

Lost Between Two Cultures:
Construction of Ethnic Identity in Korean Adoptees Adopted Into American Families

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ABSTRACT

Finding a sense of belonging is difficult for a child. With international adoption, do the adoptees find it challenging to belong to a group? Through a survey distributed online to Korean adoptees of American families, this study examines how Korean adoptees ethnically identify and the factors that influence the ethnic identities within this population. Evidence suggested that Korean adoptees were struggling with their ethnic identification, and that parents' emphasis on Korean culture, as well as acts of discrimination and prejudice against the adoptee, affected ethnic exploration and identification.

What happens when people of different ethnicities live together as one family? How do children adopted by parents of another ethnicity determine what ethnic group they belong? According to Nagel (1994), ethnicity results from “a dialectical process involving internal and external opinions and processes, as well as the individual’s self-identification and outsiders’ ethnic designations” (p. 154). At such a young age, it is difficult to gain a sense of ethnic belonging. Children whose race and ethnicity differs from their parents have an even harder time finding where they fit in. In today’s society, adoption of children by parents of a different ethnicity is more common than in the past. “Approximately 80 percent to 85 percent of international adoptions are transracial, and approximately 40 percent of all adoptions in the United States are transracial” (Baden, Treweeke, and Ahluwalia 2012:387). Researchers can look to these families to observe the effects of mixing different races and ethnicities.

There have been previous studies performed that research the construction of ethnic identities of international adoptees, including some specifically about Korean adoptees. This research project will add to the existing data and literature by providing more knowledge of influences on ethnic identities. The main theme of this study will focus on the factors that influence the ethnic identities of Korean adoptees, such as parents’ emphasis on Korean culture, and experiences of prejudice or discrimination because of their perceived race. It will also consider the identities claimed by respondents. Do the Korean adoptees see themselves as Korean, American or a mixture of both? This study will show that Korean adoptees adopted into American families are struggling with their ethnic identities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Transracial and Multiracial Adoptions

Ishizawa et al. (2006) argue that if children are adopted at a young enough age, their individual notion of cultural difference may be eliminated unless the parents make a conscious effort to incorporate their birth culture. Thus, the decision of how to raise the adopted children causes parents to include race and ethnicity as factors in their decision of who to adopt (Ishizawa et al. 2006).

When exploring parents and their willingness to explore ethnicity with their children, research shows that parents are more likely to acknowledge the ethnic differences of their Korean adoptees rather than the racial difference (Tuan and Shiao 2011). The parents explored ethnicity with their children, but “generally did not take steps to create a racially aware family setting or...provide their children with opportunities to explore their racial backgrounds” (p.65). Most children are left on their own to handle complicated situations where their race came into play. Their observations on race and ethnicity, be it through personal interactions or external sources such as the media, affected whether they saw themselves as members of a community or as outsiders. (Tuan and Shiao 2011) The authors also argue if Korean adoptees in their early adulthood are given the resources, most will explore their ethnicity. School settings were often places where the Korean adoptees in their study experienced opportunities for ethnic exploration. The experiences Koreans had while learning about their birth culture affected whether they felt comfortable to continue. Lastly, “the opportunities that adoptees pursued or did not pursue in early adulthood had significant bearing on whether they explored later in life” (Tuan and Shiao 2011:112). However, the Korean adoptees who never explored or discontinued their exploration

still expressed an interest in learning about their ethnic background and a frustration in their lack of opportunities to do so.

Researchers have found that white mothers' attitudes affect how they raise their adopted children (Johnson et al. 2007; Crolley-Simic and Vonk 2011). Johnson et al. (2007) explored parents' emphasis on ethnic pride, heritage, and diversity, defined as "cultural socialization/pluralism," as well as messages the mothers gave to their children regarding discrimination, defined as "preparation for bias" (Johnston et al. 2007:391). The authors concluded many factors influence the racial, ethnic, and cultural socialization practices of these mothers. The strength of the mother's connection to her white identity may lead to negative effects regarding cultural socialization/pluralism and preparation for bias. Crolley-Simic and Vonk (2011) suggested that parents who do not identify with their adoptee's race or ethnicity may have difficulty preparing their child for the stigmas of being of a different race. By contrast, a mother's connections to Asian Americans through a sense of closeness or through seeking information about Asians or Asian Americans also influences her socialization practices. "Mothers who feel connected to Asian Americans may be more likely to engage in cultural socialization/pluralism and preparation for bias" (Johnson et al. 2007:392). Another important influencing factor is the age of the transracially adopted children and their understanding of their adoptive status, as well as the concept of race. The children's age influenced what the mother taught in regards to racial bias and how often she socialized her children. The authors argue the amount could be based on the mothers' belief about their children's ability to understand information about racial bias at certain ages (Johnston et al. 2007).

