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What factors contribute to the identity development of international adoptees?

Submitted by Natalie Sinkler
May 2012

MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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Abstract

International adoptees face a unique challenge in their ethnic identity development because they are raised in a different culture than they were born, usually by parents of a different race. Understanding what helps develop an adoptees ethnic identity helps adoption professionals and adoptive parents facilitate a positive identity development among adoptees. The study consisted of four qualitative interviews with adult international adoptees regarding the factors that contributed to their ethnic identity development. Using a developmental framework and grounded theory the interview were analyzed and coded for themes. Participants shared a common development over time starting at a pride of their adoptee status to avoidance during adolescence. In young adulthood learning about their birth country and better understanding their adoption was significant for all four participants. Other factors contributing to the participants' identity development include visiting birth country, meeting birth family, family support, family dynamics, mental health and disability. Data shows many factors influence an adoptees identity development and each person is different. The data also shows support for pre-adoption services for adoptive families. Implications for further research are discussed.

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Introduction

International adoptions began in the United States after World War II when there were many orphaned children in Europe and Japan (Evan B Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007). Citizens of the United States continued adopting internationally after the Korean (1950-1953) and Vietnam (1955-1975) wars. Currently the United States adopts more children internationally than any other country (Evan B Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2007).

Of the children who are adopted internationally, 56% are female while the other 44% are male (US Department of State, 2012). The percentage used to be higher for girls because some countries placed a higher value on boys, leaving more girls to be placed for adoption (Smolin, 2007). This was common in China and South Korea, for example. Adoption grew significantly through the 1990's and reached its peak in 2004 with 22,991 adoptions. Korean adoptions then led the way for other countries to develop their international adoption programs (Freundlich & Lieberthal, 2000). The number has decreased since then and in 2011, Americans adopted 9,317 children internationally (U.S. Department of State, 2012). The decrease in adoptions in the last few years has been the result of shifting social, political, and economic environments.

As mentioned earlier, the idea of international adoption started during World War II because of the large number of children left orphaned due to the war. The numbers have increased over time because of the availability of children for a variety of reasons dependent on the circumstances of each country. Over the last 40 years, the number of infants available to adopt within the United States has decreased and therefore, parents

who can afford to are choosing to adopt internationally because they are able to more easily adopt a young child (Smolin, 2007). Around 74% of children adopted internationally are under the age of five (US Department of Homeland Security, 2011).

The high number of international adoptions has led to an increase of families that are a mix of different cultures. An estimate in 2005 stated 60% of international adoptees were adopted from Asia by Caucasian parents (The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2005). The majority of adoptions lead to families with two or more cultures living and growing up together. Additionally, children tend to grow up surrounded by people who do not physically look like them.

Problem Statement

The merging of cultures when an international adoption takes place has both positive and negative impacts. Children living in a multicultural family can grow up with multiple cultures, learning about their birth culture and adoptive culture. This, however, can be difficult for adoptive parents to incorporate both cultures. Since a majority of children are adopted internationally as children under five years old, they are not able to learn about their birth country from their birth parents or in their country. This requires the adoptive parents to take on the responsibility of learning about their child's country. Therefore, adoptees tend to grow up in a culture that is not their birth culture. They grow up not looking like the people who live with them. Although the number of internationally adopted children is small compared to the total number of children in the United States, 58% of people have a personal connection to a child who has been adopted (Adoption Institute, 2002). This includes knowing someone who has been adopted, has adopted or placed his or her child for adoption. Therefore, it is not just the parent's

responsibility to teach a child about where they came from, but every adult in the child's life. Growing up in a multiracial family, internationally adopted children may lose their birth culture and as a result have difficulty developing their sense of ethnic identity as an adopted person.

Relevance of the topic/problem to social work practice

The study of identity development is an important topic for social work practice for a number of reasons. First, social workers are essential in preparing adoptive parents for bringing their child home. They help the parents by educating them about the issues potentially facing adoptees. Second, social workers must be aware of the issues that adoptees face because the adoptees are the focus of an adoption. They must be aware of how to help the adoptees make the best transition and how to grow up successfully in the United States.

Purpose of the study

American families continue to adopt internationally. Although the number of international adoptees has decreased over the last five years, there is a large cohort of international adoptees who have become adults and have developed their sense of identity as a mixture of two or more cultures. The purpose of this study is to look at how adult adoptees, adopted internationally, developed their sense of ethnic identity. The research will help to understand what factors contribute to the ethnic identity of international adoptees with the hope of mediating the negative effects of international adoption on ethnic identity.

Definitions

For the purpose of this study, the concepts of race, ethnicity, and culture should be clarified. Race will be defined as a way to classify humans based on biological factors such as “skin color, facial structure, hair type, and combinations thereof are traits of comparison of populations” (Harper-Dorton & Lantz, 2007). Race can be defined as more than just these biological factors, but as a sociopolitical construct. For the purpose of this research, the biological definition will be used. Based on this definition, race is something that does not change; one is born into it. Ethnicity will be defined as having a common ancestry or heritage group and also as something that does not change over time (Harper-Dorton & Lantz, 2007). Ethnicity is where one’s ancestors come from, and it too, does not change. Lastly, for the purpose of this research, culture will be defined as the beliefs, traditions, and behavior that characterize a group of people (Walsh, 2006). Culture is something that is always changing over the lifetime.

The concepts transracial, transcultural, and intercountry adoptions must also be defined for the purpose of this study. A transracial adoption is when a parent or parents adopt a child of a different race (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.). A transcultural adoption is when a parent adopts a child of a different ethnic identity than their own (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, n.d.). An intercountry adoption is an adoption that happens between two countries, it is also known as international adoption.

