

‘I’m the Centre Part of a Venn Diagram’:

Belonging and Identity for Taiwanese-Australian Intercountry Adoptees

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Abstract

Intercountry adoptees face many challenges in developing their identity and achieving a sense of belonging in post-assimilation Australia. This study uses a constructivist approach to analyse narrative interviews with a sample of Taiwanese intercountry adoptees in Australia ranging in age from early adulthood to middle adulthood. Social identity theory and postcolonial theory are used to frame thematic findings about the impact of micro, meso and macro influences on identity development and belonging. The article concludes with discussion of the importance of analysing the impact of colonisation and broader societal discourse in social work practice when working within the adoption sector.

Keywords:

Intercountry adoption, adoption, ethnic identity, ethnic socialization, belonging, Australia, Taiwan

Introduction

Intercountry adoptees can face obstacles in developing a positive identity and sense of belonging, particularly in relation to ethnic identity (Murphy et al., 2010). Intercountry adoptees typically have a different ethnicity to their adoptive parents and are often a minority ethnicity within their adoptive society, which can lead to issues for identity development and belonging (Ben-Zion, 2014). While ethnic identity is usually defined as the self-identification in an individual's ethnic group (Montgomery and Jordan, 2018), this identification process is much more complicated for adoptees. Intercountry adoptees often have a bicultural identity, where they identify with both their birth culture and adopted culture (Scherman, 2010), yet due to limited access adoptees may not know *how* to identify with their birth culture. The level of security in intercountry adoptees' bicultural identity can impact their wellbeing, psychological adjustment and sense of belonging in their adopted family (Montgomery and Jordan, 2018).

Influences and interactions at the level of society, schools or communities and the family collectively impact upon the development of an adoptee's identity. This can be understood through the application of social identity theory and postcolonial theory. Social identity theory postulates that an individual's membership to a particular group greatly impacts belonging and identity and that individuals choose to identify with groups that are valued in society (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). Postcolonial theory seeks to examine the permeation of colonialist attitudes and discourse within contemporary society (Mayblin, 2017). It posits that race is socially and politically constructed to maintain the subordination of non-white subpopulations (Kim, 2012). These theories can be applied to better understand the obstacles in adoptees' identity development and sense of belonging on a familial, community and societal level.

Raising intercountry adoptees to have a secure, positive identity and sense of belonging, is integral to their wellbeing. The identity development of intercountry adoptees, however, is

highly complex and involves the influences of greater social discourses, community, peers and family. While these dynamics have been examined in the past, most of the scholarship on identity and belonging focuses on intercountry adoption in the US (see Baden, 2015; Simon and Altstein, 2002; McRoy, 1991; Soon and Reid, 2000) or Europe (see Bagley, 1993; Ben-Zion, 2014; Deguchi, 2013; Hübinette and Tigervall, 2009). Focusing on Australia, this paper aims to investigate the unique social and political factors which shape intercountry adoptees' understanding of ethnicity and identity, examining the impact of parents, peers and society on their understanding of self. Providing new insights to the research literature that has primarily depended on American and European samples, our empirical analysis draws upon narrative interviews with Taiwanese intercountry adoptees in Australia, who ranged in age from early adulthood to middle adulthood.

Intercountry adoption in Australia

Intercountry adoption in the Australian context refers to the legal adoption of a child from another country by an Australian citizen or permanent resident (Department of Social Services, 2018). Intercountry adoption in Australia emerged in the late 1960s, and grew in proportion of overall adoptions over the subsequent decades as domestic adoptions declined. Since the late 1960s, there were 10,221 intercountry adoptions to July 2008 (Rosenwald, 2009) and a further 1,470 to July 2019 (AIHW, 2019). The first official intercountry adoptions took place from Vietnam. A group of 292 children arrived in 1975 as part of 'Operation Babylift' (Martin, 2014). These adoptions occurred at a time when the 'White Australia' immigration policy limiting non-European immigration was changing and there was the beginning of more accepting attitudes towards multiculturalism (Moran, 2011). In parallel with observed global trends among receiving

countries (Selman, 2012), intercountry adoptions in Australia peaked in 2004 at 434 and has steadily declined to a low of 57 in in 2018-2019 (AIHW, 2019). The continuing decline of intercountry adoptions is attributable to improvements in the economic and social development of sending countries as well as the tightening of adoption procedures in sending and receiving countries, in line with widespread implementation of the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption (Hilferty & Katz, 2019).

While Australia has an active intercountry adoption program that includes countries in Europe, South America, and Africa, the majority of intercountry adoptions come from Asia. The primary sending countries have changed over time. From 2006-2011, China or the Philippines were the leading countries of origin. From 2012-2018, this shifted to Taiwan or the Philippines. In the most recently reported year (financial year 2018-2019), the most common sending country was South Korea (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2019). In 2018-2019, 57 intercountry adoptions were processed in Australia of which 15 were from Taiwan (AIHW, 2019).

