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*Innovations in Research and Scholarship Feature*

# Too Korean to be White and Too White to Be Korean: Ethnic Identity Development Among Transracial Korean American Adoptees

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*The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore how lived experiences affect ethnic identity development of transracial Korean American adoptees raised by White parents with the intent of informing higher education practice. Participants included 12 recently college-graduated transracial Korean American adoptees who were raised in the Midwest, rural south, and on the west coast. A theoretical model that surfaced from data collection is presented, demonstrating the complexity of transracial Korean adoptee identity.*

Transnational adoption has become prevalent in the United States because there are more parents seeking to adopt infants from a number of ethnic backgrounds than there are healthy

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American infants waiting to be adopted domestically. Between 1971 and 2001, a period pertinent to participants in this study, U.S. citizens adopted 265,677 children from other countries, of whom 156,491 (59%) were from Asia, making Asians the largest population of adopted children by U.S. citizens (U.S. State Department, 2011). The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute (2002) estimated that Americans adopted more than 110,000 children from South Korea alone between 1955 and 2001. The U.S. State Department Bureau of Consular Affairs (2011) reported that 18,605 South Koreans were adopted between 1999 and 2011. Based on these statistics and timelines, it is probable that many Asian and Korean American adoptees have attended, are attending, or will soon attend colleges and universities nationwide.

Studies show that transracial adoptees—or children with adoptive parents of another race—typically face unique developmental challenges due to ethnic identity (Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Friedlander, 1999; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000; Steward & Baden, 1995) and issues related to grief and loss (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Lifton, 1994; Verrier, 1997). Minimal research, however, focuses on how these challenges promote or hinder the ethnic identity development of adult transracial adoptees, or specifically, how the presence of these challenges affect how adoptees experience college. Even though the majority of transracial adoptees are Asian or Korean, most research explores the experiences of Black children and adolescents in White families instead of transracial Asian or Korean adoptees (see Friedlander, 1999; McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1982).

This grounded theory study explored how lived experiences affect ethnic identity development of transracial Korean American adoptees raised by White parents and how their journey of development influenced their experience in college. Considering research limitations in relation to identity developmental theory and potential adult challenges associated with loss and grief for transracial adoptees attending college, institutions of higher education are limited in their ability to support this population of students in their total development. A study that explores the development of adult Korean American transracial adoptees is necessary, especially as it relates to how they navigate their college experiences.

## **Unique Ethnic Identity Challenges for Transracial Adoptees**

For many transracial adoptees, ethnic identity development can be a complicated journey because they have no contact with their biological parents or native cultures. Although many adoptive parents try to educate their children about their cultures of origin, these children still face unique developmental challenges (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Friedlander, 1999; Gaber & Aldridge, 1994). Many transracially adopted children struggle with identity issues because they do not look like their parents (Brodzinsky et al.; Friedlander; Grotevant et al., 2000; Steward & Baden, 1995). Brodzinsky et al. (1992) suggested that this issue is related to an adoptee's inability to find a "biological mirror" and adoptees cannot take similarities and differences between their bodies and their parents for granted as biological children can because they struggle to

imagine what their birth parents look like. The only reference adoptees have is their appearance. In addition to noticing physical differences, a child's understanding of adoption progresses developmentally and does not advance until adolescence (Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984). Child adoptees are often not cognitively ready to understand the meaning of adoption or their individual life histories. Existing literature about transracial adoptee socialization and ethnic/racial identity development primarily focuses on family and school experiences of children and adolescents, ignoring later phases of lifespan development. In one of the only studies that explored the racial identities of adult Korean adoptees, Palmer (2010) interviewed 38 participants between the ages of 20 and 51 with the intent of establishing a theoretical framework that could illustrate how Korean adoptees moved toward a social justice advocate mindset. He found that parts of adoptees' identity development corresponded with particular established racial identity stages, but also resembled aspects of the early stages in White identity models. Palmer suggested that "Korean adoptees do not match any of the established racial identity models because of their unique experience of being people of color growing up in White homes" (p. 7).

## **The Importance of Studying College Students**

Few studies address how adoptees or transracial adoptees experience college. One study by Shiao and Tuan (2008) spoke to the experiences of Korean American adoptees and the ways in which they explored ethnicity during early adulthood, but they included both college and non-college adults in their sample population. Shiao and Tuan's (2008) sample population comprised individuals adopted between 1950 and 1975, placing many of their participants in college during a time when formal opportunities for ethnic exploration were limited, especially in comparison to higher education settings today.