Between Cultures

The majority of transracial adoptions involve white parents adopting children of a different race, born either within the United States or from another country (Baden, Treweeke, and Muninder 2012). According to Baden et al. (2012), children become aware of racial differences at a young age. They are forever associated with their birth culture by appearance, even though the majority of adolescent adoptees assimilate into the white culture of their adoptive parents (Baden et al. 2012). As they grow older, however, they attempt to “bridge the gap between their expected and their lived cultures” (Baden et al. 2012:388). The authors argue that the terms previously used to describe the constructs for cultural adaptation and cultural change do not accurately represent this process, and instead introduce a new term: *reculturation*. They use this term to describe the process transracial and international adoptees go through in order to “acculturate to or to reclaim a culture that is not the same as their adoptive parents’ culture nor is it dominant in their lived environment” (Baden et al. 2012:389). The adoptees can undertake this process through many activities associated with their birth culture, such as education in ethnic studies or study abroad experiences.

Kearly (2002), a Korean adoptee, published a personal account of being raised in a White family that provides an example of being between cultures. His parents downplayed Kearly’s cultural and racial differences. Yet, other people enforced stereotypes based on his Asian appearance. The author was expected to be the over achieving, well-behaved student based on the model minority myth. Kearly was disgusted by this role and longed to be included with his white classmates. The author did not feel a sense of belonging to either culture. Appearance barred acceptance into the American culture of Kearly’s white family, and lack of personal attachment to Korea barred acceptance into Korean culture associated with birth in that country.

Lee (2006) argues, “embedded in this societal ambivalence is the covert pressure that coerces individuals to choose either-or between American and Korean cultures” (292). Korean Americans are either more American or more Korean, and there is an implicit judgment that it is better to move toward the dominant culture. Anyone in between Korean culture and American culture is deemed to be in cultural transition. The author argues that the people in this cultural transition are part of the “1.5 generation” (Lee 2006:293). The 1.5 generation Korean Americans feel marginalized by both cultures, often resulting in confusion of their identities. Adoptees are similar to the 1.5 generation Lee discusses, and face a similar situation of being in between both Korean and American cultures. Kim, Suyemoto, and Turner (2010) argue Korean adoptees must navigate between two reference groups. The adoptees are influenced by their white, European American families, as well as Korean Americans who live with their racial and ethnic group. Although both reference groups influence Korean adoptees, they are not fully accepted by either. Having an ascribed racial identity of Asian because of their physical characteristics separates the adoptees from European Americans in society. However, fluency of the Korean language is one of the most salient markers of cultural knowledge since a shared language is a marker for ethnic boundaries. Since most Korean adoptees lack this fluency and knowledge, they are disqualified from full acceptance by Korean Americans (Grace et al. 2010). This non-acceptance is how Peter Kearly described his feelings about navigating between the two cultures.

Alternative Research: Adoptees are Well Assimilated

Other research suggests that Korean adoptees may not struggle with their ethnic identity. Kim (1995) argues that, regardless of age, Korean adoptees are adapting better than adoptees of other ethnic groups, including white U.S.-born adoptees. The author also states that the majority of Korean adoptees are not overly interested in their heritage during their adolescence and young

adulthood. “They may be so well integrated that they may not face the psychological dilemma of identity formation, especially ethnic identity” (Kim 1995:152).

Concluding Remarks

Overall, research is divided on whether Korean adoptees are assimilating well into the United States. One group of researchers argue that Korean adoptees are struggling with determining their ethnic identities, while Kim (1995) claims that Korean adoptees are integrating themselves into American society with little or no worry over their ethnic identity. This study will contribute to the existing literature by examining the identity construction of Korean adoptees by American families.

THEORY

Berger and Luckmann’s Social Construction Perspective

Berger and Luckmann (1966) are the first sociologists to challenge the idea of a structurally determined identity by theorizing that identity is socially constructed. The two theorists argue that social processes not only form identity, but also continue to shape the identity once constructed. Berger and Luckmann (1966) state that identities also modify or maintain the social structure around them. They argue that the formation and maintenance of identity occurs “within the framework of the theoretical interpretations within which it and they are located” (p. 175). Identity then depends on the different social contexts people live in, such as the environments from primary socialization and secondary socialization. Thus, there is a relationship between identity and the surrounding social structure, and “specific historical social structures engender identity types” (Berger and Luckmann 1966:174). They conclude different identity types can be observed and verified. Thus, people who have a certain identity, such as an

American identity, can be verified as members of that identity type by performing particular behaviors expected of that specific identity.

Constructing Ethnic Identity More Specifically

The identity optional-situational perspective “conceives of ethnic identity as an ongoing process in which individuals or groups see themselves, and define themselves with respect to others” (Danico 2004:52). In this view, ethnic identity is an ongoing process influenced by interactions with other individuals and encounters with different situations. This emergence of new identities is normal in multi-ethnic societies where individuals encounter people from diverse backgrounds. Individuals come to “anticipate and deal with changes in self-definition and redefinition of others as an instance of emergent meaning and as a usual feature of collective life” (Danico 2004:53). Consequently, individuals can switch and choose their identities at any given time.