This paper focuses on adoptees who originated from Taiwan and were adopted in Australia. Between the two countries, 386 adoptions¹ are recorded, with the majority of these adoptions having occurred since 2005. The practice of intercountry adoption in Taiwan originated with faith-based organizations, established as branches of U.S. non-governmental organizations during the 1950s and 1960s. Opposed to growing numbers of abortions among unwed women and teenagers, these organizations shared the mission of supporting women to complete their pregnancies and place their newborns for intercountry adoption. Intercountry adoption was seen as a solution for the shame and stigma of unwed motherhood, with adoption

¹ Calculated based on Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) Adoptions Australia data collection.

perceived as offering a better future (Lai & Yang, 2012). Prior to child welfare reforms initiated in the mid-1980s, adoptions in Taiwan were often arranged privately, often involving secrecy or even human trafficking. An estimated 26 children were adopted from Taiwan to Australia in the early 1980s organised by lawyer Julie Chu, who was convicted by Taiwanese authorities of illegally obtaining babies and fraudulently registering these births to unrelated households (International Social Services Australia, 2013). Following a period of economic growth and decreased birth rate in Taiwan, legislative child welfare reforms were implemented between 1985 and 2012 (Wright et al., 2020).

A major concern raised about intercountry adoption involves racial and cultural identity. Adoptive parents, in Australia and other Western ‘receiving’ countries, are primarily white, while the majority of children from ‘sending’ countries are of colour. The move from one country to another means that children are generally raised without contact with their birth family and exposure to language or culture of origin. They have little or no choice in this change in status, from “fitting in to standing out” (Anderson, 2014: p. 7; see also Yngvesson, 2000; Castaneda, 2002; and Kim, 2010). While this is also an issue raised in relation to transracial domestic adoptions (Vonk et al., 2010), intercountry adoptees have less direct access to their culture of origin due to geographic distance and therefore may experience greater challenges related to identity formation and feelings of isolation (Kirton, 2000). Moreover, white parents are likely to be unprepared to educate their adopted children about racism.

Australian society has been characterised as transitioning from a legacy of Anglo domination and cultural superiority to gradual acceptance of multiculturalism, not unlike other settler societies with recent substantial immigration (Forrest & Dunn, 2006). Prior research, including surveys of the public, have identified Asian-Australians as an ‘out-group’ of “key

Others to the Australian national imagination” who face intolerance (Dunn et al., 2004: p. 412) and are perceived as less Australian than White migrants even if they display assimilation with the national culture (Thai et al., 2020). Physical appearance may be the strongest signifier in constituting who is perceived as Australian - what Andrzej Gwizdalski (2014) called ‘visual belonging’ (see also Ang, 2001). Asian intercountry adoptees in Australia are likely to face challenges with developing their ethnic identity and confronting racism in different societal contexts.

Challenges in identity development for adoptees

Identity formation is one of the chief developmental goals of childhood and adolescence.

Bronfenbrenner (1979) highlights the importance of relationships and environment on human development, from those that are closest to the individual at the micro level (e.g., family), the overlap between environments at the meso level (e.g., overlap between peers and schools) and the societal context at the macro level (which includes dominant attitudes and values). Garcia Coll and colleagues (1996) draw attention to how environments may be promotive or inhibitive towards the outcomes of ethnic minority children in terms of how they relate to each other.

Promotive environments protect children from racism and discrimination as well as hold norms that are consonant (e.g., family and school mirror similar expectations and values). Inhibitive environments, on the other hand, expose children to incongruence (e.g., where family and school cultural values conflict).

There are multiple influences on ethnic identity, which occur on a micro, meso and macro level, and may operate differently for intercountry adoptees in transracial placements. Micro influences include the role of parents and family in identity development. Meso influences include community socialisation and group identity. Macro influences include greater social

processes and discourses that indirectly impact identity development (Kirk and Okazawa-Rey, 2010). In the following section micro, meso and macro level influences are considered and also used to scaffold findings.

Macro influences on identity development

Greater social contexts and discourses can significantly impact adoptees' identity and sense of belonging (Ben-Zion, 2014). Racism is entrenched in Australia white settler history (Jayasuriya et al 2003). In the 1850s, the first wave of Chinese immigrants to come Australia were viewed as 'other' and discriminated against by white settlers (Ferguson 2007). In 1901, the newly formed Australian federal parliament introduced the Immigration Restriction Act which formally established the 'White Australian' Policy. This policy systematically discriminated against non-British immigrants and specifically against Asian immigrants. Immigrants were expected to abandon their ethnic cultures and languages and assimilate into the Australian way of life, to maintain an Australian identity that was based on Anglo-European ancestry (Atkinson, 2015). These policies were dismantled in the 1970s, and in line with other countries such as Canada, the 1970s also witnessed the start of a formal and state-promoted multiculturalism. Scholars define this shift as part of a symbolic politics that redefines the nation as inclusive and heterogeneous (Ang 1996). In this sense, the ideology of multiculturalism became core to the new Australia and enjoyed support from governments across the political spectrum. While the 1990s encouraged migrants to retain and celebrate their cultures and exhorted Australians in general to value cultural diversity, tensions existed with prior notions of Australia as a White British society.

Applying postcolonial theory, Australia's historic racially discriminatory immigration policies and residual assimilationist attitudes are reflected in contemporary perceptions of Western culture and whiteness as the norm within Australian society, with non-white Australians perceived as foreign (Hatchel, 2008). For intercountry adoptees, being perceived as an immigrant despite their social and cultural acculturation into their adopted society can greatly influence their identity and sense of belonging (Ben-Zion, 2014). Intercountry adoptees are often viewed as migrants from their birth country, who are "kinned and incorporated" into a local family (Marre, 2009: p. 239). Intercountry adoptees' identity can be linked to the postcolonial theoretical concept of 'hybridity', defined as a new identity that emerges within postcolonial societies, that does not fit wholly into traditional identities (Ang, 2001). This applies to intercountry adoption, where adoptees are neither completely accepted by their adoptive culture or their birth culture (Ben-Zion, 2014).