Many of the policy and practice decisions made by professionals in higher education are based on the notion that students learn and develop in certain predictable ways and colleges and universities have the responsibility to create environments that nurture this development. Much time and research has been dedicated to understanding development for various student populations and how they make meaning of their college experience (Wilson & Wolf-Wendel, 2005). Transracial adoptees—or more specifically, transracial Korean adoptees—are not recognized among these college student populations. Minority identity development theory can offer practitioners insight into the experiences of transracial adoptees, but it does not offer a complete picture.

## **Considerations Related to Adoption**

Intertwined with concerns related to ethnic identity development, matters related to loss and grief are core issues in adoption and play a significant role in the broader identity development of transracial adoptees (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Grotevant et al., 2000; Lifton, 1994; Russell, 2000; Verrier, 1997). Brodzinsky et al. (1992), Lifton (1994), and Verrier (1997) have found

feelings of loss and grief develop out of feelings of abandonment and coming to understand the implications of adoption. Adoptees must cope with adoption-related loss and the realization that they were given away (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Brodzinsky et al. (1992) found that conscious and unconscious grieving could motivate behavioral changes such as increased anger, aggression, depression, and problems with self-image and suggested that this could complicate developmental tasks during various stages of a person's lifespan. With respect to ethnic identity development, feelings of loss and grief may lead to an adoptee's desire to explore his or her identity, heritage, and/or culture of origin. Some adoptive parents discourage this type of exploration and inadvertently communicate to their adopted child that their heritage is disposable. If adoptive parents behave as if they are the child's biological family, adoptees may discount their ethnic identity and heritage for the sake of their family and a sense of belonging (Brodzinsky et al., 1992; Lifton, 1994; Russell, 2000).

Development can be problematic during various stages of an adoptee's lifespan (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Issues of loss, grief, mistrust, and fear of abandonment may affect an adoptee's ability to form meaningful relationships with peers and significant others during early adulthood and college. If identity exploration was discouraged as a child, an adoptee may continue to minimize his or her ethnic identity and heritage in order to fit within the college community. Consequently, if adoptees experience sadness, depression, or suicidal tendencies in college due to feelings of abandonment, anxiety, loss, and grief, practitioners in higher education must be prepared to offer and refer them to appropriate student services.

## Research Design

### Methodology

The intent of a grounded theory study is to generate a theory that explains a phenomenon based on the qualitative experiences of participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2000; Morse, 2009). The guiding question of this study was, "How do lived experiences affect ethnic identity development for transracial Korean adoptees and how they experience college?" Because no current theory exists that explains the experiences of Korean adoptees during college and because we view the world from a constructivist epistemological lens in which knowledge is seen as constructed through interactions with the world and others (Charmaz, 2000), we decided to develop a theory grounded in Korean adoptees' reported life encounters and perspectives.

### Participants

Participants met the following criteria: (a) Korean American adoptees raised by White parents, (b) college graduates, (c) 1 to 10 years out of college, and (d) knowledgeable of their journey of ethnic identity and moments of discovery. Theoretical sampling was used to identify participants over the course of the study in order to develop categories and concepts of the emerging

**Table 1**  
**Participant Demographics and Characteristics**

Pseudonym	Region	Graduation year	Age
Abby	Midwest	2007	25
Adam	Rural south	2007	27
Ashley	Midwest	2005	29
Colleen	Midwest	2005	27
Charity	Midwest	2005	28
David	Midwest	2010	24
Heather	Midwest	2006	26
Haley	Midwest	2005	27
Julie	West coast	2008	28
Neal	Midwest	2009	24
Stephanie	Midwest	2001	31
Tim	Midwest	2006	28

theory (Morse, 2009). Twelve participants were identified via listservs, Facebook, and word of mouth. Though participants resided in various geographical areas of the United States at the time of the study, many participants were raised in the Midwest and others from the West coast and rural South. Adoptees ranged from ages 22 to 31 and were no more than 10 years out of college. See Table 1.