Ethnic Layering

According to Danico (2004), both primary and secondary socialization are part of the social construction process. The family, as the primary agent of socialization, has the most important impact on ethnic identity. Danico (2004) argues that parents of the 1.5 generation consisting of children who immigrated from Korea to the United States at a young age, teach their children the norms and values that is part of their cultural heritage and also the beliefs of the mainstream culture. Parents may choose to stress their ethnic cultural traditions, influence the children to adapt to mainstream culture, or instill knowledge about both cultures to their children. This decision by parents is one socialization factor that can influence an individual’s ethnic identity. Secondary socialization comes from those outside of the immediate family, such as school systems or peer groups. Danico (2004) finds members of the Korean 1.5 generation also

form their identity based on their personal experiences and the way people react towards them. Furthermore, ethnic identities vary based upon the meanings individuals attach to different interactions. The 1.5 generation is similar to Korean adoptees since the adoptees also immigrated from Korea to the United States at a young age. However, there is a difference since the adoptees did not continue to live with their Korean parents, but joined a family within the mainstream culture.

Nagel (1994) uses a social constructionist framework to argue “one’s ethnic identity is a composite of the view one has of oneself as well as the views held by others about one’s ethnic identity” (p. 154). An individual may have multiple ethnic identities that are more or less salient depending on the situational context. For Nagel, “this produces a ‘layering’ of ethnic identities which combines with the ascriptive character of ethnicity to reveal the negotiated, problematic nature of ethnic identity” (p. 154). One example of this layering of ethnic identities Nagel discusses is Asian Americans.

Nagel draws upon Espiritu’s (1992) work to describe the ethnic identities of Asian Americans. “While the larger ‘Asian’ pan-ethnic identity represents one level of identification, especially vis-à-vis non-Asians, national origin (e.g., Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese) remains an important basis of identification and organization both vis-à-vis other Asians as well as in the larger society” (Nagel 1994:155). Layering creates sometimes problematic multiple ethnic identities for individuals born in one country, but living in another. Individuals must decide which ethnic identity to use at any given moment based on context and the response to classifying themselves one way or another. “Individuals choose from an array of pan-ethnic and nationality-based identities, depending on the perceived strategic utility and symbolic appropriateness of the identities in different settings and audiences” (Nagel 1944:155).

Applying Social Construction Perspective

Social construction perspective provides a theoretical framework for understanding the formation of ethnic identity. Much of the previous research focuses on the immigrant generation or 1.5 generation. This project will apply this theoretical frame to the formation of an ethnic identity for children born in one country and adopted by parents living in another country. This research here uses social construction theory to analyze the process of shaping and reshaping ethnic identities of individuals born in Korea, and adopted into white families living in the United States.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Participants were Korean adoptees adopted into American families. To participate, the Korean adoptees were required to be 18 years of age or older and have lived in the United States for at least 7 years prior to this study. There were a total of 30 complete responses.¹ The ages ranged from 19 to over 50 years. There were 20 females and 10 males total in the study, and the participants were spread across 18 states, as well as two other countries. Only one participant was not adopted by white parents, and all adoptive parents were married at the time of the adoption.

Survey Method

This study consisted of a survey constructed and distributed through an online service called Survey Monkey. The survey included multiple choice questions and open ended questions. The first set of questions dealt with demographic information, followed by questions related to the participants' adoptions. The next set of questions inquired about the participants' current

¹ Four responses were marked as incomplete since some of the required questions were left unanswered. These responses were removed from the study.

knowledge of Korea, and future desire to learn about their birth country. Finally, the survey addressed the adoptees' knowledge and perception of their ethnic identity. Participants were recruited from online sources such as Yahoo chat groups, with a majority of the responses resulting from a Facebook group for Korean adoptees.

Independent Variables

The independent variables of this study included demographics such as age, educations, and religion, as well as other factors pertaining to adoption. One important factor was the parents' emphasis on Korean customs, language, or food. Two other key questions on the survey addressed prejudice and discrimination. The adoptees were asked if they had ever encountered prejudice (attitudes) or discrimination (behaviors) because of their perceived ethnic or racial status.

Dependent Variables

The dependent variables in this study were measured with questions according to three categories. The first category contained questions attributed to the adoptees' curiosity about Korea and birth parents. The survey asked whether they had ever taken any courses on Korean culture or language, if they wanted to visit Korea or if they wished to visit in the future, and if they wanted to learn more about Korea. The second category pertained to the adoptee's opinions on how much emphasis the parents placed on Korean culture. Lastly, for the third category of questions the adoptees were asked to classify themselves as American, Korean, or Korean American. None of the above and depends on the situation were also given as options to this question.

Data Analysis

This study utilized quantitative methods. The statistical software SPSS was used to graphically show the percentages of responses to certain questions, perform cross tabs and show associations between the independent variables and dependent variables. Responses to open ended questions were used only to further support evidence gathered from the answers to the closed ended questions.

FINDINGS

Parents' Emphasis on Korean Culture

Table 1a presents the relationship between parents' emphasis on Korean culture and the curiosity of the Korean adoptees.