Research on intercountry adoption has demonstrated that, because of racial othering, intercountry adoptees struggle to assert the legitimacy of their nationality and identity in countries like Australia where that identity is associated with whiteness (Ben-Zion, 2014; HübINETTE and Tigervall, 2009). Asian intercountry adoptees in the Australian context are often assumed to have migrant identities, revealing the rigid understanding of Australian identity as strictly Caucasian. Intercountry adoptees often absorb the negative social attitudes towards their ethnic/racial group, which can lead to internalised oppression (Baden, 2008). The difficulties intercountry adoptees face being ethnically different to their parents and community can lead to the incongruence of feeling white but having a different appearance. Conversely, knowing little about one's birth culture can lead to exclusion by their birth culture group (Armstrong and Slaytor, 2001). In Armstrong and Slaytor's (2001) study of Australian intercountry adoptees,

almost all participants reported experiencing racism, with some reporting feelings of dislike to their own ethnicity. This study demonstrates the impact of racialized and postcolonial constructions of intercountry adoptees as ‘other’, despite their Australian upbringing.

Meso influences on identity development

Peers and community play an integral role in identity development, with both positive and negative outcomes depending on the nature of the relationship. Young East-Asian Australians are reported to experience disproportionately high amounts of racism from their peers, demonstrating the persistence of racism in contemporary Australian society (Priest et al., 2019). Experiencing racism from peers can lead to identity conflict, where individuals consciously or subconsciously reject their Asian identity, instead preferring to identify with mainstream white society. Belonging in a multicultural community or Asian community, however, is a positive contributor to ethnic pride, identity and cultural knowledge (Kim, 2012). This notion is supported by Long and Gale’s (2017) study of Australian intercountry adoptees, where connection with the adoptee’s birth culture community or adoptive community positively impacted their sense of belonging. The influence of peers thus plays an integral role in the development of identity and belonging for intercountry adoptees.

Micro influences on identity development

Adoptive parents can play an important role in exposing intercountry adoptees to positive aspects of their birth culture, in order to foster a healthy bicultural identity and self-esteem, particularly in the context of postcolonial constructions of race (Bailey, 2007). Adoptive parents are themselves socialised into their roles, largely through the training, interviews and other

requirements to become approved for an intercountry adoption. As part of this process, prospective adoption parents are required to complete educational sessions, which include content on “cultural and ethnic identity issues that may arise and the importance of the adoptive child’s identity” (Intercountry Adoption Australia, n.d.). These sessions often feature adoptive parents and adopted adults sharing about their experiences. Tefler (2003) noted, during the lengthy intercountry adoption approval process, an ‘imagined child’ is constructed, in which the government and brokers such as social workers help to constitute notions of the child and the parents’ role. For some, this may be a process of reflection and personal growth, as they contemplate the role of parenting a child through intercountry adoption. Moreover, the state has a selective role in choosing who among prospective adoptive will be able to form their families through intercountry adoption (Young, 2012), demonstrating the link back to the macro level of policies and dominant social attitudes.

Methods

The current study aims to examine the attitudes of adult Taiwanese adoptees to their ethnic identity formation, using a postcolonial framework and Tajfel and Turner’s (1986) social identity theory. Ecological levels (micro, meso and macro) are used to consider levels of identity development influences (see Figure 1), in combination with the Garcia Coll et al. (1996) integrative model for the study of developmental competencies in minority children to consider how influences at the different levels relate to each other.

This analysis reports on part of a larger study that focuses on intercountry adoption between Taiwan and Australia, as a context in which to explore perspectives on openness and connection. The study examines the attitudes of adoptees and adoptive parents in Australia, birth mothers in Taiwan, and adoption professionals in both countries towards connection and

openness with family and culture of origin in intercountry adoption between the two countries.. Unlike the stark differences in development between many sending and receiving countries, both countries are considered to be advanced and high income (World Bank, n.d.). Popular access to technology including high speed internet and relative geographic proximity may reduce some of the potential barriers for interaction between birth families, adoptive families and adoptees. While Taiwan is not a signatory to the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, because it is not recognised as a country by the United Nations, it has a bilateral agreement with Australia that complies with Hague Convention standards (Australian Government, n.d.). Findings about adoptees, adoptive parents and birth mothers' perspectives on connection and openness in adoptions are reported in Wright et al., 2020 and findings on post-adoption services in intercountry adoptions based on the perspectives of adoption professionals from Taiwan and Australia are reported in Lin et al., 2020. This portion of the project focused on the research question: What are the factors that influence identity development and belonging for Taiwanese adoptees in Australia?