Literature Review

Ethnic identity refers to the part of an individual’s self-concept that is comprised of identification with one’s ethnic group, a sense of belonging to one’s ethnic group, and

positive feelings and attitudes about one's ethnic group (Lee & Yoo, 2004). It is continually a work in progress from the time we are aware of our ethnic identity. Children who are adopted from another country may encounter more difficulty developing their sense of ethnic identity because they have a different ethnicity than their parents and possible other family and community members. It is important for people to develop a positive ethnic identity because researchers have found a consistent correlation between ethnic identity and measures of subjective well-being and psychological adjustment (Yip & Fuligni, 2002). International adoptees' ethnic identity development has been studied to determine what factors contribute to identity development and why these factors are important.

Identity Development in Childhood and Adolescence

Most parents start telling their children about adoption from a young age and just make it part of daily life (Brodzinsky, Singer, Braff, 1984). The adopted child doesn't give much thought to being adopted and what it means until later, but that doesn't mean they cannot recognize there are differences between them and their family. When Jeffer and Tieman asked children, age 4-16, about their race, about half of the 1233 from China and 412 from India wanted to be Caucasian or wished to have been born into their adoptive family (2000). Children are able to recognize basic differences between them and their parents or other family members. This study shows how children can recognize differences before they can understand them. It suggests parents address the differences at a young age because it seems to have an effect on the feelings they have about their own race. Half of the children wished to be the same race as their parents. Although the

study has a large sample size, it did not ask further questions about what participation they children had in their own race and understanding their ethnicity.

As children grow physically and cognitively, their understanding of adoption increases and becomes more complex. In a qualitative study of Korean adoptees, children start to develop knowledge about ethnic groups in society between ages 9-11 (Huh & Reid, 2000). They start to develop certain attitudes about their own ethnicity. Some were positive, and they felt special and unique because they were adopted. Other children, who were not as aware of their ethnicity, did not know how to explain their ethnicity when asked by a researcher. By age 12, children seem to have developed a more internal interest in learning about their ethnicity rather than it being an encouragement or push from parents, as is usually the case when they were younger (Huh & Reid, 2000).

In a study of adolescent and young adult international adoptees, 10% of them think of themselves as Caucasian (Westhues & Cohen, 1997). This suggests to researchers that as children grow into adolescence, they have developed more of a sense of their own identity and part of their racial identity. This could also suggest that developing a sense of ethnic identity to the participants of this study was not important (Gonzalez, 1990; Lydens, 1988). They have developed their sense of ethnic identity within their adoptive family and community. Some researchers argue whether this is good or bad, but it seems to be the result of personal differences. Researchers argue it is bad because the adoptee doesn't get a chance to participate in their birth culture, and therefore develop that part of their identity. Other researchers argue there is nothing wrong with developing their identity within the adoptive family and community because

that it what they know and are used to. It is not that they are not developing their identity; it is that they are developing their identity as the culture in which they are raised.

As children grow older they are able to have more independence and drive in their interest in their adoption. Their parents are no longer pushing them to take part in activities; they can choose themselves what they want to participate in. If interested, during this time young adults will search out deeper level experiences to help them develop their ethnic identity, like traveling back to their birth country or searching for their birth family (Song & Lee, 2009). Adoptees who do want to develop a deeper sense of their ethnic identity usually do so during young adulthood. Even if adoptees are not able to meet their birth parents or family, visiting their birth country help contribute to their understanding of their adoption (Bergquist, 2003). In a study of the experiences of Korean adoptees returning to Korea, the adoptees reported feelings of acceptance and belonging in Korea as well as a sense of support from the other adoptees they traveled with (Bergquist, 2003).

Although identity development is a lifelong journey, over time, the issues of identity development among international adoptees seem to be less problematic. As adolescents, there are some differences found when comparing adoptees to non-adoptees. Sharma, McGue, and Benson (1995) conducted a six year study across 35 states of more than 170,000 students that showed adoptees reported higher rates of licit and illicit drug use, negative emotionality, antisocial behavior, and methamphetamine use compared to non-adoptees. Adoptees also had significantly lower levels of optimism and self-confidence. A smaller study, done by Passmore, Fogarty, Bourke, and Baker-Evans, found when comparing adoptees to non-adoptees, adoptees had lower levels of self

esteem (2005). These studies with large samples collected over time support the fact that there are adjustment issues that international adoptees have to deal with relating to their identity. They suggest that not having a strong sense of yourself or identity can be connected with self-esteem and other dangerous behaviors. Although differences between adoptees and non-adoptees regarding self-esteem and confidence are found during adolescence, differences are not found in adults (Mohnaty & Newhill, 2005). Since there is not a difference between adults, it leads to the question of what is contributing to the development of an adoptee's identity between adolescence and adulthood?

Although these differences are not seen between adoptees and non-adoptees as adults, adoptees still experience discrimination. A 2010 study in Sweden of 20 international adoptees and their parents concluded that although Sweden is an antiracist country, which actively fights against racism, racism still exists (Tigervall & HübINETTE, 2010). The majority of the international adoptees experienced discrimination on a daily basis because of their non-normative appearance. They also found that it was difficult for adoptees to develop their ethnic identity in a culture that is different than their own.

How Parents Influence Identity Development

Most research points to the adoptive parents being the most important factor in developing a sense of ethnic identity in international adoptees. Transracial adoptees, or adoptees who were adopted by parents of a different race, develop their ethnicity in similar ways to how biological children learn about their ethnicity-through their parents (Lee & Quintana, 2005). Parents play an important role in developing their biological children's ethnic identity, so they would obviously play an important role in developing

their adopted children's ethnic identity.

