinnis, 2007). Unemployment and poverty were rampant, resulting in many families with children becoming helpless victims of dependency on foreign aid (D. S. Kim, 2007). Thus, these images of devastation left by the Korean War became consciously consumed by citizens in the United States, and along with it, the language of rescue that became imbedded in the collective consciousness (Goldberg, 2001).

**IA as part of the Cold War campaign.** Initially sanctioned as part of a humanitarian effort to rescue children from the ravages of the Korean War, as mentioned earlier, international adoption from Korea also represented a U.S. Cold War political campaign (Klein, 2000). In effect, IA became established as part of the general anti-Communist movement of the Cold War, developed as an integral part of U.S. foreign policy on intervening in the Asian Pacific region. This policy gave ordinary U.S. citizens the opportunity to participate in the Cold War effort, while simultaneously building international families as part of the political obligation and patriotic duty of responsible citizens (Hübinette, 2005; Klein, 2000). Rescue narratives of the Western media presented visual images of poor children in Asia (Briggs, 2003; Dubinsky, 2007), which became an enduring symbol of the IA cause.

**The “rescue” and “charity” discourse.** At the end of the Korean War, charitable calls were widespread for U.S. citizens to adopt Korean children as part of their humanitarian duty. This campaign helped to focus attention away from the causes of the
war, while it mobilized ideologies of rescue (Briggs, 2003; Dorow, 2006). The discourse of rescue, to save the children of war-torn Korea, became symbolic and material, and extended in multiple directions as it took in a whole generation and culture (Briggs, 2003).

The “rescue” and “charity” discourse of international adoption shared similarities with the practice of “placing out,” a system developed by Charles Loring Brace, who founded the New York Children’s Aid Society (CAS) in 1853 (Kahan, 2006). Brace wanted to rescue the large number of homeless and poor children due to the large influx of immigrants coming into the cities in the Northeastern part of the United States. He recognized that although there was not enough demand for labor for the vast number of immigrants coming into the cities, there was a shortage of labor in the rural farmlands (Adamec & Pierce, 1991; Askeland, 2006; Herman, 2002).

There were three purposes for Brace’s placing out practice. First, children provided free labor to farmers (where there was a labor shortage, particularly in the West). Second, sending children out West cost less than institutionalizing them. Third, this practice served as a measure of social control of the rising number of homeless and dependent children (Kahan, 2006; Leiby, 1978). By placing children with families in the West, Brace solved two problems at once: children needed homes, and families needed children (Adamec & Pierce, 1991; Herman, 2002).

The similarities between Brace’s placing out practice in the 19th century and the IA practice in the past 60 years included the fact that the language of rescue and charity, and supply and demand (which will be discussed later in this section) mediated both
practices. In addition, both practices placed children in culturally different homes, while separating them geographically from their culture and family.

**Increase in IA Practice**

IA increased throughout the 1970s, coincident with domestic transracial debates, and the number of international adoptions doubled by the 1980s from 2,500 to 5,000. By 1987, IA doubled again to 10,000, with most of these adoptees coming from Korea (Kahan, 2006). This practice became endemic due to (a) the assumption that infants are plentiful in developing countries, (b) the lack of apparent controversy surrounding these adoptions (no communities to speak on behalf of these children), (c) the dearth of restrictions on adoptive parents, and (d) the lack of a threat of the birth parents seeking to nullify the adoption (Brian, 2007).

**Social Construction of the IA Phenomenon**

To adequately appreciate the onset and persistence of the IA phenomenon is to recognize the social construction and discursive practice that has shaped the IA practice over time. The idea of IA as being in the best interest of the child, who would otherwise have limited opportunities in her or his homeland, has been socially conditioned through the media, by political practice, and through cultural indoctrination (Goldberg, 1991).

**The Social Conditioning**

In the United States, the 1980s’ cultural imaging of drug-addicted babies and the transracial adoption controversy turned adopters away from domestic, public child welfare adoptions (Deacon, 1997). In addition, the use of photographs of children awaiting adoption in developing countries helped to “sell” the children to the U.S. consciousness. This image-making culture paralleled the 1990s’ growing demand for
children, with discourses of limited supply at home, while promoting the available supply in the developing world, thus solving problems of unwanted and homeless children in other nations.

In the case of Korea, for example, abandoned children have no legal rights in society. When a child is born in Korea, she/he is registered under the father’s family registry, which is equivalent to a birth certificate in the United States. A copy of the birth registry is required for the child to register for school and later to obtain employment. A child without a birth registry becomes a non-citizen (Hollingsworth, 2003; Wilkinson, 1995). Whereas the unwed mother is considered immoral, the birth father has no responsibility (Herrmann & Kasper, 1992). This unjust system stigmatizes single motherhood; hence women have no choice but to put their children up for adoption (Hübinette, 2007).

Discourses surrounding these types of injustices towards women and children have been justified in the adoption of these children. In addition, the media exposed deplorable conditions in foreign orphanages as well as the general condition of poor and homeless children around the world (Nicholson, 2002; Varnis, 2001), effectively shifting the attention of adopters to IA, where international children were seen as economically rescuable (Dorow, 2006), and the adopters felt as if they were contributing to a humanitarian cause (Quiroz, 2007).

The essentialization of poor children affords middle-class adoptive parents an opportunity to form families (Anagnost, 2000), with this practice having been advocated for the past 60 years. In other words, IA has been built over time, becoming part of the ingrained belief system and accepted by the wider community. This belief system
becomes part of the shared consciousness to the point where even the adoptees themselves believe in the benefits of IA (Brian, 2007). In turn, the adopted child has become the symbol of adoption discourse (Yngvesson, 2003). Justification for continuance of the practice of IA was supported by research studies, which consistently showed that children were adjusting well in their adoptive placements (Carstens & Juliá, 2000; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983; Huh & Reid, 2000; Juffer & Ijzendoorn, 2007).

The political, cultural, social, and economic forces have been the impetus behind the socially constructed practice, as IA became part of social conditioning (Goldberg, 2001). “Social constructionists argue that social problems arise or are constructed through social explanations (claims) about how these problems should be understood,” (Miall, 1996, p. 309). Thereby, current IA discourse is bound by knowledge that has been created and shaped over time through a set of discursive practices (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999).

IA thus became embedded in our collective psyche by way of knowledge production (Jaworski & Coupland, 1999), through the use of key enforcers of this knowledge (Giddens, 1999). These knowledge producers (e.g., experts in adoption, such as social workers, psychologists, lawyers, and other social scientists)—and by the very research they conduct—are used as mechanisms to enforce this cultural and social knowledge (Brian, 2007).

**Policies Regulating International Adoption**

As discussed earlier, IA has grown significantly since it began in the 1950s. However, IA went largely unregulated until the 1980s and 1990s, when stories of child trafficking came to light (Varnis, 2001). An increasing demand from the West for infants created corruption in the form of baby trade, illegal trafficking of children, and coercion.
of birth mothers (Jacot, 1999; Kapstein, 2003). These stories of the exploitation of poor and vulnerable women and children in developing countries were gradually revealed to the international community (Herrmann & Kasper, 1992; Varnis, 2001). Convening on May 29, 1993, the Hague Convention on Protection and Cooperation in Respect of International Adoption (herein referred to as the Hague) made its recommendations on displaced children and the international adoption practice, and the protections were enforced on May 1, 1995 (Duncan, 1999; Freundlich, 1998; Kapstein, 2003; O’Keeffe, 2007; Sarri et al., 1998; Varnis, 2001).

The United States, along with 54 other countries, was an original signatory of the Hague (Pfund, 1999; Pierce, 1999; Selinske, Naughton, Flanagan, Fry & Pickles, 2001); and in 2000, the U.S. Congress passed the International Adoption Act (IAA), taking the first step in making the United States compliant with the Hague Convention (D. S. Kim, 2007; O’Keeffe, 2007; Schmit, 2008). However, it was not until December 12, 2007, that the United States formally ratified the policies, making the United States a full member of the Hague Convention. Thereafter, IA practice in the United States has been governed by IAA provisions, which began on April 1, 2008 (8 years after the Congress passed the IAA) (U.S. State Department, 2008b).

The fundamental principles of the Hague are to unify and formalize the international adoption practice by maximizing cooperation among countries involved in IA and toward protecting children from exploitation (Pfund, 1999; Pierce, 1999), all the while maintaining adoptive placements without unnecessary delays (O’Keefe, 2007). Currently, 66 nations have adopted the international treaty (U.S. State Department, 2009), including the United States and China, which currently have the largest supply
and demand relationship (Pierce, 1999; Varnis, 2001). Despite signing the Hague and passing the IAA, the United States continues to have IA relationships with both Hague and non-Hague member nations (O’Keeffe, 2007; Schmit, 2008).

The IAA designates the U.S. Department of State as the central authority to mandate the Hague Convention’s regulations and rules to all adoption agencies, including accrediting adoption agencies engaged in IA (Hinest, 1999; Selinske et al., 2001). In addition, the State Department is mandated to maintain a centralized registry to track all adoption cases (both outgoing and incoming) (U.S. State Department, 2008b).

Meanwhile, the continued practice of IA conflicted with the historical discourse of anti-immigrant sentiments. Subsequent legislation, such as the “save our state” (SOS) initiatives of the 1990s, sought to deny benefits to undocumented workers (Pantoja, 2006), while in the same decade, the numbers of IA children under the age of 5 tripled (Zamostny et al., 2003). Often, immigration discussion in the United States has coincided with debates about the economic benefits and costs (Pantoja, 2006); but this is not so with the immigration of children through adoption (Brian, 2007; Vonk et al., 2007; Yngvesson, 2002).

**Immigration of International Adoptees**

Prior to opening its doors to hundreds of thousands of children from Asia, U.S. immigration law limited the number of Asians entering the United States. The United States lacked any permanent policy for permitting IA until 1961 (McGinnis, 2007). IA practice and the subsequent passage of the International Adoption Act permanently implanted IA in U.S. practice, because it changed immigration policies. Lovelock (2000) stated that the relationship between immigration and IA policies is not only highly
dependent on, but also has changed over time in response to national and international realities and social pressures from the post war period.

IA is sometimes seen as a privileged form of immigration, facilitated so the White middle class can develop families. Therefore, Asian adoptees are pitted against the envy of other potential immigrants who may not share the same privilege (Anagnost, 2000). However, this view that IA is a privileged form of immigration, with implications of privilege to class and racial hierarchies, living in relatively financially well-off environments, enjoying the status of honorary Whites (implications that adoptees enjoy the same privileges as their adoptive parents) (Anagnost, 2000), detracts attention from and minimizes the adoptees’ experience of racial discrimination, as well as separation from their birth culture (Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008).

Others see the immigration of adopted children as a type of forced migration (Hübinette, 2004; Lovelock, 2000; Selman, 2001, 2002; Weil, 1984), where children have no say and the adoptive parents are given full control over the immigration rights of the child (E. Kim, 2007). In contrast, in most cases of migration, the movers make the conscious choice to do so (Weil, 1984). IA has been justified in providing protection to needy children (Bartholet, 2005), but these protections are not afforded to those fleeing political or social persecution, or escaping economic hardship (Anagnost, 2000; Brian, 2007; Hübinette, 2005; Kapstein, 2003; Pantoja, 2006; Yngvesson, 2002). Cohen (as cited in Hübinette, 2005) described the forced migration of children as fitting the definition of a victim diaspora, “defined as an involuntary dispersal caused by catastrophic and traumatic events such as mass poverty, labor mobilization, forced transportation, severe persecution and refugee movement” (p. 231). In the case of
IA/TRA children, this definition should also include forced separation from biological family and culture.

Yngvesson (2002) further added that the children are circulated amidst the global market economy, placing these adoptees as objects, because children become ingrained as part of the commodity thinking: Destitute children become commodities in the market in developing countries, whether they are strictly used as a money-making venture or a domestic problem-solving tool. As this author explained,

[The] adoptable child is not sold, but is given to other states in exchange for a donation of money, a transaction that creates an orderly (and hierarchical) relation of states to one another through the movement of valued resources [children] in adoption. (p. 230)

The expanding influence of the market system increased the number of “for profit” adoption agencies and with it, the increased costs of adoption (Henderson, 2002). Consequently, IA also needs to be examined in terms of the market economy where adoption is big business, because formally and informally, IA contributes millions of dollars to the global economy—estimates ranging from $200 to $400 million annually; when including supplementary adoption business (e.g., clothing, dolls, magazines, books, ads by adoption agencies, and seminars and conferences), adoption becomes a billion-dollar industry in the United States (Quiroz, 2007). Therefore, part of the IA discourse needs to focus on how the global market plays a role in the production of IA, as it builds on the understanding that IA is a problem-solving mechanism for millions of homeless children (Anagnost, 2000; Quiroz, 2007).
Korean War Orphans as Symbols of Innocent Cultural Ambassadors

Korean War orphans were adopted en masse by Whites in the United States, as discussed earlier, creating interracial families on a wide scale (Choy, 2007). The institution of migration and the migration flow of children from Korea were facilitated by social service agencies and private charity organizations (D. S. Kim, 2007). IA is also significant in relation to how it contributed to changing the immigration status of formerly deemed “undesirable” to “desirable” immigrants, particularly for children who had come to symbolize innocent cultural ambassadors (Anagnost, 2000; Collinson, 2007; Yngvesson, 2003). McGinnis (2007) added that since the Korean War (1950-1953), more than 1 million Koreans have migrated overseas; and out of that number, about 15% of the children have been adopted abroad, with little over half the children coming into the United States. (Hübinette, 2004). This translates to 1 in 10 Korean Americans being a Korean adoptee (Hübinette, 2007). Thus, Asian adoptees should be seen as a significant part of U.S. immigration history (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009) and as part of the overall Asian American experience (R. M. Lee, 2003).

Critical Race Theory

I have used critical race theory (CRT) to guide this study of the racialization of internationally and transracially adopted Asian children by White parents in the United States. IA/TRA creates a dual existence for the Asian adoptee, whose racial status creates difficulty negotiating his or her environment and, at the same time, integrating the adoptee experience. These conditions render the adoptee as the “other” in both communities (White and Asian), where adoptees are “minorities within minorities” (Louie, 2003, p. 755).
Critical race theory (CRT), a branch of critical legal studies, is concerned with issues of racism, and racial subordination and discrimination. Its emphasis is on the socially constructed nature of racism, because it systematically critiques social conditions; it focuses on the interplay between subject and object, and the consequences for the human subject (Higgins & Smith, 2002). Asian adoptees thus become both object and subject of the adoption discourse (Dorow, 2006; Eng & Han, 2006). Young (1989) contended that social justice is not about equal distribution, but rather about understanding concepts of domination and oppression, and knowing the difference between the oppressed and oppressor; in this regard, those who are holders of privilege cannot escape the discussion of race in IA practice. In the case of IA, those who hold privilege are the adoptive parents, because they are given choices as to where, when, how, and who will be adopted (Dorow, 2006).

As discussed in the previous chapter, race is an ideological social construct and therefore, should be viewed with some skepticism; however, racism is real. Saxton (1997) defined racism as follows:

A system of beliefs and attitudes that ascribe central importance to real or presumed racial differences. Physical differences between groups may be easily visible and are certainly real, but racism reaches beyond them to assert that moral, intellectual and psychological qualities are also racially characteristic; that they are transmitted, along with physical traits, by heredity; and that these together constitutes a major changing of historical causation. (p. 200)

And the discussion of race is appropriate when discussing TRA and IA. As mentioned earlier, the majority of IA/TRAs consist of White parents adopting Asian children. It is rarely heard of that Asian parents adopt White children; inevitably, the IA/TRA phenomenon is the reflection of an unjust social system.
Historical Origins of CRT Theory

CRT, initially situated in critical legal studies, was developed in the mid 1970s, based on the early works of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman, both legal scholars who were concerned with civil rights legislation in regard to the Black-White framework (Ladson-Billings, 2000). These scholars felt limited by critical theory, because critical theory failed to adequately analyze racial injustice (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005).

CRT was criticized for not only placing too much emphasis on the law (e.g., in changing laws within the legal system), because not all racial issues can be tied to the legislative process (Trevino, Harris & Wallace, 2008), but also for limiting one’s ability to adequately analyze racial injustice issues affecting all communities of color (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005). However, CRT departs from legal studies by utilizing “storytelling,” thereby giving voice to communities of color traditionally left out of the research milieu (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 264) and advocating for the phenomenological investigations of lived experiences of people of color from their own frame of reference (Trevino et al., 2008).

Another criticism of CRT has been that it places too much focus on the Black-White binary (Trevino et al., 2008). Consequently, other scholars of color have expanded the scope of CRT to study and analyze the racialized experiences of Latina/os, Native Americans, and Asian Americans in trying to locate a framework beyond the Black-White binary system (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005). Delgado and Stefanic (2001) explained that CRT began with “a collection of activists and scholars interested in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power” (p. 2), where scholars were
looking for critical space to discuss how race impacts society and people (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005).

**Major Tenets of the Theory**

“CRT starts from the premise that race and racism are endemic, permanent, and a fundamental part of defining and explaining how U.S. society functions.” (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005, p. 122). The major tenet of CRT refocuses attention from White middle-class culture to cultures of communities of color. CRT acknowledges and recognizes that layers of subordination exist based on race, gender, class, immigration status, phenotype, and sexuality. CRT analyzes race and racism within both historical and present contexts, and research using CRT is guided by a trans-disciplinary approach. CRT views racism as covertly kept inside “normative” values and “neutral” social science principles and practices (Chang, 1999). CRT recognizes that the experimental knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding their racial subordination. This knowledge is viewed as “strength and draws explicitly on the lived experiences of people of color by including such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos, testimonios, chronicles, and narratives.” (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005, p. 123) Furthermore, CRT raises critical questions about the “control and production of knowledge about people and communities of color” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 272). In addition, CRT challenges the notion of color-blindness (Trevino et al., 2008), because much of IA/TRA has fallen under these ideological discussions by dismissing the significance of race, especially when it comes to transracial adoption of Asian children. This is exemplified by the fact that the majority of IA/TRA Asian-adopted children grew up in small, isolated White communities (Evan B. Donaldson
Adoption Institute, 2009; Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000; R. M. Lee, 2003; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008). Additionally, adoptive parents only occasionally engaged in cultural activities when it was available to them.

Relevance of CRT to IA

CRT recognizes that communities of color have their own unique histories and experiences of racialization. Thereby, I have applied CRT to the racialization experience of Asian adoptees. The relevance of CRT to IA is built on the relationship between power and the construction of social roles. Thus, CRT becomes an ideal forum for discussing IA, because the “sociological forces related to race, class, religion, and economics have had a dramatic impact on [international] adoption’s history” (Zamostny et al., 2003, p. 657). In addition, among the Asian American community, there is a notion of “multiple consciousness,” which refers to multiple selves, because the IA/TRA practice creates a complex social phenomenon (Ladson-Billings, 2000). For the adoptee, this includes lacking a biological connection, being separated from birth culture, being brought up in predominantly small, isolated White communities, and being raised with dominant culture’s ideology, thereby lacking racial and ethnic identity. Within the adoptee community, there exist differences in socioeconomic class, gender, ability, sexuality, and issues of abuse, as well as varying degrees of available support systems.

Adapting CRT to Social Work Practice

As of this writing, there is no current literature on CRT being adapted to social work practice. Therefore, I have taken the liberty to do so here, because this theory is seen as a transformative theory: Although it started with critical legal studies, over time, it expanded to sociology, justice studies, and education (Trevino et al., 2008). Yosso and
Solorzano (2005) added that CRT “draws from and extends a broad literature base, often termed ‘critical theory’ including the law, sociology, history, ethnic studies, and women’s studies.” (p. 119). In addition, CRT expanded beyond the Black-White framework to include other communities of color and to understand social construction of race as a way of both containing people of color as well as essentializing them within the United States (Trevino et al., 2008). I suggest that CRT is an appropriate theory to apply to social work practice in guiding the study of IA/TRA, because social workers must examine the social, political, and psychological impact that the adoption practice has on all the individuals involved (biological and birth parents, extended family, and adoptees) and on society, both within the United States and internationally, adhering to social work’s emphasis on social justice. In order to speak about the multiple consciousness of Asian adoptees, I have highlighted areas where the multiple layers of oppression have impacted the Asian American community.

**Immigration-related oppression.** The U.S. federal immigration and naturalization laws regulate the entry of foreign-born people, including children for adoption, into the United States. Prior to the 1950s, U.S. policies limited the number of immigrants entering the country, and in some cases, excluded immigrants who were viewed as undesirable, based on race or national origin (i.e., Immigration Acts of 1917, 1924, and 1952) (Ancheta, 1998)). However, coinciding with U.S. interests in Asia, the United States began to loosen up its immigration policy to admit Asians, especially children (Klein, 2000). The United States has been dependent on immigration, primarily for labor supply; however at times, it practices discriminatory immigration policies on the basis of country of origin and race (McGinnis, 2007).
Racialization of Asian Americans

I have learned how naïve I was to have supposed that children grew out of their race and to have expected that adults could not possibly be racist. The lives of people of color are materially different than the lives of whites, but in the abiding American spirit we all prefer to believe that our individualism is most important. (Wu, 2002, p. 7)

As discussed in the previous chapter, racial terms have no meaning except for the value a given society places on their meaning. For instance, the moment an Asian person is racially taunted or teased or a stereotypical assumption label is assigned to her/his group membership, she/he is immediately placed as the “other” (Delgado, 1993). Thus, Asian adoptees, as the racialized “other,” suffer or potentially suffer from racism, despite normative values and research studies that have found little problem with IA/TRA Asian adoptions. Critical race theory proposes to place race at the center of analysis and provides a space to examine the IA/TRA Asian-adoptive experience. Membership in a racial group is “neither self induced nor alterable” (Delgado, 1993, p. 90), and the societal classification of Asian Americans and Asian adoptees is a shared experience. Racial issues for Asian Americans have different meanings and context compared to other communities of color, thereby requiring a specialized lens to examine their racialization implications (Chang, 1999). Here I present a discussion of one particular salient stereotype of Asians in the United States as the “model minority,” because this stereotype has effectively contributed to the IA/TRA Asian adoption phenomenon in the United States.

The caricature of labeling Asians as the “model minority” (Wu, 2002) is an invention of the Cold War. In “January 1966, New York Times Magazine ran an article
titled, “Success Story: Japanese American Style,” (R. G. Lee, 1998, p. 151). Since then, a series of articles highlighting the “success” stories of Asian Americans have streamed through the media and engulfed the entire national consciousness. Coincidentally, these success stories came out during a time when there was high racial tension in the United States, with growing demands from the African American community for economic, social, and political equity. The use of Asian Americans helped to pathologize the condition of the African American community as being their own fault, while moving the focus away from the real problems. This socially legitimated conception of Asians by the dominant group effectively silenced the Asian American community—for those who did not meet the model minority standard (Chang, 1999; R. G. Lee, 1998) and worked against those calling attention to the discriminatory practices targeted at the Asian American community.

The propagandized image of Asians as the model minority was constructed in order to demarcate Asians symbolically and essentially. As a result, this image has been culturally and universally consumed, and the desirability of Asian children inevitably came to be the “product” of choice for adoptive parents. Volkman’s (2005) study of parents’ decisions to turn to a particular country to adopt found that some parents choose, based on their attitudes toward a particular culture. Thus, the child becomes packaged into a convenient entity whilst selling a culture of preference (Brian, 2007). In other words, by the very act of choosing a country based on liking a particular culture, the parent thus objectifies the child, while ignoring the conditions that separate the child from his/her birth culture in the first place (Anagnost, 2000). Dorow (2006) added that the hegemonic form of family is reproduced through the consumption of exotic difference.
R. M. Lee (2003) introduced the concept of the transracial adoption paradox, which “refers to the contradictory but true experiences that adoptees confront in society as an ethnic and racial minority while ostensibly perceived and treated by others as Whites” (R. M. Lee, Yoo & Roberts, 2004). This differential status of belonging to neither the White nor the Asian culture is a common experience among Asian adoptees (Meier, 1999). Asian adoptees are often included in adoption-related literature but rarely found as part of the Asian-American-experience literature, despite the fact that many Asian adoptees experienced racial discrimination.

**Research Review**

An extensive body of research has focused on adjustment issues of adoptees, concerned with developing healthy identity as mediating good adjustment. In most instances, research studies have centered on the relationship between the adopted child and the adoptive parents as the determining factor in the child’s adjustment (Carstens & Juliá, 2000; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983; Huh & Reid, 2000). To that end, researchers generally conducted outcome studies measuring psychological adjustment of adoptees (W. J. Kim, 2002; Levy-Shiff, Zoran, & Shulman, 1997; Wickes & Slate, 1996). Outcome studies typically studied transracial adoptees with same-race adoptees, and these studies generally showed that there were no significant differences in behaviors between the two groups.

A majority of the studies on IA found that adoptees, in particular Asians, fared well in their adoptive homes, having integrated into the family with few if any developmental issues, and were successful in school (Brooks & Barth, 1999; Carstens & Juliá, 2000; Huh & Reid, 2000; Feigelman, 2000; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983; W. J.
Kim, 1995; W. J. Kim, Shin & Carey, 1998). Furthermore, despite contemporary thinking that adoption is a lifelong process (Shiao & Tuan, 2008), most research has been conducted on young children to assess initial adjustment and has involved surveying adoptive parents about the child’s behavioral issues (Carstens & Juliá, 2000; Huh & Reid, 2000; Feigelman, 2000; Feigelman & Silverman, 1983). Shiao and Tuan (2008) argued, What these data tell us is that white adoptive parents, for the most part, are “very satisfied” with their Asian children and are pleased with how well they have merged with their families; [however] they tell less about what adoptees think and feel about their experiences. (p. 1033)

In addition, most of these studies assessed adoptees use of self-descriptors, such as being proud or comfortable with group membership, as signifying psychological well-being (R. M. Lee, 2003). Earlier studies on adjustment were conducted to combat criticism of transracial adoption practice, and these studies were the basis for ideological discussions. These research studies consistently showed few, if any significant factors that influenced how having a sense of racial and ethnic identity correlated with psychological adjustment of adoptees. Generally these studies supported the continued IA practice as a good option for resolving the problem of homeless and abandoned children.

In the past 25 years, the first generation of Asian adoptees have been instrumental in informing adoption scholars about the future practice of IA, because more are coming out and speaking about their experiences (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009). Research on identity development of adoptees has more recently focused on adoptees’ ethnic sense of self, identity development, and their emotional or behavioral and social adjustments (Andujo, 1998; Berquist et al., 2003; Feigelman, 2007; Huh, 2007; Huh &
Reid, 2000; Simon & Altstein, 2002). In general, empirical research on identity
development in internationally and transracially adopted children concluded that
developing positive ethnic and cultural identity helps the children acquire positive self-
worth and a healthy self-image, as well as builds self-confidence when faced with
societal discrimination, thereby aiding their adjustment. In addition, these studies found
that ethnic identity development is influenced by the parents’ ability to recognize and
promote the child’s ethnic heritage in the home (Andujo, 1988; Carstens & Julia, 2000;
Feigelman, 2000; Huh & Reid, 2000; Mortland & Egan, 1987). However, these studies
consistently showed there is a disconnect between adoptees’ physical appearance and
their sense of self due to the adoptive family structure, their having had limited access to
communities of color, their having to face discrimination due to physical appearance, and
because parents lacked the ability to deal with these issues (Anagost, 2000; Evan B.
Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009; Shiao & Tuan, 2007).

A summary of my integrative research literature review on racial and ethnic
identity of adult Asian adoptees who were IA/TRA adopted is provided in Appendix E.
The studies highlighted in Appendix E used both qualitative and quantitative methods to
assess psychological adjustment as it relates to one’s racial and ethnic identification.
Both approaches attempt to extrapolate knowledge of complex social phenomena by
identifying a specific philosophy and methodology (Grinnell, 2001; Patton, 2002;
Singleton & Straits, 1999). The qualitative data contributed in-depth accounts of
adoptees’ experiences and feelings about psychological adjustment in relation to racial
and ethnic identity, whereas the quantitative data attempted to conceptualize definitions
of healthy ethnic and racial identity development. Baden (2002), in particular, found no statistical significance related to cultural-racial identity and psychological adjustment.

A majority of the studies utilized the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) scale developed by Phinney (1992), to measure ethnic identity in adult adoptees. The MEIM scale includes such statements as “engaging in cultural activities,” “feelings of being happy,” “feeling pride,” and “sense of belonging” to an ethnic cultural group. The measure was developed to determine ethnic identity in “individual’s self-concept that derives from his or her knowledge of membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Phinney, 1992, p. 156). However, adoption scholars have often used the measure to assess adoptees’ sense of ethnic identity. Nevertheless, adoptees’ cultural experience in their racial and ethnic group may be limited, contrary to the general group membership experience.

However, these studies on adult Asian adoptees indicated that adoptees often struggle with identity development and lack skills to cope with the discrimination, stereotypes, and racism they face in U.S. society (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009; Mohanty et al., 2006; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008). Coping is defined as a function of interaction between perceived available subjective and external resources. How individuals interpret their environment is dependent on understanding and assigning meaning to their experience. Personal meaning is a key determinant of an individual’s attitudes and behavior and how she or he negotiates the environment (England, 1986).

In addition, adoptees exhibited a great deal of variability in their racial and ethnic identities (R. M. Lee, 2003), and some used the stereotypical attitudes of Asians by either
hierarchally ranking different Asian groups, completely avoiding or associating with other Asians, or feeling discomfort being around other Asian groups (Shiao & Tuan, 2008).

The empirical generalizations based on the literature review suggested that those parents who engaged in open discussion about race and culture found that transracially adopted children faired better in negotiating racial and ethnic identity issues (Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000; Mohanty et al., 2006). In addition, during the adolescent and young adult years, the issues of racial/ethnic identity become more important (Mohanty et al., 2006; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008). Meier (1999) and Shiao and Tuan (2007, 2008) found that most Korean adoptees were preoccupied with “fitting in” with their new social group as children and avoided thoughts or anything associated with being Korean or exploring their racial and ethnic identities. A majority of the studies indicated that adoptees identified with the parents’ culture (Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008), 78% of Asian adoptees reported that as children, they considered themselves to be White or wanted to be White (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009).

Often when adoptees moved away from home and into school or professional life, it was found that they had the opportunity to engage in activities where racial/ethnic identity is developed (Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008). Also impacting identity development is the social environment (Meier, 1999; Mohanty et al., 2006; Shiao & Tuan). Studies found that the majority of adoptees faced discrimination/differential treatment from their peers due to visible physical differences (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009; Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000; Meier, 1999; Mohanty et al., 2006; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008), and explored ethnic identity, given the opportunity (Shiao & Tuan, 2008).
Freundlich and Lieberthal’s (2000) small group discussions, adoptees reported they faced racism in every aspect of their lives. In contrast, studies by Brooks and Barth (1999) and Feigelman (2007) that assessed adoptive parents’ perception of their (adult) adoptive children’s adjustment, found that the majority of parents indicated that their children did not suffer from racial discrimination due to physical appearance. Additionally, parents with Asian-adopted children reported fewer placement problems compared to other TRA adoptee groups. These studies present a fundamental flaw in how studies have been traditionally conducted: There is a disconnect between how adoptees and parents’ experience adoptive placement.

In short, these studies suggested that parents should be aware of what their adoptive children are facing and be culturally competent (Mohanty et al., 2006; Shiao & Tuan, 2007, 2008; Vonk, Simms & Nackerud, 1999), and it is suggested that this competence be a requirement for all IA and TRA adoptions (Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001). However, studies show that some parents place less emphasis on cultural identities, preferring the notion of universal human belongingness or identification as just “an American.” These families see themselves as Whites with Asian children rather than as multicultural or multiracial families (Vonk et al., 1999). Even if these parents recognized the importance of culture, they were found to lack access to information and resources. In addition, most adoptees lived in White neighborhoods, with little opportunity to socialize with other communities of color (Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001).

**Implications of the Studies/Evidence Suggests**

Adoptive parents need to examine their own beliefs and biases in conjunction with understanding both the developmental needs of the children, such as when the adoptees
become ethnically and culturally more aware, as well as some of the more difficult issues they face, such as discrimination (Brian, 2007; Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001). Adoption scholars from both sides of the IA issue have widely recognized the importance of not only the adoptees’ development of a healthy sense of racial and ethnic identity but also the responsibility of adoptive parents to incorporate such awareness in the home (Baden & Steward, 2007; Bailey, 2006; Bartheslet, 2005; R. M. Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, & Gunnar, 2006).

In Search of Racial/Ethnic Identity

It is important to keep in mind that varying ethnic identity definitions related to race are socially constructed concepts, and racial and ethnic identity is historically dynamic. Individuals develop racial/ethnic identity in the context of stereotypes through discourse and collective identities, and identities are developed from interaction with others (Omi & Winant, 1986/2001). The Asian IA/TRA adoptees’ racial/ethnic identity may be disrupted due to not only being raised within a White family, but also the dynamic formation of racial and ethnic identity in relation to wider social and political forces that change over time (Shiao & Tuan, 2007).