In 2018, the research team conducted 11 interviews with Taiwanese adoptees via phone, 'Zoom' video calling and in person. The research was approved by the [Redacted for peer review]. Adoptees were recruited via social media, with information posted to adoption-specific Facebook groups, and through snowballing techniques where participants shared study information with other adoptees they knew. Participants were aged between 20-50 years old and were adopted between the 1970s and 1990s, with majority of the sample adopted in the 1990s (see Table 1). Participation by the 11 adoptees, all of whom were adopted no later than the decade of the 1990s, represents a high proportion of the earlier adoptions from Taiwan.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Semi-structured, narrative-based interviews were used, as this approach allows for the research participant to describe their own understanding of personal events and experiences (Andrews, Squire & Tamboukou, 2013). Open-ended questions asked participants to share their adoption story in narrative form, with a set of prompts that covered influences on cultural identity and sense of belonging. Interviews were recorded and transcribed professionally. Interviews were then coded and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2012) six phase method of thematic analysis. The first phase involved gaining familiarity with the data. Codes were then created and identified. Phases three and four involved searching for greater themes within the codes and creating theme maps. In the last two phases themes were organised into broader categories and quotes were selected that exemplified the themes. Pseudonyms are used to protect confidentiality. These are randomly selected names corresponding with the first 11 letters of the alphabet (A-K), to represent the sample. The non-gender specific pronoun 'their' is used.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

The project employed an exploratory narrative methodology. In contrast to a fixed interview agenda that may impose the researchers' constructed view of a phenomenon, narrative interviewing encourages the participant to identify aspects of their situation that hold significance to them (Riessman, 2008). Through the vehicle of personal narrative, opportunities for corresponding social narratives may emerge. It may be argued that adoption sits within these two spheres; as a deeply personal experience that is undeniably socially, culturally and politically defined. Furthermore, narrative research has the potential to reduce power differentials between researcher and participant. Stemming from humanist and poststructuralist traditions, narratives may even challenge existing discourses and structures of power (St Pierre and Pillow, 2000),

including those surrounding intercountry adoption.

A constructivist approach informed our data collection and analysis. Constructivism is based on the notion that individuals' worlds are socially constructed and seeks to examine how people make sense of the world through interactions with others in the context of historical and societal factors (Adom et al., 2016). Constructivist research is typically qualitative and inductive, with the researchers developing a theory based on the data collected. A constructivist approach recognises the researchers' values and perspectives as influential in the research process (Adom et al., 2016). The research team included Asian Australians, including one of the interviewers who was an intercountry adoptee, positioning the team along an insider/outsider spectrum of sharing experiences with the participants of adoption and being non-White (Breen, 2007), while not being a part of the target sample of Taiwanese-Australian adoptees.

The current research is subject to some limitations. The sample size was relatively small, which may have influenced the reliability of the findings and applicability to other Taiwanese adoptees or intercountry adoptees in general. This is a retrospective recall study, in which participants were asked as adults to reflect back on their upbringing. One weakness of this approach is that there may be inadvertent omissions or distortions, or they may see continuities, logic and associations in their experiences that were not apparent when they were young. The focus of this article is an analysis of interviews with adoptees rather than with adoptive parents, which may have offered different insights into the role of adoptive parents in identity development. Despite the limitations, the findings from the current study have implications for adoption practice, including recommendations for adoptive parents, adoption professionals and intercountry adoption policy.

Findings

The results highlight the dynamic ways in which adoptees view themselves and their identity. This can be demonstrated through the analysis of micro, meso and macro levels of socialisation (See Figure 1). The impact of racism is present throughout each of these levels, through the social attitudes to adoptees' identity, the experience of racism from peers and socialisation from parents. These factors all contribute to adoptees' sense of self and belonging.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Belonging in White Australia: societal influences on identity development

Societal context plays a significant role in the development of cultural identity. Racism and negative attitudes towards Asian culture are still present in post-assimilation Australia and manifests itself in different ways, as highlighted by the participants' varied experiences and understandings of belonging and their identity. The findings revealed adoptees' understanding that society views an Australian upbringing as superior to a Taiwanese upbringing, which highlights postcolonial perceptions of Western culture as superior to non-Western cultures. Societal rejection of Asian-Australian identities made it difficult for adoptees to achieve a secure sense of self.

Adrienne explained:

There's that assumption that my life would have been absolutely dreadful (in Taiwan) and I feel like saying, "Are you a clairvoyant?" Because no one knows for sure. And I'm not saying that my life wouldn't have been different; of course it would have been culturally, linguistically, socially. Of course it would have been, because it would have been a different country. But here in Australia when people tell adopted children, "You should be so grateful," how does that fit in with the Australian ethos, "Fair go, mate"?

This highlights the societal perception of a Taiwanese upbringing as inferior to an Australian upbringing. Adrienne narrates postcolonial assumptions of Caucasian-Australian cultural superiority and how this is in contradiction with Australia's facade culture of egalitarianism. The postcolonial moment is captured here geopolitically, for *where* one ends up (in the Global North) seems more important than *with whom* one ends up (van Wichelen, 2019a).

Bernie further highlights the societal perception of Western culture superiority, through their retelling of a narrative they encountered: "*[An adoptive parent] found out that [the birth] parent wanted their child back and she goes 'No, that child's mine. The child's better with me than in a rice paddy field in Taiwan.'*" Bernie's remark highlights the language of humanitarianism that is central to postcolonial narratives legitimizing international adoption. Humanitarian action (both Christian and secular) informed cross-border adoption practice and signified a politics of redemption and compassion (van Wichelen, 2019a).