Mohanty, Keokse, Sales (2006) found that when adoptive parents support and encourage cultural socialization, adoptees have more positive feelings about themselves. Additionally, adoptees saw their parents as more warm and affectionate if their parents did offer support. From the other side, Mohanty, Keokse, and Sales concluded that a "lack of cultural socialization may lead adoptees to feel less attached to their adoptive families and more confused about who they are and where they belong" (2003, p. 167). They also found that the most well adjusted international adoptees had parents who joined adoption support groups, and made an effort to educate themselves and their child about their birth culture. This suggests that parents' attitudes towards their children's adoption and how adoptees perceive their parents attitude about their ethnicity are important. They learn from their parents and take on their parent's attitudes. Friedlander (2003) found that international adoptees adopted by Caucasian families are challenged more by racial identity issues than by the facts of their adoption. This is important to pay attention to because it is the most physically noticeable sign of adoption. Our society places a significant emphasis on one's race and physical appearance and we are still very much live in a racialized society.

Parents struggle with the amount of attention to place on their adopted child's cultural differences. Rojewski & Rojewski (2001) and Cole (1992) found that parents did not want to put too much attention on the differences between their adopted and biological children for fear of making the adopted child feel more different. They concluded that incorporating the ethnic socialization of the adopted child into the whole family, and not isolating the child with their ethnic socialization, is best. In a similar

study of parents who have adopted internationally, Tessler, Gamache, and Liu (1999) found that parents didn't want to place too much emphasis on their child's Chinese culture at the expense of losing out on the child's American culture. It is found that overall, including the child's ethnicity into the family is important for their development, but it cannot be forced or done for the child alone, but with the whole family. These studies show the delicate balance and thought patterns of adoptive parents in regards to their children's identity.

If parents do not facilitate the development of their child's ethnic identity, it does affect the child. If parents see their child as part of the racial/ethnic majority, like themselves, then their child is less likely to have developed their own ethnic identity (Westhues & Cohen, 1997). If the parent views the child as the same as them, then the child will lack development of an ethnic identity. These adoptees are more likely to see themselves as Caucasian and not incorporate or try to learn about their own birth culture. Children may be more interested in developing their ethnic identity if they see their parents encouraging or giving permission to do so (Lee and Quintana, 2005). Mohanty, Keokse, and Sales (2006) found that when adoptive parents support and encourage cultural socialization, adoptees have more positive feelings about themselves. When parents model a positive attitude towards their child's adoption and ethnicity, the child will also feel more positive and comfortable exploring.

A 2010 study revealed ways that adoptive mothers can use contact with their adopted child's birth family members to facilitate ethnic identity formation (Korff, Grotvant, and Samek, 2010). It suggests that having contact and communication with one's birth family, as long as it is a healthy relationship, helps ethnic identity

development. In these situations children get to see people who look like them as well as be a part of their adoptive family and community. Adopted children will also see their parents making an effort for the child to connect with his history, so they will not feel ashamed or worried about wanting to know more about where they came from. Having access to one's biological family is much more difficult in international adoption. Distance, languages differences, and unknown information make it difficult for international adoptees to have contact with their biological families. This study, therefore, suggests a barrier to ethnic identity development for international adoptees because they have less access to biological family than do domestic adoptees.

Other Factors that Influence Identity Development

Parents need ongoing, post-adoption support to help guide their adoptive child's identity development. Feigelman's (2000) quantitative research with adoptive parents found that in the parent's opinions, there were no significant differences between transracial and inracial adoptions in the adoptive child's adjustment. This suggests that parents may not be aware of the adjustment issues or be aware of what their adoptive children were experiencing. This would be something important for adoption social workers to address with prospective adoptive parents. Although the study does not address this, the results could also suggest that their children were adjusting and developing without many problems. Feigelman (2000) did find that the family's neighborhood made a difference for transracial adoptees. When adoptive families lived in racially diverse neighborhoods, the adoptees had less discomfort about their appearance than those living in predominately Caucasian neighborhoods. Although the study focused on transracial domestic adoption, the same might be applied to

international adoptions because they are primarily transracial as well. The community and neighbors' ethnicity has been found to play a significant role in developing a sense of ethnic identity (Song & Lee, 2009; Cole, 1992). If there are other children, mentors or adults of the same ethnicity as the adopted child, then they will feel more comfortable exploring their identity. In addition to being more comfortable exploring their identity, they also have people to talk to who share their ethnicity. In contrast, racial or ethnic isolation may lead to viewing and questioning one's identity. If the child is the only non-white person in his community, then they may think of themselves as Caucasian or have difficulty addressing how they feel.

Participation in cultural activities plays a big part in developing an ethnic identity for international adoptees (Huh & Reid, 2000). Although, when children are young this is something parents will organize, it helps initiate conversations about adoption and different ethnicities. At cultural events children will see other children and adults who look like them. They can talk to people who were adopted and share their stories about being adopted with kids like them. Going to cultural events helps keep an open dialogue about adoption. Adoptees can also learn basic things about the country they were born in, like food, games, language, and songs at cultural events (Huh & Reid, 2000). This study assumes there are cultural activities near where the family lives. In smaller towns with less diversity, there may be fewer, if any, opportunities for cultural events. Today, the internet has made it easier for families living in more isolated areas to connect with people and information than in the past. Parents can get books, films, and video chat with people from their child's culture. More current research has looked at the importance of going beyond attending culture camp to help develop an adoptees sense of

identity (Evan B Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009). The Evan B Donaldson Adoption Institute believes while the culture camp is a good way for an adoptee to learn about his or her birth culture, it is not enough to help them develop their identity. They suggest being around people who share their ethnicity and having sustaining relationships with those people are more important.

The age at which the adoptee has positive experiences developing his ethnic identity is important. Young adults (18-21) who participated in cultural activities of the country where they were born have a more positive sense of ethnic identity than those who did not (Song & Lee, 2009). This is at the age where adoptees may be looking more in depth at their identity and where they came from. This is a common time for adoptees to look for their birth parents and understand more about their ethnicity. Research has shown that searching for birth family is associated with positive ethnic identity (Song & Lee, 2009). Again, the study does not address the challenges international adoptees may face with little information on their birthroots or barriers such as distance or language.