The issue of identity and the concept of self in relation to social structure have been dominant in social psychology discourse. Social theorists speculated that an individual’s action affects society in terms of culture, social structure, power relations, and organization (Hewitt, 1991). Mead (1934/2003), in The Self, stated that the processes of interaction with others develop the concept of self. Individuals take themselves as objects of their own thought and assign symbolic meaning to abstract concepts, such as love, sense of belonging, social justice, and so forth. Individuals then choose how they
will interact with these objects. Therefore, the self is a conscious construct, as a result of interaction with social structures. The object is a designation of symbolic meaning through the use of language; and the object exists in relation to acts taken by individuals (Hewitt, 1991). Consequently, identity development is constructed by shifting social transactions (Cruz, 1996). As a result, racial and ethnic identities are imposed by social systems and internalized as truth, and behaviors are reproduced to meet this social conditioning (Baber, 2008; Cruz, 1996). Crocker and Quinn (2004) added,

Collective representations are shared beliefs, values, ideologies, or systems of meaning. Collective representations that affect the meaning of situations for the stigmatized may take the form of awareness of cultural stereotypes about one’s group, understandings of why one’s group occupies the position it does in the social hierarchy. (p. 126)

For the IA/TRA Asian adoptee, these “collective representations” by the White cultural group has been ingrained since youth, because this belief structure has been constant and permanently implanted into the psyche of the adoptee; who, at the same time, realizes that she/he does not truly belong in the White group due to physical differences (creating a type of social diaspora). This constant state of shifting identity builds a type of schizophrenia in IA/TRA Asian adoptees (Yngvesson, 2002).

In *The Looking-Glass Self*, Cooley (1902/2003) suggested that self-perception derives from the perception of others. In this process, individuals conceive how they appear to others and consequently how others judge that appearance; and with this speculation, the individual develops feelings about self, either positive or negative (Cote & Levine 2002). In addition, the idea of self is developed through the process of interaction with others, and subsequent rules of behavior are cooperative and negotiated within the social system (Mead, 1934/2003). For Asians as discussed earlier,
stereotypical images of the “Oriental” have been created and maintained by Whites, thus constructing racialized images of Asian Americans (Gotanda, 1996; Omi & Winant, 1986/2001). For Asian adoptees, the self may be in conflict due to a confused identity: The adoptee may internalize or become disconnected to his/her ethnic group because of societal bigotry and from being seen as a minority member, with stereotypical images associated with that group and feeling a sense of shame for belonging to that group membership (Eng & Han, 2006), while feeling culturally White. Nevertheless, as adoptees grow, they are materialized into media images of what they will become (Volkman, 2005). In this way, society controls the identity development of adoptees into already “scripted” roles (Baber, 2008).

Torres, Howard-Hamilton, and Cooper (2003) contended that gaining a sense of self is discovered through “who we are and who we are not” (p. 23). Consequently, the dominant culture sets the parameters of role assignment for ethnic and cultural minorities (Snyder, 2001; Torres et al., 2003): The Whites set the standards of normalization and the “others” are compared against them (West, 2002). We live in a world where Whites are seen as natives and everyone else as non-natives (Trevino et al., 2008). This is consistent with the social inequality that is pervasive throughout social institutions and embedded within the individual consciousness of both the dominant and minority groups (Snyder, 2001; Torres et al., 2003). In addition, preconceived beliefs become central to everyone’s identity (Omi & Winant, 1986/2001). Historically, racial and ethnic groups’ identity has been transformed and/or reinvented, dependent on the social conditions (Hall, 2002).

When Asian adoptees realize the racial difference between themselves and their parents, the recognition may hinder identity development due to the constant reminder of
the difference (Huh, 2007). Ego strength is important to help one navigate through the developmental stages when faced with difficulties (Cote & Levine, 2002). One coping strategy developed by adoptees when faced with discrimination due to phenotype variation is trying to assimilate into dominant culture whilst denying their racial and ethnic origins (Basow et al., 2008), thus losing part of themselves.

In conclusion, ethnic and cultural minorities internalize their subordinate, scripted roles (Baber, 2008), along with limited opportunity to determine their own destiny (Snyder, 2001). Accordingly, they accept negative self-images that are reflected through social interaction and within the social structures. Consequently, for ethnic and cultural minorities, individual interaction is based on preconceived ideas about the self that are, in turn, based on dominant societal stereotypes and preconceived notions (Torres et al., 2003; Wing & Rifkin, 2001). However, every person reacts differently to situations, making it difficult to categorize an individual’s experiences (Giddens, 1999). This is consistent with research findings by Shiao and Tuan (2007, 2008), where Asian adoptees develop differing associations with the Asian American community. Thus, identity development for Asian adoptees involves multiple levels of implications in adjustment, such as societal racism and oppression.

Knowledge Gap and Methodology

There is a lack of research exploring the experiences of the Asian adult adoptees’ racialization in the United States, which warrants further research in this area. To my knowledge, there is no phenomenological research exploring the experiences of Asian adult adoptees. The few research studies conducted on the racialization experience indicated a gap in knowledge in presenting the holistic experience of adoptees. Thus,
there is a need for in-depth study of Asian adult adoptees’ awareness about their racialization experiences, as well as their perception regarding their adjustment and experience (Mohanty et al., 2006; Shiao & Tuan, 2007). In addition, there is a need for more specific focus on racial and ethnic identity development when adoptees are encountered with media and stereotype images (Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001). Furthermore, there is a need for understanding the coping strategies used by adoptees to combat racism and discrimination.

In terms of methodology, there is a need to develop an accurate measurement scale that incorporates the unique situation of IA/TRA adoptee identity. The usage of a measurement scale, such as the MEIM, is inappropriate when measuring the complex experiences of the Asian adoptee population, because MEIM was specifically developed for measuring general racial and ethnic populations. As discussed earlier, the majority of Asian adoptees had limited contact with communities of color and were brought up in a White cultural environment. Moreover, it seems shortsighted to conclude that having a sense of ethnic identity has any correlation to how the adoptees are able to cope when faced with discrimination.

To further address the knowledge gap related to adoptees’ racialization experience, there is a need for research studies that assess (a) how parent’s deal with issues of race and racism when their adoptive children faced with these issues; (b) how the social system, including schools, have dealt with issues of racially based teasing and taunting on the school campus; and (c) what strategies are utilized by adoption agencies in finding appropriate placement for IA/TRA adoptees beyond examining family history, income, ability to parent, and emotional support system. A need exist for greater and
deeper understanding of this population, because it may inform theory, help with the
development of an accurate measurement scale, and be of value in informing social work
and adoption practice

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I expanded on the topics discussed in the previous chapter. In
addition, I presented (a) historical developments of IA, (b) a socially constructed practice
of IA, which has been socially conditioned through discursive practices, c) explanations
of the critical race theory, including a brief history of the theory’s development and its
application to this study; (d) an integrative research literature review on IA/TRA Asian
adoptees and how societal context affects racial/ethnic identity development in Asian
adoptees; and finally (e) I identified gaps in the knowledge base.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The Qualitative Research Tradition

The qualitative research method provides the foundation of understanding about the “other” through cultural and interpretative studies, because such qualitative studies “seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 14). Thusly, use of the qualitative approach generates richer information, which is unavailable with the quantitative method. In essence, the aim of this approach to research is to explore the quality of data, not the quantity. Strauss and Corbin (1998) pointed out that conducting a qualitative research study is to frame a research question in a way that allows for flexibility and freedom to explore a phenomenon in depth. The emphasis is on the ability to observe (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Moreover, only those who experience the “lifeworlds” of subjects can adequately interpret those experiences (Stanfield, 1994).

The purpose of this study was to achieve a deeper understanding of the meaning of racial and ethnic identity as described by Asian adoptees who were internationally and transracially adopted. Given the significance of identity development in IA/TRA Asian adult adoptees, this study sought to understand the relationship of the sociopolitical system to identity development. The racialization experience poses many questions, and there are many research designs associated with the qualitative research tradition that
could possibly answer the questions. However, I chose the phenomenological approach, guided by the CRT perspective, because it enabled me to get rich descriptions of the adoptees’ “lived experiences,” thereby guiding my understanding of their (IA/TRA Asian adult adoptees’) experiences and attitudes. As the researcher, it was important for me to understand the adoptees’ feelings and experiences from their own point of view rather than from my own. Phenomenological researchers as well as CRT theorists believe that people experiencing the phenomenon hold the data, and therefore, the subjects are the real experts and thus are engaged as co-researchers (Pollio, Henley, & Thompson, 1997).

The Phenomenological Perspective

Origins of phenomenology can be traced to Kant and Hegel, however, Edmund Husserl of the early 20th century established the term as part of the philosophical perspective (Small, 2001). The purpose of the phenomenological design is to capture the essence of the lived experience of the participants, adding depth and breadth to the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). “It aims to identify and describe the subjective experiences of respondents. It is a matter of studying everyday experience from the point of view of the subject, and it shuns critical evaluation of forms of social life” (Schwandt as cited in Patton, 2002, p. 483).

The goal of the phenomenological approach is to attain a first-person description of the phenomenon in question (Pollio et al., 1997). Moustakas (1994) stated that evidence comes from first-person accounts, and who can better speak to their adjustment than the subjects themselves. Hence, phenomenology is concerned with the first-person viewpoint and the objective study of the subject. As pointed out by Sadala and Adorno
(2001), “Before any objective reality there is a subject that experiences” (p. 283), and any knowledge has its basis in experience. These scholars further explained,

Phenomenology as discussed by Husserl (2000) is a return to the lived world, the world of experience, which as he sees it is the starting point of all science. Phenomenology proposes that a phenomenon be described instead of being explained or having its causal relations searched for, and it focuses on the very things as they manifest themselves. (p. 283)

In a phenomenological research approach, realities are treated as phenomena, and the objective of this methodological approach is to describe as accurately as possible the phenomenon under investigation, as experienced by the people involved (Moustakas, 1994); in this way, the basis of human knowledge is established through the study of personal judgments, perceptions, and emotions (Small, 2001). Furthermore, the phenomenological approach does not restrict the researcher by implying that there is only one way of getting at knowledge (Small, 2001). Rather, this approach introduces the idea of “perspective, which points to the mutable and relative character of truth” (Sadala & Adorno, 2001, p. 282); and consistent with the phenomenological perspective, the truth depends on the experiences of the subject.

In short, the phenomenological perspective offers a holistic approach wherein the primary concern is in the participants’ subjective, lived experience of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 1998), because “the only thing we know for certain is that which appears before us in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45). Thereby, I used the phenomenological approach to extrapolate a deeper understanding of perceptions and feelings about racial/ethnic identity and self-concepts in IA/TRA Asian adult adoptees. Because the phenomenological tradition is primarily interested in participants’ subjective experience of the phenomenon under investigation, it is well suited for this purpose. To
this end, the study was conducted with mature adoptees who were able to self-reflect on their experiences of racialization and identity development during different developmental life stages. Adoptees were able to present their views and opinions on their own terms without limiting their views, allowing for more open expression of their opinions. For, unlike other types of research, this approach allowed for more open expression of their experiences versus, for example, using a rigidly held set of questionnaires, which might have restricted the opportunity to explore the phenomenon more in depth, thereby limiting the participants’ view (Patton, 2002).

The general structure of a phenomenological study includes (a) introduction of the problem and research question(s); (b) research procedures with phenomenological assumptions, data collection, and analysis; (c) the collecting of significant statements; and (d) the assembling of themes of meaningful statements until exhaustive description of the phenomenon is reached (Creswell, 1998). The basic assumptions of a phenomenological study are that the people experiencing the phenomenon are experts on that phenomenon, and they share certain essences of their experiences (Patton, 2002), the identification and interpretation of which constitute the goal of phenomenological analysis.

**Opportunities for Research Using CRT**

I used CRT in informing the phenomenological approach. CRT recognizes that race is central in people’s lives, particularly those who are of minority racial/ethnic status, because it affects all aspects of their social life; therefore, race should be placed at the center of analysis. CRT recognizes that people of color have their own experiences and histories, shaped by intersecting forms of subordination (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005),
such as gender, immigration status, class, and sexual orientation. Asian adoptees also share a common history of being severed from their biological families and culture, having no cultural connections while growing up and being raised in a White culture, yet looking Asian.

Furthermore, CRT informed the research with its emphasis on “storytelling”—telling a story of those experiences that have not been told. This approach offered a powerful method for challenging assumptive and normative opinions (Chang, 1999), because it allowed me, as the researcher, to draw on multiple forms of data to recount the racialized experience of Asian adoptees. In this regard, Ladson-Billings (2000) pointed out, “The value of storytelling in qualitative research is that [it] can be told in different and multiple ways depending on the storytellers” (p. 268).

Another central component of CRT is that as a research method, it offered the opportunity for me to examine the relationship between me, as the researcher, and my co-researchers (in this context, the participants are considered the co-researchers). According to CRT, the researcher brings in her or his own situated life experience, which informs the knowledge production of the research study. In other words, bringing forth my own story, such as my beliefs and experiences, affected how the data was handled and processed, as suggested by Chang (1999). “CRT asks the critical qualitative researcher to operate in a self-revelatory mode, to acknowledge the double (or multiple) consciousness in which she or he is operating” (Ladson-Billings, 2000, p. 268). My personal understanding as a racialized person and as an adoptee was thus invested in this research process.
Research Question

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the experiences of Asian adult adoptees’ sense of racialization within the United States. Accordingly, the overarching research question, directed to participants’ lived experiences, feelings, and beliefs about the phenomenon, asked, “What is the racialization experience of Asian adoptees in the United States?” Within this broad research question, the following key areas were further explored:

- How do Asian adult adoptees characterize their racial/ethnic identity development throughout the different life stages?
- What are the key social and cultural factors that contributed to their identity development?
- To what degree did societal stereotypes influence Asian adoptees’ identity?
- What strategies have Asian adult adoptees used to cope with difficult life situations in regard to their racialization experience?
- What are the possible structural meanings of the experience?
- What are the underlying themes and contexts that account for the experience?
- What are the universal structures that precipitate feelings and thoughts about the experience?
- What is the overall essence of the experience?

About the Researcher

I am rooted in the phenomenon in question. I am an adult Asian adoptee from Korea. I am one of the first generations of adoptees that came to the United States in the early 1970s, and like many adoptees, I grew up in a culturally isolated community. I have
no information or knowledge of my biological family or circumstances surrounding my adoption. I have no information regarding where I was born, my birth date, or information regarding my biological family. My adoption experience includes feelings of loss and sense of abandonment by my birth family, culture, and country of birth. A large part of my life journey has involved searching for my sense of self and trying to find a place of belonging. In part, I found my sense of connection when I gave birth to my daughter: For the first time in my life, I had a biological connection and a bond with another person that I had never before experienced.

My professional experience involves many years working in community non-profit organizations in the San Francisco Bay area. I have also worked as a child protection worker with the City and County of San Francisco, and at times, I have worked with families regarding adoption issues. Although I have worked extensively with communities of color, I have had little contact with the adoption community.

As the researcher, I have read and researched extensively on issues affecting the IA/TRA community. My interests and involvement in this community evolved over the last few years. During the past 3 years, I have made contacts with people involved in international adoptions, having attended a Korean Adult Adoptee Network (KAAN) conference in Denver in the summer of 2007 and a Korean Heritage Camp as a co-facilitator in the summer of 2006. I have since made connections with adoption professionals, adoptive parents, and adult adoptees nationwide. While conducting this research, I found myself deeply connected and related, on some level, to the experiences of my co-researchers. Overall, this has been an emotional journey, a journey of self-discovery.
Presuppositions

The following presuppositions are based on my personal experience as an Asian adoptee and as a result of my literature review on the phenomenon in question.

I presume that, at some point, Asian adoptees

- Felt a sense of shame due to their racial and ethnic heritage and appearance;
- Were denied Asian identity or belonging to an Asian ethnic culture;
- Wanted or wished to be part of the White culture;
- Were impacted by media images in terms of self-image;
- Did not know the language or words to describe feelings of subjugation;
- Felt disconnected from family and friends, community, and society;
- Felt a sense of loneliness and isolation;
- Experienced discrimination and prejudice due to physical appearance, and these experiences were often unacknowledged or minimized by family members, friends, and community;
- Grew up in culturally isolated areas (White communities), where they were often the only person of color;
- Had limited contact with other Asian-American or other communities of color;
- Avoided contact with other Asian groups, not wanting to be associated with them for fear their status would be questioned;
- Explored ethnic/racial identity (most likely in a college campus environment), once they left the family home.

Epoche

Concern with qualitative research, in general, has centered on the lack of rigor in making sure the information obtained is accurately and rigorously analyzed. Rigor is achieved through the practice of epoche, a term referring to the strategy whereby the
researcher endeavors to refrain from making predetermined judgments (Patton, 2002), and to free him or herself from presuppositions and intellectualizing. This was achieved in this study through *bracketing* (i.e., separating out or putting aside) all assumptions about the participants’ experiences, in other words, bracketing out presuppositions in order to identify the data in their pure form.

Creswell (1998) recommended both bracketing the researcher’s own preconceptions about the phenomenon as well as the use of self as interpreter of the participants’ true experiences/descriptions. Bracketing the researcher’s own experiences helps avoid bias of the data. Moustakas (1994) added that the strategy of epoche involves a return to the self wherein the researcher engages in the process of self-reflection through self-awareness and self-knowledge.

**Data Collection**

**Sampling**

As the primary research instrument and guided by the research question, I defined who and what might aid in understanding the phenomenon in question. The emerging process of the qualitative research guided me in obtaining information-rich samples. In other words, the sample was selected using my judgment to address the purpose of the research, specifically looking for those who had experiences related to the phenomenon under study, and these individuals became the primary units of analysis (Patton, 2002).

**Sampling criteria.** Individuals who fit the following criteria were selected as possible participants for the study: (a) adult Asian adoptees who were internationally and transracially adopted, (b) adoptees at least 25 years old at the time of the study, and (c) adoptees who were able to reflect upon their adoption experience.
**Sampling method.** In order to maximize variation of the sample, I utilized the strategic, purposive sampling method (participants were selected with respect to being information-rich cases). Purposive sampling is considered to be the most viable sampling method in conducting phenomenological research (Creswell, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994). The aim of this method of sampling is to capture and describe central themes that cut across variation, including social class, age, gender, and geographic upbringing (Patton, 2002). Furthermore, purposive sampling gives the researcher the ability to pick and choose among cases that offer different perspectives and/or unusual cases (Patton, 2002). Random sampling is not necessary for this type of research, because the goal is not to generalize the findings to a larger population but rather to highlight individual lived experiences (Creswell, 1998).

**Recruitment Method**

Participants were recruited utilizing a wide spectrum of venues. As a main strategy, I posted ads on various adoption support group websites, including the Chinese Adult Adoptee Network, the Transracial and International Adoptee Research Group on Facebook, an on-line adult adoptee Vietnamese support group, the *Korean Adult Adoptee Network Newsletter*, and the *Colorado Culture Heritage Camp Newsletter*. In addition to posting ads on adoptee websites, I wrote to the Holt International Adoption Agency, located in Eugene, Oregon, regarding recruitment possibilities. I also used a community leader as a key informant to post advertisements of the research study. Another important recruitment strategy was simply word of mouth. To further facilitate the identifying of potential participants, a snowball sampling strategy was utilized. This sampling method
was initiated by seeking recommendations from a knowledgeable community leader, who was used as a key informant for this purpose (Creswell, 1998).

**Sample**

As a result of these various recruitment efforts, I received responses from a diverse group of Asian adoptees from across the country, ranging in age, socioeconomic class, sexual orientation, gender, marital status, age at adoption, country of birth, and demographic profile of the adoptive and birth parents. These individuals constituted the sampling frame from which I purposively selected the study participants. Because my goal was to recruit adoptees who represented a variety of experiences, I continued the recruitment and subsequent selection process until I reached saturation in my sample. The resultant sample of adoptees not only met the study’s basic criteria for participation, but also represented diverse, information-rich cases.

**Demographic Profile of Participants**

The participants in this study included eight Asian adult adoptees, seven of whom were born in Korea, with one adoptee born in the Philippines. There were 3 male and 5 female participants. The participants’ ages ranged from 25 to 46. A majority of the participants were adopted at 2 years old or younger, with the exception of one adoptee, who was adopted at the age of 11, along with her two younger siblings. Most of the participants grew up in culturally isolated environments where a majority of the population was White, with the exception of 1 participant, who grew up in a multicultural neighborhood and whose family occupied a lower socioeconomic position. All the participants attended a university or were currently attending one. Two of the participants have children, and 2 reported that they are currently married. All participants reported
experiencing varying degrees of discrimination and racially based teasing during childhood and as an adult. As a result of such incidences, a majority of the participants had gone through an identity crisis and questioned their status.

**Individual participant profiles.** All of the participants’ names have been changed in the following profiles, as well as throughout the dissertation, in order to protect their identity, whilst enabling me to individualize each participant’s unique and varied experience.

Carrie is a 34-year-old mother of two young children. She was adopted at the age of 11, along with her two younger brothers. She has clear memories of living in Korea with her parents and brothers. Her mother died in an accident when Carrie was 8, and her father placed her and her brothers up for adoption. Carrie and her brothers grew up in Boulder, Colorado.

Tom is 34 years old. He was adopted when he was 8 months old. He has three siblings: One is the biological child of the adoptive parents, and the two younger siblings were also adopted from Korea. He has no information regarding his biological family and/or history about his adoption. Tom grew up in Longview, Washington.

Amy is a 25-year-old, recent college graduate. She was adopted at 6 months of age from Korea. The only information she has about her biological family is based on the social worker’s written report in her adoption file. Her birth father was a fisherman who lost his arm in an accident and could not afford to support another child, and consequently, she was put up for adoption. Amy has two older brothers in Korea, but she has had no contact with her birth family. She has one older (10 years older) sister who is
the biological child of her adoptive father from a previous marriage. Amy grew up in a small farming town in the Midwest.

Kim is a 46-year-old mother of one adult child. She was adopted at age 2, in 1965. Prior to being adopted, she lived in a foster home in Korea. She has no other information regarding her birth history and/or family. Kim has four younger siblings who are the biological children of her adoptive parents. Kim grew up in Northern California, and her family struggled financially.

Kris is 30 years old and was adopted at 6 months old from Korea. She has no information regarding her birth family and/or history. Kris was adopted into a biracial Japanese and White family. Her father is Japanese American, and her mother is White. Kris has one older brother who is the biological child of the adoptive parents. She grew up in the suburbs outside of Philadelphia.

Will is 25 years old. He was 6 months old when adopted. He has two siblings: an older brother who is the biological child of the adoptive parents and a younger sister who is also adopted from Korea. Will joined the military after graduating high school and is currently a full-time student. He grew up in Denver, Colorado.

Susan is 28 years old and was adopted at 4 months old from Korea. According to her adoption record, she lived in a foster home prior to her adoption. Susan is biracial (Black and Korean). She has three brothers: two older brothers who are biological children of her adoptive parents and a younger brother who was adopted domestically and is also biracial (Black and White). Susan grew up in Spokane, Washington.
Dan is 27 years old. He was adopted from the Philippines when he was 1½ years old. Dan is the only child in his adoptive family. However, according to his adoption record, he has 4 or 5 biological siblings in the Philippines. He grew up in Connecticut.

**Method of Inquiry**

The primary method of inquiry used for data collection in this study was the personal interview, supplemented by informal observation and field notes. During the data collection phase of the study, I was particularly aware of the need to practice the strategy of epoche, conscientiously engaging in the process of self-reflection regarding my biases and presuppositions in order to truly listen to the voices of the participants, as recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1998).

**The interview.** In accordance with qualitative research, there are various ways to collect data. I utilized the unstructured interview, guided by a self-designed interview guide (see Appendix A), which is in keeping with a phenomenological study (Creswell, 1998). Serving as the research instrument, I conducted in-depth, personal interviews with eight individuals who met the criteria established for participation in the study, using a number of prompts and open-ended questions, in order to understand the participants’ lived experience of their racialization in the United States.

To facilitate this data collection, I audio-recorded all interviews with the permission of participants. A separate tape was used for each interview and marked to indicate date, time, location, and the code matching that assigned to each participant. Within 2 days of the interviews, I transcribed the interview tapes, noting general meanings, as recommended by Hycner (1985).
**Observation and field notes.** During each interview, I observed and took field notes regarding what had been heard, seen, experienced, and thought during the interview process. Soon after each interview, I listened to the tapes and again made notes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Hycner (1985), field notes are essential in qualitative research, because this strategy allows the researcher to record non-verbal and environmental descriptions, which Hycner described as “noting significant non-verbal and paralinguistic communications” (p. 280), for example, the types of words used to describe their experiences as well as intonations, gestures, pauses, and inflections. The field notes and memos were subsequently dated in order that the notes could later be correlated with the interview data.

**Procedure**

Interested adoptees were encouraged, either through the website ads or the key informant, to contact me directly by phone or email. Once I had been contacted, I set up an initial meeting by phone to discuss the study and the process in greater detail.

Prior to the actual interview, demographic and consent forms (see Appendices B and C, respectively) as well as an introductory letter, including contact information (see Appendix D), were sent as an email attachment to the 5 participants who were to be interviewed by phone and by mail to the 3 participants who were to be interviewed in person. Once I received back the signed forms in the mail, I contacted the participants by phone to set up the interview date and time. I called the participants at their home, with the exception of one participant who wanted to be contacted at his office. Prior to all interviews, I discussed in detail the topic and context of the study. I encouraged all participants to contact me with any follow-up questions.
I conducted three face-to-face interviews, all of which took place individually at my home. The other five interviews (due to geographical constraints) were conducted using Skype, a software program that enabled me to make voice calls over the internet and the eCamm Network, a software program that allowed me to audio-record the interviews over the phone. I had two to five prior contacts with each of the co-researchers, using a combination of phone calls and emails, before the actual interview. The interviews lasted anywhere from 1 and 2½ hours.

**Steps to Data Analysis**

Creswell (1998) stated that all phenomenological methods generally take similar steps in analyzing the data, yet Hycner (1985) cautioned against following any set method in conducting phenomenological research, explaining, “No method (including this one) can be arbitrarily imposed on a phenomenon since that would do a great injustice to the integrity of that phenomenon.” (p. 280). With this in mind, I used Hycner’s (1985) outline of procedural steps for explicating the data as a general guide to my data analysis, in addition to being influenced by Moustakas (1994), Patton (2002), and Small (2001), as well as Chang (1999) and Ladson-Billings (2000). (Please refer to Table 1 for Hycner’s guide.)

Table 1

**Phenomenological Data Explication Process/Guidelines**

- Transcribe interview tapes—make notation of general meaning
- Engage in bracketing (listing researcher’s presuppositions)
- Listen to the interview for sense of the whole (including non-verbal levels of communication, such as pauses, intonations, etc.)
• Delineate units of meaning (going over every word, phrases, sentences) – stay close to literal data

• Delineate units of meaning relevant to the research question (what was said that illuminates the research question)

• Eliminate redundancies

• Cluster units of relevant meaning

• Determine themes from clusters of meaning

• Write a summary for each interview

• Conduct a validity check with interviewees – possibly conduct second interviews

• Modify themes and summary

• Identify general and unique themes of all interviews (looking at common themes as well as individual variations)

• Contextualize themes

• Write up a composite summary

Similar to Hycner (1985), Patton (2002) recommended that a critical, first step in analyzing phenomenological data is to again examine personal bias and eliminate personal involvement with the subject material by gaining clarity about preconceptions about the subject matter. Simultaneously, in using a phenomenological approach, together with a CRT perspective, it is important to have the researcher’s input on interpretation of the data and how data will be collected (Chang, 1999). In this regard, Ladson-Billings (2000) contended that the researcher must speak directly to the experience of the subjects, because “CRT asks the critical qualitative researcher to operate in a self-revelatory mode, to acknowledge the double (or multiple) consciousness in which she or he is operating” (p. 272). As the researcher, my personal stake was in
understanding the multiple and varied experiences of Asian adoptees, thus I endeavored to follow the advice of the above-mentioned scholars.

**Preliminary Steps**

Informal data analysis began soon after each interview, because each interview informed the next step in the data collection process. The more formal analysis began after transcribing the interview tapes and revisiting the strategy of époche, where I again made a conscious effort to reflect on my own presuppositions and biases in order to have an open mind and be as objective as possible in the analysis phase of the study. Also, I listened again to the tapes and reread my field notes to gain a holistic perspective of the participants’ perceptions and lived experiences. I proceeded by identifying and studying significant statements and phrases related to the racialized experiences expressed by the participants. Then I was ready for the next step involving the process of phenomenological reduction.

**Phenomenological Reduction**

The goal of phenomenological reduction is to understand the intentional object that constitutes the actual thing, as experienced by the person experiencing it. An *intentional object* refers to the participant’s perception, memory, and fantasy, also known as consciousness (Small, 2001). Moustakas (1994) provided this explanation:

Because all knowledge and experience are connected to phenomena, things in consciousness that appear in the surrounding world, inevitably a unity must exist between ourselves as knowers and the things or objects that we come to know and depend upon. (p. 44)

This is achieved by bracketing—grouping—participants’ descriptions into essential themes of their experience through systematic reflection to determine essential
properties (essences) and structures of consciousness and conscious experience. During this process, I eliminated redundancies and synthesized the significant statements, collecting and subsequently clustering them into clusters of themes. These themes were used to produce thick description of the participants’ experiences. It was at this point that I conferred with the participants to confirm whether I had accurately captured their lived experiences in order to ensure trustworthiness of the data, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) as well as Hycner (1985).

I then compiled structural descriptions of the participants’ experiences as a whole group, explicating how the group in its entirety experienced what they had experienced. And finally, I synthesized the meanings of the composite experiences in order to arrive at the underlying meaning—the essence of the phenomenon (Hycner, 1985; Patton, 2002).

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

A critical factor in analyzing qualitative data is the issue of trustworthiness and rigor, mentioned earlier in regard to epoche. Trustworthiness is an essential part of qualitative research—research findings should reflect the reality of the experience. This was accomplished by member checking, a strategy that allowed participants to review my interpretation of the data (Hycner, 1985; Patton, 2002). In addition, triangulating the research design also ensured rigor of the research. For instance, I combined observation and field notes with the interview data (Patton, 2002). Rigor also depended on the rigorous method applied to data collection and the credibility I had established as the researcher (discussed earlier in the section about the researcher).
Protection of Human Subjects

An application was submitted and approval received from University of Denver’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. This application included information regarding who would be the subjects in the research, what measures would be used, the research question, research procedures, information on confidentiality and the storage of data, and schedules.
CHAPTER 4. DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

Description of Findings

This study offers insight into the essential qualities and degrees of racial and ethnic identity of Asian adult adoptees who were internationally and transracially adopted. The findings in this chapter identify complex issues that mitigate racial and ethnic identity development and comfort levels with self in Asian adoptees. Although participants in this study varied considerably (e.g., geographic upbringing, economic and social background of the adoptive family, sibling group, gender, sexual orientation, and age at adoption), remarkably, there were similarities in their experiences. Participants went through complicated and multiple processes in coming to terms with their sense of self, and they described their racialization and adoption experiences, resulting in several profound themes.

The goal of this study was to accurately describe what was said and eliminate any personal bias in interpreting the data. Therefore, direct quotations have been used to highlight major themes, as participants described their racialization, adoption, and identity experiences. The quotations provide opportunity for participants to tell their “stories” in their own words. In addition, the quotations provide deep connections from theme to theme, as participants describe their experiences, which are unique and varied, and ascribe meaning to these experiences. In the first section of this chapter, I present a
descriptive account of the participants’ experiences; the second part of the chapter includes my analysis of the descriptive findings of the study. I synthesized significant statements and clustered them into central and sub-themes; the cluster of themes was used to produce thick description of an experience related to the phenomenon in question. I was able to capture and describe the following central themes that cut across variation among participants, including (a) developing self-perception: the adoption experience, (b) developing self-perception: the racialization experience, (c) essential feelings and struggle for belongingness, (d) journey of self-discovery, and (e) self-awareness, empowerment, and acceptance. A chart of the themes and subthemes are provided in Appendix F.

**Developing Self-Perception: The Adoption Experience**

The first theme I identified centered on development of self perception. Factors that were found to influence one’s racial and ethnic identity as well as the meaning placed on their racialization experience as a whole. I identified several factors (domains of influence), grouped into sub-themes that were found to mediate self-perception, which included social environment, family social structure and available support system. Other factors that influenced the developing of self-perception included gender, geographic upbringing, current age, age at adoption, memories of birth family and culture, available information regarding birth family, feelings of acceptance by birth culture, opportunity to socialize with birth culture, and general life experience and individual’s openness to explore.

**Social environment.** A majority of the participants described growing up in culturally isolated environments, mostly White, small-town or Suburban areas, where
participants were often the only person of color in their family and had limited contact with other people of color as well as limited access to cultural activities. Carrie grew up in Boulder, Colorado where “I was known as the Chinese girl.” She and her two younger brothers were the only students of color in their elementary school; and in junior high and high school, the majority of students were White (97%), with only a sprinkling of Latino, Asian, and African American students.

To a more extreme, Amy grew up in a small farming community in the Midwest. She described the general community make-up as “country music, Christian, Rednecks, Confederate flags, [and] very White….In my high school, I can count the number of people of color on one hand.”

Susan too grew up in a small town, which was in the Pacific Northwest. She described her childhood community as follows:

It was a typical American [experience of] growing up in a nice neighborhood. I grew up in a small town, me and my little brother who is also adopted was pretty much the only minority in town.

That [raising us in that environment] was probably not the best choices on my parents’ part. I don’t know what was going on with their generation; I think they were the colorblind generation. I don’t know what they were doing, but they wanted to make you feel exotic and beautiful.

I didn’t really think about it until I was in college away from that environment. [I thought], “Wow, that wasn’t a good place for me to grow up.” I didn’t know anyone else who was biracial, or Korean or Black. I didn’t have any friends who looked like me or knew anyone who looked like me. It was just very homogenous, and at the time, I didn’t know anything else.

Kim is the only participant who grew up in a culturally and socioeconomically diverse community. Having grown up in Northern California, she explained, “We lived in a poor part of town. There were a lot of Mexican people and Black people and a few Asian people.”
Kris, on the other hand, who grew up in the East Coast, outside of Philadelphia, stated,

[I] pretty much lived there my whole life with my mom, my dad, and my brother, and it was pretty White. My dad is Japanese, and my mom’s White, and my brother is mixed [he’s the biological child].