Achieving a sense of belonging in Australia, was a challenge raised by almost all adoptees. Adoptees reported discomfort with their Asian identity, as they did not fit into the stereotypical Caucasian Australian phenotype. Justin highlights the dominance of whiteness in Australia and the discomfort of being Asian in this context:

I didn't hate the way I looked, but I didn't like looking Asian either. So, during the '90s, being a teenager and looking Asian and looking different in, you know, what was predominantly White Australia, yeah, I didn't like that, I didn't, you know, the typical Australian is blonde haired, blue eyed and I didn't look like that.

This demonstrates the difficulties of having an Asian appearance in a society where whiteness is normalised.

The normalisation of a Caucasian Australian identity was revealed in adoptees having to explain their identity. Typically, adoptees raised the issue of not feeling fully accepted as Australian and having to constantly respond to questions about their identity. This form of racial othering challenged adoptees' self-perceived identity of being Australian. This is exemplified by Kelly's statement: *"It's a very frequent thing that people ask, "What's your nationality?" and I say, "I'm Australian" but then they look at you and think you don't look Australian."* This demonstrates their perception that society does not accept them as Australian based on their physical appearance and ethnicity, rather than where they grew up. Adoptees reported experiencing discomfort as a result of these interactions. Eileen described their emotional response to Caucasian Australians constantly questioning their identity: *"It almost feels like they're kind of attacking you,"* highlighting the microaggressions that result from racial othering (Zhang et al 2019). Adrienne conveys the frequency of their experiences of ethnic othering and lack of acceptance in Australian society: *"I can count on my hands the number of times in my life... where I have been just Australian and nothing else."*

Some adoptees experienced dissonance, where they did not feel comfortable expressing their Asian or Australian identity. This shows how bicultural identity and identification with birth culture is not straightforward and can even be problematic. Bernie highlighted their desire to disassociate from Asian people: *"I wouldn't take photos in [Major City] when I was visiting with my friends because I didn't want to look like a Japanese tourist."* This comment suggests a desire to distance oneself from the stigma they believed was associated with Asians. Moreover, these forms of disassociation demonstrate the difficulty of bi-culturality. While adoptees recognise that they look different from (Caucasian) Australians, they do not necessarily feel

different from them, or want to identify with Taiwanese culture or some form of 'Chineseness' or 'Asian-ness'.

Thus, despite Australia's public policy of multiculturalism, the historical 'White Australia Policy' remains entrenched in contemporary Australian social consciousness. This manifests in Western culture superiority and the understanding of what it means to be Australian, which poses a challenge for non-white adoptees' sense of belonging.

Discrimination and belonging: peer impact on identity development

Peers can greatly impact the identity and sense of belonging of individuals (Kim, 2012). Adoptees typically experienced racism from peers on varying levels. This manifested in both overt and covert racism as well as intentional and unintentional racism. Racism tended to occur more in adoptees' childhood years and in environments that were predominantly Caucasian. Adoptees also reported positive impacts of peers on identity development, specifically from being involved with adoptive and Asian communities. The findings highlight the importance of promotive environments that reinforce positive messages about cultural difference, among schools, peers and community groups. The findings also highlight the importance of recognising and addressing racism, which can be reinforced in ways subtle and overt, creating inhibitive environments, which can have harmful ramifications for identity, belonging and wellbeing.

Throughout all age demographics, adoptees reported experiencing racism. Ivan, one of the younger participants, commented on the presence of overt racism in their life and in greater Australian society:

People just making comments, slurs, like, oh, it's your eyes of [sic] it's your yellow skin or it's – yeah, it's anything like that, of course, which can trigger you but, as many might know, in Australia racism is actually very present.

This highlights the pervasive racism within Australian society that continues to discriminate against Asian Australians in the 21st century. Adoptees generally experienced this racism during the earlier years of their childhood. Dean inferred the lack of Asian students in their primary school led to increased bullying: *“There wasn't [sic] many Asian kids in my primary school. You get the normal like slanty eyes, chingchong China, that kind of thing. But kids are ruthless. They'll say whatever they want.”*

The positive impact of connecting with an Asian or multicultural community was discussed by a number of adoptees. This increased their sense of belonging and normalised a non-white Australian identity. Harris described the benefits of growing up in a multicultural environment: *“My primary school was mixed cultures... I wasn't bullied in the racial sense at all from anyone because we were all different and we had a multicultural open school so that was not a worry for me.”* Bernie described the positive experience of immersing themselves in an Asian community later on in life: *“Do you know what, I didn't even really learn to love Asians until I lived amongst the Asian race which is only five, six years ago.”* This theme demonstrates the importance of proximity to ethnic Chinese communities, and exposure to multicultural or Asian societies on the understanding and acceptance of self and identity.

Similarly, engaging with adoption communities was also described as a positive experience by some adoptees. Dean described their feeling of belonging in the adoption group: *“But one thing is with our group, the [Taiwanese adoption] group, we always have that weekend together which is – I don't know, we feel like we all belong together, because we've all been*

adopted.” Eileen explains the impact of knowing other adopted people throughout their childhood, describing their relationship with a Sri Lankan adoptee: *“I saw him sometimes when I was young and we would play together so I think that helped me... knowing that it was okay to be a little bit different.”* This highlights the positive impact of connection to other adoptees and how this normalises adoptees’ identity. Thus, despite the experience of racism from peers for most of the research subjects, involvement in a multicultural community or adoptive community can aid adoptees in achieving a sense of belonging and identity.