Searching for one's biological parents can be more complicated when the adoptee was adopted internationally. Besides the fact that one's biological parents may be on the other side of the world, record keeping is not as accurate or reliable in other countries compared to the United States. A study of international adoptees from many different countries found that adoptees from countries where getting birth records and information was more difficult (like India, Bangladesh, Lebanon, and Colombia), adoptees had more preoccupation with their biological parents compared to adoptees from other countries where getting information was easier (Teiman, Ende, and Verhulst, 2008). This research suggests that not having access to one's biological parents may cause negative impact on

identity development. It denies the adoptee a complete sense of his or her self. If adoptees have access to knowing where they came, this study suggests they will have less preoccupation with this information. It suggests that having access to the knowledge may settle the adoptees curiosity about where they come from, whether or not they choose to meet their parent.

There are individual differences among adoptees however. Tieman, Ende, and Verhulst found that even before adoptees started searching for their biological parents, the adoptees that were more interested in searching for their biological parents had higher levels of behavior problems (2008). This finding suggests that higher problem levels are present before the adoptee even begins to search for his biological parents. This may be what leads one to search for one's biological parents. Other factors that may encourage the adoptee to search are family functioning, parenting, or mental and physical health (Tieman, Ende, and Verhulst, 2008).

Although there are many arguments for encouraging and developing a strong ethnic identity as an international adoptee, some studies have found that some adoptees are simply not interested in exploring their ethnic identity (Gonzalez, 1990; Lydens, 1988). These adoptee have developed their own sense of identity within their adoptive family identity and they do not feel the need to look into their development further (Gonzalez, 1990). They may feel completely comfortable with the ethnicity they were raised in and the information they have on their own ethnicity is enough. Research would not encourage adoptive parents to ignore the ethnicity and race of their adoptive child even when the child is young, but as the child grows the difference may not be important to the child (Westhues & Cohen, 1997).

Where the gap in the research of international adoptees' ethnic identity development is in the qualitative research of the adoptees themselves. This is often because the research is many times conducted by social workers, psychologists, adoptive parents and so it is filtered through a non-adoptive lens. Other research tries to measure identity development in different ways through the child's life. Research has shown some differences between adoptees and non-adoptees during adolescence, but it does not necessarily continue into adulthood. Research suggests that parenting plays a large role in one's ethnic identity formation, but during young adulthood and adulthood, parents play less of a role in their child's development. Since this is the time where the adoptee can develop his or her identity as he or she wants, what contributes to this development? Research has just started asking this question to adoptees and by adoptees. Now, more adoptees are conducting the research, and therefore, the data is not filtered through a non-adoptive's lens and experience.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used to conduct this research on the identity development of international adoptees is psychosocial developmental theory. Specifically, Erickson's (1950) Eight Stages of Psychosocial Development will be considered. It will be used to help understand the identity development of international adoptees because it looks at the inner conflicts of all individuals encounter as they develop. It suggests that if you cannot resolve the inner conflict, then the rest of the developmental stages are also difficult to work out (Forte, 2007).

Erik Erickson used psychodynamic theory in his psychosocial model of development. He extended our understanding of psychodynamic theory through the

creation of his psychosocial model, where he described eight psychosocial crises that children and adults go through. Once they master a stage they have “basic strengths” within that stage, but when they are not able to complete a stage it leads to “basic ego weaknesses” (Forte, 2007). They are stuck at that stage and will struggle with concepts in that stage until they are able to develop the strengths. Once they master a stage they develop strengths, but the crisis may also come up in the future and they must master it again. Although Erickson attaches an age at which a child or adult first struggles with the stage, but conflicts may recur over a person’s lifetime.

The proposed study focuses on Erickson’s fifth stage “identity vs. identity diffusion.” It looks at the developmental theme that is focal in adolescence. It is categorized by the question, “Who am I?” Adolescents use their peers, in-groups, and role models to answer this question (Forte, 2007). The answers in this question include one’s ethnic identity, sexual identity, and work identity. During this time the individual begins to be aware of his or her identity. Although it is established during this time, identity develops over the lifetime. If the individual does not develop strengths during this crisis, then they may develop a negative identity or have indifference to committing to an identity. Erickson described individuals who have mastered the stage of “identity vs. identity diffusion” as having confidence in who they are as a person is consistent for the most part over time.

If adolescents or young adults are not able to successfully master this stage and gain an understanding of themselves then they will have a difficult time in the next stages of psychosocial development, according to Erickson. After adolescents and young adults go through the stage of “identity vs. identity diffusion,” they will go through the stage of

“intimacy vs. isolation.” If they are not able to develop a sense of their identity, they will have difficulty building and maintaining intimate relationships.

Developmental theory is important in understanding this research for a couple of reasons. First, developmental theory places emphasis on the early experiences in a child’s life (Forte, 2007). Children who are adopted internationally are adopted as infants or young children. They may experience a great amount of trauma, grief and loss during this time. Although they may not be aware of it, or remember the experience as adults, it still may greatly affect their development as children. It is important to be aware of the issues that may result from adoption during infancy or childhood that may still affect adoptees and how their identity develops (Westhues & Cohen, 1997).

Developmental theory is also helpful in this research in that it assumes that developing one’s identity is an important part of every adolescent and young adults’ life. It is a stage that all go through and they use their peers, family and mentors to develop their identity. This can potentially be a problem for international adoptees because they are in families, usually, of a different race, culture, and ethnicity. If they were adopted into a Caucasian family that lives in a Caucasian neighborhood, they will not have many opportunities to interact with people of their race or culture. It is obvious that the adoptee is racially different and this may lead to struggle while forming their identity as an adoptee in a multicultural family (Yip & Fuligni, 2002). Developing their ethnic identity may be more difficult for international adoptees because they are not surrounded by people with the same ethnicity who can serve as role models (Feigelman, 2000). Adoptees may also have struggled with other psychosocial crises before identity that may have slowed the development or may make developing their identity more difficult.