I guess most of my elementary school experience is lot of the kids were White; there weren’t much Asian kids. And then, as I got older, there were more representation of other racial/ethnic experiences.

I think my high school was pretty diverse; it wasn’t all White. But most of the folks who were people of color were African American, and there were Asian folks too; but it wasn’t people who were adopted – they were people who were 1st generation. I guess, lot of folks were Korean actually. [However], I was pretty disconnected from them— most of my friends growing up were White.

**Relationship with family and peers.** A majority of the participants described having positive relationships with their family and peers while growing up. They cited having loving, close-knit relationships with their parents and siblings. They felt accepted by their extended family and felt like they were a part of the family. Although Kim generally felt loved and accepted by her family, she recalled comments by her siblings, who were the biological children of her adoptive parents, which made her feel as if she was not a full member of the family.

My brothers and sisters’ friends would come over and they would see me and say “Who is that?” [and my siblings’ response would be] “That’s our sister—we got her from Korea”….“Yeah, we picked her up.” I would get angry, and I’d say, “You weren’t even born when I came”….I was about 8 or 9.

[It made me feel like] I wasn’t a full sibling [that] I wasn’t a full member of the family, even though I was never treated differently by my parents or any of the relatives – it was never an issue that way.

A majority of the participants described that their parents provided material needs; they often engaged in educational and artistic activities, such as having piano and dance lesson as children. They remembered going on family vacations and, in general,
felt like a typical American family. However, Kim recalled having a disruptive childhood
due to her family’s financial insecurity and volatile relationship.

We moved a lot—I was in all these different schools up into high school. We
were on welfare at some point even homeless…it was never secure.

[I remember], there was a lot of fighting—some physical violence but
mostly verbal from both parents. I was always left in charge to babysit my
siblings who were younger than me, because my mom went back to school.

She [my mom] was gone a lot. It was pretty dysfunctional. I know that
they loved me and cared for me, but I never felt very close emotionally to them;
[I] felt really out of place.

I was the oldest of 5, and I had a lots of pressure on me as a kid – had to
be responsible [help take care of the kids]—stick by my mother—my parents
divorced when I was 11—pretty rough time—I didn’t have a normal childhood.

I’m not saying I had a horrible, horrible existence, because I know that
when I was little, we had a lot of family pictures, and we had a lots of good times.
I know they loved me, and everyone the relatives all accepted me, you know, I
didn’t feel outcasted in that way. [However, I remember] I literally locked myself
in my room to get away from the yelling and screaming.

**Family discussion about adoption.** A majority of the participants indicated that
their parents’ discussed adoption by providing books about adoption, and often, the
parents were more willing and able to discuss adoption with them compared to other
topics, such as racial and cultural issues. If parents did discuss adoption with their
children, it was most often portrayed positively. All the adoptees felt that they were
adopted because they were wanted and loved by the adoptive parents—no one questioned
this.

Although Kim felt loved and accepted by her parents, her parents did not
particularly discuss adoption. Instead, she recalled,

My dad used to joke around. “Well you came from the belly of the big bird”
meaning the airplane; that was the running joke for years and years. Even until he
died, he would joke about that, “Ha Ha.” It doesn’t matter to me now, but as a
little kid, you know, I started to think, “Did I come out of the belly of the big
bird?”
In this regard, Amy described her experienced, “I always knew [I was adopted]; I don’t remember how we discussed it. There were books about adoption, like children’s books, so I always knew that I was adopted, but it didn’t change how my parents thought about me.” Amy did not recall questioning her status as an adoptee or her relationship with her adoptive parents; however, her peers often brought up her adoptive status. Amy’s emotional connection with her adoptive parents was questioned by her friends, as she recalled,

My friends would do their typical [thing], asking me if I wanted to find my real parents. They really pissed me off, because I always thought my parents were my real parents. They couldn’t separate their experience of being related to their parents through biology and my experience, so that caused a lot of tension particularly as I got older.

Dan always knew that he was adopted, but he had no specific memories of having discussions with his parents:

It was always under the understanding that I was adopted, and I’m from the Philippines. I never had an issue with it. I’m pretty sure that they [parents] told me as I was growing up, and I just knew that, and I didn’t have any questions or problems with it.

In regard to family discussions about adoption, Tom recalled,

I do remember having lots of books – kids’ books about adoption, and some of the books featured Asian kids with White adoptive parents and that was helpful, and I remember these books on diversity—how being different is a special thing.

My parents weren’t really type of people comfortable talking about [what] they thought were more sensitive subjects, so that was their way of having talks with us. Having lots of books talking about racial and ethnic differences and that it’s okay to be adopted. The theme of the books was, “We adopted you, because we love you so much” and stuff like that.

However, the actual information about adoption came about as result of Tom’s “snooping” around some documents that his parents’ had. The documents stated that he had lived in a foster home prior to adoption. “I think I felt naughty for
looking at something that I wasn’t supposed to look at ….I just felt like I was looking at information that I wasn’t privy to.”

Kris stated that she always knew that she was adopted:

So it was integrated into my growing up experience, and they [my parents] didn’t really talk about stuff too much. I think the only time things came up was when I was doing school projects—autobiographical things—genetic things that were really connected to asking your family questions. At those points, we would talk about me being adopted: This is how our family looks like and how it’s different from someone else’s family. But I don’t remember having proactive conversations with them that was brought up by them, and it was always emotional. I would cry and get really upset about it, but I wasn’t sure why.

The participants’ understanding of why their parents chose to adopt was overwhelmingly due to issues of infertility, and the reasons for choosing a particular birth country was due to having connections with other adoptive parents who had positive experiences with an adoption agency, as well as wanting to have the experience of raising children from a different culture. For example, Amy stated,

My mom can’t have any children biologically, so she wanted to adopt; and both my dad and mom wanted a girl. They had known a couple in Grand Rapids who had adopted from Korea a year before, so that’s why they did it—the couple had a good experience—they used Bethany, which is a subsection of Holt. They went to the sessions they had, and they really liked it.

On the other hand, Kris speculated that the reason for adopting an Asian child internationally was her father’s idea – in relationship to his own racialization experience:

I haven’t asked them directly why they decided to do it this way, but from [what] I could put together, it was my dad’s experience. [I could hear him saying], “I don’t want you to grow up in a White family.” Our family is not a White family; there are people in it that’s White, but children of generations are not White. They’re either mixed or like cousins in my age is all Japanese. I can see that as informing a decision [to adopt from an Asian country].

Reflecting on a conversation she had with her adoptive mother, Carrie recalled, “I think part of them thought it would be interesting to have children from a different
country….My mother said that when she saw our pictures, she knew we were hers. So that’s how they came to us.”

Contrary to others’ experiences, Kim’s parents did not adopt due infertility; they had four biological children after Kim’s adoption. Instead, her parents’ motivation to adopt was due to humanitarian reasons. Kim, who was adopted in 1965, speculated, “I think seeing the war, he [my father] had some sympathy, you know, for the kids. That’s how they decided to adopt me from Korea.”

**Exposure to birth culture and cultural activities.** The participants reported they rarely engaged in racial and ethnic cultural activities. In most instances, when participants did engage in cultural activities, it was limited to occasionally held, annual events, sponsored by the adoption agency.

Dan recalled attending Filipino adoption parties, sponsored by the adoption agency, but stopped going when he was about 8 or 9. He had no context of what it meant to be a Filipino person: “When I was a kid, I didn’t know much about the Philippines, and my friends didn’t know much about it. All I knew was what I could read in an encyclopedia or a book my mother got me.” Other than that of the Filipino adoption parties, he had no other cultural activities introduced to him.

Susan too recalled attending adoption agency picnics but stopped attending when she was about 10 years old:

I remember when I was really young, I remember going to like Holt picnics, and I remember trying *kimchi* once, and I hated it. And I didn’t like going to the picnics, because I didn’t know these kids. It was weird; it was once a year thing. And I remember, there was this annual camping trip or something, and we did that until I was in 1st or 2nd grade. But I think my parents caught onto the fact that I was not interested in attending these functions. In hindsight, I probably should
have been interested but how am I suppose to be interested in something I didn’t understand why we were going to these things. So I think they [my parents] just gave up on it; it was these once-a-year Holt things that I would be exposed to cultural aspect. I don’t know how authentic it is when White people are talking about Korea.

Although Kris grew up in a bicultural family, she resisted engaging in activities that would call attention to her adoptive status:

I remember, when I was young and my mom asked me if I wanted to go to a heritage camp and I didn’t have a concept of what that was; and I think I was at a stage of where I said, “No, I don’t want to do that”—it was scary, and my friends aren’t doing that. She [didn’t] push, and I can understand that.

Some of the participants reported lacking even the occasional exposure to cultural activities and had wished for an opportunity for even the occasional contact with other adoptees. For instance, Tom had no experience participating in any culture-related activities, even though he stated that his community had a number of IA/TRA adoptees, because the practice was very popular at the time. He would have appreciated any activities, including attending once-a-year cultural heritage camp, for the opportunity to meet other adoptees and to share experiences.

Amy stated she lived in a small town with limited access to cultural activities however, she recalled,

I went to one culture camp when I was in 4th or 5th grade—it was for a week, and it was a day camp. I didn’t like it at all, because it was stupid; they had us make pot stickers, cut out pictures from Korean catalogs—that kind of crap—and they had dolls and fans. I hated it, and I did not want to go back. But that was the only activity around here. My mom didn’t want to force it on me; she wanted me to interested in it. But now she knows that it was her responsibility that she should have known that I wouldn’t want anything to make me different; but now she knows that it was her responsibility.

Amy now wishes that her parents had been more proactive in introducing cultural activities, explaining, “I think I would be more comfortable [with Korean people and
culture].” As a child, Amy had stereotypical images of Korea, “like dragons, colorful, I had a couple of books when I was a kid that showed what a hanbok [traditional Korean dress] looked like.”

Carrie had limited contact with the Korean community or other communities of color after she was adopted. She had no exposure to cultural activities other than her adoptive parents’ culture. As a result, she lost her original language, culture, and everything she knew prior to being adopted. However, she took the initiative by choosing to attend the Colorado Heritage camps when she was 16 years old, eventually becoming a counselor. She met other Korean adoptees and together they began to explore their Korean heritage by attending Colorado University Campus’ Korean Student Association cultural events.

Kim recalled the only information she had about Korea was some coins that her father had and a travel book. Will recalled attending culture camps but found the experience uncomfortable, because he “didn’t know what to do with them [other Korean adoptees]” and stopped attending when he was about 12 years old.

**Developing Self-Perception: The Racialization Experience**

The second part of the theme of developing self-perception is the racialization experience. The subthemes that supported this theme include racialization experiences as a child and later as an adult, discussions about race and ethnicity at home, coping strategies as a child, the impact of media images on self, and the meaning of Whiteness. These subthemes influenced the participants’ racial and ethnic identity as well as the meaning placed on their racialization experience as a whole.
Racialization experiences as children. All the participants reported having, at some point, experienced racially based teasing and taunting. The most common form of racially based teasing and taunting was being called out on their physical appearance.

Participant Carrie described unrelenting teasing and taunting when she was in elementary school, leading her into an emotional crisis for much of her childhood and into her early adulthood. She described some of the typical treatment by her peers:

A boy kept teasing me….He called me the Japanese girl—called me chopstick. He was too young to know derogatory terms, but he called me anything he could think of—I was 12. In junior high [school], this girl told me to go back to my country and pick rice.

Participant Amy recalled when she was in elementary school:

Some boys [were taunting and teasing me]: “Look at that Chinese girl.” [The experience was upsetting, because] I didn’t like being called out as being different, and because I was Korean [not Chinese]. [I also remember] some guy also in elementary school who did that pulling back his eyes [slant eye gesture].

When the racial incident occurred, Amy told her parents. Her parents took immediate action by confronting the school and the teasing incident stopped. Amy’s parents were prominent members in the community and well known. Amy explained,

[We lived in] a small town, and my dad was on the city council. And he was the town banker, so everybody knew me, and everyone knew him. When I would go into a store, the people behind the counter would say, “You’re [so and so’s] daughter, right?” So I think that protected me from other [the] students and [general] comments.

Similar to Amy, Carrie also told her parents when she was teased:

[When I got teased], I [did] tell them [parents, counselors, teachers] that I didn’t like it; but no one knew what to do. My parents actually tried, but as far as I’m concerned, they may not have been able to relate to my pain like an ethnic person. But they definitely cried with me—my parents clearly understood that we live in a racist world….In a community like Boulder where it’s all White people, [they] don’t know what to do.
Participant Kim recalled, “I was really shy. [I got] made fun of a lot and had all that racial stuff…[kids making fun of how you look]: ‘Your nose is flat’ and making fun of your eyes.” Will recalled when he was in 3rd or 4th grade, “This kid said something about my mom….something about my mom being Chinese or something like that. I retaliated by kicking him.” Will clearly took this comment as an insult, because he was being called out as being different.

Dan told about his experience with being teased and how he dealt with it as follows:

When I was older, it was actually from other minorities that I received any teasing— from a lot of Black people and Hispanic people; they start calling me Chinese, or they were saying a lot of Chinese derogatory slang to me. People would ask me what I am and I’d tell them that I was Filipino and half of the people wouldn’t know what that was. They didn’t know what a Filipino was, they never met a Filipino person before. When that [racial stuff] happens you know you just brush it off – can’t do or say anything.

Kris reflected her childhood experiences in this way,

I think people would like tease me, and it was based around race. And I remember that there’s one other Asian kid, and they would [say], “You should marry him,” but he’s not a desirable person. I understood [these message as] “that’s how you think about me then.” Anytime anyone would point something out that something is different about me, [I would get upset]: “I don’t know how to react to you—you’re saying all these negative things.”

Susan described discrimination and racism experiences related to living in her community:

In my town, there was this racial tension….I remember when I was a freshman in high school, there were going to be a Ku Klux Klan march in my town, and a lot of people didn’t want them there. I don’t think it was [because of] necessarily the messages being brought into town, [but rather] it was more like the chaos bringing into town.

[There were these general comments about Asians as], “they’re taking over the world; before long, they’re going to have all our jobs,” and weird things
like that. I mean, because I’m biracial, I look more Black than Korean, [so] people don’t know what to think of me or ask me what nationality [I am].

I was called the N word for the first time when I was in the 5th grade; and I didn’t tell anybody, because I didn’t know what to do. My family didn’t talk about that [race].

People always wanted to feel our hair; seriously, we were 12 or something, and people would say, “Can I touch your hair?” Because I think they never saw such curly hair.

For Tom, racially based teasing and taunting was somewhat bearable, because it was a shared experience. He recalled,

Generally, like all children of color, we were all teased for being Asian. I grew up in an area where there were several other adopted kids of all different backgrounds….There were enough [of us], especially because it [IA/TRA] was very popular at the time, even being teased, I never really felt alone, [because other children were also being teased].

The majority of adoptees did not tell their parents of their racialization experience as children. Tom stated that he never complained to his parents when he was teased and taunted by other children, giving this explanation:

I’m sure [if they found out], my parents would think that it was bad on the other kid’s part, but I don’t know if they would necessarily understood that. My dad understood teasing because when he was growing up, he was very overweight, and he was teased because of that.

I don’t remember going home, saying, “Mom and dad, someone teased me today, because I’m Asian. You know, slanted eyes, and pulling the eyes like that.” I don’t remember going home complaining about any of that. I’m not sure if it was because it didn’t bother me—[well, no], it definitely did bother me at the time.

All of the adoptees immersed themselves in the American culture, desperate to fit into their social surroundings and afraid of being called out as being different (as not belonging). All the participants in this study had gone through racialization experiences as children, calling into question their status and acceptance into the American culture. For participant Carrie, when she became an American citizen she believed that she was
an American until other people reminded her that she truly’ did not belong: “I remember in 6th grade, this girl [said], ‘You know, just because you’re an American citizen, it doesn’t mean you’re an American.’”

**Racialization as an adult.** All participants recalled incidents of racially based teasing and taunting in schools as children and being called out on their physical difference. As adults they faced racism by the wider community, and it continues to be a daily experience. In the words of one of the participant,

> Issues come up quite a bit, but it doesn’t hurt me as much as it used to; when I was younger, it used to hurt me so much, but now, I just get annoyed, and I explain it to them….I’m almost 35, so it’s not as bad now; I just don’t take it personal.

In most instances, these racialization experiences constituted some aspect of physical threat to the participants. Male participants, Will and Dan, both stated that they have often been stopped for traffic violations and treated differently compared to their White peers. Will stated the racial incident that he noticed most was in receiving a traffic ticket:

“All my friends tell me about their pull-over stories and how they received a warning; but every time I was pulled over, I got a ticket. In that area, that’s where I noticed the difference.” On this same topic, Dan described his experience this way:

> I feel like there’s been racial profiling in this area [Boston suburbs]. I got pulled over once, and I know there’s a history of racial profiling [in that area]. I was a dark [skinned] kid with a bunch of White people.

> I’m pretty sure I got pulled over at an off ramp of a highway for speeding, and the officer was very unprofessional. And it wasn’t my neighborhood; I was just dropping some people off. I was told they had some problems with racial profiling there. At the time, I wasn’t thinking about it like that, but in hindsight, after people told me, [I think it was racially motivated].

Both Amy and Carrie recalled incidents when men made obscene and violent outbursts while driving past them. Carrie relayed her experience, “I remember once, my
girlfriends and I were downtown, I think we were 22. Some guys yelled out of their car, calling us Vietnamese whores, and I remember, hearing stuff like that I literally wanted to fight people.” Similarly, Amy, who was walking with another Asian student on her college campus, recalled,

[We] were walking down the street to meet [my other friend], and these three White guys pulled up in this mini van and yelled, “Go back to China, and bunch of other stuff,” then ended with kung fu—we couldn’t hear anything in the middle, because the engine was so loud, but it was all racist crap, and neither one of us ever faced that kind of racism and hatred from anybody before, up until that point; so it was really hard for both of us.

The most common experience of racialization for participants was the implication of their foreign status. The foreigner status characterization follows the adoptees throughout their lives, – even by friends, as in the case of Carrie, where one of her friends commented that her daughter who was 3 years old at the time, had an accent. Carrie related her response as follows:

I was like irritated. I was like, [my daughter] does not have an accent. They said that, well, [my daughter] gets her accent from [my husband]. I’m like, immigrant parents’ children do not learn the accent part of the language….I felt so stereotyped, and then I tried to explain to her that [my husband] may have a little accent, but he’s been here for over 25 years. I told her that I did not like it—my child only speaks one language. When she’s [friend] saying that my daughter has an accent, it’s like she’s stereotyping my daughter—we only speak English at home.

When Kim was younger, she disassociated herself from other Asians for fear she would be grouped into the same social category. She has continued to struggle with these issues:

You don’t want people to (I’m in my 40’s now) [think that I’m part of the Asian group], but people still say, “Well how long have you been here, and your English is good,” and you get sick of that. I always have to explain myself to people who don’t know me like, I’m not one of them [Asian immigrants], I’m not fresh off the
boat...like I have the right to be here you know. I hate the whole thing about “Are you American?”

**Discussions about race and ethnicity at home.** The majority of adoptees indicated that their adoptive parents rarely if ever brought up racial and cultural issues during their childhood. In cases where participants did bring up race and racism issues to their parents, the parents’ response was to get defensive, because they took it as questioning their parenting practices, or they simply did not know how to have conversation with their children regarding these issues. Susan stated that when she tried to bring up issues of race,

> They get [parents] very defensive—not so much my dad; my dad is very quiet, but my mom gets very defensive about anything to do with parenthood and decisions made. That’s why I never bring it [racial issues] up, because when my brother does bring it up, she gets very defensive—not even worth having the conversation.

Susan recalled one particular incident:

> I don’t know, my parents gets very defensive. Once someone called my little brother a N word...and he did tell my parents. And they were at the school, getting all upset, and it was a big deal. But they never told him what he should do or how he should deal with that, because I don’t think they knew. They went to talk to the principle, but I don’t think anything came of it. My brother didn’t know how to deal with that, other than fighting—he would fight anybody. I don’t think they [my parents] had any idea what they were getting themselves into.

Participant Carrie did not recall having any conversations with her parents about racial issues; however, she stated, “They [my parents] addressed it [racial issues] when it came up.” Consequently, because parents did not prepare their children for the potential racism that they might face, none of the adoptees were braced to deal with the racially based teasing and taunting by others.
Participant Kim stated, “I don’t think they [parents] were aware of it [racially based teasing], ‘cause I didn’t talk about it.” There was a general consensus among participants that parents could not possibly understand on a visceral level with the adoptees due to racial differences and status; therefore, the parents could only sympathize. When I asked Kim why she did not go to her parents for support, she responded,

In those days, I don’t think people talked about it [racial issues]—to them [parents], I was their daughter, to them I didn’t look any different. They knew I looked different; they got comments when we go out in public, like, “Oh she’s so cute.” [But] no, they were not aware at all [racial issues]. That’s one thing I learned from talking to other adoptees is that’s a common thing—they just see you as their child—it doesn’t occur to them. In those days, they didn’t think about what that kid has to deal with.

As Tom stated earlier, his parents were not comfortable talking about “perceived” sensitive issues, and their way of “talking” was to bring books into the home. He explained,

I don’t think it’s [racial issues] something my parents would necessarily bring up or talk about. I feel like we talked about things little more, now that we’re all little older, but we don’t even talk much about it now.

Although Amy’s parents quickly handled the racial incident that occurred during elementary school when she was a child, they did not follow up by discussing racial issues with her afterwards. Amy’s parents did not incorporate any cultural activities in the home, and Amy later discovered that her mother believed that Amy would not suffer from racism because of the “positive” stereotypes associated with Asians, in general, as the model minority:

My mother bought into the whole “model minority myth.” She didn’t know about the “forever foreigner” concept or the Suzie Wong or Dragon Lady. All she knew was the model minority stereotype, that it’s positive; [therefore] I wouldn’t have
to face any racism and that she thought she could protect me from it. Which is true when I was still at home, but she didn’t think beyond that or having prepared me for leaving home.

It was not until Amy had a traumatic racial experience in college that she recalled having conversations with her mother about the racialization of Asians:

[My mom] she thought that I wouldn’t face it [racism], on one hand, or that she could protect me from it, from the other; and so we never talked about it until, at that point [when Amy was in second year of college].

I was expecting her to get ready for it [racialization experience], and she wasn’t; she was defensive and angry, and we got into fights about it. She kind of deals with that kind of stuff on daily basis, on other parts of her life [professional as an attorney], but she never applied these experiences with me. She just was not ready to deal with it, and I wasn’t ready to handle it.

When Amy told her mother about the racial incident on campus, her mother’s response, according to Amy, was “pretty much silence. She didn’t say anything at first, then she was crying. But as far as I can remember, she didn’t say anything that was comforting or anything—she just cried.”

Amy added,

She couldn’t separate herself from this, that we were different and that there are some parts of my life that she couldn’t access, and there were divisions that separated us. And that’s the reason that she wasn’t ready to handle it, and she got so defensive.

Kris too did not recall having any conversations with her family regarding race and racial issues while growing up. It was not until when she was a young adult, coming out to her parents regarding her sexuality, that she had a discussion about race with her father, who is Japanese American:

I remember in my adult life, we brought that [race] up. We got into a conflict about something else—about Queer identity, and that brought up a lot of stuff, and that was the first time, in a personal way, [that my father] brought up that he had some feeling about people who had said racist things to him. He said “You
I said, “Of course I do; I think that, but you never told me that.”

He never reached out to talk about that specifically. The family, we would get together, most often was his side of the family, and now reflecting on that, that was a nice part of my experience. There are other Asian folks in my family—not like we sit around and talk about being Asian, but he was never bringing it up [being subjected to racism].

When I asked Kris why she thought her father did not discuss race and racial issues, she responded,

[The way] I think about it is, whatever the internalized things going on. I think, for him, the way he’s talked about race in his family—my dad’s family was in the internment camp during the war—and they would talk about it; but he was really young then [and not able to fully understanding the meaning of his family’s incarceration].

He’s not very verbal, for him, you know, talking about that experience is something that’s happened occasionally, and I think my cousins and me and like, my grandma, [that’s part] of our family history and want to talk about that. He talks about that in a way that’s not personal.

The only other time he’s talked about race at all is related to school. But it’s also been in this personal but not personal way, like, “Oh, people made fun of me and my brothers, and this is how we reacted to it. We were the bad kids in school, and we acted out, and this is how…” This is how racism works, right, this is what people said to us, and this is how we reacted to it. So he talks about those things, but in the context of [when] everybody is present in our family, when commonalities are happening.

Will stated that his parents brought some culture into their home as much as they could. Will and his younger sister (who is also adopted from Korea) attended Korean Culture camps, and their parents hosted monthly dinner groups for families of other Korean adoptees. Will developed couple of friendships with other adoptees, however, he disconnected from these relationships. In general, Will is uncomfortable being around Asians, including other Asian adoptees.

For participant Dan, his sense of reality was distorted due to his family structure and how he understood family structures in general. Dan described that his mother tried
to discuss the concept of race, but he could not grasp the concept due to a limited understanding of what it meant to be a person of color:

    When I was young, my mom was explaining the races, and I didn’t fully grasp it. My understanding of it was that some people are White, some people are Black, some people are brown—but all mommies are White. And she had to laugh, and she had to go over it again until I got it.

**Coping strategies as a child.** When faced with discrimination, participants used varying coping strategies to deal with their feelings of subjectivity. Carrie recalled feeling helpless and angry: “I cried a lot—it was awful….When I was young and heard anything racial against me, something inside me would start boiling. It actually made me feel violent, and I’m not a violent person.” Kim just shut down emotionally:

    You know, when you’re a little kid and you don’t know how to deal with it, I just clammed up. I didn’t go out and play and do stuff that other kids did….I just internalized it, because I didn’t talk to my parents about it, because I didn’t know what to say [to them].

    Amy, on the other hand, told her parents when incidents of racism happened to her in elementary school. She related their response: “They called the principal, and he [the boy] got in trouble and stopped picking on me after that.” Because these issues were stemmed immediately and not talked about afterwards, Amy did not put much thought into them, because she removed was from the general Asian American population until she was in college.

    Tom was able to cope with racially based teasing and taunting as a child, because he knew he was not alone in his experience. As he stated earlier, there were several other adoptees, including two of his younger siblings, who were also adopted from Korea. This made the teasing and taunting somehow more tolerable to endure:
I think my experience is different than a child who is the only Asian adopted child in the family. I think [being the only Asian child] would be a much different sort of experience. Even if your parents can be sympathetic, they could never be empathetic; so if you’re the only adopted Asian child in the family, then you don’t have the built-in support network like I did of having my brother and sister.

He reflected on his racialization experiences as a child in this way:

I think it made it weirder, because kids will make fun of anything, but they’re making fun of you for being Asian or teasing you for being Asian. And the feeling I had was, “I’m not any different than you”….I was teased for all sorts of things…but the Asian jokes was the weirdest, because “I’m not that different than you, I eat the same food, I go to the same school, listen to same music.” I don’t understand the rationale behind trying to make someone feel bad for something they can’t change.

For Dan, having a strong support system of friends and family helped to deal with issues of being teased and taunted. When incidents of teasing and taunting occurred, Dan told how this made him feel:

It makes you feel kind of shitty, but I think they’re shitty people. So, you can’t think that it matters—if they’re going to be assholes, then I don’t think about it. I don’t think anytime you get made fun of, it’s not going to make you feel good; but I was good at brushing it off—I knew I had people who didn’t think that way.

Dan also coped by having fantasies about his life, as he recalled,

When I was younger, to be honest, I didn’t think much about it [differences]. I knew I was from someplace different. I didn’t really understand it. It was kind of neat to me, because I got to create all these [fantasies] about what my life could have been like. I didn’t know much about it, because I didn’t know any Filipino people. So for me, it was like I got to use my imagination a lot [to be whatever I wanted].

For Kris, racially based teasing and taunting was especially difficult during her elementary school period, as she recalled,

Elementary school was really difficult for me. That’s when I felt like I’m really different; I can’t connect with other peers. [I felt like] “People don’t like me,” so I remember feeling pretty lonely and confused and being upset a lot.

I remember doing a lot around my self-esteem when I was younger. I remember working with the school psychologist. I [also] remember doing things
with my dad, like everybody loves me, and I would cry all the time—that kind of stuff. [I often felt] isolated and alone.

Kris created a sense of belonging by imagining herself as the biological child of her adoptive father. She talked about this need to “belong” to her adoptive family in order for her to feel “normal”:

I have all these processes: “Oh well, it looks like I’m not adopted, because there’s this whole other story of why my family looks this way.” It is like I could be my dad’s biological child, and then he married, my mom and that’s how it all played out. I would make up these stories why my family was normal – [yet] sometimes it would make me mad when people say me and my dad look alike, [because] we don’t look alike.

**Impact of media images on self.** Another factor influencing self-perception is Asian images portrayed in the mass media. The majority of participants cited distancing themselves from one-dimensional characterizations of Asians in the media: nerdy, unpopular, smart, overly sexualized Asian women, asexualized Asian men, the model minority, martial arts expert, the dragon lady, the foreigner, the villain, as well as the typical lumping of Asians into one group.

Amy recalled her only exposure to Asian culture was through images on television and movies: “[The only exposure to] Asian culture was through Power Rangers or Mulan—I didn’t have any idea at all [about Asian culture].” Amy disassociated herself from images of Asians in the media, because she did not understand what these images meant in relationship to herself: “I didn’t associate myself as being one [Asian]. I didn’t have any Asian role models.”

For Carrie, media images informed how she saw herself. She recalled,

I felt like an awkward Asian girl for a long time. I thought everyone else was more attractive, because they were Caucasian. Then when I was 21 or 22, I was the hot Asian chick, and I was soaking that up. When you’re young, you want to
be wanted, and the stereotype that Asian women as overly sexualized, [I saw it] as a compliment; and then later on, I was offended, then I did not like it.

Another common experience is being told that you look like every other Asian person. In Carrie’s words,

I was obligated to be Connie Chung. She was the only role model that was Asian American, and everyone told me that I looked like her, and of course, I looked like every other Asian person they ever seen (Kristi Yamaguchi, the girl from Karate Kid).

Media images, in part, played a role in Kris’ self-esteem and sense of self. Kris reported that the lack of Asians images influenced her feeling about herself. When Asians were represented, she felt that she could not possibly fit into the standards of Asians represented in the media:

[Media images] definitely played into how I saw myself—standards and stuff like that—you know. I remember not having any sort of role models or like things that felt relevant in my life. The images were White people, you know, that has, at different points, really affected me and made me feel worse about [my] physical appearances—things going on with my face or body, things like that—you know, as a teenager, I was really lost.

[Whenever I saw an Asian person in the media, my reaction was], “Oh my gosh, I’m going to connect to you,” I’m going to grab onto to that [image] and that, “you made it someplace in the world, and people think that you are beautiful, and success [is] attached to you.” And that’s something I really [wanted to] connect to [give me validation].

[Not until] college, I was like, “Oh, okay, I don’t have to get wrapped into this [mass images of Asians].” I don’t fit into [these standards], but the reality of it is that, of course, it still affects me—still informs how I think about myself.

For Kris, a lifetime of being exposed to cultural imaging of objectification of Asian women as overly sexualized personas has informed her comfort level with White men:

[Now] I’m appreciative of any images at all of real representation [of Asian women]; but I recognize that’s disconnected from so many things. The other piece of things is the real, sexualized images of Asian women and relationships in dating White men.
Popular culture or media has influenced [how] I think about that in relation to Queerness now. I am not going to date [White men] now, but I’m [also] not comfortable around White straight men...who may be awesome, like really allied people, but that’s not interesting to me.

Carrie consciously chose not to date White men because,

I hated being that “China doll.” I hated being that overly sexualized Asian woman—the stereotypes—feeling more like an experiment, instead of getting to know me—you know what I mean?

Carrie added, “I really didn’t feel like they saw me [the whole me], and I experienced that with other racial groups too.”

For Kim, most of her relationships were with White men when she was younger; however, her attitude changed over time with her understanding of the politization of Asians, including the proliferation of overly sexualized images of Asian women in the media:

I feel that I’ve gone the other direction. I’m sure to some people, it may sound racist, but I don’t find White people to be very attractive. I know it sounds horrible, but I really look at people of color now; I look at their features, and I think, “Wow, their skin.” I don’t know, like when you’re with a person of color, you don’t have to explain.

Kim came to realization that the media images created false identity of Asians as a group.

She gave this explanation:

[The media images of Asians], I just learned much later that it was false betrayal...It was so limited, based on all the stereotypes Asians in the media—even now you don’t see Asian men much. It’s part of the whole thing of not being understood, not being seen as a whole person.

When I was in my 30s, I saw this movie, The Joy Luck Club, and it was really a wake up call, because it was the first time—I get emotional when I say this—that it was the first time I saw Asian women as beautiful. It wasn’t the story, [but] looking at the actresses, and wow it was a revelation! It triggered this whole transformation: [a new] awareness [that Asian women were] attractive and not shameful.
Participant Tom illustrated the common portrayal of Asian men in the media as he described the multifaceted, complicated emotional response these images draws:

There is definitely lots of images of Asians, especially when it comes to men. The Hollywood image of Asian men is that they’re asexual, or they’re the Ninja … When they are based on stereotypes, it bothers me—I couldn’t say to what degree—especially now that I’ve been interested in [examining things] with a critical eye.