Fostering bicultural identity: parental impact on identity development

Parents play an integral role in cultural identity development of adoptees. Adoptees reported different ways parents contributed to their sense of identity and belonging. Parents typically attempted to engage adoptees in Taiwanese culture and multiculturalism. Their lack of understanding of Taiwanese culture presented as a barrier to meaningful engagement and the development of a positive racial-ethnic identity. Instead, some adoptees reported identifying with their parents’ cultural identity, over a Taiwanese identity.

Some parents utilised a number of strategies to introduce multiculturalism and Taiwanese culture. Eileen described how their parents introduced them to multiculturalism from an early age through play: *“[Adoptive parents] were also very open to multicultural and that sort of thing because I used to have this [doll] and it was a dark-skinned one. And I remember being like, “Why do I have to have this one?”... [They were] casually teaching me about being multicultural and things like that.”*

Adoptive parents can play a key role in introducing adoptees to Taiwanese culture. Parents in the current study who adopted children in the last two decades typically made some attempt to do this, using a variety of methods, such as having cultural artefacts around the house,

eating Taiwanese food, celebrating Taiwanese festivals, buying their child traditional Chinese clothing and visiting Taiwan. Kelly described their parent's strategy of introducing Taiwanese culture at their own pace:

I feel like my parents have always been there for me, they've always supported it (cultural expression). They've never been like, "Do this, do that, believe in this way or this culture." I've never felt that way and they've never pressed it upon me that, "You have to have it in your life and you don't have to have it." I think it came from me that this is what I would like to explore, this is what I would like to show.

Not all adoptees had a positive experience with their parent's attempts to engage them in Taiwanese culture. A recurring theme within this group was that the parent's lack of understanding of Taiwanese culture made it difficult for adoptees to engage in the culture.

This was mentioned by Eileen:

They tried to introduce me to it all and help me be as culturally aware as I could but it's also very hard for them because... they're Caucasian and they've never experienced anything different so it's hard to kind of educate your child in their culture if you're not really familiar with it to start with... I didn't feel a great sense of connection because it kind of was new to everyone... it felt kind of like posed.

Some adoptees reported they identified strongly with their adoptive family, including their adoptive parent's cultural background. Caitlin described the cultural influences of their upbringing as coming from their parents' Italian and Irish heritage, as well as Australian and Taiwanese culture.

Parents play a critical role in the development of adoptees' cultural identity, however not all attempts were successful in engaging adoptees to develop a secure bicultural identity. The

most successful attempts, according to the adoptees in our sample, were those that fostered meaningful relationships with people from that culture, who may serve as cultural mentors to the adoptive person. These relationships may come about in the context of community settings such as schools, churches, playgroups and other community groups, demonstrating the value of actively seeking out promotive environments that reinforce positive messages about the adoptees' cultural identity.

Peer relationships with other families who have adopted children from the same country can also encourage efforts towards cultural connection. Ivan shared about their experience of having a group of family friends who had also adopted children from Asia:

Everyone wants to feel a part of something. And you do feel a part of the family who has adopted you, but at the same time I feel personally growing up having this adopted group I felt a part of that. I wasn't alone. Like I said, all the [people] in that group we've almost formed this feeling of being [siblings] together and always being there for each other. And I think that that bond is formed through adoption, but never really spoken about too much amongst us.

Ambivalence with bicultural identity: understanding of self

Typically adoptees reported experiencing issues or discomfort with their bicultural identity. Many reported a dissonance between their appearance and their cultural identity. This posed an issue for effective cultural identity development, particularly within post-assimilation Australia.

Greta described their understanding of themselves, highlighting the difference between their physical appearance and identity:

I look Asian, but I don't feel it. ...Because I don't speak the language and when I talk [with people speaking] Indian, Mandarin or another Asian language, it feels very foreign... I don't feel like them.

Caitlin highlighted the difference between their publicly perceived self and their identity:

I feel when I'm out and about with strangers, or just generally in the public, I'm the centre part of a Venn diagram, I'm not in the circle that is labelled 'Asian' and I'm not really 100% in the circle that's labelled 'Australian'.

This demonstrates the adoptees' difficulties understanding their identity, due to a conflict between self-perception and societal perception.

The older adoptees (Adrienne, Bernie & Justin) tended to report more negative experiences regarding identity insecurity and a lack of belonging. Justin described the dissonance between their perceived self and actual self: *"I always described myself as feeling like I was wearing a costume, like, I was Australian, but then I had this mask on that people would perceive me in a different way."* This highlights the impact of the strict Caucasian Australian identity on Justin's perception of self. Adrienne reported a similar experience of a feeling of dissonance between their identity and perceived self, describing themselves as, *"like a monkey in a circus, like a freak show."* This demonstrates the discomfort Adrienne experienced in conceptualising their identity.

Discomfort with a bicultural identity can also impact adoptee's health and self-esteem.

Bernie highlighted the impact of their identity issues on their wellbeing:

"I had issues, like I became a drug addict and other things, but I would never at the time attribute it to my adoption. I was just being a tool and having identity issues but not realising until later on what that could be probably nailed down to a little bit more."

Through this quote, the harmful ramifications of identity dissonance and a lack of belonging are exemplified. The experience of racialized difference could make it difficult for Taiwanese adoptees participating in this study to form a secure and congruent sense of self, with negative impacts on self-esteem and wellbeing.