Although the primary focus is the identity vs identity diffusion stage of Erickson's model, the first crisis, "Trust vs Mistrust" is also an important developmental stage for adoptees. Erickson's first stage begins at birth and usually is resolved around 12 to 18 months (Forte, 2007). During this stage a child begins to attach to his or her caregiver and trust that his or her needs will be met (Main, 2000). This builds the trust the infant begins to have in her caregiver. She trusts that her caregivers will protect her and meet her needs. In adoption, this time period is often difficult for adopted children who may develop multiple attachments to different caregivers or they may not develop any strong attachments (Cohen and Farina, 2011). Although an infant's attachment style is not permanent, it still takes some extra care to develop a healthy attachment later on in development (Main, 2000).

As Erickson suggests in his theory, if one crisis is not resolved, it reappears later on throughout development (Forte, 2007). If children do not develop the ability to trust their caregivers, they will struggle with trust throughout their development. It might also extend the ages by which they reach the other stages of development in Erickson's model. The beginning stages in an adopted child's life focuses around attachment and developing trust with his or her caregivers (Main, 2000).

Since the focus of the research is how international adoptees develop their ethnic identity, using developmental theory to view the problem and research can be very helpful. It helps us understand the importance of identity development in the first place, it reminds us that early influences or experiences play a big part in the person you become and how you cope with problems, and it helps us see the potential for resolving international adoptees struggle with identity development.

Methods

Research Design

This research was conducted through qualitative semi structured interviews with adult international adoptees using Grounded Theory Methodology. Grounded theory, developed by Corbin and Strauss (1998) is a method of qualitative research where the researcher seeks to develop theories through inductively coding and analyzing the data. The steps through which grounded theory is practiced are first open sampling and coding, then axial coding, and, lastly, selective coding.

In the data collection process of grounded theory methodology the researcher gets all the information he or she can. Information was collected in semi-structured interviews with the participants. Pre-determined interview questions were asked (see appendix B), but there was still some flexibility in the questions asked. This allowed for following up on topics that were not expected to come out through the participants' own thoughts and experiences. Grounded theory method is best for this research because it allows the answers to come from the participants' experiences. This is significant because historically, the answers on identity development have not come from adoptees, but adoption professionals and adoptive parents.

Sample

The sample was four adult international adoptees who were asked to participate through a key informant through the Resource Committee of Adopted Adults. Following that a snowball sample of voluntary participants was convened. See Appendix A for recruitment flyer. Additional participants were recruited from online discussion boards from Minnesota Adoption Resource Network. The participants were between the ages of

25 and 33, three females and one male all born in different foreign countries before the age of two.

Study Recruitment and Protection of Human Subjects

Participants were recruited through a key informant in the Resource Committee of Adopted Adults. She is a recent St. Thomas MSW grad and she gave them the primary investigator's email address to contact if they were interested in participating in this research on international adoptees ethnic identity development. A snowball sample was collected by the initial participants suggesting other international adoptees they know who were willing to participate. Additional participants were recruited from message boards from the Minnesota Adoption Resource Network, an organization for adult adoptees that offers resources, information and friendship. The researcher posted to see if there were any international adoptees interested in participating in this research project on how international adoptees develop their ethnic identity.

The participants remained anonymous throughout the research and their names or identifying information were not be used. Their interviews were stored in a locked folder in the researcher's computer without their names.

Informed consent can be ensured because they contacted the researcher if they were interested in being a part of the study. The researcher explained the whole project and research question before starting the interview so the participants fully understood the topic. At any time during the interview up until the project was presented the participants had the choice to not let the researcher use their interview and could contact her by phone or email to let her know.

Data Collection

The data was collected through in person interviews or Skype video-chat interviews with the participants. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The interview questions focused on what current research has pointed to as factors contributing to identity development among international adoptees (see Appendix B). The questions asked the participant what he or she remembered about his or her adoption story and what their parents did to teach them about adoption and the culture of origin.

Data Analysis

The transcribed interviews were analyzed using grounded theory methods. The transcribed interviews were coded for themes and common topics. Then theories were generated from the themes and common topics that emerge.

In the first phase of coding in grounded theory methods, the data was openly coded. The researcher went through the data (in this case it was the transcribed interviews with the participants) and line-by-line determined what is important or significant (Corbin and Strauss, 1998). At this level the researcher did not try to compare or interpret the findings and she was just open to what came from the data. In the next phase of the research, axial coding was used on the data. The researcher began to organize ideas from the data under collected headings. These then became concepts or categories that were developed from the data. The data was “put back together” after being taken apart from open coding. The final step of the axial coding stage is that connections were made among categories. Once the categories were developed in axial coding, the final stage, selective coding began. Selective coding refined the categories

that were developed in axial coding. Gaps in the categories are also identified and explored while the final concepts and theories were developed to describe the data.

Strengths and Limitations

This research has both strengths and weaknesses to its design. A strength to this qualitative design is that the data is based on the participants own experiences. The results will be concluded from the meaning the participants give in their interviews. Another strength to qualitative research is it allows the researcher to study a limited number of cases in depth. Lastly, qualitative research is useful for helping understand complex phenomena, like identity development.

There are limitations to qualitative research as well. First, it is difficult to generalize qualitative research to other people because the sample is so small. Due to time limitations on the project, only four participants were able to be interviewed. Since the sample size is so small, it is difficult to make predictions about the outcome of the research. The study did not reach saturation and new information was collected from each participant. Another weakness of qualitative is that the results are more easily influenced by the researcher's bias because of the data is collected and analyzed by the researcher.

As the researcher I have personal biases related to the topic. I currently intern at an adoption agency. Part of the job of an adoption social worker is to prepare parents about the importance of educating their child about where they came from and making them feel comfortable in their new family. I am also Caucasian, not an adoptee, and not a member of an adoptive family.