It’s amazing to me that we’re in the year 2010, and we still have these polarized versions of stereotypes of Asian people and that. Asians are from diverse areas, and the media still doesn’t reflect that….It’s hard not to internalize people who look like you in the media somewhat.

**Meaning of Whiteness.** For most adoptees, being/becoming White was the goal to strive for, because it meant fitting into their social environment. Although Carrie was adopted at the age of 11, she recalled that by the time she was 12 or 13, “I thought I was White American.” Like many of the adoptees, Carrie was invested in becoming American and preoccupied with fitting into her social group:

It wasn’t just about being an American; I really believed that I was White American, [because] I only had White friends, my parents are White, I ate White people’s food….There was nothing in my life that made me feel I was something different than the mass community other than my own skin color.

With no exposure to her birth culture or communities of color and lacking any conversations regarding her family make-up other than that she was adopted from Korea, Amy gave the following description of her childhood feelings about identifying as White:

When I pictured myself, when I wasn’t looking in the mirror, I pictured myself as a White celebrity [Power Rangers character played by Amy Jo Johnson]. I don’t think it registered as being big physical difference for me.

I mean, on one hand, I always knew I was adopted, and that wasn’t a issue for me—my parents were proactive on that front. I never knew that I wasn’t adopted, [but when teased in elementary school,] I got really upset, and my parents came in and handled it really quickly; then I would forget about it. There were moments when [I thought about the differences], but I never thought about it until I got to college—[until that point], I always thought I was White.
Susan, too, denied parts of herself in order to fit into her community structure: “I didn’t think about Black history or Korean history or the aspect of either culture, because I was more interested in just trying to fit in, to belong.”

Similarly, Kim viewed her identity as a child as someone who was adopted from Korea, but her desire was to fit in.

Because I didn’t know back then the word Asian. [As a child], I adopted the dominant thinking that blonde, tall, and blue eyes are the epitome [of beauty]. When I was a kid, I just wanted to fit in; I didn’t see myself physically [as White], but in my thinking, [I wanted to be White].

Kris did not question her identity until others brought it to her attention that she was different from them. Despite having a father who was Japanese American and having had lots of family contact from her father side of the family, Kris still wished and hoped and dreamed of being White. Her identity as Asian or Korean American came more from a spatial place rather from internal understanding of what it meant.

It wasn’t until other people had a reaction to me that I had a understanding of what I looked like or how I saw the world. I was like this normal [kid] and then other people would come out and say you look like this and your mom looks like this. That’s when I said ‘Oh, that’s how I see myself” not normal – so it wasn’t until other people started giving me the feedback. [I was] feeling so isolated because this wasn’t an experience of my friends not being able to explain things being a kid and not knowing how to ask for support or knowing what that would look like. [My parents] would have more tools to support me as a kid rather than my friends [but they didn’t].

I don’t think I ever identified as White but I identified [White] was a normal thing like a goal and I remember looking at myself when people pointed hinges out and thought okay if I can just alter these things the way I looked then that would be closer to being White.

In regard to his feelings related to Whiteness, Tom gave this account:

I definitely knew I was Asian; other kids don’t let you forget that, for whatever reason. Then and now I pretty much view myself as White, in a way, because
that’s the cultural experience we had. You know, my parents never sent us to Korean camps or any of the cultural heritage camps that are out there.

For Dan, identity was composed and developed through his social relationships and community surroundings; he had a very strong support system in his friends and parents. He felt accepted for who he was and did not feel compelled to be White in order to fit in to his social environment. In the following quote, Dan explained how, as a child, he saw himself:

I’d say I was Filipino and American basically. My life wasn’t much different from my other friends growing up, like I had a loving family, I went to school, I did most of the stuff my friends did. I feel like I had a pretty good support system there, and no one really gave me any problems; and if they did, I just shrugged it off—didn’t think twice about it.

Will had very little memories of having any identity questions as a child, but his parents told him that he asked them, when he was 6 years old, “Why do I look so different than you?” Other than that incident, Will always saw himself as White instead of Korean, and for him, being around other Asian adoptees was and continues to be difficult: “I didn’t know what do to around other Asians like myself.”

I asked Will, who saw himself as White, what he saw when he looked in the mirror. He responded,

That it wasn’t White. [But] I didn’t want to be different, I guess, because lot of my friends are White. So I didn’t want to bring it to attention [that I wasn’t White]. I usually don’t think about it everyday. I just shove it down and don’t let it bother me I guess.

**Essential Feelings and Struggle for Belongingness**

The second theme relates to the essential elements manifested in personal feelings about self. Feelings about self were revealed by the participants’ sense of loss and
abandonment from their birth families, culture, and country, as well as in regard to discovering their conditional acceptance to the American culture. These intermingled feelings generated thoughts about the self as well as toward others, and how their racialization and adoption experience impacted their feelings about self and how they place meaning to these experiences. The following sub-themes illustrate participants’ description of these feelings as they openly reflected on their experiences.

**Feelings of abandonment from birth family.** Many of the participants spoke about their feelings of abandonment and loss from their birth family, birth culture, and/or birth country. Participant Carrie’s suffering of multiple loss and feelings of abandonment by her birth family, culture, and country constituted an integral part of her life experience. Carrie’s mother died in an accident when she was 8 years old. Carrie scarcely had time to grieve her mother’s death before her world, as she knew it, utterly disintegrated. The death of her mother had more alarming consequences, because she and her younger brothers were soon abandoned by their birth father and by the extended family. She described how her world, as she knew it, totally collapsed in an instant: “My dad pretty much fell apart…as far as I understand, my father put us up for adoption [and] my [extended] family did not want to take us in.” Carrie described that once her mother died, the community treated her and her brothers as virtual pariahs; instantaneously, they became social outcasts:

> Usually kids without moms are considered dirty and misbehaved, [generally having a] negative stereotype….We had an amazing mom, but once she died, people started treated us like we were less. And I remember these ladies who knew us wouldn’t let their kids play with us. In school, there was a lot of physical punishment—the teacher beat my brother.
Carrie and her brothers went to live with various relatives for a couple of years prior to going to the orphanage, before being adopted. Carrie described the differential treatment she and her brothers received from their extended family:

[When] we were living with relatives, they would give all the yummy food to their kids while we got the leftovers. Nobody washed our clothes; I was 8 and 9 and doing laundry for me and my brothers. I would hide food for my brothers. No one cared for us—everyone treated us horribly.

A majority of the participants in this study were adopted at a very young age and had few if any information regarding their birth family and the circumstances surrounding their adoption. Nevertheless, the desire to understand the reason for their adoption and the need to re-connect with their biological family still remains a powerful draw for some participants.

Participant Will stated, “All my questions came from why I was adopted, why I was given up pretty much.” When he was in high school, he went to Korea in hopes of reconnecting with his birth mother. His adoption agency in Korea found his birth mother, but she refused to have any contact with him. Will expressed his sense of helplessness and anger at his birth mother’s refusal to meet with him:

There’s nothing you can do about that…. [It] made me feel sad, because I was there to see her. But she said, no, ‘I don’t want anything to do with you’….The part that my biological mother doesn’t want anything to do with me makes me angry.

Will felt abandoned from his birth family for the second time in his life. Consequent to his birth mother’s refusal to meet him, Will rejected his birth culture. He explained that he currently has no desire to know or take any interest in wanting to know anything about his cultural origins. Yet for Will, having more information about his birth family would
rouse more interest in his birth culture. In this regard, he stated that this would “definitely help me want to learn more about the culture.”

For the majority of participants, having some understanding as to why they were given up for adoption may alleviate lifelong feelings of loss and abandonment. Kris explained what it would mean to have information about her biological origins:

I guess, first to have the context of what was going on—why was I given up for adoption and the reasons for that. What was I doing for the first 6 months of my life? [What was] the environment around me and who was taking care of me? I feel like that is an immediate response, and I feel like that opens up a whole other things to think about too, which seems big and scary.

I know that’s the stuff I really want to know, but I might not get that. I might have to be okay with not knowing that stuff, because there’s not access to that kind of information. [Having information may mean] I can understand more about myself; I can understand why I feel the way I feel or why my relationship with my family looks certain way now—how I am able to talk about things, and if I had that information, I can talk about things more easily.

I don’t know, maybe I would close myself off and not be able to talk about it. I know that I have issues with conflicts, and I get really anxious and have a lot of fear. So I can see all those things coming up, even more with more information and really scared to know things that I haven’t known.

Participants Dan and Tom both shared similar anxieties as they expressed feelings of apprehension from finding out the reasons for adoption and potentially meeting their birth parents because of fear that it might potentially bring up additional feelings of trauma. Dan expressed his anxiety this way:

I’m not super into looking for her [birth mother], personally I feel like it’s a lot more emotional baggage then I could deal with. I won’t turn down the opportunity to find her but also I’m not also looking for it either.

Tom stated that the idea of possibly finding out that he was the only child put up for adoption from his birth family might potentially cause additional feelings of abandonment—the fact that he had been the one singled out to be adopted.
On the other hand, Susan actively searched for her birth mother in Korea. She went to Korea through an adoption agency-sponsored program and went through extensive bureaucratic rigmarole trying to find answers. She gave this explanation:

I’m just really curious at this point. Everyone says, “Well, you should know what your expectations are,” and I don’t think I defined that in my head yet. I’m not saying that I want to have a relationship with them, but I’m very curious if I have siblings. I really want to know the story behind how I got here and things like that. And even if it was a one time meeting would mean more to me than anything else. Right now, there is all these questions in my head.

Amy was aware that she has two biological siblings living with her biological parents back in Korea, however, she was the one put up for adoption due to her birth father’s accident. Amy deals with this knowledge by not thinking about it in terms of personal rejection but simply accepts it in terms of being offered “a better life by coming to America.”

**Abandonment from birth culture/country.** A majority of the participants have not actively searched for relationships with members of their birth culture, because they lacked exposure to and had no connection to their birth family, culture, and country as children. In instances where participants did come into contact with members of their birth culture, they had varying degrees of acceptance and comfort levels. Most often, participants found that they lacked connection with their ethnic and racial group members, because their life experiences have been so vastly different from the general Asian and Korean American population. Commonly cited experiences when participants did come into contact with members of their birth culture were feelings of rejection and discomfort.
In addition, the participants found that they were not accepted as members of their birth group due to their family experience, because they lacked a common experience. For instance, Carrie learned that, due to her adoptee status, she was no longer considered Korean by the Korean people in the United States and, at the same time, was seen as a social outcast in Korea. In Carrie’s words, “I found out I was considered White among Korean people, and so that was really confusing, because I’m thinking I found my people, and they don’t consider me as Korean.” Consequently, she not only suffered separation from her birth father, language, culture, food, and the way of life she had known for the first 11 years of her life (before adoption), but had now lost her birth group membership.

Carrie has vivid memories of living in Korea prior to coming to the United States: “[I remember] my parents, the food, the language, the culture. I have so much memories.” As a result of her adoption, Carrie’s earlier memories of living in Korea became displaced in order to survive in the new White American culture: “I was sent to America, and I had to learn this whole new life.” Carrie became preoccupied in trying to fit into her new environment, and in this process she lost her culture of origin, language, and connection with group membership.

Carrie felt the Korean community, both in Korea and in the United States, abandoned her by refusing to embrace her as one of their own, because she later learned that the Korean people she encountered both in the United States and in Korea no longer considered her Korean:

[Because] I don’t the language, the culture. When I told them [the Korean people I encountered] that I was adopted, they feel sorry for us; then there was this sense that I wasn’t Korean enough.
A whole new issue came up [for me]. Korean people, they looked down on me because of being adopted; [then] when I went to Korea, Korean people asked me if I was Japanese or Chinese. I wasn’t very thrilled with Korean people.

Kim, too, discussed her experience of coming in contact with other Korean Americans who openly criticized her for “not being Korean enough,” because she did not know the language or was not versed in the cultural practices.

For participant Susan, due to her biracial background, peoples’ automatic assumption upon meeting her was to assume that she was Black (Susan’s own identification). Even when she told other people that she was Korean—was born in Korea—no one accepted this self-identification and discounted her claim of being a “real” Korean. As an adult, she recalled,

I have friends who are Koreans or Korean Americans, and they are surprised when I tell them that I’m Korean. And a lot of my friends who are Korean Americans are surprised when I tell them that I was born in Korea because I have no cultural ties as far as how I was brought up or anything similar to them.

When Susan went to Korea on an organized adoptee tour, she recalled “being stared at a lot by Koreans;” she stood out due to her biracial heritage. Her peers and family rarely recognized Susan’s biracial background, becoming an additional layer of subjective experience for her, because her Asian background went unacknowledged. Nevertheless, her desire to know the nature and reason for adoption, and wanting connection with her birth family have remained an essential part of her search for self.

Contrary to other participants, Dan recalled having positive and supportive experiences when he came in contact with members of his birth culture:

The Filipinos I’ve met, whether it’s adoptees, immigrants, or first-generation Filipinos, have been very accepting of me. A lot of them tried to teach me Filipino things, introduced me to food, introduced me to music, told me about the culture that I’ve might not known [before]. One of my roommates is Filipino; [he’s]
slowly trying to teaching me some words. I’m not the quickest with learning [language].

For the most part, they’ve been pretty accepting, and I enjoy meeting other Filipinos, because we have that connection there. [When other Filipinos learn that Dan was adopted], for the most part, it’s a positive response. They say, “Oh, do you know about the culture,” and they want to show me stuff.

I received positive response from most of Filipinos I’ve encountered. They just want to teach [me] about what you might not know about the culture, and I’m open to learning about it too. So they’re just happy to show me stuff.

This acceptance by members of his birth culture encouraged Dan’s further interest in finding more about his birth culture:

I didn’t get interested, and curiosity [about the Philippines] didn’t happen until I got older. [I don’t know Filipino culture.] I learn bits and pieces. I still feel like an outsider. I don’t know what it’s about, but I think it’s interesting learning about it; for the most part, I feel like an outsider, looking in on it. It’s interesting learning about it, because it’s part of my roots.

I’m Filipino, so I feel like I should know about it. I don’t fully embrace it or try to understand it or act like that, but I want to understand it and good to recognize it, I guess.

In contrast to Dan’s experience of acceptance from members of his birth culture, participants adopted from Korea had different experiences. Consequently, they generally felt discomfort being around other Korean Americans. Carrie stated, “I would rather go into a room full of White people than room full of Korean people—room full of Korean people scare me. I could never feel like right at home.” Will concurred, “[I] just don’t know how to act in a roomful [of Korean people].”

Many participants who were adopted from Korea expressed strong opinions regarding Korea’s social system. They expressed feelings of abandonment and betrayal from their birth country. Many participants expressed their sense of outrage at a country that lacked a social system to support single parents, especially single mothers, as well as
the country’s failure to encourage domestic adoption, resulting in vast number of children being displaced from their homeland.

Women participants in particular criticized Korea’s patriarchal system, because they speculated that had they remained in their birth country, their life would have been fraught with difficulty and hardship due to the social status of women and discriminatory practices toward biracial and abandoned children. For example, Kim contemplated that her life would have been “pretty dismal,” especially as a female, because she saw Korea as a male-dominated society, where women have few if any choices except to marry or live in poverty.

Similarly, Carrie speculated about what might have happened had she stayed in Korea:

Being a girl with no family, I would have definitely been raped….Coming here [to the United States], my journey of all the stuff [I went through] is nothing compared to what kind of hardship I could have had in Korea.

Carrie expressed outrage at her treatment by her birth country leading to her adoption:

As far as I’m concerned, Korea is a nation of deniers, [because] it’s a country that has no support system for single parents….As far as I’m concerned, I have abandonment issues with Korea itself. I was sent to America, and in the end, it was America [that’s] taken care of me. I know all these adoptees. We all have a love-hate relationship with Korea.

For Susan, her disappointment with her birth country is undeniable, as she described her search for her biological mother in vein. She has little information regarding her birth mother and no information regarding her birth father, who may or may not be an American citizen. Susan expressed her frustration in searching for her birth family:
I don’t understand the [Korean] culture. I don’t understand why single parents, especially single mothers, are so frowned upon and why so many children are put up for adoption. I don’t understand why children who are biracial are outcasts, and I don’t understand why things haven’t changed more. It seems like things are changing slowly, but I don’t know if that’s true.

Susan equated (viewed) loss of her birth mother as a consequence of forced separation due to her birth country’s social system. In this sense, she feels a sense of abandonment from the birth country, both for herself as well as for her birth mother, who (she assumed) had little choice in the matter.

**Feelings about self.** For many of the participants, feelings of loss and abandonment by their birth family and culture, and racialization experiences and feeling “othered,” has had negative consequences in regard to their feelings about self; and often, participants described feelings of helplessness and anger.

Amy’s world, as she had known it, became shattered after the racial incident on campus: “At first, I was in shock. I didn’t know what to think, and I was kind of numb.” She added that later, the incident “blew my sense of being”— the incident on campus was a “blow to my senses,” because she had never expected it or prepared for it.

Kris spoke of struggling with her need to be understood:

I want to have people get me [by giving] me space to talk about my experiences, [and] when I feel like that’s going to be taken away or somebody may leave, then I get scared.

Having more information about the nature of why she was put up for adoption would give Kris some psychological relief from feelings of exclusion and give her the ability to sort through her feelings of loss and abandonment. Not having any information has left Kris feeling groundless.
Speaking of his feelings of loss and abandonment, as a result of being adopted, which affect him in his relationship with others, Tom stated, “They come up time to time in relationships.” He was aware that some of his feelings of sadness and/or feelings of insecurity could be traced to being adopted: “I can’t help but to think, ‘Gosh, that a lot of my issues have to do with that [being adopted].’” However, Tom, as well as Kris and Dan, struggled with needing to know and, at the same time, feeling dread of finding out information about their birth family and/or history for fear it might cause additional emotional turmoil. And admittedly, that is the reason they are not prepared to seek further information about their birth history.

Many participants’ feelings about self came from their racialization experiences. For instance, Kris’ sense of self was conditioned by her social interaction with peers. Her desire to be White was so great that she would imagine about being White, as discussed earlier: “I had times, and I’m sure it’s common too, that I looked at myself in the mirror and thought, ‘Yeah, I look White,’ for whatever the reason, when clearly, I did not look White.” Kris recalled generally feeling rejected and sought counseling from the school psychologists, doing a lot of work around her self-esteem issues:

[I felt] well, feeling like the “other,” compared to my friends; I looked different, that my family had a different make-up. Being White felt so normalized, felt like [it was] the ideal experience, which I don’t think was exclusive to me. I think that’s an experience lots of people of color have, especially from [living in] really White environments.

I didn’t want to be different; I wanted to be like my friends, [like] trying to figure out what you’re attracted to and what’s attractive—those kinds of things—like I wasn’t fitting into those things. And I don’t think I had tools to talk about stuff, because there wasn’t a lot of conversation in my family about it.

Many participants internalized experiences of racism. To illustrate, Kim recalled,
I hated how I looked—even as a young adult, I never felt proud. [My feelings about myself] was always negative….It happens to this day, sometimes when I see other Asians—it’s almost like a knee jerk reaction. You know, you go through these phases where you don’t want to associate with them [Asians].

I felt removed from it, but I felt like I was always fighting from that, because even today, people judge me on outward appearance. You know, they say, “she’s Asian, so she’s nice and sweet and submissive”—I can really, really be mean. I did internalize it; it affected how I interacted with and reacted to people.

In regard to his feelings, Tom made the observation, “I definitely think it [racialization experiences] made me more sensitive. I was always more sensitive to racial jokes, because I don’t understand the rationale behind trying to make someone feel bad for something they can’t change.”

Dan has found comfort in his current community surroundings and his support system of friends:

It makes you feel shitty that there are still people out there—like that out there in the world. I live in New England, and there are people of all different race and creed up here; so it’s not much of an issue, but I know in this country itself that some people think a lot differently towards people of color—treat people differently. It frightens me, the extremes of that, I guess.

Carrie too recalled that she went through a long period of “crisis” due to constant racially based teasing and taunting. Part of the internalized racism was how participants viewed their self-image. For example, Carrie recalled,

I remember looking at myself [in the mirror] and wondering what it would be like if my eyes were rounder, my lips thinner. I felt very unattractive being Asian….I didn’t like what I saw in the mirror.

My parents said that color doesn’t matter. It matters what’s inside….It’s an ideology to live by, but it didn’t work like that, because how you looked is how people treated you in a certain manner. I don’t know how many people asked me if I spoke English. It’s a daily experience—people constantly reminding me that I look different.
Kim also felt unattractive, describing what she saw in the mirror: “[I felt] really ugly. I had this thing about my mouth, that my lips were really big, and still to this day, I don’t like to look in the mirror.” In this regard, Amy remarked, “I knew I was Asian, but I guess I saw more the White characteristics, so I can rationalize it away.”

Feelings toward others. Feelings toward and relationship with others is affected by feelings about self, one’s racialization experience, and feelings of loss and abandonment. Many of the participants described general feelings of insecurity in relationships, often distancing themselves for fear of being left, and learning not to depend on anyone. Kris stated her general anxiety as follows:

Just being scared that people are going to leave me. I can’t contribute all that to being adopted, but I think feeling marginalized in other ways [too]. You don’t want to [feel] alone; you don’t want to be isolated. So I think I have that [need to] feel included.

For Kim, feelings of loss and abandonment affected her ability to have intimate relationship with others:

I do feel love, but I don’t reciprocate it in the same way. Not that I’m not caring, but I think, you know, I hear people talking about this is the abandonment thing—the feeling of being left—you never let down your guards. I know this is true for me: You never want to depend on anyone emotionally, financially. You know, if that person ever died, I never want to have that loss. I have intimacy issues: I don’t trust people.

I don’t think until recently that I realized how adoption [has] affected my life—my interactions and my interpersonal relationships my whole life. I don’t think I thought much about it; I don’t think it occurred to me.

Amy felt a sense of disappointment in her family and friends, who were unable to understand the gravity of her experience of racism on her college campus:

I felt like my mom and I disagreed about how she responded to the situation. I guess I just wanted her to comfort me and stuff, and she [couldn’t understand]—when I said something about White people, she got really defensive about it. She wasn’t able to deal with it, and I wasn’t able to deal with it. And I was hoping that
she could guide me through it, but she wasn’t able to deal with herself. So it was really hard for me.

My best friend all through high school called me a victim and just did not understand what I’m going through and was very hostile about it. She didn’t understand why is was so important—why it wouldn’t just blow off my back, because it was like somebody yelling something down the street. She didn’t get that it was racist, and it was my first experience with racism—even more traumatic. She buys into the whole colorblind society kind of thing, so she became very, very hostile.

**Feelings toward birth family and culture.** The majority of participants expressed that they felt uncomfortable with members of their birth culture and had no sense of connection or concept of what it meant to be part of the birth culture. Will felt uncomfortable being around other Asians, especially other Koreans. He reflected on the potential cause of his discomfort: “Just because they probably have Korean parents (their biological parents), so they were raised and act differently….I just don’t know how to act [if in company of Asians].” Will was able to find his birth mother, but as mentioned earlier, she refused to meet with him, further exasperating his feelings of rejection from his birth family and culture. He has coped by withdrawing from any feelings toward his birth culture and/or birth country. He feels disconnected, not knowing how to connect with a culture where his birth mother rejected him. Thus, his coping strategy was “just not thinking about it.”

Amy viewed her birth country as just a place where she were born and feels no particular connection or understanding of her birth culture. Therefore, similar to Will, she has dealt with it by totally disconnecting herself from thinking about her birth family and/or birth culture. Her thoughts toward her birth family and culture were of a place in a distant space, far removed from her day-to-day experience.
I always thought about my birth parents as biological parents, as more abstract—viewed them more in terms of science project rather than as real people. I never thought about the birth mother to have their own perspective on the issues, until going to KAAN [Korean Adult Adoptee Network Conference] and also talking about ethics about adoption. I just found it interesting [wanting to do more to find out about birth culture and adoption issues].

Carrie, on the other hand, had negative feelings of her birth culture, as discussed earlier, because she associated her birth culture as a source of abandonment, whereas both Susan and Will actively searched for their birth parents and birth history. Susan struggled with finding any information about her birth parents and hoped that finding her birth mother would also facilitate her finding her birth father.

**Sense of emptiness, lacking connection.** Participants expressed general feelings of emptiness and lacking connection with peers, family, and cultural group membership. Will stated that he felt something was missing in his life, his need in “finding out more information about my biological parents.” Having more information about his biological family and the opportunity to ask pertinent questions regarding why he was put up for adoption would facilitate his interest in his birth culture. Will felt a sense of disconnection from his birth family; therefore, he felt disconnected from his birth culture. This loss was profound for Will. Although he had difficulty evaluating the meaning of his adoption experience, he stated that knowing his birth connections would awaken interests previously unexplored and he added that he would want to help his birth family in any way he could. Another part missing for Will was having a direction in life. He stated, “I’m studying accounting right now, but it’s not going so well, not to my liking. [I chose accounting because] it was the first thing in the book.” Will viewed having a job as a life necessity rather than providing any meaning.
In contrast, Kris felt that what had been missing in her life was having more open communication with her family about racial/ethnic and adoption issues:

I feel like things [that are] missing is more conversations with my family now and being brave to ask things, and it’s normalized not to ask in my family. [In addition, having community connections.] I guess adoptive folks in the Asian community that has a radical perspective on life would be nice. I don’t know where to look for that, and I know I’m pretty happy here. So I’m not going to move someplace else right now, or maybe that’s not the priority—I think doing more exploration around my adoption, that feels pressing all the time. I’m not following up on that. It feels important—I think going to Korea and like figuring out how I want things to look in regards to my personal research could see that as something missing.

I want to be a whole person. I want to have whole experiences. I want to be able to talk about my life as wholeness, in particular around adoption—not even to figure it all out or do just a little bit more in terms of getting to a different place, finding out more information. I can see that as missing [in my life].

In regard to the notion of connections, Dan felt it was about having shared experiences with other adoptees,

To know that there are other [people] out there in similar situations—they might not have the exact same experiences, but you have a network of people your age that you can talk to. If any one of those [adoptees] have racial- or adoption-type issues, they have someone to talk about those issues with. I told them [other young adoptees at Heritage camp] that it would have been really neat to have had [connections with other adoptees] when I was growing up—and I think the camp itself is a good idea.

Having a network of other people who might share that common bond; you have—it’s good to have that bond with someone—someone you can relate to. They may or may not be going through similar emotions but can at least relate to you. It’s just comforting to know.

An additional layer of feelings of disconnection came from strangers’ questioning participants’ membership in the family. Tom reflected on how his adoptive status changed as he became an adult:

I think when you see children with their parents who are of different race, then you know they are adopted or from a previous marriage. But when you’re an adult, even now, we go into a restaurant, the host or hostess will assume that we’re not together. It’s not anything traumatic or anything like that, but it’s kind
of funny, really, to see that—just to see that, and it’s kind of—the assumptions people make.

**Journey of Self-Discovery**

The third major theme uncovered in this study was the participants’ process of engaging in a purposive journey of self-discovery. This study revealed that a majority of the participants engaged in self-reflection as a result of their racialization and adoption experience. They began to question their status, because they were constantly challenged on their stated identities. As a consequence, they began to question their place in the world and how they fit into the social system.

Part of that journey involved making sense of life experiences and making connections with communities and people that shared similar experiences and ideologies. Also, the journey involved moving away from the communities in which they grew up and creating a network of social support. Some participants conducted research about the adoptee experience, took courses in ethnic studies, and learned about the Asian American experience while in college. Several participants chose to actively search for birth connections and/or sought out cultural connections. This process helped to define their self-concept.

**In search of self.** Participants were compelled to search their sense of identity as result of their racialization and adoption experience. Carrie’s sense of identity came into question from relentless teasing and taunting by peers, leading her to a self-revelatory mode:

I knew I was Korean, and I knew I was American; and then people started saying stuff. It created a lot of confusion for me….From the age of 12 to 24, I had this identity crisis, “Who am I,” and searching and going from thinking completely that I was White to I wanted to be Korean so bad.
Like most of the adoptees in the study, Carrie explored her identity as a racialized person and as an adoptee while in college:

I remember writing a paper about transracial adoptee children and their identity crisis. I felt better then I studied multicultural and ethnic studies for sociology – a lot of studies we did was about me trying to figure [out how to] live in this country and writing papers about Asian American history in general and being part of Asian American community helped me define that I am Asian American. [I understood] that my group has been here for a long time and we have a rich history of our own – so that helped me to define my Asian American identity which is very different than my Korean adoptee identity.

Unlike Carrie, Kim had no connection to Korea as a child, because she had no concept of what Korea was or what that meant. She explained,

[When I was a child], I think I had a book—maybe a travel book about Korea; but that was the extent of it. So for me, it wasn’t really about being Korean. I didn’t necessarily identify with Korea. I didn’t know what that meant. I didn’t know anything about Korea. [As] I got older and I guess [I] started questioning, you know, my identity, today I am more drawn to Asian-related stuff. Those are my taste, not just in food wise, but in my house I have a lot of Asian stuff—in my apartment I have lots of Asian stuff, because that’s what I like.

Similar to Carrie, Kim also did research about her racial and ethnic identity due to feeling like she did not fit into her social environment:

I had a kind of “coming out” in my 30s. I had become pretty radical in my attitudes as far as politics and women’s rights and gay rights. I went back to school in my late 30s, but I just became more aware as a result of that stuff [racialization experience] over the years about my identity stuff. I was drawn to sociology courses—race was a really big issue for me. I finally had the vocabulary to finally get all these feelings out.

Kris’ sense of being was connected to her racial identity and trying to figure out how to define her sense of self that spoke to her experience. She explained how the college environment provided her the space to explore those issues:
Figuring out my racial identity really came from other people pointing out why you don’t fit into things, and I think the challenges for me is when my dad is not talking about race at all with me.

I think the challenges around racial identity and trying to figure that out is something still exists for me. How do you explain yourself? How do you explain stuff that feels accurate? That speaks to your family structure and your experiences. I don’t want to claim something that’s not mine. [How can someone say,] “You’re more Asian than me” or different levels of validity.

I definitely felt that, sometimes too; it’s awful and hard, and I’m really hard on myself: “Well that’s just the way it is,” and my experience is my experience— that’s fine, and I’m comfortable with that—whoever is putting that expectation on me.

I don’t think the challenges will ever end. And I don’t think it’s uncommon either that people who have access to college education, that’s the time when lots of people say “Let me explore my identity.” People get real selfish in thinking about who they are, which is important.

Amy initially became shocked and numb after the racial incident that she experienced on her college campus. When she realized what had happened, she began to understand the implication that she truly was not White and that she was seen as an outsider. This realization led Amy into a depression where she became debilitated, barely able to complete her courses. Eventually Amy became angry and turned her energies to taking action. She started doing her own research on the Asian American experience and began speaking out on her campus. In her words,

It was at this point that I started to identify myself as Asian American. It wasn’t until that point that I got that I wasn’t White.

[After the racial incident], at first, I was in shock. I didn’t know what to think, and I was kind of numb. And then, after awhile, after I talked to [my friend], and the more I started to understand it myself, I got angry and then depressed.

Amy’s main focus at this point is in discovering her racial identity. The racial incident on campus was the impetus that began her journey of searching for her sense of self. She explained how she tries to make sense of her experience:
I think a lot of it is racial identity, and some of it is just with my generation of adoptees: We grew up in this White culture, and we identify with that. But we also gave these racial experience, define us and separates us off. So it’s how we work through that kind of tension, and for me, that’s the biggest issue. For me, it’s racial identity or self-identity and finding a voice for that or like sexual identity, feminism, and as an Asian American woman—that kind of stuff. But the thing I focus on the most is racial identity. I immersed in doing my own research in Asian American studies [which was not part of the college’s curriculum].

This racial incident on campus was a turning point for Amy, who prior to that time, had no interest in associating herself with Asian Americans. Prior to that point, she always saw herself as White.

Tom was able to connect to other Asian groups through professional affiliations:

[I know that] I’m definitely Asian—I’m Korean. I have several Korean attorney friends who are in the Korean American Bar Association of Washington, and several of them are adopted Koreans ….It has been an affirming experience to be around other attorneys who also share same kind of cultural experience, and they have a wide variety of adoptive experiences.

Part of Susan’s journey was to understand the context of her adoption in order to assess meaning of self, and part of that was doing a birth history search:

I think a big part of me [was] trying to figure who I want to be and what I want to do and who I want to associate with. Every year, it’s different. Last year, I decided that I wanted to do a birth-family search, and going to Korea was a huge part of how I wanted to identify myself. It was so foreign to me; I mean, I’ve been to other countries before: I’ve been to South America, I’ve been to Europe, but I haven’t been to Asia since I was born. It was such a culture shock, but it was so cool too, even though it was such a shock. And it was so different than everything I knew, but there was something so familiar about it too. It was very strange.

[My childhood identity was shaped by] my parents growing up. Meeting new people and hearing different perspectives, that’s something that’s good, and I didn’t have that when I was growing up.

For Dan, finding adoption papers when he was 17 years old had a profound impact on his sense of self:

I guess when I found those papers [adoption] when I was younger, it got my motor running, because before that, I didn’t know anything about [myself].
guess what those papers did was, it brought me back to life, like I actually don’t know anything [about myself]. I mean, when you’re at that age, you’re going through a lot. It put my mind through a loop, and it’s a lot to deal with, I guess. [My understanding of self is] something that’s evolving as I meet more people, and I find out little things about myself as I learn more about the Filipino culture and finding more about the American culture just in general.

**Search for connections.** Part of the journey involved finding connection with birth family, birth culture, and finding shared experiences. In this regard, Dan explained,

The only documented stuff I have is my birth certificate. It has my mother’s name on it, and it says she has 4 or 5 kids before me. That’s all basically I know. They don’t know who the father is—that’s basically about it. I don’t know that much about the family itself; I just know her name. The curiosity [about the birth family] was there. I casually researched it.