Discussion

Through the analysis of identity and belonging in intercountry adoptees, the impacts of assimilationist attitudes can be examined on a societal, community and familial level. The findings support previous research, where societal attitudes towards Asian Australians shaped the way Asian adoptees view themselves (Ben-Zion, 2014). As with Feast et al's (2012) British Hong Kong study, a retrospective study of a sample of middle adulthood adoptees, the experience of racism was common, as was the feeling at points over early life of wanting to look less Chinese. A survey of 179 Korean adoptees also found that 3/4 of the participants reported that racial discrimination occurred with moderate to heavy frequency over their childhoods and the same proportion sometimes felt, or wished to be, white (McGinnis et al., 2009). Similar to previous studies, the narratives of adoptees revealed the influences of their community contexts on shaping perceived identity (Long and Gale, 2017). Adoptive parents also had the potential to positively influence identity development, by supporting adoptees to engage with their culture (Ferrari et al., 2015).

Influences on the adoptees' lives at the micro, meso and macro levels related to each other in complex ways. These findings point to the importance of messages from different environments (e.g. communities, schools) and relationships (e.g. peers and parents) and how these interact. Where these different influences mirror each other in positive messages about the adoptees' ethnic identity, the congruence among these environments can be promotive of

positive ethnic identity for intercountry adoptees. In particular, adoptees who experienced multicultural school environments that embraced diversity, relationships with Asian peers, friendships with other intercountry adoptees and parents who integrated practices about the child's cultural into their daily life (e.g. through language study, food, and other methods) reported a greater sense of comfort with being Asian Australian. Connection with multicultural or Asian communities fostered ethnic pride, a positive identity and increased cultural knowledge (Kim, 2012). Adoptees in this sample who experienced inhibitive environments that reinforced racism experienced in the macro culture within their schools, communities, and even families, with older adoptees in particular describing practices that ignored their ethnic differences or focused upon them and led them to feel ostracised. Clashes between environments was also described as undermining cultural identity development; for example, receiving positive messages about one's culture from family while being bullied about it at school. The experience of racism can have harmful effects on adoptees' understanding of their social and cultural identity, which can lead to negative self-esteem (Kim, 2012).

The identity of adoptees in the current study conforms with the postcolonial construction of a 'hybrid' identity, whereby individuals do not fit fully into either category of Western or non-Western (Ben-Zion, 2014). Ang (2001) argued that individuals with a hybrid identity can experience belonging issues in societies that have strict dualist boundaries of East and West, such as contemporary Australia. From a social identity theory perspective, adoptees' rejection of their Asian/Taiwanese identity was caused by a social perception that an Asian identity is inferior to a Caucasian identity (Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The racism adoptees experienced denoted this perceived inferiority. This is complicated however, as adoptees also reported experiencing rejection from an Australian identity, excluding them from identifying with the

socially perceived 'valuable' identity. The findings demonstrate the difficulties adoptees faced when securing a positive and congruent sense of self and belonging, with the older adoptees experiencing more difficulties related to their identity. From a postcolonial analysis, this can be viewed as the assimilationist attitudes being more prevalent in Australian society in the 1970s and 1980s when the older adoptees were adopted, than they were in the 1990s and early 2000s. Overall, the results of the current study indicate that post-assimilationist attitudes to an Australian identity make it difficult for Taiwanese adoptees to secure a positive sense of self and belonging.

Conclusion

Experiencing racism was common across the sample, from teenagers to middle-aged adults in their 50s. Often these are the subtle forms of racism manifest in misrecognition, where community members routinely question 'where are you from?' (Koskinen 2015). Despite having an Australian accent, adult adoptees noted that this was a frequent question put to them, asking them to account for how they fit in as an 'Australian' when they look 'Asian'. Other Asian-Australian adoptees also report frequently being questioned about where they are from (see, for example, first-hand accounts from adoptees in *Colour of Time*), a constant reminder that they are not seen as belonging in the country where they have lived the majority of their lives (Walton, 2009). For these Taiwanese adoptees growing up with predominately white Anglo Australian parents means their Asian ethnic identity and adoptive status is evident and cannot be concealed. Some adoptees in our sample commented that they did not tell their parents about experiences of racism.

Rather than the onus being on the adopted person to manage such encounters, it is important for adoptive parents to be supported to know how to create an environment open to

conversations about race and identity. This might include ways in which the adoptive family see themselves as a mixed-race family, or collectively work on an “adoptive family identity” (Tan & Liu, 2019). The majority of adoptees’ parents attempted to engage them in Taiwanese culture, which research has demonstrated can improve intercountry adoptee’s self-esteem and lead to a positive ethnic identity (Chen, 2016; Ferrari et al., 2015; Long and Gale, 2017). Yet there were substantial barriers due to adoptive parents’ lack of knowledge and understanding of Taiwanese culture. Forming relationships with Taiwanese people can create opportunities for cultural mentoring for the adoptee and adoptive family. Adoptees have identified building ongoing relationships with peers and role models who share the same cultural background as most helpful in supporting their cultural identity (McGinnis et al., 2009).