Findings

The responses of the four participants varied in their personal life experiences, but there were some common themes that emerged from them. The participants were all adopted from foreign countries before the age of two. They were adopted at two months, four months, six months, and 18 months old from Chile, South Korea, Guatemala, and India respectively. Only one of the participants had siblings in their family who were also adopted internationally. Two participants had siblings their parents had biologically and one participant had a sibling that was adopted domestically. Two of the participants had open adoptions, meaning there was information on their birth families. Two participants had closed adoptions. One only knew that her birth mother was a prostitute, but no other information, while the other knew less than that. All four participants were raised in Midwestern cities, mostly Caucasian, middle class neighborhoods where they were one of a few people of color. They all had only one or two other adoptees in their school, but grew up with mostly Caucasian friends and family.

Adoptee Status as Identity

It's complicated. One theme that emerged from all the participants was that their identity and how they define their ethnicity is complicated. How they define their family and who is a part of their family is complicated. There was never a confident answer from the participants, but a long explanation. Participants shared that it is always changing as they are better able to understand who they are and where they came from. It is not a simple, easy answer for an adoptee to define his or her ethnicity and family. Although their feelings about their adoption and where they came from have changed over time, they still say who they are is complicated because they are adopted.

When asked about their ethnicity, all the participants gave answers that it was a combination of the country they were born in and the culture they were raised in, for example, “Korean-American” and “East Indian and American.” Three participants noted how difficult it was to answer the question about how they describe their ethnicity. Their initial responses were, “It’s complicated because it’s such a work in progress” and “I think it depends on who is asking.” And another responded, “I’m still trying to figure it out.”

All the participants gave explanations how their identity has changed over time and how it is a combination of both their birth country, the United States, but also include their adoptee status as part of their ethnic identity. I heard from participants, “within the adopted community sometimes we say we have our own ethnicity, our own culture.” Another said, “We formed our own identity, it’s our group of adoptees.” A common idea came up through the interviews that having other adoptees support was important and being an adoptee was an important part of their identity.

Managing Compounded Developmental Tasks in Childhood and Adolescence

Attraction. All the participants remember adoption being a normal conversation topic growing up. Their parents were very open about adoption and talked about it often. There were either books about adoption available or pictures of the adoption out or cultural artifacts visible in the home.

As children, the participants knew they were different it was not a problem. One participant in the study said, “I thought [being adopted] made me special because everyone thought I was so cool because I was adopted.” As a child she felt really special by her peers and family. They celebrate her birth culture and she was very proud of it.

Another participant voiced similar feelings when saying, "I think I was always proud, like 'I'm adopted, I'm adopted.'" Although another participant said as a child his adoption wasn't something he thought about much, "I would wonder what my birth mother or birth father was doing... but it wasn't something I spent a lot of time thinking about."

All four participants attended cultural events from their birth culture. They were all involved with an adoptee group from their birth culture that would get together a couple times a year for a picnic or other event. Adoptive parents organized all this and the participants took part in these events, but all noted it was not meaningful. Participants said it was an event they attended once or twice a year, and the other adoptees they met through these events they did not see often enough to develop meaningful friendships with. They all, as children, attended a "cultural camp" in the summer of some sort relating to their birth country.

Avoidance. Although it was a normal topic of conversation in the participants' families growing up, they all mentioned they knew they were different because they looked different:

I remember knowing somehow my mom wasn't my mom...I knew that I didn't belong in my family. Somewhere deep, deep down in me I totally knew I had a whole different story.

Participants all made some kind of comment about the fact that their appearance was different, "I knew I was different because I looked different."

One participant struggled as a child with her adoption. She remembers:

I resented [being adopted] so bad... I hated the fact that I was adopted because it meant that I was different. Like in the summer I would get incredibly dark and I would get made fun of at school for my skin tone... I remember actually taking a pencil and trying to erase my skin. Like I literally thought I could erase the brown away.

Eventually as a child, she would stop attending the cultural gatherings and not acknowledge that she was different because she said it had scared her as a child. The fact that she was adopted had scared her because she thought that someone would come to her house and take her away to a country where she didn't speak the language.

When asked about their feelings toward their adoption as adolescents, the participants had more negative feelings. They didn't like being different during this time. One participant who liked that adoption had made her feel special as a child said, "I grew away from the Korean thing for a while, and I just wanted to be American." Another participant said during adolescence she didn't want to stand out either. She said:

I just wanted to be a regular teen. I didn't want to own it in a way, because I felt that if I owned it, then that's going to be what people see me as and then they are going to judge me even more. It was hard enough growing up with a [hearing] disability, growing up I'm the colored girl with fuzzy black hair, you know? I already had visual things that made me stand out. I didn't want to add something... that would alienate me even more.

Two female participants talked about negative body image during adolescence and tied it to being different than their family and friends. One said "It's not like I wanted to be skinny because I wanted to be like every other girl. I wanted to be skinny

because I wanted to look like my family.” Another said that dating was difficult: “I felt like a lot of the guys I went to school with were into the blonde, tall girls.” She looked different than the girls in school and it affected her self-esteem.

The participant who shared that as a child she wanted to erase her darker skin tone said during adolescence she didn't talk much about her adoption. Her parents didn't bring up the topic and she didn't know to talk to them about how she was feeling. During this time she starting think about her biological family a lot more, and she didn't know how to talk about it to her parents. She said, “It's the most terrifying thing. It literally sits so bad in your stomach like you're cheating on your parents.” She didn't want her parents to think she was “cheating” on them because she was thinking about her biological parents and family.