## Data Sources

Grounded theorists rely on interviewing to capture effectively the encounters of participants as they relay the information in their own words (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Face-to-face interviews served as the primary data source. A semistructured interview approach was appropriate in that, if a participant shared a life encounter that needed to be explored further, probing questions were used to investigate that particular experience and encourage more disclosure. Participants kept journals where they answered several guiding questions to reflect on their ethnic identity development. The journals served as an added layer of data collection in which participants could privately reflect on emotions and critical incidents of self-discovery and development. Phone interviews were used as an additional opportunity to follow up on and clarify adoptees' reported experiences. As a form of member checking, participants were given the opportunity to read a summary of the findings and offer feedback regarding their reactions to the data and interpreta-

tions. Journal entries and follow-up phone interviews also served as a form of member checking. Through these means, adoptees clarified interview responses, confirmed quotes, and provided insight related to emerging themes. The interview protocol was revised twice based on participant feedback.

## Data Analysis

Open, axial, and selective coding were used to analyze the interview data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). A constant comparative method was employed where pieces of collected data were compared to emerging categories while searching for similarities and differences. In this process, the researcher gathers information, analyzes the data, collects more information, and analyzes more data with the intent to ground the categories in the data and reach theoretical saturation. In the end, a theoretical model was constructed, grounded in the significant findings that emerged.

## Results

The model that emerged from participants' reported experiences represents the elements and themes that were most salient in shaping the ethnic identity development of transracial Korean American adoptees. See Figure 1.

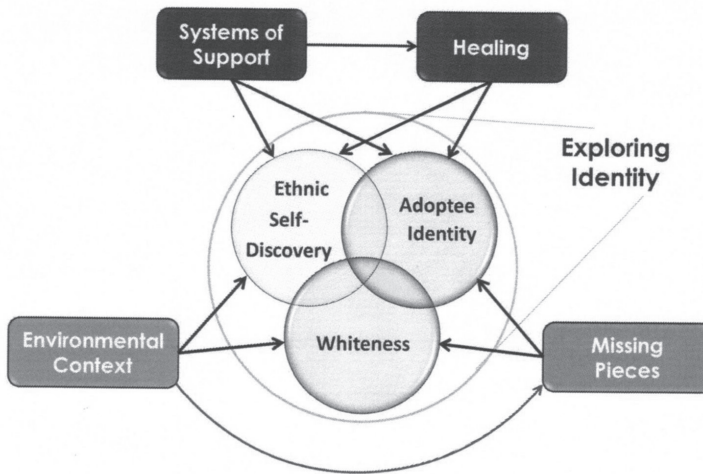
The process of exploring identity emerged as the central phenomenon of the model. Identity exploration encompassed various elements of personal examination by adoptee participants, which included (a) adoptee identity, (b) ethnic self-discovery, and (c) the notion of Whiteness. The following additional related themes, including how they interact with elements of the central phenomenon, are also presented: (a) environmental context, (b) systems of support, (c) missing pieces, and (d) healing.

### Adoptee Identity

Adoptee identity played a salient role in participants' overall identity exploration. Adoptees usually reflected on their adoptee identity when they experienced "reminders" that would bring this part of their identity to the forefront. These reminders could occur subtly or overtly depending on the context and people involved. Participants reflected on their adoptee identity within three contexts: family structure, the need for a biological mirror, and parental influence.

Every participant shared stories regarding family composition and awareness of their adoptee identity, specifically recalling what it was like being raised in a White family. Participants were self-conscious of the difference between themselves and their families. Ashley wondered what others thought about her when she spent time with her parents and sister in public. She thought, "Do

**Figure 1.** Experiences that shape the ethnic identity development of transracial Korean American adoptees.



they think I am with this . . . White family? Is it . . . a friend of their daughter’s?” Heather, who was also raised in the Midwest, chuckled when she portrayed her family structure, but also described an environment that accentuated differences among her relatives.

Family get-togethers were, um, tall White person, tall White person, tall White person, short White person, short White person, couple little Asian kids . . . you know that you stand out but you are looking out and you see all of these people . . . they’re all White . . . you’re the only one that they can pick out super easily.

Descriptions of experiences ranged from humorous to frustrating and were often matter-of-fact. Adoptees’ awareness of identity remained an omnipresent part of their daily lives.