Table 1a. Relationship Between Parents' Emphasis on Korean Culture and Adoptees' Curiosity²

	<u>Parents Emphasized Korean Culture</u>		Total
	Yes	No	
Adoptee's Curiosity (yes responses)			
Taken Class on Korean Culture	5 (29.4%)	0 (0%)	5 (16.7%)
Taken Class on Korean Language	5 (29.4%)	5 (38.5%)	10 (33.3)
Have Visited Korea	11 (64.7%)	8 (61.5%)	19 (63.3%)
Wish to Visit Korea	17 (100%)	12 (92.3%)	29 (96.7%)
<u>Want to Learn More</u>	<u>17 (100%)</u>	<u>12 (92.3%)</u>	<u>29 (16.7%)</u>
Total N	17	13	30

The results show if parents placed any importance on Korean customs, language, or food, then the adoptees were more curious about their birth culture, but were less likely to actively search for courses on Korean culture or language. This is evident by comparing the low percentages of all adoptees who have taken a class on Korean culture or language to the high

² The percentages do not add to 100 percent because each row is a separate question on the survey.

percentages of all adoptees who wished to visit or learn more about Korea. Parents’ emphasis on Korean culture did not seem to affect the adoptees’ curiosity except for taking a class on Korean culture. Adoptees whose parents emphasized Korean culture were more likely to have taken a class on Korean culture (29.4 percent) than those whose parents did not place any emphasis (0 percent).

Table 1b displays the relationship between parents’ emphasis on Korean culture and two dependent variables: the adoptee’s perception of the amount of emphasis their parents placed on Korean culture and the adoptee’s ethnic identification.

Table 1b. Relationship Between Parents' Emphasis on Korean Culture and Adoptees' Opinion of the Amount of Emphasis Parents Placed On Korean Culture and Their Ethnic Identification

	<u>Parents Emphasized</u> <u>Korean Culture</u>		Total
	Yes	No	
Amount of Emphasis Wanted by Adoptee (yes responses)			
Less	2 (11.8%)	1 (7.7%)	3 (10%)
Right Amount	9 (52.9%)	3 (23.1%)	12 (40%)
<u>More</u>	<u>6 (35.3%)</u>	<u>9 (69.2%)</u>	<u>15 (50%)</u>
Total N	17 (100%)	13 (100%)	30 (100%)
Adoptee's Ethnic Identification (yes responses)			
American	4 (23.5%)	1 (7.7%)	5 (16.7)
Depends	3 (17.6%)	8 (61.5%)	11 (36.7%)
Korean	1 (5.9%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)
Korean American	8 (47.1%)	2 (15.4%)	10 (33.3%)
<u>None</u>	<u>1 (5.9%)</u>	<u>2 (15.4%)</u>	<u>3 (10%)</u>
Total N	17 (100%)	13 (100%)	30 (100%)

There were significant differences between adoptees whose parents placed emphasis on Korean culture and those whose did not in terms of the amount of emphasis desired. 52.9 percent of adoptees whose parents emphasized Korean culture thought the right amount of emphasis was

given compared to only 23.1 percent of adoptees whose parents did not emphasize Korean culture. In contrast, 35.3 percent of adoptees whose parents placed importance on Korean culture wanted more emphasis to be given compared to 69.2 percent of adoptees whose parents did not place any emphasis on Korean culture.

The majority of adoptees who had parents that placed importance on Korean culture identified as Korean American (47.1 percent) compared to 15.4 percent of adoptees whose parents did not place any importance. The majority of adoptees whose parents did not emphasize Korean culture identified depending on the situation (61.5 percent) compared to 17.6 percent of adoptees whose parents did emphasize Korean culture. There were also differences in the other choices for identification between the two groups. Of the adoptees whose parents emphasized Korean culture, 23.5 percent identified as American, while only 7.7 percent of adoptees whose parents did not emphasize Korean culture identified similarly. There was a less than 10 percent difference between adoptees who had parents that placed emphasis on Korean culture and those who did not in regards to identifying as Korean and identifying with none.

Table 2a displays the relationship between the adoptees' experiences of discrimination and their curiosity about Korea and Korean culture.

Table 2a. Relationship Between Experiences of Discrimination and Adoptees' Curiosity³

	<u>Experienced Discrimination</u>		Total
	Yes	No	
Adoptee's Curiosity (yes responses)			
Taken Class on Korean Culture	4 (19%)	1 (11.1%)	5 (16.7%)
Taken Class on Korean Language	7 (33.3%)	3 (33.3%)	10 (33.3%)
Have Visited Korea	13 (61.9%)	6 (66.7%)	19 (63.3%)
Wish to Visit Korea	20 (95.2%)	9 (100%)	29 (96.7%)
<u>Want to Learn More</u>	<u>20 (95.2%)</u>	<u>9 (100%)</u>	<u>29 (96.7%)</u>
Total N	21	9	30

There are no significant differences between those who did experience discrimination and those who did not. Again, although there are no significant differences in regards to experiences of discrimination, there is a difference in percentages of those who have taken a class on Korean culture or language and those who have a desire to visit and learn about Korea.