Moving Towards Acceptance

All the participants in this study began a search for their biological parents and made trips to their birth countries. They all said young adulthood was the most active time when they were discovering and learning about their identity. In young adulthood they all had more interest in learning more about where they came from and about their adoption. It was something driven inside of them, not forced by their parents. Going to visit their birth country was mentioned as a significant event in their identity development. One participant went on a trip back to her birth country with a group of adoptees. She said, “I think we were searching for some answer to who we were, something that would fill the small piece that we were missing.” Another participant said she had an urge from inside to learn about her birth family: “Something bigger than me, and I don't necessarily believe in God, but I can't explain it. Like something bigger than

me was like, ‘just find your birth mom.’” In young adulthood the participants all said they had more interest to learn about their birth culture or birth family to help them understand themselves.

Traveling to birth country. All four participants said an important factor in developing a sense of identity as an adoptee was traveling to their birth country. Two participants also mentioned their interest in their birth country being encouraged by physical visits to their birth country. Both started out with one visit to meet their birth family and learn about the culture. Then both made more frequent visits.

Meeting birth family. One participant described an awkward meeting and conversation through a translator that was not very emotional or meaningful, but was a good start to a relationship. Another participant had a very powerful reaction to meeting her birth mother. She mentioned that being in her birth country does not make everything better, but she had a very positive experience:

It literally was like there was something so empty inside of me that I wasn’t even aware was there and instantly, the second I touched [my birth mother] it was filled and more. It was like I was absolutely healed knowing her, having her presence in my life.

She went on to say it was not always a perfect relationship, and although they are in each other’s lives and have communication, there are a lot of challenges as well.

Finding connection and beauty. After participants visited their birth country for the first time, a couple mentioned the connection they felt. One participant found pride in her birth country and herself, she said, “You find things you love about your country, then you can say ‘hey, I love that’ and you can be a part of that.”

The feeling of finding beauty in one self after their visit was repeated by another participant. Another participant said when she looked around on her first visit, “Wait a second, this is where I’m from... I am these people. It was the first time in my entire life I was able to see any type of beauty in myself.” They were able to see people like them and feel like they belonged in a place instead of standing out.

Content, but learning more. At this stage in the participant’s lives, they all have come to some understanding or feel content about their ethnic identity as an adoptee. They say this has come as a result of learning more about their birth county, and if possible, their birth parents. They all still voiced feelings about wanting to visit their birth countries in the future and two maintain relationships with their birth families. They all acknowledge they have ups and downs but feel good about where they are at.

Adoptive Family as Container

When asked about the most important factor in their ethnic identity development, all four participants mentioned their family’s support. A few themes emerged from this idea as the adoptive family playing an important role despite the poor preparation they received prior to adopting a child internationally.

Poor preparation for adoptive families. All participants mentioned their family as being an important factor in developing their identity, but none of the participant’s parents had much, if any, training in preparation for adopting internationally. Their parents may have known friends who adopted internationally to give them some guidance, but none had received training on raising a child born in another country and the identity issues that might arise later on in life. Although it has changed greatly since

the participants were adopted, this suggests the importance of social workers providing adequate pre and post adoption support and services to families.

Holding “safe space” to explore. One participant said the support of her family in accepting her feelings about her adoption. She explained:

The times when I am most comfortable with myself and with my identity are the times when I know that I’m in a safe place or it’s safe to feel the way I do. And if I choose to share, those thoughts and feelings are validated.

She described how her parents gave her space to explore who she was and where she came from and they were always available to talk. They accepted her when she was experimenting with what it meant to be Latina and let her figure it out on her own time.

Another participant said, “My parents, and my family have really helped shape my identity the most. They’ve always encouraged me to do whatever I wanted. They’ve kept me grounded.”

Individual Life Experiences

The participants mentioned other life experiences that significantly impacted their identity development. These factors are similar to how non-adoptees develop their identity and are not related to adoptee status.

Gender differences. Although there was a small sample of four participants, the one male participant had different overall responses than the female participants. The male participant said both in childhood and adolescence he did not think much about his adoption and ethnicity. As a child he said he knew he was adopted, but only thought about adoption every once in a while when he wondered what his birth parents were doing. When he was asked how he felt about his adoption as a child, he answered “it

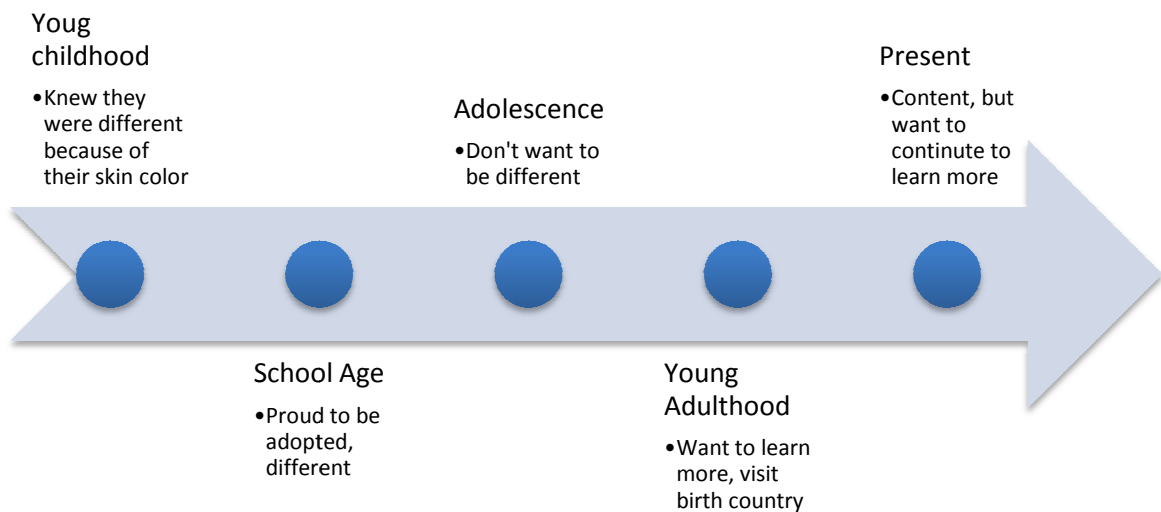
wasn't something I spent a lot of time thinking about." He said it increased a little in adolescence with thinking a little more about what his birth parents were doing, but nothing more. He also said he primarily considers himself Caucasian.