While feelings of uncertainty about adoptee identity were reported, adoptees expressed genuine love for their adoptive parents. Ethnic differences were not a source of resentment, nor did they yearn for different parents or families. Six participants emphasized the importance of looking like someone of the same ethnicity. This need for a “biological mirror” could not be met within the family structure unless they had an adopted Korean sibling who shared similar physical features. When adoptees revealed the significance of looking like someone, it ranged from wanting to look like their parents to simply interacting with another Asian or Korean person. Abby remembered a brief connection with a Korean woman, who happened to be her mother’s friend. The relationship did not last long due to the discomfort it caused her adoptive mother, but it made quite an impact on Abby. “I became really emotionally connected to her, and freaked my mom out . . . that was the

first time I realized like, okay, there's a different type of connection I could have with someone who looks and identifies as something similar to me." The participants' need for a biological mirror was not a reflection of their need for a relational connection, which they received from adoptive parents. It demonstrated a desire to look like someone, even if it was occasionally, because their daily status as a transracial adoptee did not afford this opportunity.

Parents indeed played a pivotal role in embracing the participants' adoptee identity as adopted and helping them feel accepted in their transracial families. Individuals reported the candidness of their parents when talking about their adoption. These conversations usually involved a message of acceptance and highlighted the uniqueness of their families. Stephanie recalled a conversation with her mother when Stephanie asked about their differences.

I remember looking in the mirror and being like, asking my mom, you know, "Are we really different?" And she was like, "What do you think? You know, do we look different?" And I was like, "Oh yeah, I guess we do," and she was like, "Yeah we're different but you know we love each other and that's what matters."

Other participants stated that their parents openly discussed information about their adoption, including information on the biological parents if it existed, reasons for adoption, and place of birth.

## **Ethnic Self-discovery**

Individuals referenced various activities or moments that promoted ethnic self-discovery, which in turn helped them (if not forced them) to acknowledge their Asian and/or Korean identity. For adoptees in this study, ethnic self-discovery occurred when they learned something new about their ethnicity, culture of origin, or heritage. Participants shared many stories about opportunities or incidents that promoted self-discovery and affected their sense of ethnic identity, and reflected on both positive and negative experiences. Some of the experiences mentioned by adoptees included: joining an Asian or Korean organization at school or within the local community, reading blogs by Asian people or Internet searches for Asian-related topics and literature, intentionally befriending Asian peers, and taking courses on Asian American history or related topics.

The majority of reported experiences related to ethnic self-discovery involved connecting with other Koreans/Asians, participating in Korean heritage/culture camp, and confronting racism and ignorance. Six participants noted that their parents not only discussed adoption, they encouraged them to engage in adoptee activities and meet other adoptees. Although the heritage/culture camps served as a venue to introduce adoptees to Korean culture and history, they also highlighted the participants' adoptee status because the experiences were reserved for Korean adoptees and their adoptive families. Colleen shared her experience. "We would go to that Korean heritage camp. . . we all went there together. . . so that was clearly, that had a very strong basis in [understanding], like 'Okay we're all adopted.'"



Discovering one's ethnic identity was not always a positive experience. Adoptees recalled incidents when they were teased for their physical appearance, which not only emphasized ethnic differences, but also sent a message that there was something wrong with their ethnicity. Stephanie, among others, remembered childhood rhymes that explicitly focused on her ethnicity and race as an undesirable characteristic.

I remember kindergarten perhaps or even first grade, you know, "Chinese, Japanese, dirty knees," type of thing. . . . They would pull at their eyes, and they would be like, "How can you see out of slits like that?" And so there was a lot of taunting as I grew up.

Haley also recalled a particular incident in elementary school. "I remember in elementary school . . . I know a lot of people have experienced this but where they pull their eyes back or they make kung fu noises or that kind of thing"

Ten out of the 12 participants tolerated the same types of rhymes and comments, as peers blatantly called attention to their race and ethnicity with no regard for their feelings. Adoptees were forced to examine their identity because others emphasized it. Despite being raised in White families with parents who accentuated the uniqueness of difference, being ethnically dissimilar from their peers became a source of confusion and inner conflict. Peers did not demonstrate the same appreciation of diversity as adoptees' families, requiring them to scrutinize their identity from another perspective and make sense of the incongruence.