Social workers can play an integral role in promoting intercountry adoptees’ development of a positive ethnic identity, through assessing potential adoptive parents’ ability to foster a cultural identity and educating adoptive parents about ethnic identity development (Bailey, 2007). Adoption professionals can educate parents about the impact of past assimilation policies on contemporary Australian society and how this impacts adoptees’ sense of self and belonging. Intercountry adoptees need to receive more validation for their Asian Australian identity and be raised in an environment that values their birth culture, which can be facilitated by connecting adoptees to multicultural, Asian and adopted communities. This connection normalises adoptees’ identity as non-white Australians, allowing them to achieve a secure sense of self and belonging. Adoptive parents need to connect to their children’s birth cultures in meaningful ways, to avoid the tokenistic engagement with their adopted children. Social workers can encourage adoptive parents to foster this connection, by offering training and highlighting the value of fostering positive ethnic identity. Social workers can also be part of a growing international debate that is

framed by post-colonial questions of whether the practice of intercountry adoption primarily serves wealthy childless couples in the Global North, while discounting Global South concepts of care and kinship (van Wichelen, 2019b) and consideration of local alternatives that would keep children within their birth country and culture.

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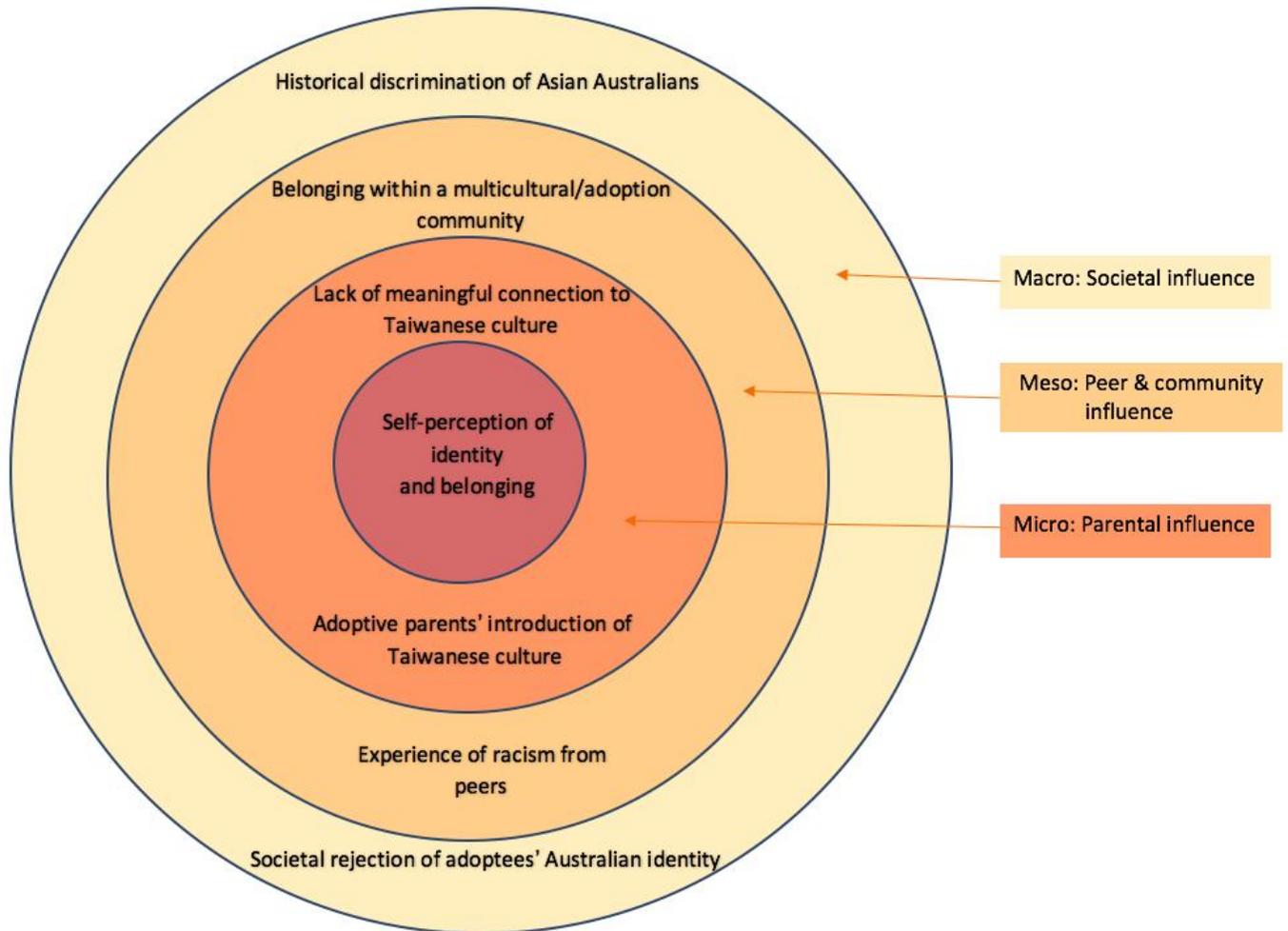
Table 1.

Sample characteristics

Characteristic		Number of participants	%
Gender	Male	4	36
	Female	7	64
State to which they were adopted	New South Wales	7	64
	South Australia	3	27
	Victoria	1	9
Era of adoption	1970s	1	9
	1980s	2	18
	1990s	8	73

Figure 1.

Levels of identity development influences.



Note. Each circle represents a different level of society and the factors within these levels that contribute to identity development.