However, Dan had a general fear of searching for his birth mother, because of all the unknowns attached to it:

I don’t need any type of emotional baggage or any thing that’s going to bog me down. I’m just trying to get back on track now. I don’t want to get my hopes up either way, because for the most part, she could be dead—might not be able to speak to me; she might not want to talk to me. I don’t want to put my hopes up either way. I also don’t want to close any doors. If an opportunity comes, I might jump on it, but I’m not going to drop everything to pursue that.

Nevertheless, Dan believed that finding biological connections would have special meaning for him:

It would [mean having] a connection with someone I haven’t had. I guess it would be important; it would be special to me, you know, like if I ever have a child, that biological connection is something I’ve never had—just a special connection that I could have with someone. It hasn’t happened yet, so I don’t know what it’s like. So, I think it would be a special connection, and it would be meaningful for me. So…I don’t know how to explain it.

Susan had actively searched for birth mother and gone to Korea and inquired into her birth records. But she was met with frustrations, because the adoption agency in
Korea only released a few tidbits of information. She did not trust the adoption system in Korea. She described her experience as follows,

I went to Korea last summer. [My adoption agency] opened my file, and they wouldn’t show me a lot of it. But what I do know is that my birth mother was 23 when she had me; she worked in a hair salon, something like that—they didn’t really tell me very much. My biological father – I’m assuming that he was American. He was 28, he was dark skinned, and he was some type of engineer.

That’s all the information I have about my father in my file, but I don’t believe all the information on that file. According to that file, he doesn’t know that I was born or anything. I would really like to meet him as well [as my mother], but I don’t have any information about him, and I can’t find that until I find some of my Korean family. [They] might have knowledge of his name, something like that. I know they had a short 6-month relationship, but pretty much, that’s all I know about their relationship together.

It’s been frustrating. I contacted my adoption agency last year. So they were going to do the search, and I know they contacted the police station near where I was born. But the number my mom gave, which is like a social security number did not pan out. I was able to go see the doctor who delivered me, and she gave me information.

I had my birth mother’s name and the address of where she was living at the time, and the only reason that I know it’s her, because I remember my adoptive parents saying her name when I was young. It’s the same name that comes up in my birth records—basically a book that documents all births—everything is the same, but my adoption agency hasn’t gotten back to me, and it’s been awhile. I don’t know what their procedures are. They don’t really tell you [anything].

**Finding a place of acceptance.** Many of the participants searched out for places of belonging, whether it was a community of people, associating with other adoptees, or simply choosing to move away from where they grew up. Having connections means also finding shared experiences, whether it is with other adoptees or with politically and socially like-minded people. Susan felt part of gaining a sense of acceptance was achieved when,

I guess just growing up – I don’t know, as soon as I got out of that small town and moved into the city, and that was helpful. I just couldn’t stay in that town. I mean, it’s beautiful, and it’s home; but my friends don’t even live there, and I couldn’t even imagine living there.
Kim did not have any relationships with Asians as a child and had no concept of what it meant to be an Asian person; however, she stated,

In my 20s, I didn’t meet Korean people, but I met some Chinese people, and I was drawn to them. It didn’t matter what kind of Asian, whether Japanese or Chinese; just the fact that I felt really sort of curious and wanted to be friends—to know more about Asian culture.

Kim found her sense of emotional connection (that she never experienced before) when she had her son:

I had my son when I was 22. I was pretty young, and I think that was a turning point for sure. Other adoptees say the same thing, that when they have their kids it triggers a lot of stuff.

For Kris, connecting with communities that share similar experiences is an important component in finding meaning; however, she often feared the possibility of rejection and not being fully understood:

I think, when talking about identity stuff, I think about coming out as a Queer—it’s a process, you know; tell your family and tell your friends that whole thing. Being comfortable talking to people, that’s a whole process of coming out. I think about that, that being in relation to being adopted—that’s been consistently hard thing [for me]: “I’m telling you this, and that’s not your experience” [not a shared experience].

If I don’t want to talk to people [about my experiences] what does that mean? I get like scared, like “you’re going to think something about me [that you are going to make assumptions].” I get like fearful feelings, or I don’t know, maybe it’s a really big deal to me, but it’s not to someone else. It’s like, why do I even think about all this? [On the other hand], I feel pretty comfortable talking about being Queer and being a person of color. Those are the communities of people I really want to connect with. I think, talking about my adoption is hard. It’s also hard, because I don’t have a lot of information. Thinking about going to Korea and doing a birth mother search, it seems so big—can I handle it now?

When Kris attended the KAAN conference, she was able to connect with other adoptees:

It was the dialogue behind stuff that I was connected to, and I was excited about that. I remember thinking, this is the kind of stuff I want to think about. Thinking about things around abandonment, like those things — things that I wasn’t talking
about with other people. I can talk to other people about those experiences and have context from my own experiences.

Carrie searched for communities where she felt most comfortable and had a sense of belonging. When Carrie was dating, she felt most comfortable dating Asian Americans, except Koreans:

[Because] they didn’t expect me to speak Korean; but I was part of their group, because I was Asian, and there was no issue of me being adopted or being an orphan. They just saw me as Asian. Even with other racial groups, there was stereotypes; but it wasn’t so bad, because we were all ethnic [and racial minorities]. I may [have been] more patient [with other ethnic groups], because I understand that person is not a person of majority.

Part of Carrie’s search led to adoptee support groups and becoming an active member in the Korean adoptee groups around Colorado. In addition, she consciously chose to live in an ethnically and economically diverse part of Denver, Colorado. She gave this explanation of her choice:

I don’t want my kids to be around only White kids or only around Korean kids—they are surrounded by lots of different cultures; [my kids] feel special. They can look at other children as unique and special is the norm, whereas if you went more to the South or North, you stick out like a sore thumb.

Although Tom had only a White cultural experience growing up, he currently feels a sense of belonging with professional Asian group associations due to shared racialization experience. Tom reflected,

I don’t feel like an outsider in groups of Asians, even though culturally I identify myself as White; because people look like me, and when you’re around White lawyers—lawyers tend to ask a lot of questions, and inevitably, they’re going to ask where you’re from and get into that.

On the other hand, Dan found connection with people, based on shared interests:

[I associate with] people with same interests as me—it’s not about race. I like music stuff, like that; so people who like music and people [who] like cartoons, stuff like that. I live in Boston, started hanging out with more Asian people, in
general, because there’s more than where I grew up. There is some kind of connection there when I talk about, like they understand, they can relate a little bit, but like I said, I don’t discriminate against anyone about making friends.

With my friends, I feel very comfortable. I’m pretty sure my friends will be my friends, regardless of what I was, because I think our personalities have made us friends—my family has been always been accepting; I guess part of me feels like a black sheep, like figuratively and literally, but they’re accepting, [and] I don’t feel out of place. Like I said, I feel more comfortable with my friends.

Dan also found acceptance, based on his broad definition of American society.

Dan viewed America in the following way:

It’s just a multi-nation—like there’s not one definitive thing you can say about it except that it is a mix, and that there’s a lot of different people from a lot of different backgrounds. Like you can’t define it by generalities, for the most part. What I think of it is a bunch of different cultures coming together.

Although Kim initially had negative encounters with Korean Americans she had encountered in the past, she has more recently found comfort and a place of belonging through her Buddhist center:

I started going to the Korean Buddhist center last year….I met some people through that. It’s really neat: I have couple of older Korean friends—women—that I call my Korean mothers. They kind of embraced me, and I think a lot of us [adoptees] don’t have older Asian role models.

The neat thing about these older ladies, they just sort of accept me….It feels really good; I don’t feel like they judge me, whereas the younger Korean people I meet, sometimes—I was talking to another Korean co-worker yesterday—you hear this a lot with 2nd generation Koreans—they don’t fit into either world; they’re not seen as White or Korean. So there’s a lot of judgment, and I know there’s a lot of social and cultural stuff with Korean people that I don’t understand.

Kris moved to the Denver area a few years ago and found connections in her new community environment:

Denver is pretty small, but I think I have an awesome community of Queer community of color, and that’s a bottom line for me now. I’m really focused on finding—I think it would be awesome to be with Korean Queer adoptee folks, but I don’t think that’s really here, so I’m not actively searching for that.
As well as having a community of people with shared experiences, having a space to share her experiences with diverse group of people is important for Kris:

I know other folks of color are really different from each other, but there are things that overlap. I think while it’s important to have this really tight connection with really specific stuff, but there are things that overlap about our experiences in the world that—like things around media images or looking for a place—that overlap. So, I have gotten that from folks who are not necessarily Asian or Korean.

I feel also that people with complicated identities, like all Queer people aren’t White, but if we want to make a movement like social movement. We can’t all be isolated from each other. I think about that when I think about liberation—it doesn’t do us any good to be so compartmentalized—all those things are important and validating.

On the other hand, Amy described the “White college” she attended:

[The] majority is White or it has a mentality of Whiteness. It’s one of the oldest schools in the country, so it’s got this institution behind it. My school is very focused on race being a Black and White issue, and there was no room at the time for what happened to my friend and I [on campus].

Amy felt lack of support from her college administrators, her family, and her peers on campus, and even her former friends from high school who had called her a “victim.” Nevertheless, she was able to find an outlet to express her feelings about what she had gone through and subsequently found new purpose and connection with her new-found identity:

I did write a lot about my process of coming to identify myself as Asian American on my blog…This may sound stupid, but when I got to college, I had this idea that I would never do Asian studies or join Asian Student Association or do any of that stereotypical stuff…. [Then when the incident on campus happened], it was a struggle on every front here on my campus [due to lack of support], and that gave me leadership tools and voice that I wouldn’t have had anywhere else.

Amy added that her friendships have changed,

I’m not friends with very many people [that I used to be with friends couple of years ago]. I used to think it was because of race with my new-found racial identity, but looking back, I think I’ve always moved on. I think my friends now
are pretty much my reflection of where I would stay. There are a lot more politically minded and a lot of them are Asian American; and they have the tool that I look for, and they have the worldview. The people I kept in touch with, my parents, are those who have learned those tools too.

Similar to some of the other participants, Amy attended a couple of the Korean Adult Adoptee Network (KAAN) conferences and joined on-line adoptee support groups.

**Identity as an adult.** Many of the participants’ self-identity changed as they gained new insight into their racialization experiences. However more often than not, participants’ identity was based on their life experience, including their adoptee status.

Participant Tom described his identity in this way:

I identify myself as Korean, but culturally I’m very Caucasian and Pacific Northwestern. [I’m] definitely very Westernized.

People have all these expectations and assumptions of how you grew up. The usual assumption is you’re Asian, and you have Asian parents, Asian customs and cultural traditions, and things like that; and I think they’re kind of surprised, and now [I like] to challenge people’s assumptions and see the processes they go through as they find that you’re adopted and your heritage is similar to theirs.

[I think if I was filling out demographic form], I usually check Asian, if it breaks it down like that; but if it asks your identity, I want to say that I usually mark Asian American because it’s not 100% accurate, but it’s as accurate as you’re gonna get with respect to who I am. It comes as close to a description of who I am as an identity and sort of that duality [Asian heritage, White cultural identity].

Participant Will continues to see himself as White, because “I didn’t really have Korean culture in my and my sister lives—my parents didn’t really bring in [Korean culture in the home].” According to Will, the reason he identifies as White is because “I do everything that my parents had taught me how to do—how to do business—manners, ethics, morals.” All the values of his parents who are White are adapted into Will’s identity. When asked if he ever explored his birth culture identity, he responded, “[I] just don’t think about it. [It’s probably] someplace and just nothing has triggered it yet.”
Carries’ identity is also based on where she feels most like she fit in. She defined her identity in this way:

I’m a Korean adoptee. I prefer Korean adoptee or Asian American, and I don’t want to be [be referred to as] a Korean American. When people ask me, “What is your heritage,” I tell them that I’m a Korean adoptee. [I tell them that] I was born in Korea but adopted by a White couple in America—to give them an idea, [so they do not try] to stereotype me. I also feel very comfortable as Asian American, [because] within the Asian American culture, there is so much diversity, and I feel like I fit in.

I’m not that comfortable telling people that I’m Korean. People want to know why I look the way I do; they’re very curious about my heritage….The thing is, if I tell them that I’m Korean, then they’ll misunderstand me, and I don’t want to be misunderstood. I tell strangers all the time that I’m a Korean adoptee….I feel like I tell my story all the time, so people know who I am….Yeah, I let people know, right off the bat.

For Amy, her sense of identity did not come into question until the racial incident on her campus during her second year in college.

I still don’t identify myself as Korean American. I identify myself as Korean adoptee or Asian American. I think I would be more comfortable as Korean American if I had more connection with the Korean culture. I just don’t know that much about it, even now.

My identity now is more along the lines of Korean adoptee and Asian American identity. I still disassociate from Korea as my birth country and home country. My sophomore year in college, which was 2005, is when I first identified myself as Asian American, and it was about a year or two later, in 2007, when I started identifying myself as a Korean adoptee.

Dan’s adult identity has not changed from his childhood identity. His self-definition stems from a life context rather than social context: “I’m Filipino, I was adopted, I grew up in America…. I’m not that in tune with my ethnic part of my background, but I acknowledge it, and I try to learn more about it as I can.”

Kim, at the age of 46, is still trying to figure out her identity: “I don’t really like [the] word American. I don’t use that word. I refer to myself as just Asian, not Asian American.”
Part of Kim’s identity is around her sexuality:

When I was 30, I discovered women. I left my husband for a woman, and I was with her for 10 years.

I think sexuality in the gay community, it’s about who you sleep with; but for me, it was more a political thing—I was so fed up with how men treated me and looked at me. It was like giving a finger to men. Ironically, my girlfriend turned out to be very masculine and controlling; she was the breadwinner. I ended up leaving the relationship, because I couldn’t be in such an unequal partnership.

I identify myself as bisexual. I haven’t had another long-term relationship with a woman. I date men now, and I don’t know where I’ll end up or who I end up with—it’s more about the person, not about the sex. I actually met other adoptees who had similar experiences. I think it is the result of how Asian women are sexualized.

I think, for me, it was a way of acting out. You know, rejecting that whole male/female role—you know, I hate gender roles.

For Kris, too, her sexual identity is a salient part of her identity, as well as her racial identity:

I identify as Queer; I identify as a person of color. I identify more specifically as Korean and also a family as Japanese but as a quick thing, if someone asked me, I identify myself as Queer and as a person of color.

I use the word Queer, and I know not everybody use the word Queer, but I use it because I never identified as a lesbian or like gay. Queer always felt comfortable to me, because I was really involved in the Queer community, even when I wasn’t owning that’s what felt right for me, so after college, I guess around 22ish – [I came out] to my close friends and my family.

Susan maintains her identity by taking ownership of all parts of self, despite how others have identified her in the past.

I’m biracial, Black and Korean, not half Black or half Korean, but both. I’ve definitely always saw myself as Black. That’s because that’s how other people perceived me, but once I got into college, I met some Korean people, Korean Americans, and Korean Koreans. I got more curious about being Korean. I mean, I always knew I was biracial; and checking the box on any forms, I couldn’t check more than one box, so I always checked Black and that’s because that’s how its perceived, and that’s how I perceived myself. But now, I definitely feel I’m both, and I don’t like to think half of anything, even though technically, it might be true. I definitely feel I’m Black and Korean.

Well, I mean it is what it is. I can’t deny that I’m Korean, nor do I want to; but maintaining that part of my identity, I don’t do a lot of Korean things, I don’t
go to Korean church, I don’t know, but I do try to do small things. I try to make Korean food once in awhile, and I do have a lot of friends who are Koreans or Korean Americans, and I like to hear their stories, because most of them have some connection to Korea. I feel like my experience is so disconnected [from Korea], so it doesn’t feel real to me. [But] hearing about their experiences is at least real. I don’t know if you’re an adoptee and brought up in White culture, then you don’t have that, unless you were immersed in that as a child. I don’t have a lot in common with Koreans….There is definitely a disconnect there.

**Meaning of identity/self-acceptance.** None of the Korean adoptees felt comfortable identifying themselves as Korean American, but rather as Korean adoptee or Asian American. Claiming themselves as Korean American seemed false. Amy explained it in this way:

To me, it means that someone has a relationship to the Korean aspect of [her/his] culture and [considers] themselves as Korean, and I just don’t. I have no emotional connection or understanding of Korea, or of Korean culture. So it doesn’t make any sense to embrace Korean American as my identity. When I went to the KAAN conference, a psychologist there said that “if your family identifies as a Korean American family…” But my family lived experiences had nothing to do with Korean America at all. It’s not part of my life, and it never was, [and] I don’t feel right saying I’m Korean American.

Kim added that she was not always accepted by Korean Americans, and often she would be openly criticized for not knowing the language or culture, implying that she was not Korean enough. Those criticisms were once heartfelt, but Kim explained how this has changed:

I can be whatever I want. That was the really liberating thing about going to Korea was [being able to accept who I am]. “Yeah, I’m not going to be Korean,” quote unquote, whatever that is.

I’m just going to be who I am and take a little bit of [what I can from the culture]. I have the right to do what I want to do—[if that means that] I want to go to Korea for a year and teach English for a year, then I’ll do it. [I have] this [sense of] freedom, like nobody has the right to tell you who you are. I just don’t have any patience for people trying to put you in a little box—you know, being judged on just your outer appearance.

I’m 46 now—I think it’s part of getting older—I don’t care so much about being accepted [by other people]….This is who I am. I mean, it still matters.
sometimes when you get comments or looks, it pisses me off, but its not as same
when I was younger. I have a more of a sense of who I am. You know, you get to
a certain point, and you say, “Screw it—I don’t care what people think,” just that
freedom to do whatever you want to do.

Dan talked about his process of self-identity as an adult as follows:

[I feel] comfortable about myself—I think it’s true for everyone, you’re always
learning about who you are as you get older—so yeah, I feel like I’m always
learning, and I’m accepting about who I am and where I came from. [My adoption
experience], it’s part of me.

For Kris, her self-acceptance is an ongoing process:

I think [figuring out your identity], that’s ongoing. There are points where I think
I figured it all out, and then there are times when I feel like I haven’t figured
anything out. [At times, I feel] very lost, I guess. I think when you figure out stuff
about your identity, you become vulnerable to all these feelings, and feeling like
confused and lost and needing to reach out to others who had more experiences
and being frustrated if you can’t do that. Those things are like what seems big and
scary—not interested in being totally disassociated.

I think when I was at the camp [heritage camp], people were openly
talking about their adoption experiences; so I feel comforted being in that space. I
feel like that’s something I haven’t done. I’ve been concentrating more on being
in these other communities [Queer and communities of color] that I feel
comfortable in. Like when you feel this marginalization in the world, you kind of
[need to] have somebody having exact experiences as you. Not only understand
being adopted, but being part of community of color or being Queer; and all those
feel real crucial to [survival].

I feel like going to the conference [KAAN] was right in my face, but in a
good way: People were talking about their identity and how it impacts them;
people are doing research and finding things from their past, and I think that’s
really empowering, and that’s really cool. But I’m thinking, is it too late [for me?]
But of course, it’s not too late to do stuff; but I felt like [maybe it was too late] to
connect with a birth parent.

Carrie attributed her gaining self-acceptance to maturity:

Coming into my thirties, becoming a mom—gaining self-esteem, self-confidence
that I never had before—this is me I don’t let other people define me anymore.
The maturity and becoming a mom, you become consumed in this little world; the
outside world doesn’t matter as much. I don’t know—I feel good.
Contrary to others’ experience, Will’s only question regarding his identity came from being adopted—gaining insight into why he was put for adoption in order to provide some meaning—this seemed the most salient point for him.

**Self-Awareness, Empowerment, and Acceptance**

The fourth and final major theme is awareness and understanding, finding power in self-determination and finding voice, and finally, accepting life experiences as part of life’s journey. The participants examined how their relationships with family and friends were affected by their racialization experiences. Consequences of the participants’ life experience invariably changed their relationship with their parents, siblings, and childhood friends.

**Family and peer relationships.** The majority of participants reported that they had a fairly secure upbringing in a seemingly good neighborhood, with good schools, and so on. However, relationships changed, because participants were able to place meaning on their life experiences.

Kim’s relationship with her family was strained, and she reported being emotionally distant from her family:

I talk to most of them, but I don’t share much of my life with them, when I talked to my mom—my dad passed away in 2008. I talk to my mom, and I visit her, but I don’t share [my life with her].

I’m always guarded. There are things I don’t tell her, because she would never understand. It’s just not worth it, so we talk about cooking and day-to-day stuff; but I don’t share my deep feelings, because growing up, that was one of the things she was very critical and negative.

I’m at a point that I don’t need that. She’s my mother, and I love her. It would be sad when she passes away, but she’s just not an important person in my life—[not] a support person I guess.
Amy’s awareness of her father’s reaction to racialization was illustrated in the following passage:

He’s just a basically a White guy. His grandmother was some kind of Native American, but he doesn’t know what and was not interested in it, and he looks more Indian than some people. I think he can relate to being called out on a physical level, but he got the White privilege; he’s considered a White guy, and that’s how he’s grown up. He can relate to it [racial issues] on a Black and White level.

Amy described how her relationship with her best friend from high school changed as result her racialization experience on her college campus:

She [my friend] felt anytime I said White or Asian or Asian American, like I was separating us, and that I was being racist, so it caused a lot of tension, and we’re not friends anymore.

Susan’s relationship with her parents also changed as she got older and moved out of the small town where she had grown up:

It wasn’t until I was older that I felt out of place with my family. Now I feel like “Oh Wow! I’m really different from them,” just the way I think and politically, just a lot of differences. I don’t know if its nature versus nurture thing, but I do have a lot of independent spirit anyways, so it could be either.

[Currently], I live a block away from my parents. They moved to Seattle too, and I like that. They’re not super imposing, although my mom tries to be. But you know, they give us space and everything. I think, currently, our relationship is good not great. Clearly, there are things we don’t talk about, and I don’t know if we ever will.

When I was telling them that I was going to Korea, my mom started crying; like I said, she gets defensive, so I expected that but she was okay with that and my dad was really quiet and he was okay with it too, they gave me almost all the adoption papers they had. [But] they didn’t give me my Korean passport. I think they were told, at some point, that this may happen [searching birth roots], but they never expected it from me. I think they expected it from my little brother; but when I came back, they didn’t really want to talk about it. They asked me if I found my birth mother, and I said, no, and that was pretty much it. They didn’t want to talk about the trip. They didn’t want to talk about anything, so I think there’s definitely things we don’t talk about.
Although Susan did not feel she could turn to her parents for support when she was younger, she identified that her support came from “definitely my younger brother [who was my support system and the support system for each other], because he could relate, [but] I think he had a harder time than I did.”

Tom had two younger siblings, also adopted from Korea, who were his primary support system. He recalled when incidents of teasing occurred during his childhood, he went to talk to his siblings for support rather than going to his parents:

I’m really lucky to have my brother and sisters. None of us are blood related, but we’re very, very close, and we talked about these things [racial issues] time to time. I’ve definitely been lucky to have them, because they sort of really understand me.

On the other hand, Kim’s relationship with her siblings has always been strained from not feeling like a full member of the family and having a lot of responsibility taking care of her younger siblings while her mother went back to school.

**Feelings toward adoptive parents – What could have been done differently.**

All the participants reported having close relationships with their adoptive family growing up. However, most felt that their adoptive parents were unable to empathize with their racialization experiences due to cultural differences. Some participants felt their relationship with their parents became distant as the participants came into adulthood and were able to make sense of their experiences. Whereas many participants were understanding of their parents’ decisions, they expressed what could have been done differently in order to make their growing-up experience easier. Carrie, who was a proponent of IA/TRA adoptions, contended,

Living in more diverse neighborhood [would have been helpful], [and it is harmful] when parents are in denial [of what] children go through [growing up]
isolated—important for parents to stay resourceful…. White parents can sympathize [with TRA adoptees’ pain], but they don’t [fully] understand.

Tom and Amy expressed that having more contact with other adoptees, in addition to living in more diverse communities, would have been helpful. Many of the participants expressed their parents’ inability to discuss racial issues and prepare them, as children, for what they might potentially face in the wider society. This left them ill-equipped as adults to deal with societal bigotry. As Susan explained,

I don’t know how it impacted me, but I would choose to be in a place that was diverse in culture, religion, people, diversity of thought, because I think it makes for more a wholesome environment. If I had kids, my children would be of mixed heritage. I would want them to meet people who looked like them, talked like them. I think all people have some complaints about their parents, but I think my parents have failed on this [diversity issue], not having the forethought to bring the cultural influence of me or my brother.

Susan added some thoughts about her disappointment in her parents’ lack of preparedness for adopting TRA children:

When it comes to discussing racism or hair, I don’t think they [my parents] knew how to cope with that. I don’t know, maybe when I was adopted, the adoption agencies weren’t very good at preparing parents for these situations, and I don’t know what they do today. Honestly, I’m hoping its better than back then, but I don’t think they were totally prepared for the impact of what communities you live in makes a difference in who you talk to. Things you say can make a difference.

Susan wished her parents had been proactive in engaging in cultural activities:

I think the community where you raise children is very important. I would have wished that I had some Korean classes, would have loved to have been able to read a sign in Korean, say something other than hello. I would have loved that. I don’t know, if I would have loved going to Korean school every weekend when I was growing up but it's one of those things that you just do. I hadn’t had Korean food until couple of years ago, except for the bite of kimchi when I was a kid. Honestly, it would not have been hard for them to drive 30 minutes to a Korean restaurant, but I don’t think the thought ever even occurred to them.
I don’t know if [exposure to Korean culture] would have made my childhood better, but it’s part of my culture, and I don’t think they even thought about it. My parents generally gave me everything I needed, almost everything I wanted. I was totally spoiled. In that regards, I was totally cared for, but when it came to cultural aspects, explaining to your child what to do when you’re discriminated against, whatever, I don’t think they had a clue.

Amy perceived that having lacked any relevant Korean cultural experiences as a child had damaging psychological consequences for her as an adult. In Amy’s opinion, her parents should have incorporated cultural activities in the home throughout her childhood:

I think if my parents were more proactive about me being a Korean American, Korean adoptee, and Asian American as they were about me being adopted, I would have been able to handle it [racism] much better, and it wouldn’t have been as debilitating.

I wouldn’t have been so self-threatening. That experience started to break down who I was and everything I believed in, but it wasn’t until junior seminar that it completely demolished. I feel like had I been as prepared as an Asian American as I was about being adopted that it wouldn’t have been such a blow to my sense of being. Basically, if you looked at the students who felt their entire sense of identity was destroyed and their life became shambles in junior seminar class, it was another Korean adoptee, me, as a Korean adoptee and a biracial student who had grown up identifying as White American. People who were not prepared for this material felt like their lives were destroyed by it, compared to my friend who is Filipina American who grew up with Filipino family but grew up in White culture—[it wasn’t so intense for her].

Part of Kim’s life experience included chaos in the home life:

[I would have wished for] more stable home life for sure. You know, economically it could have been better, and I don’t know how they could gotten the tools, the knowledge to instill some kind of racial pride. Just if they were more aware, but in those days, people weren’t aware; they didn’t talk about it. Even today, people don’t talk about race. They just don’t think it [racism] exist. They just try to gross over it, the racial tension we have in the US and other places, you know.

**Partner choice.** Some women participants made their partner choices based on their racialization experience. For instance, Carrie stated, “When I was dating, I wouldn’t
date Korean or White guys. I dated everyone in between. Those two are the basic groups that I did not want to date or marry.” Carrie explained her reason for not dating Korean men: “We don’t want to deal with rejection. There was a chance that Korean parents would not let their children marry [an] adoptee, because we’re not good enough for their children, [because] Koreans think we’re not fully Korean.” Despite Carrie’s initial refusal in dating Korean men, she did marry a Korean American man:

I think that at an unconscious level that within me that I can’t deny the fact that I’m Korean, that something inside me craves that balance between Korean and American….I would have married [my husband] no matter what he was.

For Kim, relationship was more about finding emotional connection than a sexual connection. She was drawn to those she felt were political and social allies:

After I left my girlfriend, I dated a couple of Black men. I think I was drawn to them because of the race thing….Still, to this day, I’m friends with both of them. I’m very drawn to Black people. I don’t know if it’s identifying with racial oppression; but with them, it was that whole social and [political] education, [also about social and political connection].

[I had] pretty negative [feelings] towards White people. I tended to date, well, I dated some Black guys, but the older White guys that I’ve dated just like, Ugh! just gave me the creeps. You know, it doesn’t matter how liberal they are or how open-minded they think they are—still have all these notions about Asian women. So I don’t know, I just get irritated.

**Sense of awareness.** Participants developed sense of awareness as they came place meaning to their racialization and adoption experience. Carrie understood her racialization experience as an Asian American in the United States:

I think it’s so disrespectful how we are all categorized. I can’t stand it when Koreans call Whites, Americans. People around the world associate White as Americans—as true Americans.

I think we’re all Americans, except we’re all hyphenated [like] Asian Americans, Black Americans, Hispanic Americans, except Whites [who are] known just as Americans on it’s own. That’s why I like to refer to them as White Americans, and I don’t like putting them on this [racial] pedestal.
When Carrie encounters racism now, she handles the situations differently than before:

Now I turned more into a smart aleck….Now I hear it and yeah, that’s who you are and just walk away, whereas as a young girl, I just didn’t have much self-esteem [or] equipped [to deal with racism]. So yeah, it would hurt me—it would break me.

Kim came to realize how she had internalized her racialization experiences as a normal part of her existence. She came to realize the social conditions that contributed to her adoption:

It’s funny how you adopt that [negative images of Asians]. You don’t realize it, but it becomes part of your thinking, without even knowing. The most gratifying and meaningful is meeting other adoptees, especially the female adoptees, and being able to share those feelings. That’s therapy—knowing that other people have those same feelings is like, Wow!

[Going to Korea] was an eye opening experience—seeing first hand the social situations. I knew growing up about the war and economic situations and about the single mothers having to give up their kids, but then you see the social workers there. How they withheld information; there were [all these adoptees who were] really angry. You know, there’s more [information] about the family—there’s information that we could never know because of all that social stuff. You know, it wasn’t our mother’s choice to give us up. No mother will give up their children. It wasn’t a choice; it wasn’t voluntary.

For Tom, the sense of political and social awareness in part came from his profession as an attorney. In addition he stated,

I think just reading about it and talking to friends, meeting people, meeting other Korean American adoptees and getting to know other Asians of all sorts in my professional and personal life.

After the racial incident on campus, Amy began to remember other incidents of racialization that she had previously dismissed as insignificant:

It was at this time that [my friend] and I started remembering stuff, like I remember the Chinese girl comment, the slanted eye stuff, and when I was in high school and I was applying to colleges, this one kid said, “Oh, you shouldn’t have any problems getting in because of affirmative action.” I just laughed it off at the time. When I repeated the joke to my best friend at the time, the one who called me the victim said, “Oh, I don’t think of you as a minority.” I just looked at her
funny, but I didn’t really think about it until the junior seminar. Then I was remembering it. So [my friend] and I thought our lives had completely different context. I felt betrayed by my classroom and my college. It was really hard for me to finish [school]. In hindsight, I should have transferred, but I didn’t want to. But I think it would have been better if I had. I did finally finish last June.

As previously discussed after recovering from shock and numbness, Amy found her voice, her ability to speak out on campus about her experience:

I think what’s important to me is to get a stronger voice and getting stuff out there which is the best thing to do. The most people I’ve reached on campus is through my writings or lectures I’ve given. I think I can make the most impact for Asian American and Korean adoptees.

**Self-acceptance.** In this study, self-acceptance refers to the participants’ ability to reflect on life’s journey and find acceptance of self. Carrie recognized that her unique life experience has contributed to getting to a point in her life where she now accepts herself for who she is:

I spent my whole life trying to find who I am. I don’t go into denial about who I am, what I’m experiencing. I had to study about it, write papers about it; whereas my brothers will probably never explore. I tried to fit with different groups, but in the end, I only fit in with other adoptees…like I’m White but look Asian.

I get to decide who I am. I cannot deny that I am a Korean White American—that’s the culture I grew up….So in the end, it wasn’t about letting people claim me, because that’s what I wanted as much as I am claiming you both like whether you choose to choose me or not. I still belong to you, and you belong to me.

In the end, when I’m much older, I can accept the fact that I am who I am, because of what I feel inside, [rather than] what I look like outside. Now I can deal with what the world sees, but when I was young, what I looked like outside was hugely important for some reason.

Amy stated, “Now I have both the language and the emotional strength to respond [to racism] instead of just standing there [shocked].” Continuing with this thought, she explained,

I feel that Asian American exists because there are so many different cultures and experiences, so there has to be a pluralistic identity just like Native American. So
I think of it more as a sociocultural politics. For myself, I don’t feel as comfortable with Korean American identity.

I think now that I’m on the other side of it, I think it’s empowering, within Asian American studies, which is still relatively a new field; and within Asian American studies, Korean adoptees has not been a part of the studies. So I find it empowering personally to be able to be part to fill that void, to be that generation to fill that void and be part of that—the movement to expand what it means to be Asian American and what kind of experiences we have as Korean adoptees.

For Kris, accepting and owning her sexual identity helped her to accept herself:

I was around this LGBTQ community, but I didn’t say it [that I’m part that community], because “Oh my God, it’s going to be true,” like it’s going to confirm all these things we all knew, but once I got over that, I felt empowered.