Complexities inherent in navigating life in White families and communities as Asian people contribute to the uniqueness of this model. Their daily lives entailed navigating a White family and White community as an Asian person. In addition to ethnic differences among their peers, adoptees experienced difference within their families, a place where most people share the same ethnic background or biological similarities. Adoptees rarely found themselves in environments where they did not stand out. Self-discovery and identity exploration were not only natural processes in this context, they were continuous, sometimes painful, and often perplexing.

## **The Notion of Whiteness**

A final piece of personal examination revolved around notions of Whiteness or not feeling "Asian or Korean enough." Growing up in White communities and being raised by White parents affected the participants' identity development because adoptees rarely interacted with other Asians unless someone intentionally introduced them to such opportunities or they sought them on their own. Adoptees' environments influenced with whom they interacted, the culture they learned, and how they identified. Despite their moments of self-discovery and identity exploration, growing up in a White environment accompanied by dominant culture led to situations where participants did not "feel" Asian or Korean. Stephanie communicated this sentiment well.

I mean if people were to ask, "How do you identify?" I would say "Korean American," but because I don't have the Korean heritage sometimes I feel like I'm not falsifying information

but somehow that I don't necessarily feel right saying Korean American because what do I know about Koreans? . . . I don't have that cultural understanding so it's hard for me to even identify myself as such.

Even Heather, whose parents infused Korean culture into daily life, noted that she was "yellow on the outside, white on the inside." She recognized that being surrounded by White people affected her identity. She clarified, "I was raised by White parents in a White community and I still do have, I guess, the whiteness instilled in me."

For many individuals, finding Asian and White communities in which they felt they belonged was challenging. Some conveyed discomfort around Asian communities due to incompatibility. Haley recalled a time when she tried to join a Korean community but felt out of place.

I was exploring being involved in the Korean community . . . there was a conference and a Korean American Student Association organization so I did try . . . but I know that throughout that whole time I didn't feel like really a part of the community.

In addition to feeling like an outsider among Asian peers, Tim acknowledged a sense of displacement in White communities. "other Asians that I have been friends with, like they always say you're too Americanized to be, to be fully Asian . . . and I think with the Caucasians like you're Asian, you're not really part of us." This "in-between" identity created an ongoing challenge for many of the participants, because they did not have a community that fully embraced them.

Participants' stories related to Whiteness or feeling non-Asian represent a complicated aspect of personal examination. In a sense, adoptees assumed two identities—one of being Asian and/or Korean, and one of being White or as Tim and Ashley defined, "Americanized." Some of their experiences validated their Asian and Korean identity, whether it was in the context of an adopted family or exploring Korean and Asian culture. Other moments promoted an identity where being American translated to being White.

## **Personal and Contextual Experiences Influencing Identity Exploration**

Four interrelated themes emerged that interact with the central phenomenon of identity exploration: (a) environment, (b) systems of support, (c) missing pieces, and (d) healing.

First, the theme of environment corresponded with ethnic self-discovery and notions of Whiteness. When recalling their environments as children and adolescents, adoptees noted that their neighborhoods were predominantly White, which also resulted in their enrollment in predominantly White schools. As Adam described, "it was Caucasian families in rural [State] . . . that's all I knew." Julie supported Adam's description with a recollection of her neighborhood. "Growing up in [State], it was always very Caucasian and the few Asians that I knew were so White-washed that we often thought they were Caucasian . . . I literally was around White people all the time." Living and learning in such settings resulted in participants identifying as White, feeling White, experiencing moments when they forgot they were Asian/Korean, wishing they were White, or

people perceiving them as White. Neal revealed the concept of “feeling White” as he reflected on his neighborhood. “I think I grew up with a White complex thinking that I was White . . . my school district that is probably still over 90% White and the college I attended was not much better demographically . . .”

As participants were one of few or the only Asians in their neighborhoods, they oftentimes became targets of racist comments and microaggressions. Ashley recalled an incident in elementary school: “A couple of boys used to tease me about how I looked . . . they called me names, it was a bad moment for me . . . a very painful moment.” Nearly every person in this study remembered similar situations at school and in their communities.