Table 2b presents the relationship between adoptees' experiences of discrimination and the two remaining dependent variables: the adoptees' opinions on parents' amount of emphasis on Korean culture and their ethnic identification.

³ The percentages do not add to 100 percent because each row is a separate question on the survey.

Table 2b. Relationship Between Experiences of Discrimination and Adoptees' Opinion of the Amount of Emphasis Parents Placed On Korean Culture and Their Ethnic Identification⁴

	<u>Experienced Discrimination</u>		Total
	Yes	No	
Amount of Emphasis Wanted by Adoptee (yes responses)			
Less	1 (4.8%)	2 (22.2%)	3 (10%)
Right Amount	9 (42.9%)	3 (33.3%)	12 (40%)
<u>More</u>	<u>11 (52.4%)</u>	<u>4 (44.4%)</u>	<u>15 (50%)</u>
Total N	21 (100%)	9 (100%)	30 (100%)
Adoptee's Ethnic Identification (yes responses)			
American	3 (14.3%)	2 (22.2%)	5 (16.7%)
Depends	9 (42.9%)	2 (22.2%)	11 (36.7%)
Korean	1 (4.8%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)
Korean American	6 (28.6%)	4 (44.4%)	10 (33.3%)
<u>None</u>	<u>2 (9.5%)</u>	<u>1 (11.1%)</u>	<u>3 (10%)</u>
Total N	21 (100%)	9 (100%)	30 (100%)

In regards to the adoptees’ feelings towards the amount of emphasis placed on Korean culture, the majority of adoptees, regardless of experiences of discrimination, wanted more emphasis placed on Korean culture. Of those who had experienced discrimination, 52.4 percent wanted more emphasis given, while 44.4 percent of those who did not experience discrimination also wanted more. Another result to note is of the adoptees who had experienced discrimination, only 4.8 percent wanted less emphasis given compared to 22.2 percent of adoptees who had not experience discrimination and wanted less emphasis placed on Korean culture.

When looking at ethnic identification we see significant differences between adoptees who have experienced discrimination and those who have not. The majority of adoptees who have experienced discrimination ethnically identified depending on the situation (42.9 percent). This is in comparison to the 22.2 percent of adoptees who have not experienced discrimination

⁴ The percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

and identified depending on the situation. Of the adoptees who have experienced discrimination, 28.6 percent identified as Korean American in contrast to 44.4 percent of those who did not experience discrimination and identified similarly. There were little differences between adoptees that have or have not experienced discrimination in regards to those who identified as American, Korean, or did not identify with any of the choices listed on the survey.

Table 3a shows the relationship between the adoptees’ experiences of prejudice and their curiosity about Korea and Korean culture.

Table 3a. Relationship Between Experiences of Prejudice and Adoptees’ Curiosity⁵

	<u>Experienced Prejudice</u>		Total
	Yes	No	
Adoptee's Curiosity (yes responses)			
Taken Class on Korean Culture	4 (16.7)	1 (16.7%)	5 (16.7%)
Taken Class on Korean Language	8 (33.3%)	2 (33.3%)	10 (33.3%)
Have Visited Korea	17 (70.8%)	2 (33.3%)	19 (63.3%)
Wish to Visit Korea	23 (95.8%)	6 (100%)	29 (96.7%)
<u>Want to Learn More</u>	<u>23 (95.8%)</u>	<u>6 (100%)</u>	<u>29 (96.7%)</u>
Total N	24	6	30

While there were few differences between those who have experienced prejudice and those who have not, there was a difference between adoptees who have or have not experienced prejudice and being more likely to have visited Korea. Those who have experienced prejudice were more likely to have travelled to Korea after their adoption (70.8 percent) than the adoptees who have not experienced prejudice and have visited Korea (33.3 percent).

Table 3b displays the relationship between the adoptees’ experiences of prejudice and their opinion of the amount of emphasis placed on Korean culture and their ethnic identification.

⁵ The percentages do not add to 100 percent because each row is a separate question on the survey.

Table 3b. Relationship Between Experiences of Prejudice and Adoptees' Opinion of the Amount of Emphasis Parents Placed On Korean Culture and Their Ethnic Identification⁶

	<u>Experienced Prejudice</u>		Total
	Yes	No	
Amount of Emphasis Wanted by Adoptee (yes responses)			
Less	1 (4.2%)	2 (33.3%)	3 (10%)
Right Amount	12 (50%)	0 (0%)	12 (40%)
<u>More</u>	<u>11 (45.8%)</u>	<u>4 (66.7%)</u>	<u>15 (50%)</u>
Total N	24 (100%)	6 (100%)	30 (100%)
Adoptee's Ethnic Identification (yes responses)			
American	4 (16.7%)	1 (16.7%)	5 (16.7%)
Depends	10 (41.7%)	1 (16.7%)	11 (36.7%)
Korean	1 (4.2%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)
Korean American	6 (25%)	4 (66.7%)	10 (33.3%)
<u>None</u>	<u>3 (12.5%)</u>	<u>0 (0%)</u>	<u>3 (10%)</u>
Total N	24 (100%)	6 (100%)	30 (100%)

Unlike with experiences of discrimination, the majority of adoptees that experienced prejudice thought the right amount of emphasis on Korean culture was given (50 percent), while none of the adoptees who had not experience prejudice thought that the right amount of emphasis was given. Instead, the majority of those who had not experienced prejudice wanted more emphasis on Korean culture by their parents (66.7 percent) compared to 45.8 percent of the adoptees who had experienced prejudice. Only 4.2 percent of adoptees who have experienced prejudice wanted less emphasis compared to 33.3 percent of those who have not experienced prejudice.