**Thoughts about IA/TRA.** Participants expressed their feelings about IA/TRA practice. Tom had mixed feelings about IA/TRA, even though, for all intent and purposes, he described his childhood as a positive one:

I think it’s really important for parents who adopt children—if it’s Caucasian parents who adopt children of color or any parents adopting a child of other than their own—that I think it’s really important to acknowledge that the child is going to have this experience of growing up and maybe being teased, because they are a person of color.

Whatever specific country they were born in, and they are also going to have this cultural experience where their cultural heritage comes from the adoptive parents, I think that’s important for parents to realize and recognize.

I don’t know if I would have been open to going to Korean cultural camps when I was a kid, but now I think it would have been helpful.

I think it’s important for TRA adoptees to have access to wide variety of different cultures, not just their birth culture; but for any kid, it’s important to expose them to a wide variety of cultures, especially for TRA adoptees where you have this odd sense of duality—you’re physically Korean or African American or any number of other things—but culturally you’re whatever your adoptive parents are.

I’m not opposed to TRA/IA adoptions. I think they could be good. I think it definitely adds some responsibility for the adoptive parents.

Kim is against IA/TRA adoptions:

I wrote my senior paper on that. It’s not that great [TRA]. I have a lot of issues about that. It’s kind of like catch 22, like okay, you have all these orphan children
around the world, and if they could have a better life by coming here; but [when] they’re adopted by White parents…but look at the trade offs.

Certainly there are more groups and more awareness for parents adopting transracially, but still I don’t know. In fact, I tell people this story that if I’m in the store and I see White parents with little kids [TRA kids], I tell my other adoptee friends about this. I just have this visceral reaction, “God, those poor children.” I really get emotional. I think what are their lives going to like? What are their experiences going to be like? Are they [going to] grow up with a sense of themselves?

You know, in a sense, it’s the same crap, even though it’s a different year. They’re still going to go through all that. I guess I’m not gung ho about transracial adoption. I know people are doing their best, and my parents did their best. You know, I don’t fault my parents, because it was the time, and that’s just the way it was. But how do you combat all that?

How do you raise healthy children? I think it’s much too painful. And then there are other people who say it’s not an issue. They just go on with their lives. It’s not a big deal. Certainly the younger adoptees now have a sense of themselves.

The whole model minority deal, well you know, I wasn’t a model minority. I grew up working class and pretty poor; and you know, how people are pushed into getting a good education, get a good job. You know, I’m an administrative assistant. I’m not blaming my parents, but I wasn’t raised in that culture; you know, like excel, excel. You know, being the best, get the best grade, and you know, now the younger people being adopted are being adopted by people who are financially able to.

Kris also had mixed feelings about IA/TRA:

I had different feelings about it at different points. When I was really trying to think about adoption, I was like, “this is so inappropriate.” I’m so angry about a lot of things. It feels like it’s connected to capitalism, like the way it’s this industry that kids are being adopted into, [and] not reflective of [their] racial experience. And that’s so important, especially when you are trying to figure out your identity. [It feels like a common experience], especially when people are adopted aren’t [living] near a city or access to people that might look like them.

Also the families [that] are adopting is like middle- to upper-middle-class folks who can afford to [adopt and the implication] the cost of Asian kids, where does that lie compared to other kids of color? I think Asians in terms of race in the US is like, “You’re better than” or closer to assimilating, [compared] to African American folks [creating] that division.
Susan’s experience as a transracial and international adoptee left her feeling unprepared to be a parent. She stated that she personally could not adopt due to the lack of cultural exposure and parental support she received as a child:

Honestly, that’s why I don’t want to adopt, because I don’t think I can do it. I don’t know, I didn’t get that culture when I was young, so I don’t think I can provide it to them [children]. That’s not something I could provide as a parent. I don’t think I would even put myself in that place, whereas if I had my own kids, I can teach them a little bit about the Korean culture and little bit about the Black culture.

If I adopt transnationally, then I’m perpetuating the same thing—taking them from the country they were born and not teaching them about their culture. I can’t give them what I would want to give them. I don’t know if it’s because I was adopted or because I wasn’t brought up in Korean American culture.

When asked about her feelings regarding IA/TRA in general, Susan responded,

I don’t know, it really depends. When you think about Korea, and it goes back to I don’t understand the culture. It doesn’t sound like there’s a whole lot of domestic adoption going on. They’re trying to push for it now, but I don’t know why—sounds like it’s a taboo to have an adopted child whatever but, and I don’t get that.

I don’t know why the mothers can’t keep their kids—that might be the main issue. I can’t speak for other countries I don’t [know about] international adoption from other countries. I wish adoptions in the US, that race was a more of a factor for placement consideration, similar to how Native American [children] are placed.

When I went to Holt to look at the adoption records, I was with a group of other adoptees; and some of them had met their biological family and the records at Holt indicated that biological parents had died. That’s why the children were placed for adoption. I don’t know if the files were just lies—just not true [nothing to trust]. I don’t know who lied, but the whole thing seemed corrupt, and I don’t really like it. But I don’t know how to change it, because I don’t know how things are administered today.

Contrary to others’ opinions, Carrie was a proponent of IA/TRA practice:

I think it’s great….I talked to some of my adoptee friends who are against TRA adoption. They prefer domestic adoption and stayed in Korea, but I realized that they were adopted as babies. They don’t know what Korea is like, but I believe in transracial adoption. I believe that’s where world peace happens; mixing families/race is the key to world peace.
Appreciation for life experiences. Participants have come to appreciate their life experiences both positive and negative attributing to developing their personal strengths.

Although Kim had experienced difficulties and continued to struggle financially, she was appreciative of her life experiences:

I try to remind myself I do feel very grateful for what I have. Yeah, I [would] like to have a lot of money and be able to travel and be financially secure. But I also recognize that I have a lot more than a lot of people, and that’s what I think about a lot is people who have less—being much more poorer than I am. The fact that I have a roof over my head—I’m still holding on for dear life, [but] I think about how I’m very lucky. I had a really incredible life. I’ve had a lot of people who loved me and do love me.

Dan saw adoption as part of his life experience:

I think it’s an interesting part of a person’s history. When you grow older and meet people that have the same situation, it’s something to talk about and have that common. You have that common bond with people [other adoptees] like that, and it’s interesting. I feel like that you get both worlds: the culture you were raised on—you have people who raised you and family who don’t care where you came from, and then you meet new people from the culture that you were born from; [they] might want to teach you these things. For the most part, it’s interesting. I enjoy it for the most part.

[I] definitely [have] more questions, but for the most part, I feel it’s pretty positive [experience]. You can learn a lot from it. I can’t go from another experience, because this is the only [experience] I have. I learn a lot about myself by meeting other people and about adoption—like [meeting] all these different people you can relate to on these different levels.

Amy appreciated her experiences, even though the racial incident on campus was very difficult for her. In the end, she appreciated what she learned about herself:

I am glad that I had the experiences, being in the Midwest particularly; had I grown up in California, I wouldn’t have had the same kind of experience. Asian Americans in California are not as militant as other Asian Americans, even in New York, because they don’t know what it’s like not see people that looks like you or being stared at for being Asian and not being White when you go to a coffee shop or restaurant, and because Midwest is still so White. They don’t know how to interact with people of color.

I’m glad that I’m from the Midwest, because I wouldn’t care as much and I wouldn’t have the experience through the resistance and education that I have
now if I had gone to college in California or New York or some other place, because it was a struggle on every front here on my campus, and that gave me leadership tools and voice that I wouldn’t have anywhere else.

Carrie has come to appreciate all her unique cultural experiences, being able to incorporate all parts of her self:

My adoptee identity has become the biggest part of me. I have come to love being an adoptee—I am an Italian-Irish Korean American—even though I went through lot of crisis; but in the end, there is no one I rather be. Being an adoptee [has been a] blessing, and because I was older [when adopted], I know what life was like in Korea.

**Composite Summary of the Themes**

**Summary of developing self-perception.** A majority of the participants, except one, grew up in culturally and socially isolated environments, mostly White, in small towns or suburbs, where they were often the only person of color in their families and there were only a handful of people of color in their schools and communities. Consequently, they had limited access to racial and ethnic cultural activities and opportunities to socialize with other people of color. Many of the participants felt isolated as a consequence of living in socially isolated environments of predominantly White communities.

Another common theme among participants is that they lacked exposure to their birth culture growing up. In many cases, the adoptive parents often lacked resources or the foresight to connect adoptees to their birth culture. Often, the adoptive parents left the choice of participating in cultural activities to the adoptees. When asked, the adoptees often rejected participating in cultural activities for fear of being singled out as different from their peers. When they did engage in birth culture activities, it was limited to annual
events, such as cultural heritage camps or adoption agency-sponsored picnics and/or parties.

The most frequently cited reason for not participating in cultural activities was that the participants lived in communities that had limited access to such activities. However, one participant grew up in a culturally and economically diverse environment in Northern California, and the family still did not engage in any cultural activities. In cases where participants did engage in these activities, activities were seen as superficial; for example, participants made “pot stickers” or cut out pictures from magazines. Furthermore, no context was provided as to why they (participants) were engaging in these activities. Consequently the participants who did participate in these annual events were uncomfortable and felt out of place, further emphasizing their difference from their social peers. Often, those engaged in these “cultural activities” stopped attending these events when they were young (between 10 and 12 years of age). As mentioned earlier, continued attendance of these activities was left up to the participants, who protested attending these activities because it further focused on the differences with their peers. However, one participant took initiative and started exploring her cultural origins when she was 16 years old by attending cultural heritage camps, connecting with other adoptees, and attending Korean cultural events on a college campus. This may be due to her being adopted as an older child and her desire to re-connect with her birth culture.

It was common for participants to experience racially based teasing and taunting once they entered the public social environment, such as the school system. For some, this teasing and taunting represented a constant source of trauma, whereas for others, it was an isolated and insignificant incident. Most often, these incidents were from their
peers in schools, calling attention to differences between themselves and their peers. A majority of the participants did not turn to their parents for support, because they did not know what to say. Two participants indicated that they told their parents when racial incidents occurred in the school; however, only one participant’s parents were able to put a stop to the incident, due to living in a small town where the parents were prominent members of the community, which protected this participant from further teasing. Nevertheless, parents who knew about the racial teasing at school did not follow up with having discussions with their children. Two of the participants indicated that their parents and family members also racialized them. For instance, Susan’s parents wanted to make her and her younger brother feel “beautiful and exotic,” whereas Amy’s mother did not believe that Amy would suffer from racism due to the “positive” stereotype associated with Asians in general. Kris’ father, on the other hand, had first-hand knowledge of racialization as a Japanese American man in the United States, had difficulty dealing with it or even having a discussion with his daughter. He could only talk about race in an impersonal way; He had his own internalized conditioning of racism, based on he and his family having experienced the internment camp.

Generally, family discussions around differences were limited to talks about adoption, and all the participants had a clear understanding that they were adopted and no one seemed to have an issue with it, except Kim, who wondered if she indeed “fell out of the belly of the big bird.” When participants’ parents did discuss adoption, in particular regarding IA/TRA adoptions, parents often used books as the most common way to introduce adoption to their children. Parents did not discuss racialization issues with their children as a way of preparing them for what they could potentially face in public due to
their Asian appearance. When issues of race were brought up to the parents, the parents were often defensive and took it as questioning their parenting practices.

In most instances, participants had to negotiate and cope living in a racially hostile environment, without support from their families. In general, there was a disconnect between parents’ understanding of racism and their ability to teach their children versus what children faced/experienced from the wider community. Despite the inability to share these experiences, a majority of the participants reported having close-knit relationships with their family, except for one participant whose family struggled financially and lived in volatile family environment.

All the participants expressed that they wished their parents had been more proactive in encouraging cultural activities when they were children, because this may have facilitated their comfort level with their own cultural group. Many participants felt discomfort with their racial and ethnic affiliation and did not identify with their birth cultural group. Generally speaking, participants who had other family members who were also persons of color, such as another sibling, felt a sense of having a support system, which lessened their feelings of isolation due to the racially based teasing and taunting they received from their peers. They were able to share their pain with siblings who were also adopted, and the pain was more manageable. Some participants described feelings of isolation and sadness for not being able to share their pain and experiences with their parents and peers.

For the participants, the most common form of racialization as children was being called out on their physical appearance, and these remarks came from their peers, most often at school. However, as participants grew older, they described their racialization
experience as coming from the wider community. Their racialization experiences often included a connotation of their foreigner status (generally assigned to Asians in the United States) as well as the insinuation that the participants did not belong in American society.

The participants were constantly reminded of their difference from their family structure, peer relationships, and the community environment, including what they saw in the media. Media images of Asians had an impact on participants, both as children and as adults. Many of the participants coped with the media images by disassociating and distancing themselves from the general Asian group and denying membership in their racial and ethnic cultural group. The media images created division between themselves and membership in their racial group, because they lacked any concept of what belonging to such a group meant. Some participants indicated that the media images were confusing, because participants mirrored these reflections; however, their life experience was so different compared to the images portrayed. Some participants stated that they felt “ugly,” and it was “difficult to fit into standards” created in the media. Basically, the media images lacked a portrayal of the whole person, and often the participants’ inclination was to disassociate themselves from these images that did not reflect their life experience.

The combination of living in culturally isolated environments, lack of exposure to and socialization with their birth culture or other communities of color, racialization experiences, and media images all contributed to the participants’ self-perception. In addition, parents generally lacked skills to encourage discussions with their children and to incorporate cultural activities, which contributed to participants’ self-concepts.
As a consequence of their lacking connection and having no context of what it meant to be a person of color, plus their desire to fit in their community, the participants thought themselves or desired to be White. They believed that the White experience was the normalized experience and the ideal standard to fit into. This was inevitable, because they were exposed only to those things that informed their understanding of what was the standard. They were not told otherwise or prepared for what they might encounter in their social environments. When their peers and family members called them out as being different, they got upset and internalized these feelings, because they understood that being different was innately bad. Being told that they did not fit into the norm represented their constant racialization experience. Participants often did not share those experiences with their parents (who should have been a source of comfort), because they realized that their parents were different from them (their parents looked like their tormentors) and understood that their parents could not possibly understand their pain.

A majority of the participants reported that they only associated with White peers during their childhood. Participants saw themselves as White during early childhood because everything in their day-to-day experience informed them that they were White. Thus, participants’ self identity was informed by peer relationships, social environment, media images, family structure, and family practice.

The fact that the participants believed themselves to be White, or wanted or wished to be White, was based on their understanding that to be White was the normalized standard. White children were not called out as being different, and the mirrored reflection informed the participants that they were not White, no matter what their experience or how they felt internally that they could never be White, causing
further trauma. One participant indicated he did not want to examine his identity too closely, because it might cause trauma. Therefore, not examining too closely can be a survival skill he developed to cope with his environment.

**Summary of essential feelings and struggle for belongingness.** Many participants’ feelings of loss and abandonment were compounded due to being disconnected from their birth family, culture, and country. In some cases, adoptees struggled with this sense of loss and abandonment throughout much of their lives. Separation from their birth family was a source of feelings of loss and sense of abandonment. Having knowledge that they lost their birth family not due to death of a parent but due to the social practice of their birth country (including lack of support to keep children with the family or even within the birth country, especially in the case of Korea, which has that financial means) caused anger and resentment toward their birth country.

Some participants suffered another layer of loss and abandonment from their adoptive country as a result of the reaction of others: They discovered that they were not accepted into the American White culture. Moreover, feelings of loss and abandonment were complicated by feelings of isolation or perpetuated feelings of isolation coming up at different times, depending on what was going on in the participants’ lives.

One participant had clear memories of her birth parents and living in Korea prior to adoption. Her sense of abandonment and loss was understood from her separation from the life she had known for the first 11 years of her life (prior to adoption). As a result, she felt a sense of betrayal and abandonment from her birth family, culture, and country.
Although her life after adoption had been traumatic at times, she stated that it was nothing compared to what she had experienced after the death of her birth mother.

For a majority of the participants, their sense of loss and abandonment came from having questions regarding the circumstances that led to their adoption. Some participants have coped by trying to reconnect with birth family but found little if any information available to them. Those participants searching for birth information did so thinking that having information about their birth history (having a context for why adoption took place, e.g., being unwanted vs. the birth family’s inability to care for them) might alleviate lifelong feelings of loss and abandonment in order to find wholeness.

Some participants coped by not thinking at all about their birth history, whereas others realized that there were issues that needed to be addressed, but were unable to examine them for fear that a floodgate of emotions might pour through. Still other participants went through a period of denial, choosing not to think about it or make it an issue by disassociating themselves. The general feeling among participants was that they were not seen in light of their whole experience. In effect, their perception of self was often forced to be divided, depending on which community they happen to be interacting with. There was a sense of separation of experiences, because their experiences were disconnected from other’s evaluation—and not accepted in any community. Therefore, their sense of belonging was questioned at every level.

Feelings of isolation came from this separation of experiences by their peers and family and as a result of living in racialized environments. All the participants found their acceptance into American White culture was limited and conditional. All the participants described being called out in their schools or in the community as racially different,
which in turn questioned their identity and questioned their sense of self. A majority coped by distancing and disconnecting from their birth group membership and other ethnic and racial groups in order to fit in.

**Summary of journey of self-discovery.** A majority of the participants engaged in a journey of self-discovery in order to gain insight into self. Participants engaged in the search for self-understanding as a result of racialization experiences as children and as adults, and being called out as different from their peers. Participants were motivated by their need to make sense of their racialization and adoption experience, and to find a self-identity that felt relevant to their unique life experiences. In most instances, this journey began as part of reaching maturity and for others, as a consequence of a traumatic racialization experience, in order to make sense of their experience.

The process of self-discovery involved actively searching for meaning and how they fit into the social system. All except one participant indicated that most often, the search began while they were in college, away from home. The college atmosphere provided a space and time to explore one’s identity and sense of self. They questioned their growing up experience, community environment, and their parents’ responsibilities, which contributed to an identity crisis in some of the participants.

Participants engaged in various strategies in search for meaning and self-discovery, including conducting independent research on what it means to be a person of color in the United States, writing about their own identity issues as an IA/TRA adoptee, and taking courses in ethnic studies and sociology. For some of the participants, the search also involved finding birth connections. This process involved traveling to their birth country and seeking information from the adoption agency in an attempt to find
birth parents, as part of the trying to gain a context for why they were given up for adoption and to place meaning on their adoption experience. For others, the search also involved connecting with communities that shared similar experiences and finding a place of acceptance. This included communities of color, adoptee support groups, and communities that shared similar interests and/or concerns. Most often, moving away from the communities where they grew up facilitated their openness to search for cultural connections.

Participants agreed that finding personal meaning is connected to understanding their racial and ethnic identity, and understanding the context of their adoption experience. For some, understanding their racial identity was most salient, whereas for others, it was a combination of understanding their identity as a whole and making sense of their identity in the context of their whole experience.

Participants sought out communities that shared similar experiences. However, even within these communities, participants generally dreaded potential rejection. Central to their search was in understanding their life experience and placing meaning on that experience—finding a place of belonging, finding one’s own voice, and gaining self-acceptance that was relevant to their experience. Within the adoptee community, there are varied experiences; thus identity is developed that speaks to that individual’s experience. Therefore, identities among adult-adoptivee participants and the meaning placed on those stated identities varied. A majority of the participants identified as Asian, and noted that the Asian identity was the most salient in their self-identification. A majority of the Korean-born participants identified themselves as Asian American rather than Korean American, because there they had no connection to or context regarding Korea. These
participants identified Korea as a place of birth but had no additional experience with Korea after their adoption. Therefore, their identity more accurately spoke to their experience. They found that within the broad definition of Asian America, they were afforded the space that is inclusive of their unique experience of being adopted from Asia, but raised within the White social system and its cultural values.

Exploring one’s identity involved searching for a place that accurately reflected their whole experience. In so doing, some participants engaged in purposive social association and relationships that provided space to share their unique life experiences. Identity as an adult consisted of describing a racial and social status that reflected their life experience as an adoptee.

**Summary of awareness, empowerment, and self-acceptance.** In their life journey, the participants became aware of their racialization experience in the social and political context. In this process, they became aware of their internalized feelings of subjugation and began to place meaning on their whole life experience. As part of that process, they found their voice and their ability to speak out about their experiences, as well as their ability to determine how they chose to self-identify, what language they would use to express their experience and opinions about IA/TRA, thereby finding a sense of power for the first time in their lives. In addition, they were able to appreciate their life experiences, both negative and positive, which have made these experiences uniquely their own.

A majority of the participants reported having a positive and close-knit relationship with their family, feeling loved and accepted as a member of the family. Nevertheless, one participant had a disruptive childhood due to her family’s financial
instability and volatile family relationship. The participants who had siblings who were also transracially adopted considered these siblings their primary support system, because together they shared the experience of being subjected to racially based teasing and taunting at school.

Some participants criticized their parents’ decision to live in a culturally and socially isolated community as well as their not having incorporated cultural activities or having exposed them to other communities of color while growing up. They expressed disappointment at their parents’ inability to discuss racial issues and/or prepare them for what they potentially faced once they entered the public social environment.

As participants began to question and examine their racialization experience and feelings of isolation, they expressed an increasing lack of connection with their former peers and family members due to their divergent life experiences. Many of the participants sought out new connections with people who shared similar experiences. A majority of the participants moved away from their community, often into larger cities where there was a more diverse representation of people. There, they developed relationships with communities of color or adoptee groups. As a result of gaining a better understanding of both their childhood experiences of racialization as well as their having lived in culturally isolated communities, their relationships with family and friends became distant.

For some participants, their racialization experience informed their choices in partner relationships. Women participants, in particular, distanced themselves from the overly sexualized images of Asian women in the media and society by consciously disengaging themselves from associating with White men.
The participants often found communities and forums where they shared common experiences and issues. The adoptee community is widespread and thus, not conducive to the sharing of experiences. However, many of the participants were able to connect through on-line support groups, annually held adoptee conferences, or participation in panel discussions. Some participants openly expressed their opinions on the IA/TRA practice and its’ consequential effects on adoptee children.

A majority of the participants agreed that parents who adopt transracial children need to be better prepared for potential issues that may come up. Further, they stressed the importance of incorporating the child’s culture in the home so that it becomes a normalizing experience for the child, rather than something that is different. One participant expressed her sadness now whenever she sees a child of a different race with a White parent, because she is able to reflect and wonder what experiences that child will have.

**Analysis of Findings**

**Structural Descriptions**

**Developing self-perception: The adoption and racialization experience.**

Family practice and the social environment, including peer relationships, community make-up, and media images informed perceptions of self for participants in this study. A majority of the participants’ primary social associations were with White peers and family members (except for those who had siblings who were also transracially adopted). Individual identity was consumed by needing, wanting, and desiring to fit into their social group. The participants’ fixation on fitting into the social group and having a sense of belonging took on a near obsessive quality. Their self-image was inspired by their social
surrounding and informed by their relationships with their family, peers, and the community. They desired to be White, because they viewed White as the normalized standard and consequently saw themselves as White. However, the overwhelming yearning to be White conflicted with their self-reflected image in the mirror. The self-reflected image bordered on a body dismorphic condition, because some participants became anxious and obsessed over their physical appearance that did not fit the “ideal” White image. Others chose not to “see” the mirrored image and instead imagined themselves to be an image of White they could fit into, by deceiving the mind to see something other than their own self-reflected image. The participants’ racilization experience and being told they were not White led to feelings of disdain for self, a sense of being “ugly,” and generally, the perception of not measuring up to the standard. Thus, their illusive sense of belonging was often crushed from the constant reminder of their differences.

The persistent experience of being called out on physical differences caused the separation of experiences from those of their peers and family members, generating feelings of isolation and disconnection. They perceived being called out on physical difference as a form of insult to their own person, and they understood this to be rejection from the social environment. Being called out also signified that they did not fit into the normalized experience of their peers, consequently causing negative feelings about self and, at times, producing feelings of shame and disdain for self. It was a natural inclination to cope by disassociating, distancing, and denying membership from their racial and ethnic group membership.
The experience of being called a member of an Asian group (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or Vietnamese) placed participants in the category of “other,” and being different signified that they were not normal. Therefore, a mere reference to being a member of an Asian group was taken as derogatory because of its negative connotations.

One participant was insulated from racism during childhood, because she grew up in a small town, and everyone knew her parents. However, once she left the relative safety of this environment, she was no longer protected against the wider societal bigotry and racism that she later faced. Her parents did not prepare her for what she may potentially face from the wider public. Consequently when the participant did face racism on campus, she became debilitated, unable to function, because her world as she knew it was shattered; she “never knew that kind of hatred from anyone before.” Her physical body shocked and numb, she felt a sense of betrayal from a culture she thought she was a part of, calling into question her whole sense of identity.

Fear was often attached to being called out as being different, whether it was on a physical level or in terms of their family make-up, including attending adoption-related activities, because attending these activities meant a further separation from their peers. Nevertheless, when participants did engage in cultural activities, they were superficial, such as “cutting out pictures from Korean catalogs” or attending annual adoption agency-sponsored picnics, and the participants questioned the legitimacy and relevancy of the cultural information.

The adoptive parents placed the burden to participate on these cultural activities on the young shoulders of their children. The natural instinct for participants was not to engage in activities that further differentiated their experience from their peers.
Participants were preoccupied in surviving in their social environment, which meant having to negotiate living in a socially hostile environment. Furthermore, there was no context as to why they were engaging in these activities. Thereby, participants generally avoided any activities that were divergent from their day-to-day experience. In addition, participants indicated that they did not put much thought into engaging in cultural activities, because they had no context or understanding of what it meant.

Complicating the participants’ experiences is that there was no sense of anonymity in regard to adoption taking place due to the very visible nature of TRA, wherein the adoption instantaneously becomes public knowledge. In effect, the adoption becomes just as visible as the adoptees’ phenotype. A majority of the participants were called out on their adoptive status, which also called attention to their phenotype. For one participant, friends who asked if she wanted to find her “real parents” questioned her attachment with her adoptive parents. These comments distinguished between what was perceived as “real” versus “false,” calling into question her sense of attachment and belonging with her family, because the implication was that her adoptive parents were not her “real parents,” therefore she did not belong with them.

On the other hand, the right to know oneself in order to gain a full sense of self is often not easily obtainable. One participant had to “snoop” among his parents’ papers in order to find information about his adoption. Consequently, he felt “naughty” for looking at his adoption information because he felt that he was looking at something that he “wasn’t privy to,” thereby denying his right to access a part of himself. This implies that his past should be completely severed from his present life, because his past has no bearing on his sense of self.
Invariably adoptive parents’ discussion about adoption was conducted with the use of books, including discussion about cultural differences (if discussed at all). One participant’s parents did not engage in adoption discussion; instead, the running “joke” in her family was that she “came from the belly of the big bird.” As a result, she often wondered, as a child, if she did indeed come from the “belly of the big plane,” feeling that she was not even part of the human race (let alone a member of her family or the community). This added another subjective layer of difference, because she “shut the outside world out.” Consequently, the ability to feel love for self and others, and her ability to trust became impaired.

The combination of lack of cultural engagement, discussions about differences, and living in culturally isolated environments all contributed to the separation of experiences between participants and their family members and peers. Feelings of self as not being “normal” were commonly shared among participants. However, one participant’s parents’ way of consoling their child was by telling her, “What counts is what’s inside,” thereby minimizing her pain in an almost dismissive manner, because they were not able to console a child who was racially teased and taunted due to her physical appearance. The majority of participants did not share their racialization experiences with their parents. They suffered in silence, because they understood their parents could not share in their pain due to racial and social differences.

Upon reflection, the participants were disappointed in their parents’ inability and unpreparedness for adopting a child of another race. Parents have the responsibility and should understand the importance of incorporating cultural practice as part of the
normalizing experience for the TRA adoptee. In addition, provide tools to deal with issues of racism adoptees will potentially face in public.

It has become the “normalized” experience to see Asian or other children of color with White parents, because it is understood that adoption had taken place; however, once adoptees reach adulthood, they unexpectedly lose their adoptive status, hence losing their family membership in the public eye. In the end, racialization is experienced throughout participants’ lives.

**Essential feelings and struggling for belongingness.** Essential feelings, rooted in the miscellany of experiences and feelings about self, are developed and informed by social interactions. Accordingly, the participants’ self-concept was informed by their social context, including family structure and practices, peer relationships, community environment, the media, and lack of exposure to communities of color. Consequently, the participants immersed themselves in their community structure, because they understood that fitting in meant gaining acceptance as part of the community. Needing and wanting to belong and fitting into their social environment became vital to their existence.

The participants understood that fitting into their social environment and gaining acceptance meant being White. They associated Whiteness as representing the norm and idealized standard in their communities, because it was reflected in every aspect of their social environment. Therefore, they struggled with their desire to be White, at the same time, knowing they could never be White. The early messages from their youth informed them that to be part of the group membership meant one had to be White. For some, their wish to be White was so necessary that they saw Whiteness in the mirrored as a reflection of self. However, their perception of self collapsed when others called attention to their
differences, implying their not fitting into the norm, and for some, this realization created moments of crisis.

For one participant, his desire to be White created a self-image that was White. However, examining himself too closely held the potential for arousing an internal crisis from realizing that he was not White. Therefore, he dealt with this in the following way: “I usually don’t think about it everyday, just shove it down inside.” For him, denial had become a powerful tool in maintaining his stated Whiteness. On the other hand, another participant saw herself as White until a recent incident, which resulted in loss of part of her self, because she lost what she had been conditioned to believe all her life. She believed that she was White, and when her belief system collapsed, her whole sense of being came into question. She was forced to make a close inspection of her life, her beliefs, her relationships, and her sense of being.

In general, participants suffered internal turmoil due to the constant reminder of their difference in the form of racially based teasing and taunting by peers. This was further exacerbated due to living in socially and culturally isolated environments and to their inability to share their experiences with others. Thus, the participant came to understand self as the “other.” Experiences of being “othered” resulted in loss of part of self, as well as feelings of isolation and aloneness. The frequency and nature of being called out as different had no bearing on the level of impact on self; the incident still leaves the recipient feeling as if she/he is not part of the normalized group.

Furthermore, the inability to share full experiences with family members and peers created feelings of disconnection and separation. In most cases, the parents could not appreciate the impact of racialization on their children, becoming emotionally
removed; thus their children’s experience often went unacknowledged. The participants’ feelings of isolation were intensified by living in culturally and socially isolated environments and having had limited contact with their birth culture and communities of color. The combination of not only the fear of being called out as different and the consuming desire to be part of the community but also the understanding that acceptance to the community is often limited and conditional brought forth potential rupturing of one’s psyche.

Media images also played a part in their racialization experience; for some, it was a betrayal to their senses. For one participant, as an adult, she saw for the first time the portrayal of Asian women as real and complex. Thus she saw them as being beautiful and not shameful (her socially conditioned self-reflection had been perceived as being “shameful”).

Frequently, racialization experiences led to feelings of helplessness and anger. In some cases, the combination of lacking the language to express their feelings and/or secure family relationships caused them to internalize their feelings, leading to emotional isolation. In addition, these feelings led to growing anxiety and fear of being judged as something other than what accurately reflected their experience (e.g., being grouped with other Asian groups). From time to time, feelings of inadequacy crept in, creating self-doubt—the tendency to view themselves as inherently wrong. At these times, they also felt a sense of emptiness and void; felt confused, questioning their place and sense of belonging; and had feelings of isolation and disconnection from others, because they lacked space to share their experiences and pain, including with their family members. All these feelings sometimes contributed to negative self-images and, in some cases, the
inability to cope due to overwhelming feelings of inadequacy and isolation—“literally shutting out the world.”

Driven by the need to feel included and be part of their community, their inclination was to disconnect and distance themselves from their cultural origins. Purposive disconnection from their birth culture was a coping mechanism due to their fear of being called out as different compared to their peers. Often this disengagement involved developing stereotypical images of their racial and cultural group, thereby psychologically severing themselves from their racial and ethnic membership.

The adoption experience resulted in feelings of loss, insecurity, difficulty trusting others, and in general, feelings of apprehension about what they might encounter from others, including possible feelings of rejection. Feelings of loss of self continued with each negative experience, especially when their sense of belonging was challenged. Feelings of isolation and loss due to racialization experiences were also heightened by their feelings of abandonment by their birth family and culture.

Another layer of loss came from not knowing where one came from. The adoptive family’s failure to adequately discuss adoption and racialization issues hindered the adoptee from developing a full sense of self. General feelings of isolation and loss from their racialization experience were also exacerbated by feelings of abandonment from their lack of information regarding their birth family and the reasons surrounding their adoption. As a result, they suffered varying degrees of loss and abandonment on an essential level. Ultimately, the sense of loss and abandonment impacted their sense of self, their relationship with others, and their ability to find meaning.
The innermost longing, for some participants, was to understand the context of why they were put up for adoption. They hoped that having some understanding of their origins might alleviate their sense of loss and abandonment. Feelings of abandonment and loss were equated with loss of biological relationships and exacerbated by their racialization experience of being told that they did not belong in their social environment. Understanding why adoption took place aids in providing meaning for participants.

The desire to understand remained essential in finding meaning and having some context as to why they ended up where they did, thereby facilitating an understanding of self. One participant’s search and consequent rejection from his birth mother in regard to meeting with him brought confusion and frustration. His attempt to receive some acknowledgement from his birth parents and not getting it opened up additional wounds of abandonment.