The second theme of systems of support connected with ethnic self-discovery, adoptee identity, and in the end, healing. Participants recognized parents, peers, significant others, and educational environments as chief components of their support network. These individuals and systems offered adoptees space to reflect on their experiences; discuss their feelings; and explore their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities. Support systems played a crucial role in providing individuals encouragement as they experienced discomfort, confusion, validation, and epiphanies concerning their ethnic identity. Eleven out of the 12 adoptees identified one or both of their parents as a resource for support as they explored their identity. David, one of the participants who eventually found his birth family, spoke highly of his adoptive parents. “They read a lot of adoption books . . . they felt that it was best for me to know everything . . . I always went to several adoptee camps . . . they went with me [to Korea] in 2002.”

Peer groups and significant others also served as part of the participants’ support system in relation to identity exploration, especially during late adolescence and early adulthood. Participants described many of their supportive peer interactions in the context of an educational environment. Haley reflected on a high school experience that influenced who she chose to interact with in college:

when I was in high school I joined the Asian Pacific American Youth Council . . . so I joined that and ended up making my own personal connections . . . I think I just savored that, and then for me that was important because that was something I then sought out when I was in college.

Educational contexts were referenced by participants as a system of support, but did not emerge as prominently as parents and peers. Eight out of the 12 adoptees in this study referenced college and/or graduate school experiences as important features of their developmental journey. Six of the participants reported identity exploration during college, though some of the opportunities were purposeful and others happenstance. The four adoptees who intentionally connected with Asian communities or enrolled in diversity-related courses as undergraduates all discussed attending heritage/culture camps as children and/or having parents who encouraged them to ex-

plore their ethnic and cultural identity throughout their lifetime. Two of the individuals who experienced moments of self-discovery in college did so accidentally. One connected to a mentor through a course requirement and the other met a student randomly after class. Although these unplanned interactions led to identity exploration as undergraduates, they did not reflect a series of precollege experiences that motivated personal examination. College surfaced as a supportive environment for those who took advantage of coursework and cocurricular activities that engaged students in dialogue related to issues of diversity and culture. Participants who attended graduate school, especially in the context of programs that incorporated diversity into the curriculum, described various opportunities to explore their identity in more depth. Abby explained, "I was able to immerse myself in all these different theories to give myself words to explain what I felt. . . . I definitely did a lot of processing and growing in graduate school around my racial identity."

Third, the theme of missing pieces related to adoptee identity and notions of Whiteness. Participants referred to missing pieces such as absent medical records, lack of knowledge about biological family members, and a desire to learn more about the Korean culture. Nine participants gave significant attention to acquiring medical records so they could investigate inherited health conditions or potential illnesses. Tim's comments regarding medical records reflected the concerns of other participants. "I guess the only thing right now that I would kind of like to know about my family background is like medical stuff, like that's kind of at the forefront." Participants also had no idea what they could possibly pass on to their children.

Six participants revealed curiosity about biological family members, which entailed learning more about family heritage. Haley articulated this need clearly. "I know that when I was growing up the hard things were not having any family background. . . . I had some general questions about the circumstances of the adoption. . . ." Adoptees viewed adoptive parents as their family and made no attempt to invalidate the significance of their relationships with adoptive family members. The participants also realized that connecting to biological parents and/or family could assist them in addressing unanswered questions related to their adoption and ancestry.

Eight demonstrated a desire to learn more about Korean culture. When discussing cultural identity, language surfaced as an important component and a way to connect with other Koreans. Abby summarized this when she noted,

I don't have a cultural identity . . . I don't identify with being Korean. . . . I don't know any Korean language, I don't know any music, I've never been to the country . . . I don't have a connection to the things that make a culture a culture.

This missing piece overlapped with the notion of Whiteness, because many of the adoptees did not "feel Korean" due to their inability to speak the language.

Fourth, the theme of healing often meant addressing missing pieces and was associated with ethnic self-discovery and adoptee identity. Individuals reported various forms of healing. Three participants conducted a birth parent search with the support of their adoptive parents; five commented on a potential investigation. Four adoptees had traveled to Korea and six communicated a desire to visit. Eight connected with Asian and/or Korean communities where they discovered a sense of belonging. Six noted that discussions about race, ethnicity, culture, and adoption helped validate their experiences and identity. Stephanie recalled an interaction in college that allowed her to explore emotions that stemmed from feelings of difference:

so it was based on this conversation that [mentor] really enlightened me that all of the anger and kind of odd feelings that I had been having throughout growing up . . . about the way that I was treated by people who weren't APA . . . he gave it a name.