The majority of adoptees that had experienced prejudice ethnically identified depending on the situation (41.7 percent). In contrast to 16.7 percent of adoptees that had not experienced prejudice. The majority of those who have not experienced prejudice identified as Korean

⁶ The percentages may not add to 100 percent due to rounding.

American (66.7 percent), while of the adoptees who have experienced prejudice, 25 percent identified as Korean American. The last significant difference between those that have experienced prejudice and those that have not can be witnessed with the adoptees who did not identify with any of the choices listed on the survey. Of the adoptees that have experienced prejudice, 12.5 percent did not identify with any of the choices listed on the survey, while none of the adoptees who had not experienced prejudice chose the same response. There were no major differences between those that have experienced prejudice and those that have not in regards to the adoptees that identified as American or Korean.

DISCUSSION

Crolley-Simic and Vonk (2011) discussed the possibility of parents having difficulty preparing their children for the stigmas of being of a different race, and that parental emphasis placed on ethnic pride, heritage and diversity affects the child's preparedness as well. This is evident when looking at the relationships between experiences of discrimination and prejudice and amount of parental emphasis on Korean culture wanted by Korean adoptees. The majority of participants who experienced discrimination wanted more emphasis to have been placed on their Korean culture from their parents. The findings for prejudice did not follow this pattern. More adoptees who had not experienced prejudice wanted more parental emphasis on Korean culture (66.7percent) compared to the 45.8 percent of adoptees who had experienced prejudice. This is opposite of what was expected. The findings for discrimination show the Korean adoptees who dealt with discrimination felt that more emphasis would have been useful to have.

Danico (2004) suggested that the parents' decision to instill a part of their cultural heritage into children could influence an individual's ethnic identity. The responses in this study support this claim. The respondents who had parents that emphasized Korean customs, language

or food were more likely to identify themselves as Korean American. Thus, they felt some sort of bond, even if it was a slight connection, to Korean culture.

Tuan and Shiao (2011) argued Korean adoptees who did not explore or discontinued their exploration still expressed an interest in learning about their ethnic background. This is evident in the results from the survey. Overall, participants spent little time actively exploring their culture as can be witnessed by the low attendance of classes on Korean culture and language. The only major difference was that 29.4 percent of adoptees whose parents placed emphasis on Korean culture had taken a class on Korean culture compared to none of the adoptees whose parents did not place any emphasis on Korean culture. Perhaps the parents' emphasis on Korean culture was to enroll their adoptee into a culture class, or to encourage their child to take one. In contrast, responses to both of the questions dealing with the adoptees' desire to learn were high. This supports the idea that even if Korean adoptees are not currently exploring their ethnic identity, or have not done so in the past, the wish to do so in the future is still present.

Kim (1995) argues that Korean adoptees, regardless of age are well assimilated into American culture, are not overly interested in their heritage during their adolescence and young adulthood, and often do not struggle with ethnic identity formation. The responses in this study do not support any of these claims. The majority of respondents wanted to learn more about Korean culture and their heritage. Thus Kim's claim of not being overly interested is false for this group of participants. Additionally, the responses to how the Korean adoptees identify themselves after experiencing discrimination or prejudice do not support the claim that they do not struggle with ethnic identity. The majority of participants who responded "yes" to having been discriminated against chose their ethnic identity depending on the situation. This is the same for those who responded "yes" to having experienced prejudice.

This shows that these adoptees do not have one identity in which they concretely classify themselves. Instead they must choose based on what situation they are in, and thus they do not feel comfortable declaring themselves as one absolute identity. This notion of choosing their ethnic identity on a situational basis relates back to Nagel's concept of ethnic layering. One Korean adoptee gave an explanation of why he or she chose "depends on the situation" when asked about ethnic identification.

I often find myself trying to balance between being Korean and being American, which seems to be a part of the Korean American experience in general. I've found that I need some of both Korean culture and American culture to be happy in life. I definitely wouldn't be content with only one of them, at least not at this point in my life. Even so, there are times when one takes on a role of greater importance. For example, there are times when the fact that I am Korean really shines through, usually when I'm talking about Korean culture or political/societal issues...I know that I am Korean because of where I came from, but I don't associate myself so much with Koreans who actually grow up and live in Korea. To me, Korean adoptees are a little different from even Korean Americans, because we are often less exposed to Korean culture (i.e. most of us don't speak Korean at home, don't eat Korean food much, and other things that many Korean Americans probably take for granted).