The fear of not being able to access any information and the potential disappointment of what they might learn kept some from searching. Others coped by negating the significance of their birth family by distancing themselves and thinking about their birth parents as a “science project.” In this regard, there was generally a sense of disconnection or being removed from their birthplace—viewing it as a far-off place that had no specific meaning. Others felt anger and sadness from knowing that there was a biological family but that they were unable to connect with them. Feelings of abandonment and loss led to feeling unsafe and insecure in their relationship with others. This sense of loss and abandonment impacted their sense of self, their relationship with others, and their ability to find meaning.
Generally, participants felt a sense of betrayal from their birth and adoptive families, because their experience was contrary to what they had been conditioned to believe. The participants’ status as belonging to American society was constantly questioned at different stages of life, calling into question their sense of belonging, feelings of acceptance, and their status in the American society. Understanding of self derived from their social environment, and for some, resulted in a negative self-image and feelings of inadequacy.

Part of the adoption experience, for participants, resulted in lost of self, and this loss of self continued with each negative experience, especially when their sense of self was questioned. Their desire to relate on an emotional level to someone who shared similar experiences remained an essential component in finding meaning.

**Journey of self-discovery.** Meaning of identity was informed by social interactions, the social environment, and social conditioning. Thus, as children, identity was based on the participants’ social experience, including family practices and peer relationships. Feelings about self were most often informed by others’ reaction to self. The participants strived to achieve the dominant identity within their reach. However, their stated identity was frequently challenged by others’ reactions and in turn, their self-concept was shaken, because they were often reminded of their difference.

There was no context or understanding of the racial teasing and taunting the participants endured during childhood. The teasing followed the familiar theme of being called out as physically different. The message participants received from this racially based teasing was that they were viewed as objectionable. They came to understand that they were different from their peers, and being different meant not being part of the group.
membership. Adding to the participants’ distress was when they found they were isolated and unable to share their experiences with family members and/or peers. Consequently, they learned to endure their experiences in silence and isolation. They internalized their experiences, which subsequently became part of their psyche. The participants came to understand that their physical body betrayed their internal understanding of self, and prevailing negative thoughts about self were developed, affecting their sense of self. A common experience was explaining their self to strangers and explaining the nature of their family relationship, thereby explaining their very existence.

The knowledge of difference resulted in a sense of incomplete self and a lifetime of questions left unanswered, such as where did they came from, why were they given up for adoption, and how did they ended up here. The journey began by making sense of their experiences and find meaning. Most often, their journey began as a response to others’ reaction to self, which necessitated closer self-examination. Thereby, search for self was mediated by others’ pointing out differences. Making sense of where they belonged and how they fit into their world became a necessary tool of survival. The participants engaged in a self-reflective process driven by the need to understand their experiences and gain a sense of their whole self that spoke to their whole experience. Gaining this sense of self and having a place of belonging provided psychological tools to cope in times of stress. Hence, the participants engaged in a purposive journey of self-discovery.

The participants’ sense of self became disassembled when they realized that they were not what they believed themselves to be. This realization became a source of trauma—knowing that they were different. When confronted with the knowledge that
they were not seen as White, they were forced to re-evaluate their whole sense of being. For the first time realizing that they were part of the “others,” consequently led to creating alliances for their own protection and survival. Thus, participants re-learned tools to survive in the racialized world in which they had previously been denied membership, awakening a new sense of awareness.

One participant’s refusal to identify herself as American implies her sense of disconnection and lack of acceptance into the American culture. Her definition of America as White and her realization that she was not White implied that she felt rejection from the White culture, thereby rejecting America as part of her identification.

Part of the journey, for participants, involved coming to terms with the meaning of their identity, including understanding the meaning of their birth culture identity. This was challenging, because the participants had no prior relationship with or grounding in their birth culture. The journey of self-discovery to live an authentic life, a life that spoke to their true experiences, was motivated by fear of not being able to share their full experience. Another aspect of the journey was to challenge stated identities by questioning what constitutes an identity and who gets to decide, and by making sense of where one belongs. Their identity was defined by their life experience, regardless of societal assignments. Therefore, the journey required the courage to embrace the unknown and the ability to face all parts of one’s self, and consequently being vulnerable to new feelings that come with new understanding.

Part of the journey also involved finding others with similar experiences in order to feel protected and not isolated. However, for some, the fear of rejection paralyzed their ability to search for connection with others. Finding connection meant finding
recognition of one’s own experiences and a place of acceptance and belonging. Comfort was found in the knowledge that they were not alone in their experience, and safety was found in “othered” groups, in order to feel “normal” about self. Connections guided their process of becoming whole, and self-perception changed with new understanding. Developing self-esteem and confidence provided strength to deal with difficult situations. The process of self-discovery is a lifetime journey. The racialization experience will follow the adoptees throughout their lives. The parents’ responsibility should extend beyond providing material needs; they should also prepare the adoptees with tools they will need to survive in the racialized world they live in. However, there is a separation of experiences between the parents and their children. Consequently, the journey for the participant was a lonely one; they were left isolated, unable to share their experiences with their family members and/or peers.

**Self-awareness, empowerment, and acceptance.** The consequences of the TRAs involved a lonely journey for most participants. The parents provided material needs and basic emotional support, but little in terms of safety from the racism faced by the participants. As a result, the participants lacked a sense of security and positive sense of self. The participants often negotiated the minefield of a racially intolerant community alone. They did not seek support from their parents and/or peers and suffered alone.

Often the parents’ inability to engage in proactive discussions about racial and cultural as well as adoption issues with their children made it difficult for participants to cope with feelings about self. The participants were isolated and alone in their experiences. The parents often failed to recognize what their children faced in public. Thus, they were removed from their children’s experiences and not able to fully share in
their children’s live. The parents did not recognize their privileged status in relation to
their children who were members of a racial minority. The parents did not think about
racial and/or cultural issues and consequences, because it did not affect them directly; and
in turn, participants often did not share their racialization experiences with their parents.
In addition, the parents did not incorporate cultural activities into their adoptees’ lives, putting the burden to engage in cultural activities on them.

The participants’ realization of how their childhood environment had negatively
impacted them came when they physically moved away from their communities, and they
had opportunities to socialize with a diverse group of people. Participants also recognized
the parents’ differential social status, beyond physical differences, and felt a sense of
betrayal for their parents’ lack of foresight in incorporating cultural exposure and for
their living in such culturally and racially isolated environments. As a result, their
relationship became distant both physically and emotionally, as many moved away from
their childhood communities. TRA created the separation of experiences between the
parents and their children.

One participant was emotionally and physically distant from her family due to
growing up in a disruptive home and her inability to share her racialization experiences
with family members. However, the need for connection and for a mother figure
remained potent for her, even at age 46. She had been searching for something that had
been missing for much of her life—a missing relationship with a parental figure that was
supportive and empathized with her pain. The participants realized that their parents were
not adequately prepared to raise children from a different racial group and understood
their parents’ limitation. They attempted to engage in dialogue about adoption and
racialization issues with their parents. Frequently, however, the parents often got defensive, unwilling to examine their parenting practices and the subsequent impact on their children. Thus, there was this inability to connect with their children, furthering the separation of experiences.

Their relationship with former peers also changed, as they gained a sense of self, no longer consumed with needing to be a part of the group and accepting that they were not White. On occasions when participants turned to their former peers for support in regard to their racialization experiences, they were blamed for not being able to handle the situation, receiving comments, such as “Why can’t you just let it roll it off your back.” The participants found connections based on shared understanding, place of acceptance, place of safety, and a place where they did not have to explain their self to others. Stereotypical images of overly sexualized Asian women affected female participants’ decisions in their relationships, mostly choosing to associate with those who shared political and social alliances.

The ability to take ownership of their life experiences and define the meaning of their life’s journey has been an important goal for all the participants. Many participants found their voice in speaking about their experiences on their own terms rather than having others’ imposing their views. For one participant, the implications that have come with her new identification are challenging yet rewarding, because she is now able to speak to her truth, based on her actual and lived experiences rather than from her wishful conjectures. A majority of the participants’ identity and self-concept were developed as result of life experiences. Some reached this in the natural course of exploring their identity, which came with reaching maturity and having their own children, whereas for
others, this exploration came about as a result of forced examination due to a traumatic event.

The participants also understood that self was developed as part of the false imposition by their social environment and that the self was developed based on a false premise, which could no longer hold true. In the long term, the participants’ examination of self in relation to society will continue to help determine how they will choose to relate to that society.

The participants took control of how they wanted to be identified and took proactive measures. Some have taken on an identity that spoke to their newfound political and social awareness, whereas others were motivated in part to explain their life experience, such as being an adoptee—for example, “adopted from Korea but raised in America by White parents”—as way to combat public assumptions. (They were motivated to combat the assumptions they encountered by the general public.) In this way, they took some measure of control in how they wanted to be seen by the wider public, as part of a self-protective measure. However, they were continually challenged in their ability to maintain their sense of self and take charge of their identity on their own terms due to the continued stereotypes imposed on them. With their new sense of awareness came a sense of responsibility in sharing their unique histories, informing their parents about what impact adoption had on their lives, and sharing what could be done to make the experience easier for the younger generation of adoptees.

Thus, participants have currently come to recognize and appreciate their life experiences, appreciating their unique histories, and they are willing to share their stories with others. They were motivated to find their own space and learned tools and the
language to speak to their experience. They found new tools and the language to put into words what has been missing—a sense of freedom and liberating feelings.

The journey for self-discovery is an ongoing process. Through their journey, they have come to understand the social and political conditions that contributed to their experiences and to appreciate how their social environment contributed to their self-concept. The participants reached a point of self-acceptance, and with this self-acceptance they found comfort with self. Their journey led them to speak about their whole experiences, which had previously had been missing. In this process, they learned the language to express their experiences. Consequently, they have no longer kept mute, and are now able to voice their whole experience. They have come to embrace their unique experiences and define their self-identity, which spoke to their experiences. In this process, they have become holders of knowledge to inform future generations and the direction of IA/TRA practice. However, gaining a sense of belongingness and a sense of full self continues to be an ongoing struggle.

**Essence of the Experience**

Somehow, it doesn’t seem like a colossal step backward to think of the little Korean girl looking in the mirror and seeing a strange metamorphosis of her reflection bleed into the image of a pretty White girl called Kimberly with longing…

What people don’t tell you is that when you’ve wanted something so long, like bleached blonde hair, something you imagined defined your very sense of being, and it was denied you, getting it doesn’t mean as much because you’re no longer defined by the want.
It becomes easy to forget the desire, and it was really the desire, that made you who you were.

[Excerpt from a poem Forgetting Might Be Beautiful, written by one of the participants]

International and transracial adoption started as a cultural experiment. It was an experiment in tolerance, whether or not White parents could raise children of color, and the children’s ability to maintain a healthy sense of self. This experiment resulted from a contract between nations, social institutions, and families.

The participants’ life journey began in a different country, culture, and family. However, due to their birth parents’ inability to care for them, combined with their birth country’s political and social system, they became innocent victims of circumstances. They had no choices in regard to being separated from their birth family, culture, and country. Their separation from their birth families created an uncertain future. What and how they experienced their life journey would initially be left up to the choices made by their adoptive parents.

Life began anew once they got off the plane and landed wherever their future awaited them. They had no choices regarding where they lived, their social environment, family, culture, and access to information, including their birth family and/or history, because these rights were denied them. The social institutions and families made decisions on behalf of the adoptees, claiming these were done in their interest. They had no choice except to trust in the life they had been arbitrarily assigned.

The adoptees learned a new language, customs, behaviors, values, and learned to act and think like their parents and their social environment; essentially becoming
invested in membership of their social environment. Then they discovered that their acceptance was conditional and limited, and this realization shattered their world as they knew it. It put into question everything they had come to believe; consequently, they became distraught and wondered how and why they were different. In order to make themselves more acceptable to their social group, they distanced themselves from and disassociated with their racial and ethnic group. Their life’s journey began with the trusting of their surroundings, but overtime, this trust began shattering with each experience of racialization.

For the most part, the participants grew up in loving homes, went to good schools, lived in safe neighborhoods, and felt secure and well cared for; all their material needs were met. However, the fact that they were transracially adopted (TRA adoptees) lacked invisibility, like wearing a billboard advertising of their adoption. But what remained invisible was their sense of isolation as they endured the consequences of living in a racialized world. It no longer mattered as much how their family felt about them; it now greatly mattered what the world saw, because this more critical view affected how they felt about themselves.

Exploring their identity and place in the world came at different times for participants (maturity, trauma, internal conflict, having one’s own children), finding a place of acceptance in order to find acceptance of self. They took what they needed and left other things behind that did not fit, until they found a self-definition that made the most sense. In this process, they found self-definition that spoke their truth, and other’s opinion no longer mattered, because, inevitably, finding meaning meant finding self.
They discovered power in their ability to self-examine and gain sense of self that spoke to their experience. The journey for self took courage, because they were delving into the unknown and risked that they might not find what they needed. They relearned a language and gained a sense of responsibility to speak about and share their experiences with others.

Identity changed over time with new understanding and with new experiences, piecing together all the missing parts of selves to find their wholeness. The journey to search for self went beyond what they had been told and conditioned to believe by their social environment, social interaction, family, and community. Participants were placed in difficult positions—separated from birth family, culture, and country, having to survive in a new environment with no recognition of their loss.

At this point in their journey, they have taken charge of how they want to be identified, regardless of societal conditioning, manifesting their ability to create meaning on their own terms, accepting different parts of selves and experiences, including personal challenges and lack of support systems. Their experience, similar to experiencing a type of death of (part of) self, has been followed by rebirth, with new understanding as they place meaning to their experience and find a new sense of self.

The challenges are in understanding who they are and where they fit into the social context. For some, the journey has just begun, but inevitably it starts with exploring what their adoption experience means to them—no one can define that. Ultimately, strength lies in their ability to appreciate both the positive and negative aspects of their experiences.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study examined the nature and meaning of racial and ethnic identity as described by adult Asian adoptees who were transracially and internationally adopted. Particular focus of the study examined the racialization experiences and the relationships between racial and ethnic identity and socialization, and identified key influences on self-perception. The intent of the current study was to gain insight into how this particular social group negotiated racial issues during different stages of development, while maintaining a sense of self. The phenomenological approach was used to ascertain the meaning, structure, and the lived experience of this group by inquiring into the truth and reality of their experience, and examined the nature of this knowledge (Patton, 2002).

In conjunction with its phenomenological approach, this study was informed by critical race theory (CRT), which provided an alternative lens in examining the described experiences of Asian adoptees, because they fall outside the dominant paradigm. The CRT method has no set method for conducting or analyzing research; instead the approach’s emphasis is on giving voice to the voiceless by providing space for subjects to tell their stories and place meaning to their experience.

Social Construction of International Adoption

Adoption disrupts the natural life course; as family circumstances changed, children were placed for adoption. The historical discourse of “land of opportunity,”
associated with the United States, created illusory consciousness in the minds of peoples in other nations, including U.S. citizens who believe that children would fare better in the United States than if they remained in their homeland. For instance, a majority of Koreans believe that adoptees faired well, receiving all the privileges of living in the West, whereas they ignored adoptees’ painful experience of being disconnected from their biological families and culture (E. Kim, 2007); thus the popularity of IA/TRA is largely contributed to this collective ideological understanding. B. J. Lee (2007) stated his view of adoption:

Adoption is a social matter where the best interests of the child are collectively sought for the future of the society. Adoption is also a cultural matter because family forming and parenting practices are all deeply rooted in the cultural tradition of every society. (p. 75)

Furthermore, adoption involves participation from a collection of individuals, often referred to as the adoption triad: the adoptee, the birth family, and the adoptive family (Javier et al., 2007). Once considered a single act, adoption is now recognized as a process involving a lifetime of the adoption triad. This study found that identity development is a lifelong process for the participant, and there is no particular timeframe when one searches for sense of self. Most often, identity was formed and informed by societal context and the socialization experience.

The process of adoption follows three distinct social acts: First, it is a personal choice; second, it involves a legal process; and third, it involves the socialization of the adoption triad, and in the case of IA, it also includes the international process, which involves the sending and receiving countries as well as the following of international guidelines and/or standards. In the case of IA, often the adoption-triad member, the birth
family, is missing due to geographical location, cultural and societal secrecy, social stigma, and the anonymous practice of abandonment in some countries.

Earlier research findings that Asian adoptees fared well in their adoptive homes, adjusting to their environment, continued to legitimize the IA practice as a good option for the growing number of homeless and abandoned children worldwide. Currently, IA accounts for 5 to 16% of all adoptions in the United States, and this form of adoption is likely to continue to grow. The demand for infants and young children is high, contributed to by the discourse of limited supply at home and overabundant supply elsewhere (Freundlich, 1998). The proliferation of IA/TRA practice of Asian children was constructed with the approval of research, policies, and social work practice.

Racialization of Asian adoptees has been a relatively neglected aspect of the IA/TRA adoption research. Construction of Asians’ racialized image as the model minority resulted in the explosion of Asian adoption. The cultural imaging of Asians as the model minority, along with the support of research, exploited the mass production of the adoption of Asian children on an international scale. Asians, in general, were considered to be assimilated into American culture, creating an erroneous account of what Asians face on a daily basis. It is important to recognize that adoptees enter the United States under marginal status, because they become potential victims of racism and racial subjugation.

**Discussion of Findings**

This study added to existing literature on the experiences of adult Asian adoptees. A review of the literature indicates that there has not been a phenomenological study focusing on the racialization experiences of Asian adult adoptees and its impact on their
self-definition. It was discovered that adult adoptees conceptualized and negotiated racial and ethnic identity, perceptions of self, essential feelings, and finally, self-acceptance as a result of family practices, social environment, and racialization and the adoption experience. Self-concept, derived from various social structures, influenced family relationships, social environment, culture, and racialization experiences. Common threads found with all participants in the study included growing up in culturally isolated and predominantly White environments; having limited contact with communities of color or limited engagement in cultural activities; struggling to fit into their social environment, because they faced racially based teasing and taunting from their peers; having no connection to their birth culture; and having minimal discussions about adoption or racial issues with parents. In addition, participants were not prepared to deal with the racism they faced in public.

**The Family and Social Environment**

The study found that family and the social environment played a critical role in fostering participants’ sense of self. Family is the most influential factor in developing sense of identity in children and serves as an important social identity; and their racial and ethnic identity is most often established through the family (Fuligni, Rivera, & Leininger, 2007). Children are taught history, values, and traditions from the perspectives of their parents (Ross & Buehler, 2004), and emerging identities for children are initially established through their primary caregivers (Oyserman, 2004).

These realities make families with TRA children especially accountable for promoting a safe and secure environment for their children as well as assisting in developing healthy racial and ethnic identities and preparing them for what they might
encounter in the wider society due to their racial status. However, participants reported that their families failed to incorporate any birth culture into their lives. Families were given full control as to how they would raise their children, with minimal support from the adoption agencies. Adopters determined what was in the best interest of their children, including whether or not to include maintaining the child’s cultural heritage. Participants noted that their adoptive parents universally reflected the ideological concept of universality and colorblindness in their practice and behaviors, minimizing the issues of race in their lives. If parents did incorporate any cultural activities, it was more celebratory in nature, such as culture camp and annual picnics or parties and/or the providing of books that discussed multicultural families. Discourse on multiculturalism and celebratory acts of culture separate communities of color by obscuring the immigrant histories and racial oppression of racial minority groups (Anagnost, 2000).

Traditionally, White middle-class parenting of TRA children has focused on incorporating adoptees into the dominant group structure and, in this way, containing the difference by only exhibiting celebratory cultural images (Anagnost, 2000). This study found that participants rarely engaged in activities to maintain cultural connections, and the participants themselves felt pressured to assimilate into the ideals of their family and their social environment in order to feel a sense of acceptance.

Previous research on identity development found that healthy identity is achieved by providing cultural socialization for TRA children, specifically dependent on parents to “negotiate the racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences within the family and seek to promote or hinder racial and ethnic identity development” (Song & Lee, 2009, p. 22) in the children. This study found that families established their group membership
(including their adopted children) based on their own life experience, rather than on the racial and ethnic realities of their adopted children. Thus the family’s cultural practice was infused into the participants’ understanding of self as belonging to the dominant cultural group. However, this was in conflict when participants came in contact with the outside world, because they were constantly reminded that they did not belong.

A majority of the participants had a typical family experience of living in a good neighborhood, attending good schools, and having all their material needs met. Nevertheless, the dialectic influence on self-identity conflicted with internal family identity compared to the racialized identity imposed by the social environment. Participants had to cope, living in the paradox of two different worlds—not shared by family members. On one hand, they lived with the dominant worldview and learned the values, traditions, and rituals of the dominant group; on the other hand, they coped with a separate world, where they were racialized as the “other.” They were unable to share their pain with those closest to them and struggled in seeking full admission to membership in the dominant group.

The participants were forced to cope with having to negotiate between two worlds, often coping in social and psychological isolation, as their sense of self came in conflict due to confused identity. Adoptees who grew up in small towns/suburbs had limited contact with other communities of color, and sometimes they were the only child of color in the family, school, or community, or on some occasions, another TRA adoptee was present.

Children learn by internalizing certain messages they have received as well as visual evidence, and they internalize what they know and see as truths (Ross & Buehler,
2004); moreover, self-worth is drawn from early experiences. Their position inevitably created internal conflict, as the social reality of racial minority groups is assigned certain cultural attributes when socialized within dominant ideology. Thus same group membership becomes an important survival tool when they are collectively seen as negative (Oyserman, 2004). The self-image of participants was influenced by the dominant culture in regard to how they saw themselves, including the media, social environment, and racialization (as Asians), with associated stereotypes creating varying internal understandings of self. Some participants employed value systems of the dominant culture and denied membership in a racial minority group.

The United States’ racialized discourse and historical policy of limiting entry of immigrants from Asia and the concept of “otherness” placed adoptees directly at the center of the American discourse. The “otherness” created dual status for the adoptees as they negotiated between two separate worlds—one based on privilege (the one they were raised in) and the other based on limited access and conditional acceptance (the one they were born into).

Coping Strategies

Racial visibility and questions about belongingness and identity compel most racial minorities to explore their sense of self (Shiao & Tuan, 2008). Cultural participation develops and shapes the self. Bringing forth a sense of personhood allows one to gain deeper understanding of the social context and become cognizant of in-group and majority-group interactions. Part of the challenge for adoptees is making sense of how their sense of self fits in terms of in-group and the larger societal context. Having positive racial and ethnic identity is associated with positive self-esteem and prevents
social isolation, whereas lack of racial and ethnic identity leads to psychological maladaptive adjustment (Yoon, 2004). All participants faced racialization with limited outlet to express their experiences. This isolation led to further recognition of their difference and further subjected them to a negative self-view. In addition, participants had no connections with their cultural group, therefore lacked in-group support, because they were socialized with the dominant culture ideology, making them more vulnerable to trauma.

Social theorists agree there is a natural tendency to categorize groups of people and attribute certain characteristics for the given group, so it is natural for teachers, community members and so on to do the same (Patterson & Bigler, 2007). The socially constructed identity of Asians, built on stereotypes of the “Oriental,” is confusing for transracial adoptees, who were raised with the dominant ideology and values. The general belief that discrimination against Asians is minimal or less severe can be directly linked to the model minority myth and other racial politics, which conceal the devastating effects of discrimination against Asians (R. M. Lee, 2003). In addition, full membership for adoptees remains illusive due to their forever foreigner status (Goodwin, 2003).

Conceptual understanding of racial and ethnic identity is part of the developmental process as well as a psychological tool for surviving in a racialized world. Labeling oneself in terms of racial and ethnic identity is in response to societal-imposed distinctions, wherein the dominant image of the social group is held in low regard, and in turn, the social group potentially faces negative social identity and the members of that group hold low self-regard for self (Phinney, 1990).
Adoptees faced challenges of negotiating the complicated and treacherous crossroads of self-exploration within the dominant discourse. Finding meaning for where one fits into the social system occurs as the individual engages in a dialectic struggle to understand self. Assessing adoptees’ whole experience is to examine the ecological factors, such as neighborhood, community social make-up, and schools that impact social and psychological well-being among groups (Mahalingam, 2007). Identity for the individual is centered on mass images presented before her or him. It is difficult to negotiate a positive image when there is lack of diverse representation of the images. Early experiences of how others view us—whether approval or disapproval—influence how we conceive ourselves (Oyserman, 2004).

When asked to describe ourselves, we define ourselves based on our early life experiences, recalling memories of events that we find significant contributors to our self-concept. These memories are highly susceptible to social and situational systems; thus the social system plays a crucial role in shaping our identities. Self-concept is socially constructed because not only the way in which situations are perceived and felt, but also the perceptions and reactions of others, influence our sense of self (Goodwin, 2003).

Having a sense of racial and ethnic identity is a protective measure against discrimination (Song & Lee, 2009), and it is important for adoptees to connect with other Asians (Meier, 1999) or with other groups who share similar experiences. One coping strategy in regard to having racialization experiences is to turn to the in-group for support, whereas others may cope by avoiding situations that expose them to discrimination or altering their own behavior to simulate the behavior of the majority.
Participants in this study utilized several different coping strategies to deal with their feelings of subjugation. A majority of the participants avoided association with people of color, completely immersing themselves in the White culture, especially during childhood, because they craved acceptance into their peer groups. Some, in order to preserve their social status, either did not recognize or minimized their social experience. Others disassociated with their birthplace (consciously and unconsciously), incorporating themselves into the idealized White social environment, because their imagined self reflected the normalized White cultural image. This idealized image, in turn, created a negative self-concept, because they were often alone in their experience.

Another common strategy used by the participants as a self-protective measure was to engage in domain disengagement by dissociating with stereotypically catalogued groups and virtually placing their same group in the position of the “other” (Good, Dweck, & Aronson 2007). A majority of the participants adopted the dominant ideology, venturing into denial about self and refusing to recognize all parts of self in order to alleviate feelings of helplessness and anger. Negative self-identity results in disconnection from one’s own culture as a coping strategy (Mahalingam, 2007).

Positive attitudes towards one’s group membership include feelings of pride and contentment with in-group membership, and negative attitudes include feelings of inferiority and the desire to hide one’s racial and ethnic identity (Phinney, 1990). Self-perception and life experiences impact sense of self, thus the meaning of birth identity remains strong if one is engaged in deliberate rituals and the traditions of that culture.

Participants in this study endured verbal rejection from peers when they were racially
teased and taunted, calling attention to their difference. Racial minority children develop a differing sense of racial and ethnic identity, dependent on their social environment, such as the schools they attended as children. If a child is the only representative of her/his racial group, then there is a likelihood that the child will suffer from negative feelings about self, due to lack of diverse representation; and her/his difference becomes more acute (Patterson & Bigler, 2007).

The concept, *double consciousness*, refers to common experiences of racial minorities living in two different worlds and having to survive and operate in the dominant world as a perpetual outsider. However, for the adoptees, this concept also involves a confused consciousness, because there is no context to their Asian status or meaning of their social status. Thereby, their reflected mirrored image represented a false and inaccurate projection of their life experiences, because it neglected to portray their whole experiences. An individual’s self-worth is often arbitrated by others’ devaluation or strengthened by peer acceptance. In addition, self-concept is also dependent on sociocultural and historical forces, because social forces impose group membership (Oyserman, 2004). Therefore, “[the] individual’s self-concept derives from his or her knowledge of membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership.” (Phinney, 1992, p. 156), and this requires constant investment in membership in that group, which is not always available to adoptees.

**In Search of Self**

IA/TRA adoptees’ voices have been missing from the political Asian-American discourse. This lack of recognition jeopardizes adoptees from the protection of the in-
group in order to safeguard against discrimination (Cole, 2009). Further, some of the Korean-born adoptees in this study experienced a form of “reverse racism” from the Korean community, being denied membership into the Korean American community for “not being Korean enough.” In this regard, the adoptees were caught in a double bind, because they were not embraced by either culture; and this rejection created a sort of non-identity. The general experience of not belonging to either the birth or the dominant culture created a sense of isolation and abandonment.

The adoptees’ sense of abandonment and isolation was further exacerbated by the loss of the birth mother. For, the self is also informed through the socialization of the birth mother. The birth mother has been categorically regulated by the value system of the birth culture, and the way of knowing is established through the social system, placing judgment on her for not being able to keep her child(ren), thus signifying her as abandoner. Consequently, the devaluation of the birth mother results in a devaluation of the birth culture. For example, some of the participants experienced an adverse reaction to their birth culture and group membership, ultimately leading to a devaluing of self and a questioning of self-worth. The participants felt little consolation knowing that they were given up for “a chance at better life,” because this failed to mediate feelings of abandonment and loss. Adoption discourse provides limited space to mourn the loss of biological connections, or communal space to mourn racial oppression, because adoptees were kept culturally isolated.

The participants struggled with the internal dialectic conflict between their racialized experience and the dominant ideology’s tendency to minimize or negate the Asian adoptees’ racialization experience by society, parents and peers. The participants
were continually challenged regarding their sense of belonging and their having to negotiate a minefield of crossroads into selfhood and recreate a new sense of self.

A majority of the participants identified with their birthplace as well as their cultural socialization; their identity was based on descriptive accounts of their experience, thus embracing the duality of their experience. Adoptees’ “otherness” eventually became a symbol of power, because they came to appreciate their life experiences and the ability to share in their stories. In order to dispute the ideological interests of dominant group members, marginalized groups have to contest essentialist beliefs about the social identities of marginalized groups. This is done through the person’s life history and an understanding of the self in relation to multiple identities (Mahalingam, 2007).

Participants struggled to create authentic identities through conscious decision-making and purposive engagement, creating new venues for self-expression. Search for identity and self-understanding changed over time with new awareness and understanding about self. The authentic self can be understood as coming to terms with self without the imposition of dominant structures that dictate their experience, but rather, by speaking their truth. The authentic self emerged as one struggled to gain a sense of self, resisting the dominant discourse. In this way, the self is seen as an active agent that changes overtime with new experiences (Oyserman, 2004).

Facilitating the participants’ search for self (in part) came about due to their moving into new environments and the ability to embrace their differences and re-establish the meaning of “normal,” therein finding acceptance in the sea of differences. They were able to find commonalities and engaged in the healing process: A new sense of identity emerged as they took conscious ownership of their journey. Adoptees re-
created the meaning of their birth identity, coming to terms with self, achieving selfacceptance. Participants had limited cultural infusion while growing up, nevertheless came to understand the context of their racism experience by understanding social and political realities and coming to terms with their own sense of identity based on their whole experiences.

**Implications for Social Work**

This study provides critical information for those involved in developing culturally relevant policies and services, by calling attention to the issues facing the IA/TRA community. In addition, this research can inform social work professionals of appropriate and relevant information and/or services, add to the general knowledge base, and enhance social work education, practice, policy, and research.

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

Current research can guide social work practitioners who develop and facilitate services on behalf of IA/TRA families by educating parents of potential issues that may arise from IA/TRA adoptions, especially regarding issues of race and racialization. The social environment and family practices were found to have a profound impact on not only how the participants assessed their self-perception but also their complex journey of self-discovery and acceptance. Feelings of isolation were due to living in culturally and socially isolated environments, not being able to share their experiences with their family members. The participants in this study described that their racialization experience was the salient feature affecting their sense of self and sense of belonging. The parents failed to engage in proactive discussions with their children regarding the adoption and/or racial issues that their children would potentially face when they interacted with the public,
such as the school system. Most often, the participants faced racially based teasing and taunting during their primary school years, causing confusion in regard to being called out as different. They came to understand that they were somehow different and became obsessed with fitting into their social environment. Their feelings of isolation were further exacerbated by not being able to share their experiences with their family. Further complicating their experience were their feelings of abandonment and loss due to the adoption itself. The participants’ families often lived in small towns or suburbs in predominantly White communities, with few opportunities to socialize with other communities of color. In addition, participants were not exposed to birth cultural activities, and when they did engage in them, such activities were part of occasional events, such as annually held, adoption agency-sponsored parties and/or picnics and cultural heritage camps. There was no context on why the participants were engaging in these events, and the activities provided only a “superficial” inclusion of the birth culture.

This study highlights the influence of multiple-faceted and often complicated cultural socialization, which has an effect in achieving healthy sense of self. How the participants coped within their social environment determined how they responded to stress. In this study, the adoptee population was varied and represented a geographically diverse environment. There are multiple variables that controlled their adjustment, such as geographic location, access to information, age, gender, sexual orientation, age at adoption, and siblings who were also adopted, in addition to social environment and family practices. Therefore, this study suggests that there is a need for an ecological assessment of individual adoptee clients in order to ascertain how they interrelate within their social environment and how they cope in stressful conditions; moreover it is critical
to examine these clients’ strengths in order to make appropriate service plans. Social workers need to advocate on behalf of this population, including issues and/or concerns that prospective adoptive parents should be aware of when pursuing international adoption.

There is a need to re-examine the cultural competency model, which may not be appropriate when working with this unique social group. In particular, the need for an adapted cultural model, which incorporates an understanding of the needs of this social group in all of its complexity, is well warranted. Hence, the social work profession clearly needs to intervene on behalf of this client group by recognizing all aspects of their experience. More specifically, it is essential that social work practice develop services grounded in this social groups’ culture of conflicting experience in regard to their having been raised with White cultural values and kept isolated from other cultures, whilst racialized as a racial minority by the wider society.

There are over 100,000 adult adoptees in the United States. Their voices must be considered as providing a valuable source for informing future practice. IA/TRA continues to be a major source of adoption in the United States. This practice involves the annual transfer of an estimated 30,000 children, moving between 50 different countries, with the United States receiving a majority of these children (McGinnis, 2007). Findings from this study strongly suggest that social workers work with adoptive parents on the importance of cultural continuity, including racialization concerns throughout the child’s upbringing. There is a dire need for parents to be educated in order to gain insight into their children’s social experiences that contribute to their sense of self. It takes commitment for parents to recognize the social and political realities for people of color

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and how these have/will affect their children. It is no longer acceptable for parents to sit idly by and take a backseat when it comes to the reality of experiences regarding what their children face in the wider society. Therefore, parents need to examine their own privileged status and belief system regarding racial issues, because this will invariably affect their parenting practices.