Abby found healing through opportunities to process her feelings with classmates. "I think being able to process it out loud and talk about it with people, that was hugely therapeutic, even if was people who weren't other Korean American adoptees . . ." Adoptees recognized that opportunities to address missing pieces or issues related to identity helped them to embrace their identity as Asian, Korean, and adopted.

## Discussion

While particular aspects of adoptee participants' experiences in this study indeed resonate with dimensions of other ethnic identity models (e.g., seeking out opportunities to participate and learn about one's own culture), other facets of the participants' experiences are much more fluid and complex. Our model illustrates a more intricate journey and suggests that racial and/or ethnic identity development is an ongoing process affected by environment, systems, and experiences that interconnect throughout an adoptees' lifetime. While this is consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1989, 1993) developmental ecology theory and Renn's (2000, 2003) mixed-race theory, it also extends their work by addressing the additional aspect of an adoptee identity as well as the related external influences of healing and missing pieces.

Bronfenbrenner suggested that development is influenced by elements of process, the person, context, and time; and that environmental contexts are classified as consisting of microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems. Microsystems reflect those contexts in which participants were primarily concerned with ethnic self-discovery, Whiteness, or adoptee identity. Mesosystems emerged as participants began to experience and make meaning of the interactions between these three microsystems. Exosystems, similar to the systems of support in this study, are external and do not contain the individual, but influence microsystems and mesosystems. Lastly, macrosystems represent broader influences such as the culture of the family, community, or college that influence micro-, meso-, and exosystems. According to Bronfenbrenner, the interaction (process) of the person with various contexts over time influences development. Whereas the par-

ticipants in this study reported multiple challenges that stimulated development of higher order thinking and identity in light of each of the three microsystems, many of the most significant challenges emerged as separate adoptee, White, and ethnic identities converged.

Renn (2000, 2003), who used Bronfenbrenner's (1989, 1993) work as a theoretical framework in her study of mixed-race students, suggested that there are many different forms of identity development for multiracial students, and for some, their development varies in different settings. Specifically, Renn (2000, 2003) explored tensions that may emerge when different settings or spaces interact. She noted that multiracial students—like the transracial adoptees in this study—often have a difficult time finding racial groups who understand their experience; thus, the lack of available resources creates challenges for multiracial and transracial adoptee students alike as they attempt to navigate their campus climate. In addition to the shared experience of being drawn to but not fully fitting within both White and Korean communities, the adoptees in this study discussed shared experiences related to healing and missing pieces. These connections tapped into more biological and psychodynamic roots of their developmental journeys (Brodzinsky et al. 1992; Verrier, 1997). These experiences reinforced affinities with other adoptees while also complicating their identity development journeys.

It was not surprising then that the developmental process for participants in this study took time and was not fully achieved during the undergraduate experience. Theory-informed interventions for transracial Korean adoptees and other students who face the intersection of multiple identities and multiple developmental dynamics need to both facilitate learning during college and set the foundation for future development, an important consideration for student affairs professionals.

The model is also supported by concurrent research by Palmer (2010) who explored how Korean adoptee self-discovery leads to empowerment and social justice advocacy. He described a “dance of identities” in which Korean adoptees move between and among three distinct identities—White cultural, Korean racial, and Korean transracial adoptee. According to Palmer, the White cultural identity begins as soon as the individual is adopted into a White household. He suggested that Korean adoptees learn to “be like White” (p. 21), which gains them acceptance into White communities. This aligned with the experiences of adoptees in this study, especially those who noted they “felt White” or were treated like they were White. Palmer also suggested that Korean identity is silenced for adoptees because they are raised in White homes by parents who adopt a colorblind mentality. Parents and family members who disregard race in the home consequently silence questions about race, racism, and White privilege, causing a conflict between adoptees’ racial and cultural identities. In this study, adoptees felt their parents were open to dialogue and did not feel silenced. Although Palmer found that desire to fit in may lead adoptees to suppress their identities, participants in this study did not deny or disregard their transracial adoptee identities. Their adoptee identities were salient. Similar to Palmer’s findings, adoptees did seek answers

to their past (missing pieces) through birth parent searches and reunions, connecting with other Korean adoptees, or joining adoptee groups.