Kearly (2002) expressed emotions of not being accepted by both the American culture and the Korean culture because of physical appearance and lack of connection to Korean culture. Some of the respondents felt the same way. "I feel more like an American that happened to be born in Korea. I do not feel connected to Korea, however being born in Korea has influenced the way I have been treated in America." This respondent cannot identify as Korean because there is no connection between the adoptee and Korea. Yet, the participant feels that his or her appearance has influenced the treatment he or she has been given. Thus, a Korean label is placed on the adoptee regardless if this is truly representative of the adoptee's ethnic identity.

The findings show that parents' emphasis on Korean culture affects the ethnic identification of the adoptees and their preparedness to deal with the stigmas of being of a different race. Parents should attempt to introduce Korean culture to their adoptees and continue

teaching their children about their Korean heritage. This could make the adoptees more open to ethnic exploration and having a connection with their Korean heritage. Having a connection to their Korean heritage could better prepare the adoptee for the judgments by others that are based on appearance alone. They could possibly claim some of what others are forcing upon them, which could eliminate negative feelings about their Korean heritage after experiences of discrimination or prejudice.

As stated in the methodology, this study was done using respondents from online sources with a majority from a Facebook group aimed at bringing Korean adoptees together. Thus, this sample was not representative of the population since it was not a random sample. Rather, the Korean adoptees located in this online group joined specifically because they wanted to belong to a community with commonalities. This creates some bias and could have affected the results of the study. However, since the survey was online it could reach more people from various geographical locations. An online survey can also be taken when convenient for the participants, and they can spend as much time as they need to truly express their opinions.

In future research, gender and age as possible influences of ethnic identity could be explored. There were minor differences in how an adoptee ethnically identified between genders, as well as between the different age groups, that this study did not address. Table 4 and Table 5 in Appendix C display the relationship between the adoptees' age and ethnic identification and the relationship between the adoptees' gender and ethnic identification, respectively.

CONCLUSION

This study shows that Korean adoptees are struggling with their ethnic identity, despite what Kim and other researchers may claim. Some adoptees are having difficulty connecting to

the American culture or the Korean culture. Instead, they are unsure of where they fit in society. Factors that influence the identities of Korean adoptees include parents' emphasis on Korean customs, language, or food, experiences of discrimination, and experiences of prejudice. Korean adoptees are curious about the place and customs of where they were born, whether they are or are not currently exploring. It would be interesting to do further research and interview adoptees about their curiosity and which experiences, positive or negative, specifically factor into how they ethnically identify themselves.

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Appendix A

INFORMED CONSENT

You are being asked to participate in a study of construction of identity in Korean adoptees adopted into American families. This research hopes to provide insight into how this population of Korean adoptees constructs their cultural identity. This will be done through a survey administered online. The survey contains both closed ended and open ended questions where you are asked to write a short response. There are no right or wrong answers to the questions. To participate in this survey, you must be 18 years of age or older, been adopted from Korea into an American family, and lived in the United States for at least 7 years.

The survey should take approximately 30-45 minutes.

Some questions may touch on sensitive topics due to your specific past. Feel free to skip any questions that may be too uncomfortable to answer. The survey will ask you to consider your cultural identity and how it is constructed. This may lead to a greater understanding of how you construct your identity, and why you identify yourself as such.

All answers will be kept confidential. Only the researcher and her advisors will know your answers. Please note, your answers may be quoted in the final report; however, no identifying information will be included with the quote(s). Participants will be given a number in the paper so as to protect their identity. Such as “participant 1 felt....” You may print a copy of this consent form for your records.

If you have any questions about the research or your rights as a participant, feel free to contact the researcher (Abigail Madsen) at amadse01@saintmarys.edu or her faculty advisor, Mary Ann Kanieski at kanieski@saintmarys.edu.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may choose to discontinue at any time.

By clicking on the link given, I hereby give my consent to participate as a volunteer in this study. I have been informed of the general nature and purpose of the study and the expected duration of my participation. I have been told of the extent to which confidentiality of the records identifying me will be maintained. I have been instructed whom to contact for answers to my questions about this exercise. I understand that my participation is voluntary, that refusal to participate will involve no penalty, and that I may discontinue my participation at any time.

Appendix B

SURVEY

The first set of questions will be basic information about you, your family, and your lifestyle.

1. What is your gender? Check one box

- Male
 Female
 Other [Please Explain]
-

2. What is your current age in years?

3. What state do you currently live in?

4. What is the highest level of education you have completed?

5. Are you currently enrolled in any educational courses?

6. What is the highest level of education completed by your adoptive mother? If this is not applicable, please put N/A.

7. What is the highest level of education completed by your adoptive father? If this is not applicable, please put N/A.

8. What religion do you practice, if any?

9. What religion do your adoptive parent(s) follow?

10. Are you currently employed? Check one box

- No [GO TO QUESTION 11]
 Yes [GO TO QUESTIONS a-b]
- a. Where are you currently employed?
- b. What is your position?