Social workers should provide pre- and post-adoption services to families engaged in transracial adoption and connect adoptees and parents with support groups and resources. In addition, social workers should train potential adoptive parents in regard to culturally competence parenting practices as well as an understanding of the developmental needs of their children, such as when they become racially and culturally aware and the challenges they face negotiating their place in the world.

Furthermore, social workers need to stay informed at the political level and advocate for ethical practices. For instance, social workers can provide rigorous efforts to assist adoptees in finding their birth information. The ability to access information about their birth history is an empowering tool in mitigating feelings of abandonment and loss, and feelings of isolation. However, historically, accurate birth records have been unavailable due to cultural secrecy and the adoption agencies’ complicity with the sending countries’ neglect in providing true and accurate birth records. Adoption agencies hold power, because many sending and receiving countries use the services of adoption agencies in forming families, thereby giving them much autonomy in the decision-making process regarding who will be adopted and who is able to adopt, and what information will be distributed.
Finally, social workers need to endeavor to recruit racial minority families to adopt, connect families with communities of color, and encourage and support these families to engage in cultural activities as part of daily life. Culture should be experienced on a daily basis, where cultural activities become the norm, not the exception to the family’s daily practice; and children should be part of a diverse environment so they can recognize their differences within differences without feeling out of place. The parents need to appreciate that their family practices have a lifelong effect on their children, and that they, therefore, play a key role in developing the healthy identities of their transracial adoptees.

Implications for Social Work Education

The findings in this study offer opportunity for social work educators to develop innovative services to meet the needs of the IA/TRA social group. Adoptees share a common history that is unique. They constitute a distinct social group in that together they share the common experiences related to adoption of being geographically separated from their birth culture and county, having been raised with values and traditions of the dominant culture of these adoptive parents, and lacking connections with their birth culture. The challenge for social work education is to develop new strategies in regard to working with the multitude of issues facing this population. This study offers a crucial component to the designing of social work curricula in terms of developing culturally relevant services that incorporate the unique experience of the IA/TRA population. Competencies must be developed that recognize the dual perspectives of these adoptees’ experience: being raised with the dominant ideologies as a racial minority.
The social work profession has been disconnected from the reality of the experiences regarding IA/TRA. Past research informed adoption and social work practice by examining the adjustment of young children soon after placement, basically taking a hands-off approach throughout the rest of the child’s life. In contrast, adoption as discussed throughout this study is a lifelong process, affecting individual adoptees differently; in turn, their varying experiences correspond to their varying coping strategies. Often, this group does not come into the purview of the social work profession, unless they experience some form of visible crisis; but as discovered in this study, the participants often suffered in isolation, unable to share their experiences with family and/or peers. Therefore, it is imperative that social work engage in preventive and proactive services. This needs to be done on an educational level: Social work educators can challenge students’ perceptions and assumptions about their own biases and belief systems regarding the racialization experiences of Asians in U.S. society as well as assumptions regarding “positive” versus “negative” stereotypes, which have an insidious influence on our collective psyche. Additional racial issues need to be incorporated into the social work curriculum, not only examining how racism has different contexts for different groups but also denouncing the phenomenon of “positive” stereotype. These prevailing beliefs limit the recipients’ ability to express their whole experience. Social work students need to stay grounded in the realities facing this population, particularly in terms of examining barriers to achieving sense of self (racism, isolation, abandonment, and loss due to birth-parent separation, age, parental practice, etc.). By recognizing Asian adoptees as a unique, multicultural group, social workers will be able to create a specific
cultural frame and examine coping strategies among adoptees who lack connection to a particular group.

In addition, students need to be trained to bridge complex and multiple issues that hinder the healthy adjustment of adoptees, such as adoption issues of loss and abandonment in addition to the racialization experiences adoptees face. Understanding the unique identity formation of adoptees recognizes the fact that their experiences are individualized due to geographic variation and dispersal of the adoption community (in regard to the inability to connect with other adoptee groups). It is recommended that alternative opportunities be examined that connect this population with the use of technology. For example, use of the internet to create support-group sites can be a powerful means of connecting social groups that live in diverse geographic locations. Finally, it is critical that social work students be sensitive to power differences between social groups and the impact of media on socialization.

**Implications for Policy**

IA/TRA policy is one-sided. IA policy is geared toward adoptive parents as consumers who are given full control over adoption decisions, because they choose where, when, and who they will adopt (the gender and age of the child), as well as where and how they will raise their children. Mohanty et al. (2006) suggested that social workers should advocate for policies that stress the importance of racial and ethnic issues for adoptees and ensure that adoption agencies provide those services.

On the other hand, the adopted child has limited rights in regard to obtaining her/his birth information. For instance, international law currently does not require nations to provide birth family information. Countries, such as Korea and China,
encourage anonymous abandonment due to their governments’ social policy (Heimerle, 2003). In effect, this practice gives little hope for adoptees in regard to discovering their birth identities. Social work professionals and adoptive parents can empower adoptees by advocating for ways to make accurate birth information available to them if they so choose to search for their biological origins.

Furthermore, social workers can promote policies that would require adoption agencies to provide culturally relevant services to families. Advocacy for policy that incorporates relevant home study in order to assess potential adoptive parents’ understanding of racism and cultural competency, as well as policy regarding the development of community programs that serve this clientele, is also central.

Finally, policy makers need to examine how the interests of children are met when they are distantly separated from their birth family, culture, and country. Social workers need to rigorously question the practice where children are geographically displaced from their homeland, most often removing children from economically and socially struggling countries and placing them in Western countries in predominantly White family environments. If conscientious effort has not been made to find a permanent family for the potential adoptee in her/his homeland, then one must question whether the adoption was conducted in the child’s best interest or in the best interest of the adopting parent.

Opportunities for Further Research

Korean adoptees are the oldest generation of IA/TRA adoptees in the United States. In the past 25 years, an increasing number of them began touring their birth land, trying to locate their birth family (E. Kim, 2007), and increasingly, more are becoming
vocal about their experiences. Many of these adoptees have advocated for post-adoption services that address issues of identity, race and culture (McGinnis, 2007). Yet, despite these efforts, there have been minimal changes in how IA/TRA is practiced, and research continues to lag behind the issues affecting this population. The majority of research continues to focus on early adjustment of adoptees or has relied on the information provided by the adoptive parents’ assessment of their children’s adjustment (as discussed in Chapter 2). Moreover, studies have generally focused on physical, cognitive, self-esteem, and psychological adjustment (Berquist et al., 2003; Feigelman, 2000; Howard et al., 2004; W. J. Kim et al., 1998; Wickes & Slate, 1996). However, the findings in the current study reveal there is a disconnect between parents’ perception and research findings on adoptees’ adjustment versus their actual experiences, suggesting the need for more a comprehensive study of adoptee experiences.

There is also a need to a conduct cohort study of first-generation TRA adoptees in order to better understand the dynamics involved in being raised in White homes, while racialized by the outside world. The significance of studying this group is that they can inform the future practice of IA/TRA, based on its long-standing history regarding the adoption of Korean children in particular, beginning in the 1950s, which pre-dates the impact of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s (Shiao & Tuan, 2008). In addition, this group has rich knowledge of the experiences of living in White families, while being racialized as the “other.” Hence, their perspective is necessary to inform the future direction and practice of IA/TRA.

The current study expanded on other qualitative studies by examining the contextual relationship between racialization, adoption, and the socialization experience
impacting identity development of the IA/TRA population. In addition, the study examined the multiple contextual features influencing this population’s identity and self-concept (e.g., gender, phenotype, geographic upbringing, age at adoption, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class, and membership in a sibling group) as well as their ability to function and cope within their environment. In sum, this study found that social environment and family practices played an essential role in how they coped and their self-perception. This study also found that the relationship between self and others, and between self and society represented key influences on self-concept, because in such relationships contained both barriers and opportunities.

The current study can be used as a foundation for future studies in the IA/TRA adoptee community. The limitations of studies of the racialization experiences of this population clearly call for a more comprehensive approach to studying adult Asian adoptees’ self-concept and identity development and how it affects their ability to cope in their environment. Future studies should focus on the cultural framework of the United States and how adoptees negotiate between in-group and out-group associations.

Future research needs to examine (a) the effect adoption has on individuals by studying adult adoptees, who can fully express their true experiences; (b) the relationships between trauma and coping/resiliency; (c) the relationship between racial and ethnic identity and discrimination; and (d) the utilization of mental health services. In addition, future studies could potentially incorporate other features that impact self-perception and coping strategies, such as abuse, and types of cultural activities, and examine how effective they were in developing racial and ethnic identities in adoptees. Future studies could also examine effects of discrimination on sense of self. There is need
for a study of whether the identity development process can be generalized to other groups, and more specifically, the need for a specific study on how social structure influences self-concept in developing practice modules working with this social group.

Finally, future studies should include more representative samples of adult Asian adoptees in order to understand how racial and ethnic identity is developed and how coping strategies are utilized by this population. Research has been criticized for failure to recognize the totality of experience of this population; however, the use of a qualitative method offers the more holistic approach. Furthermore, findings from this research can inform the development of more appropriate and relevant conceptual definitions of racial and ethnic identity in transracial adoptees as well as the development of measurement scales specifically geared to assessing this particular social group.

**Limitations and Strengths of the Study**

The primary limitation of the study is its lack of generalizability. The study’s non-probability sampling method, the small sample size, and the potential for self-selection bias limited the study’s ability to generalize its findings to a similar or non-similar group in another setting or to the larger population of adult Asian adoptees. However, the phenomenological approach is not concerned with generalizability. The purpose of using the phenomenological perspective was to capture “rich descriptions” of the experiences (Moustakas, 1994) of adoptees and to discover deeper understanding of perceptions and feelings about their racial and ethnic identity and self-concepts.

Another limitation of the study consisted of several threats to validity that are difficult to control. For example, there existed the possibility of participants’ not fully disclosing their experiences if they (a) found the interview process discomforting, (b)
wanted to answer in a way that would be perceived as socially acceptable, or (c) wanted to answer in a way that might please the researcher. To address this threat, I established a good rapport with each participant, stressed the importance of truthful responses to the validity of the study in making a contribution to the current knowledge regarding adult Asian adoptees in the context of racialization, and re-emphasized the confidentiality of their responses.

Because this research represents a preliminary and exploratory study in terms of understanding the racialized phenomenon from the participants’ point of view, as they assigned meaning to their experiences, a major strength of this study’s qualitative, phenomenological design is that it afforded adoptees the ability to voice their own experiences without imposing the restrictions inherent in set social constructs. Furthermore, this study may contribute to an understanding of which factors are more powerful in determining differences in the perceptions, behaviors, and experiences of adoptees across the geographic landscape and during different life stages. Another notable strength of this phenomenological study is that it attempts to understand all aspects of the phenomenon rather than being restricted to one preconceived concept (Creswell, 1998).

Overall, because no similar research study has been conducted to date, this study can be considered innovative in nature and will make an important addition to adoption literature. Hence, although this type of research is not generalizable to the larger population, it can inform theory and contribute to an understanding of the racialization experiences of Asian adult adoptees. Moreover, the results of the study can potentially provide insight to adoption workers, adoptive parents, and the opportunity for adoptees to
form forums to have ongoing discussions about their experiences and perhaps even affect policy on how the IA/TRA practice is taking place in the United States.

**Conclusion**

TRA adoptees are seen both as outsiders—the racialized “other”—and as the poster children for transracial adoption discourse. The mutability of the changing identities of adoptees are seen by the adoption world and their birth culture as White, while they are seen by the larger society as the racialized “Oriental.” The changing representational image of Asian adoptees as the idealized image of TRA/IA, on the one hand, is used to justify continued practice; however, as they grow, they lose their honorary membership status of belonging to the dominant culture and are transformed into the “other.” Their image fluctuates with the changing discourse on IA/TRA adoption.

By engaging in innovative discussions on racial and ethnic identity, adoption and racialization issues affecting adoptees can present a more comprehensive framework for understanding how adoptees make sense and place meaning on their experience. As social workers, we must look beyond the surface and ask critical questions to fully understand the complex and multidimensional issues affecting TRA Asian adoptees (e.g., what may appear as adjustment from the outside world does not necessarily reflect the internal mental state). In order to de-construct our understanding of Asian adoptee identity, we need to incorporate differing experiences through personal narratives, thereby instigating new knowledge.

Surprisingly, family practices have been remarkably similar in that no differences have been found between participants who were adopted in the 1960s versus those adopted in the 1980s: In both periods, adoptees were socially and culturally isolated,
lacking in connection with their birth culture. It is also remarkable how the participants held onto White identity as a way to mediate their sense of belonging (which speaks to the powerful pull of needing acceptance). The participant, who had been adopted at an older age and who clearly had memories of living in her birth country with her birth family, lost her birth identity within a year of her adoption, perceiving herself as White. This speaks to the adoptees’ incredible ability to adapt to their new environments and the resiliency of their spirit to survive despite tremendous loss.

As adoptees, we are all on our own journey of self-discovery, and for some, the journey has just begun. Power is found in our ability to make our own choices and decisions about how we want to define our identity. For the TRA adoptees, initially self-worth was drawn from early experiences; however change was eventually sought when conditions became no longer tolerable to our senses; as adoptees, we struggled through internal conflict, finally coming to terms with our sense of self.

This study exemplified the strength and resiliency of the human subject, moving from isolation and pain to self-acceptance. The participants’ ability to share information to guide future generations and the development of revolutionary programs and services, all was due to the adoptees’ speaking out. Since the 1980s, countless numbers of resources/services sprang up to meet the growing needs of the maturing group of Asians and the young generation of adoptees. As a result, a host of culture camps developed, in part to engage children with their birth cultures (McGinnis, 2007). Technology served as a powerful connective tool in bringing together the widely dispersed adoptee population: disseminating information, providing support groups and conferences, sharing research interests, and conducting birth searches.
Personally, this has been an emotional journey. This research project took a lifetime to complete, as I struggled to contain all the emotions related to my own feelings of abandonment and loss, and the search for a place of acceptance. Through this journey, I discovered that kinship is developed through mutual understanding, shared history, and in the ability to share experiences. As adoptees, our strength is drawn from each other. There was a sense of knowing that transcended verbal communication. At times, the presence of another adoptee evoked painful memories of our own and the constant pull between wanting connections, yet fearful of that connection due to potentially opening up hidden emotions buried deep in the crevices of our psyche.
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APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. Please describe your childhood experiences.
   a. Please describe any memories prior to adoption.

2. Please describe your relationship with your adoptive family.
   a. How would you describe your childhood?
   b. Describe your community environment
   c. Describe how and if your family discussed adoption
   d. Describe how you and your family identified you as a child
   e. Describe any culture-related events you were involved in as a child
   f. Describe any family traditions and/or practice that impacted how you saw yourself as a child.

3. Please describe how you saw yourself at various developmental stages (age 5, 10, 15, 20).

4. Please describe if you had experiences of racism and how you dealt with those issues during different times in your life (ages 5, 10, 15, 20).

5. Please describe what effect (if any) media images (e.g., TV, movies, magazines, internet) have on how you saw yourself.

6. Please describe your social relationships with peers, community, and family members.

7. Please describe any challenges you faced in getting a sense of racial and ethnic identity.

8. Please describe when you started to notice differences between yourself and family members and/or peers.

9. Please describe your current relationship with your family members and peers.

10. Please describe your overall adoption experience.
APPENDIX B. DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

1. Gender: Female:______ Male:______
2. Age:________
3. Age at adoption: __________
4. Where were you adopted from?________________________________________
5. Do you have any siblings?                    No_______              Yes________
   If yes, how siblings do you have?________
6. Parents age at your adoption_______________
7. Educational level:
   Did not graduate High School_________ High School Graduate/GED_______
   Some College _______ Bachelor’s Degree _______ Master’s Degree _______
   Ph.D. _______ Other ________
8. Marital Status: Single_____ Married _____ Divorced _____ Separated _____
   Domestic partner _______ Other_______
9. Income:               Less than $25,000 ___ $26,000-$45,000_______
                      $46,000-$65,000_____$66,000-$85,000______
                      over $86,000 ______
10. Occupation:________________________________________________________
11. Describe your race/ethnicity?________________________________________
12. What is the ethnicity/racial background of your adoptive parent(s)?
   Mother:________________________ Father:______________________
APPENDIX C. CONSENT FORM

A Phenomenological Study of Racialized Experiences of Asian Adult Adoptees

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of the study is to gain greater understanding of the racialization experiences of adopted persons who were adopted from Asia and grew up in the United States. For the purpose of this study racialization refers to the social practices of assigning racial and/or stereotypical categories to an identified racial/ethnic group in the United States. Hence this study will specifically focus on racial issues by getting at first hand experiences of adoptees by examining past and present accounts of racial experiences during different stages of development. Furthermore, this study is to better understand the individual’s life experiences as an adopted person. The benefits to participants are that they could gain greater understanding of their experience as an adopted person by sharing their experiences both positive and negative. Information gained from this study could contribute to the general knowledge about the experiences of the adopted person including what issues and/or concerns prospective adoptive parents should be aware of when pursuing international adoption. In addition, adopted persons could advocate for appropriate and relevant information and/or services from adoption agencies from the knowledge gained from this study.

This study is being conducted as a partial requirement for a doctorate degree in social work from the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver. Cindi Kim will conduct this study. The results of the study will be used to fulfill a doctoral requirement and to gain greater understanding of adult adoptees’ racialization experience in the United States. Cindi Kim can be reached at 303-304-7756 or by email at ckim2@du.edu. This project is supervised by the dissertation chair, Enid Cox, Ph.D., Graduate School of Social Work, University of Denver, Denver, CO 80209, 303-871-4018, email address: ecox@du.edu.

Participation in this study will be conducted through face-to-face interviews and it could take 1 or 3 hours, during the course of 1 to several sessions depending on the interview needs. Participation will involve responding to number of questions about racialization experiences as an internationally adopted person. The risks associated with this project are minimal. Participation in this project is voluntary and you may refuse to answer any questions that may make you feel uncomfortable including filling out the demographic questionnaire. If you experience discomfort at any time during the interview you may discontinue your participation. Refusal to participate or withdrawal from participation will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Your responses will be kept confidential and no one other than the researcher, Cindi Kim will have access to your responses. All audio taped interviews and questionnaires will not have any identifying information. All audiotapes and demographic information will be used only for the purpose of this study. However, there are two exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. First, if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities. And second, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena.

In order to ensure that no one other than the researcher has access to the interview information, the researcher will transcribe all audio taped interviews. All information including audiotapes and demographic information will be destroyed after the completion of data analysis. You will
receive a written feedback on the results of the study, which will not be available until the completion of data analysis. The date of the data analysis is expected to be completed by end of April 2010.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated during the interview, please contact Susan Sadler, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-3454, or Sylk Sotto-Santiago, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at 303-871-4052 or write to the University of Denver, Office of Research and Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO 80208-2121.

_I have read and understood the forgoing descriptions of the adoption study. I have asked for and received a satisfactory explanation of any language that I did not fully understand. I agree to participate in this study, and I understand that I may withdraw my consent at any time. I have received a copy of this consent form._

_I understand that there are two exceptions to the promise of confidentiality. If information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide or child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities. In addition, should any information contained in this study be the subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena._

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<th>Signature</th>
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I understand that the interview will be audio taped.

_______ I agree to be audio taped.

_______ I do not agree to be audio taped.

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<th>Signature</th>
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APPENDIX D. INTRODUCTORY LETTER

Hello,

My name is Cindi Kim and I will be conducting a research study as a partial requirement for a doctorate degree in the Graduate School of Social Work at the University of Denver.

I would like to invite you to participate in a research study. This study attempts to gain greater understanding of the racialization experiences of Asian adult adoptees in the United States. For the purpose of this study, Asian adult adoptees is defined as those who are aged 25 years or older, who are racially and ethnically Asian, were born in Asia, and brought into the United States for the purpose of adoption. Racialization refers to the social practices of assigning racial and/or stereotypical categories to an identified racial/ethnic group in the United States. Hence, this study will specifically focus on racial issues by getting at first hand experiences of adoptees by examining past and present accounts of racial experiences during different stages of development. Furthermore, this study is to better understand the individual’s life experiences as an adopted person.

Participation in this study will be conducted through one or more face-to-face, phone and/or email interviews. The interview process could take 1 or more hours, during the course of 1 to several sessions depending on the interview needs. Participation will involve responding to number of questions about racialization experiences as an internationally adopted person.

Information gained from this study could contribute to the general knowledge about the experiences of the adopted person including what issues and/or concerns prospective adoptive parents should be aware of when pursuing international adoption.

If you are interested in participating in this study or know of someone who may be interested in participating, please contact me at 303-304-7756 or by email at: ckim2@du.edu.

Thank you,

Cindi Kim
### APPENDIX E

**RACIAL AND ETHNIC STUDIES ON TRANSRacially ADPOPTED (TRA) AND INTERNATIONALLY ADOPTED ASIAN ADULTS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Author(s) and Date</th>
<th>Sample</th>
<th>Methods, Measures, and Purpose</th>
<th>Findings</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| Baden (2002)       | Included 51 TRA/IA Asian, Latino, and African American adopted adults; age range: 19-36 | Quantitative; cross-sectional survey, MEIM-R (Revised to include additional items to access cultural-racial identity) cultural and racial identity measures, demographic form. Exploratory and to determine and applicability and efficacy of the Cultural-Racial Identity Model | • No significant psychological adjustment related to cultural-racial identity  
• Adoptees identified more with parents’ culture than own ethnic culture  
• Ethnic and racial identity highly correlated  
• Adoptees’ identification with parents’ culture correlated with less distress |
## APPENDIX E
RACIAL AND ETHNIC STUDIES ON TRANSRACIALLY ADOPTED (TRA) 
AND INTERNATIONALLY ADOPTED ASIAN ADULTS

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| Basow, Lilley, Bookwala, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi (2008) | Included 83 TRA/IA Korean adoptees; age range: 18-37 | Quantitative; survey administered through website, MEIM scale measured ethnic identity, socio-demographic form. Ryff’s scales of psychological well-being, the Emotional Reaction Scale – to measure adjustment to adoption, Adoption Loss Scale – to assess adoptees’ adoption-related loss, the Multicultural Experience Inventory - to measure exposure to cultural diversity | • Ethnic identity scored positively higher on both personal growth and self-acceptance  
• Strong ethnic identity related to exposure to diverse Asian cultures  
• Self-acceptance related to positive adjustment to adoption |
## APPENDIX E
### RACIAL AND ETHNIC STUDIES ON TRANSRACIALLY ADOPTED (TRA) AND INTERNATIONALLY ADOPTED ASIAN ADULTS

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| Brooks & Barth (1999) | Included 244 adoptive parents of TRA Asian & African American, & White adult adoptees; mean age: 24.7. | Quantitative; cross-sectional, comparison survey, (follow up to initial study conducted in 1977); Global Assessment Scale and survey questions regarding adjustment, behaviors, ethnic identity and experience of discrimination. | • Approximately 50% reported discomfort over physical appearance, although they had strong racial/ethnic identification;  
• Most (67%) adoptive parents of TRA/IA Asian adoptees classified as having good adjustment;  
• 48% of parents of Asian children replied that their children had never been discriminated against due to their ethnic background. |
| Donald B. Evanson Adoption Institute (2009) | Included 468 TRA/IA Asian adult adoptees and domestic same-race adoptees; 18 + age group. | Mixed methods; comparison study – web-based survey; focus on interphysic processes of identity formation – when was ethnic/racial identity most important – differences between White and Asian adoptees; developed survey instrument – indicating past and present accounts of adjustments; Family of Origin Scale, MEIM, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, Satisfaction With Life Scale. | • Race trumps adoption for TRAs due to visibility factor – bringing race to the forefront;  
• 80% of adoptees reported discrimination from strangers, 75% reported disc from peers, and 39% reported race based discrimination from teachers;  
• 78% reported that they considered themselves as or wanted to be White as children; most shifted their identity later in adulthood, often due to more interaction with other COC.  
• Adoptees stressed importance of attending racially diverse schools, living in neighborhoods representative of more diverse role models;  
• Feelings of isolation: “I was the diversity in my high school.” (p. 6);  
• 34% reported that they still felt uncomfortable with their physical appearance at the time of the study. |
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<td>Feigelman (2007)</td>
<td>Included 43 adoptive parents of TRA Korean, African American, Vietnamese, Columbian, &amp; White children; mean age 23</td>
<td>Quantitative; long-term follow up (initial study began in 1975 with 737, second survey in 1980-81 with 372, and most recent study conducted in 1993 with 240); purpose to compare and contrast adoptees in early adulthood years, assessment of adoptees’ behaviors.</td>
<td>• All information was supplied by the adoptive parents; • Asians were least likely to have seen a counselor; • Asian adoptees exhibited fewer problems than African American adoptees; • Children who grew up in more diverse environments felt more comfort with ethnicity compared to isolated environments; • 47.7% of parents reported that their children never experienced racism due to their ethnic heritage; • 31.9% reported that their children only experienced problems due to race less than two times; • 46.6% reported that their children never expressed discomfort with their physical appearance.</td>
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| Freundlich & Lieberthal (2000) | Included 167 TRA/IA Korean adoptees; age range: 21-47 | Qualitative, cross sectional, descriptive survey; opened ended questions on life experiences, ethnic identity, and discrimination experience; sample drawn from conference attendees; included small group discussions. | Survey Results:  
• 36% identified as White whereas 42% identified as Korean/Asian while growing up;  
• As an adult, 78% identified as Korean/Asian and 11% identified as White;  
• 70% reported experience of discrimination due to race;  
• Only 33% reported that parents helped with developing healthy ethnic identity;  
• Majority reported identity still a work in progress;  
• Majority expressed their wish that adoptive parents had been better prepared and more aware before pursuing adoption and that they (the adoptees) had been raised in multicultural environment  
Small Group Discussions:  
• Experiences of racism pervading many aspects of their lives;  
• Themes of loss and abandonment due to adoption;  
• Celebrated the resiliency of the human spirit – ability to cope despite difficult challenges;  
• Continued feelings of loss and pain, and feelings of abandonment from birth family;  
• Distrust of adoption agencies. |
# APPENDIX E

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<td>R. M. Lee, Yoo, &amp; Roberts (2004)</td>
<td>Included 67 TRA/IA Korean adoptees, age range of 18-47 with mean age of 27.25; and 84 non-adopted Korean Americans, age range of 18-28, with mean age of 21.18.</td>
<td>Quantitative; comparison study of adopted with non-adopted Korean Americans’ ethnic identity development; MEIM, Perceived Discrimination Scale, Positive Affect Negative Affect Schedule, Satisfaction With Life Scale, and Hopkins Symptom Checklist-21; ethnic identity development related to psychological adjustment.</td>
<td>• Adoptees had lower levels of ethnic identity clarity compared to counterparts; • No difference of ethnic engagement between two groups; • Adoptees had less opportunity to explore ethnic culture; • Adoptees’ had higher levels of ethnic identity confusion; • Feelings of pride in own ethnic group correlated with life satisfaction; • Ethnic identity not related to psychological adjustment.</td>
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| Meier (1999)      | Included 23 TRA/IA adult Korean adoptees; age range 19-35. | Qualitative; life histories through semi-structured interviews with mature adult adoptees who are able to self-reflect, including development during different stages of life (childhood-adolescence-college – early adulthood). | • Most adoptees were preoccupied with fitting into a social group and being a ‘regular’ American kid during the first phase of adoption; they avoided thought of Korea or being Korean;  
• Limited contact with other POC; most grew up in small towns/suburbs; only other contact was with another Korean adoptee;  
• Experienced varying levels of racism from childhood to adulthood;  
• Most questioned whether they were Korean enough – feelings of disconnect;  
• Not fitting in anywhere was a common theme;  
• Lack of acceptance from the Korean culture  
• Some homes growing up in isolated areas – celebrated K culture – idealized and later reality of social acceptance from Korean culture did not match  
• Some felt “saved” from the conditions of Korean orphanages;  
• Korean Americans place negative judgments on adoptees – no acceptance;  
• Many felt it important to grow up in diverse ethnic neighborhoods;  
• Identity as “hyphenated” American because born in Korea but raised in White homes – not feeling they... |
belonged anywhere – internal conflict because not accepted into White culture but raised in it;
• Negative views of Korean society because of patriarchal practice;
• Affected by gender stereotypes – sexualized women, emasculated men;
• Most avoided contact with other students of color Most Korean adoptees resisted parent’s attempt to cultural soc. because societal socialization, but wished now that the parents pushed harder [it’s a matter of choice for Whites not for Asian Americans];
• Entering college often meant moving away from home – In college environment, exposed to diverse groups and safety of adoptees to explore for people of color culture is “lived in everyday life,” (p. 24);
• Attempt to total immersion – denial of own culture.
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| Mohanty, Keokse, & Sales (2006) | Included 82 TRA/IA Asian adult adoptees, age range: 18-44. | Quantitative; cross-sectional; web-based survey; survey questions included self-esteem, belongingness and ethnic self-perception, cultural socialization; demographics; hypothesis: Parental support for cultural socialization related to higher levels of self-esteem in IA/TRA adoptees. | • Parental support of cultural socialization correlated significantly with self-esteem, mediated by sense of belongingness;  
• Cultural socialization not correlated with ethnic identity;  
• “Results showed that aspects of ethnic identification mediated the effects of cultural socialization on self-esteem among Asian-born intercountry adoptees” (p.166);  
• Feeling isolated or different - very common for adopted IA/TRA, however the mediating condition is if the parents support cultural socialization;  
• Living in diverse cultural environment correlated with less feelings of marginalization and higher self-esteem. |
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| Shiao & Tuan (2008) | Included 58 TRA/IA Asian adult adoptees, 25+ age.                     | Qualitative; semi-structured interviews with Korean adoptees during their early adulthood; purpose to assess motivation of Korean adoptees engaged in ethnic exploration in early adulthood. | • Ethnic exploration was dependent on adoptees’ racial visibility and opportunity for exploration;  
• Some adoptees, in order to elevate themselves socially, separated themselves from the general Asian American populations;  
• Adult adoptees often used stereotypical attitudes of Asians in order to differentiate themselves to their peers;  
• Adoptees had experienced limited social acceptance as children, which compelled them to explore their racial identities as adults;  
• Those who explored their ethnicity were dependent on accessibility to cultural opportunities;  
• Those acculturated into the White group explored less than those exposed to diverse populations. |
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<td>Shiao and Tuan (2007)</td>
<td>Included 60 adopted and non-adopted Korean Americans; 25+ age</td>
<td>Qualitative; comparative study between Korean adoptees and non-adopted Asian Americans with immigrant parents; conducted in-depth interviews; purpose to assess (a) coping skills when faced negative stereotype images, (b) how identity shifted as a result of interaction with other communities of color, (c) at what point do adoptees identify with certain social groups. Process of developing ethnic identity negotiated racial/ethnic identities in their public and private lives over time in comparison with Asian Americans with immigrant parents</td>
<td>• Process of developing healthy racial/ethnic identity often began once the adoptees moved away from their adoptive parents, and an opportunity presented itself through contact with the Asian American community (such as in a college or university setting); • Results were mixed between those adoptees who felt uncomfortable being around other Asian Americans, often exhibiting stereotypical attitudes towards Asians and disassociating themselves from them, versus those who became fully immersed into the Asian American community; • Asian American parents who are immigrants have limited understanding of what it means to be a racial minority in the United States and therefore lack political knowledge of Asians’ racialization and its consequent impacts; • Asian parents taught their children to follow societal rules without assimilating into the society while maintaining their cultural heritage.</td>
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| Song & Lee (2009)  | Included 67 TRA/IA Korean adoptees; age range 18-49 with mean age of 27.25. | Qualitative; open-ended questions regarding different cultural socialization experiences; MEIM; Purpose to examine past & present accounts of cultural experiences and ethnic identity relation to cultural socialization | Preliminary Findings:  
  - Different cultural activities have varying level of effect on identity development;  
  - Ethnic identity correlated with cultural experience and helped to “negotiate one’s multiple identities as a person of color” (p. 30).  
  - Superficial cultural activities (food, art, martial arts, texts) had little affect on ethnic identity;  
  - Living in diverse neighborhoods mediated ethnic identity. |
Developing Self-Perception: The Adoption Experience

- Social Environment
- Family Discussion about Adoption
- Exposure to Birth Culture and Cultural Activities
- Relationship with Family and Peers
APPENDIX F: THEMATIC CHARTS

Self-Perception: The Racialization Experience

- Racialization Experience as Children and Adults
- Coping Strategies
- Impact of Media Images
- Meaning of Whiteness
- Discussions about Race and Ethnicity at Home
APPENDIX F: THEMATIC CHARTS

Social Isolation

Disconnected Experience

Essential Feelings and Struggle for Belongingness

Feelings of Abandonment from Birth Family

Feelings of Abandonment from Birth/Adoptive Culture and/or Country

Feelings about Self

Sense of Emptiness and Void

Feelings toward Others

Feelings toward Birth/Adoptive Family and Culture
APPENDIX F: THEMATIC CHARTS

Journey of Self-Discovery

- In Search of Self
- Finding Place of Acceptance
- Identity as an Adult
- Search for Connections
- Meaning of Identity/Self-Acceptance
APPENDIX F: THEMATIC CHARTS

- Family and Peer Relationships
- Feelings toward Adoptive Parents
- Partner Choice
- Sense of Awareness
- Self-Acceptance/Appreciation for Life Experiences
- Thoughts about IA/TRA

Awareness, Empowerment, and Acceptance