As adoptees recounted the most influential circumstances that shaped their ethnic identity development, their narratives about undergraduate college experiences were not as salient as pre-college experiences and contextual factors. How participants experienced college as an Asian or Korean individual differed depending on how strongly they identified with the Asian or Korean culture. Adoptees who embraced their Asian and/or Korean identity before college did so because they had earlier opportunities to explore their ethnic identity. The adoptees participated in undergraduate coursework and cocurricular experiences to further explore their ethnic identity. Adoptees who minimized their Asian and/or Korean identity as freshmen did not seek opportunities to explore ethnic identity during college unless something prompted self-examination. Some literature suggests ongoing interactions with White culture or communities during identity development affects how People of Color identify racially and culturally (Cross, 1971, 1978; Helms, 1995; Jackson, 2001; Kim, 2001). For adoptees in this study, however, a White identity reflected more than just "acting White." Some of the adoptees' ongoing association with White culture and communities nurtured a White cultural identity and perpetuated the notion that American is synonymous with White culture.

College educators likely work with an increasing transracial adoptee population without theoretical or research background, undermining their ability to be effective. The new model helps higher education practitioners and faculty to recognize that current models and theories do not reflect the experiences of all Asians or Students of Color. A deeper understanding of the Korean transracial adoptee experience challenges professionals to acknowledge the complex identities and diverse experiences of this student population and, in turn, design coursework, programs, and services that are more inclusive.

## **Considerations for Practice**

Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) mark college as a time of significant change for individuals, encompassing various dimensions of developmental tasks. Higher education practitioners are, therefore, responsible for providing opportunities that promote development and offering resources that will help students address transitions with confidence. Cultural centers and departments that focus on event planning can utilize the new model as they plan activities and programs that promote diverse identities. Application of the model would challenge individuals in the campus community to redefine culture among Asian populations and teach people about the complexity and intersection of identities.

Ethnic student organizations can play a pivotal role in creating inclusive campus environments. Infusing the model for Korean transracial adoptees into training programs gives students a foundation to work from when planning their activities, events, and other educational opportuni-



ties, not to mention the personal development that occurs as they seek understanding of their own journeys and the experiences of others. Asian student organizations might also consider including Asian adoptees in their group descriptions and mission statements to demonstrate that they recognize the diversity of Asian communities. Particular attention to adoptees through educational events and programs would send a message to transracial Korean adoptees that others notice them and care about their experiences.

Few of the adoptees in this study enrolled in ethnic study or diversity-related courses as undergraduates because such courses were not required for their degree, not offered, or participants were not interested. Every participant who enrolled in diversity- or identity-related classes for graduate school recognized their programs as a place of transformation that significantly influenced their ethnic identity development. Undergraduate students who claim majors other than sociology, ethnic studies, psychology, and anthropology may never have the opportunity to learn about identity and developmental processes. Instead of leaving this to chance, a first-year course could focus on identity development for diverse populations, including identity development of adoptees. These courses would introduce first-year students to the complexity of identity and empower them to personalize their journeys throughout their college experience. Institutions could identify ways to infuse identity-related courses into a required curriculum within more disciplines, which would provide additional opportunities for self-exploration and reflection and nurture practical skills in preparation for diverse work environments.

## Future Research

Despite the participants' ability to articulate moments of discovery, the concept of Whiteness resonated with all of them and should be investigated in more depth. A comparative study is warranted that explores the life experiences of adoptees who self-identify as Asian/Korean and those who identify as White to extend findings in this study related to life experiences that promote or hinder ethnic identity development. Such an inquiry should be extended to other transracial adoptee populations.

Because adoptees in this study recognized the impact of particular ethnic, cultural, and diversity-related classes and educational opportunities on their identity development, future studies should compare ethnic identity development for transracial adoptees who enroll in such courses to those who do not. Investigating how course curriculum influences identity development could provide data that are useful for higher education faculty and practitioners as they design educational opportunities.

This study did not explore the role other identities played in identity development such as, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, or socioeconomic status. Future studies could address the intersection of identities and how they influence identity formation for transracial adoptees.



Korean transracial adoptees must be acknowledged as a student population if educators want to promote their identity development as undergraduates. The present study argues for higher education professionals to understand the reality of Korean transracial adoptees, develop curricular and cocurricular experiences that encourage identity exploration, and honor the uniqueness of their journeys. Educators have the responsibility to create the spaces necessary for this exploration to begin and continue.

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