11. What is your current relationship status? Check one box

- Married
- Single
- Widowed
- Other [Please Explain]

12. If you are currently in a relationship with another person, are they adopted? Check one box

- No
- Yes
- Not applicable

13. Do you have siblings in your adoptive family? Check one box

- No [GO TO QUESTION 14]
- Yes [CONTINUE TO a]
 - a. How many siblings do you have?

 - b. Were they also adopted? Check one box
 - No
 - Yes
 - c. At what age was/were your sibling(s) adopted?

14. Do you have biological siblings?

- No [GO TO QUESTION 15]
- Yes [CONTINUE TO a]
 - a. Do you know their current location(s)?
 - No
 - Yes [EXPLAIN]

15. Do you own any animals? If so, what are they? Check one box

- No

- Yes [PLEASE EXPLAIN]

Now these questions are about your adoption and your biological parents.

16. From what city in Korea were you adopted?

17. At what age were you adopted?

18. Do you have any memories from when you were still in Korea, before coming to the United States? If so, what do you remember? Check one box

No

Yes [PLEASE EXPLAIN]

19. Before your adoption, where were you living? Check all that apply. If other, please explain.

Orphanage [GO TO QUESTION a]

Foster parent(s) [GO TO QUESTION b]

Biological parent(s) [GO TO QUESTION c]

Other _____ [GO TO QUESTION d]

a. How long were you in an orphanage?

b. How long were you living with foster parent(s)

c. How long were you living with biological parent(s)

d. How long were you living in this other place?

20. Do you know the identity of your biological parent(s)? Check one box

No [GO TO QUESTION a]

Yes [GO TO QUESTION 20]

a. Do you want to know the identity of your biological parent(s)?

No

Yes

21. Did you remember ever having any contact with your biological parent(s) after your adoption? Check one box

No [GO TO QUESTION 21]

Yes [GO TO QUESTION a]

a. How did you contact your biological parent(s)?

22. Do you currently have any contact with your biological parent(s) Check one box

- No [GO TO QUESTION 22]
 Yes [GO TO QUESTION a]

a. How do you contact your biological parent(s)?

23. Do you wish you currently had contact with your biological parent(s)? Check one box

- No
 Yes

24. Do you have contact with any other people (siblings, friends, other relatives, etc) currently living in Korea?

- No
 Yes

The next few questions are about your familiarity with Korea.

25. Have you ever been to Korea after your adoption? Check one box

- No [GO TO QUESTION 23]
 Yes [GO TO QUESTION a]

a. Who did you travel with to Korea? Put NONE if you travelled alone.

26. Do you wish to visit Korea in the future? Check one box

- No
 Yes

27. Have you ever taken any courses on Korean culture? Check one box

- No
 Yes

28. Have you ever taken any courses on Korean language? Check one box

- No
 Yes

29. Do you wish to learn more about Korea? Check one box

- No
 Yes

These last few questions are about racial and ethnic identity.

30. Did you ever think about your culture before now?

No [GO TO QUESTION 29]

Yes [GO TO QUESTION a]

a. Around what age did you begin thinking about your cultural identity?

b. What caused you to start thinking about your cultural identity?

c. What were your original thoughts on your cultural identity?

d. Have the original thoughts changed since then? If yes, please explain.

No

Yes [PLEASE EXPLAIN]

31. What do you consider to be Korean?

32. Are there aspects of Korean culture you possess?

33. What do you consider to be American?

34. Are there aspects of American culture you possess?

35. What do you consider to be Korean American?

36. Are there aspects of Korean American culture you possess?

37. How do you identify yourself? [PLEASE EXPLAIN]

Korean

American

Korean American

Depends on the situation

None of the above

38. Is there anything else you would like to share with me?

Appendix C

Table 4. Relationship Between Age and Adoptee's Ethnic Identification

Adoptee's Ethnic Identification	<u>Age</u>				Total
	19-29	30-39	40-49	over 50	
American	1 (8.3%)	3 (30%)	1 (16.7%)	0 (0%)	5 (16.7%)
Depends	5 (41.7%)	3 (30%)	3 (50%)	0 (0%)	11 (36.7%)
Korean	1 (8.3%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)
Korean American	4 (33.3%)	3 (30%)	1 (16.7%)	2 (100%)	10 (33.3%)
<u>None</u>	<u>1 (8.3%)</u>	<u>1 (10%)</u>	<u>1 (16.7%)</u>	<u>0 (0%)</u>	<u>3 (10%)</u>
Total N	12 (100%)	10 (100%)	6 (100%)	2 (100%)	30 (100%)

Table 5. Relationship Between Adoptee's Gender and Ethnic Identification

Adotee's Ethnic Identification	<u>Gender</u>		Total
	Female	Male	
American	2 (10%)	3 (30%)	5 (100%)
Depends	8 (40%)	3 (30%)	11 (36.7%)
Korean	1 (5%)	0 (0%)	1 (3.3%)
Korean American	6 (30%)	4 (40%)	10 (33.3%)
<u>None</u>	<u>3 (15%)</u>	<u>0 (0%)</u>	<u>3 (10%)</u>
Total N	20 (100%)	10 (100%)	30 (100%)