Divorce and family dynamics. Two of the four participants mentioned their parents' divorce as having an impact on their identity development. One participant said her adoptive parents adopted her and then divorced a few years later. Her parents did not adopt nor have any other children together. After they divorced, both her mom and dad had two biological children within a short amount of time. This not only left her the only adopted child in her initial immediate family but also the only adopted child among all her step siblings. She seemed to struggle with her adoption the most of the four participants. From a young age she wanted to erase her skin so she was the same color as her siblings.

The other participant whose parents divorced said the divorce affected her development, but she also had a total of nine siblings all adopted between her parents that have impacted her identity development. Some of her siblings were adopted from the same country. She was surrounded by family members from her birth country and other countries, but she said it was not easy to talk to many of her siblings about adoption. She said, "my brothers and sisters were anti-adoption. They don't talk about it. They would say things about their country, 'oh I like it,' but they don't have the connections like I did. And that was hard for me because you want to turn to the people you trust and the people who get you, but they're not there yet." Her siblings were not ready to talk about their adoption and their birth country, but she followed up with accepting that all adoptees have to go at their own pace to understand their identity.

Mental Health. One participant shared her struggle with mental health and contributes it to her identity development. She shared “actually when I was an undergrad as a first year, I tried to commit suicide. I was going through this whole thing, and the cross country coach did not help with that – he told me ‘you just need to fit in more.’” She said it was not a result of being an adoptee, but of having different values compared to her teammates. This is not to say that being an adoptee caused mental health issues, she shared it significantly contributed to her identity development. See Figure 1 for a visual description of findings.

Figure 1. Timeline of Adoptee’s Ethnic Identity Development



Discussion

Although the sample of this research is small, there are some similar experiences among adoptees and their identity development. First, all the participants of this study

have similar experiences in how they were raised – in the Midwest in Caucasian families, and primarily Caucasian neighborhoods and schools. Their parents all encouraged their child's involvement in cultural activities related to their birth county as children and then were supportive of their child through adolescence and young adulthood. All participants noted they were given freedom to explore their culture and identity at their own pace and as they wanted.

Developmentally, the participants had similar changes in feelings about their adoption growing up. As children they were proud of being adopted. They all participated in cultural events from their birth county and met with other adoptees from their country. As they grew into adolescence, things changed. The participants no longer wanted to stand out and be different; they wanted to be like everyone else around them. This is consistent with developmental psychology and most adolescents feel this way, whether they are adopted or not (Forte, 2007). This was difficult to do because they were usually one of the few people of color in their schools and communities. This supports the current research that says it is important for children to grow up with people who look like them. Fiegelman (2000) suggested international adoptees would be able to better develop their sense of ethnic identity if they are surrounded by people who look like them. All of the participants in this study grew up in communities and neighborhoods where they were not surrounded by people who looked like them. Their parents attempted to expose them to other adoptees and mentors, but their primary network was Caucasian.

All the participants mentioned that young adulthood was when they really began to search for their identity and connect with their birth culture, but said it is a life-long

journey with will continue to develop. This agrees with Erickson's psychosocial development stages because young adulthood is when people are searching and resolving the inner conflict of identity vs. role confusion. It is usually worked out during adolescence, but in the participant's experiences, it wasn't until later in adolescence and early adulthood that they began to embrace and understand their ethnic and adoptee identity. Song & Lee (2009) suggested that searching for one's birth roots helps strengthen one's positive sense of ethnic identity. This research agrees with this previous finding because all the participants traveled to their birth country and said it was an important part of developing their sense of ethnic identity.

Lastly, all the participants have visited their birth country and have found it an important part of their development. Although the participants had different reactions and experiences to visiting their birth countries, they all mentioned it as an important event in understand where they came from. It may not have filled missing holes they were looking to fill, or they were surprised at how it filled a hole they didn't know they had. Either way, the experience of traveling and learning more about where they came from contributed to their current understanding of themselves and where they came from. This finding supports current research that visiting one's birth country may give adoptees feelings of acceptance and belonging (Bergquist, 2003).

Bergquist's 2003 study of adoptees experiences returning to Korea also found there was a connection and bonding among the adoptees who traveled together. This agrees with findings of this study because all the participants included being an adoptee as part of their identity and even ethnicity. Hübinette (2004) termed this identification as an adoptee as the 'third space.' Adoptees identify partly American, partly Korean, but

also in a 'third space' as an adopted Korean. It suggests this 'third space' more closely describes their identity and also agrees with the responses of participants in this study. Once participant even said she and her Korean adoptee friends have their own ethnicity of adoptees.

Given all these similarities in the participant's situations, their stories and journeys to understand their ethnic identity are very different. Listening to the stories of the adoptees, it seems there may be other life or personality factors that have contributed to their identity development more than just being an adoptee. For example, one participant had struggled with depression and at one point attempted suicide. She believed this was an important factor in trying to understand her identity more than her ethnicity or adoption. Another participant had a hearing impairment and that was another part of her identity that she struggled with growing up. Two participants had gone through their parent's divorce, which affected them a lot as children. One participant said she doesn't like to stand out as part of her personality. She contributed her negative feelings towards being an adoptee as part of her personality trait to not stand out. Although it is difficult to say what has really contributed to once ethnic identity development, there seem to be many more life and individual factors. Each participant's journey has been affected by individual differences and they are a continual work in progress.

Implications for Further Research

This study leaves many options for further research in the area of adoptee identity development. First, since the sample in this study is so small, it cannot be generalized. Therefore, further research, given more time for more in depth interviews, would give the

researcher more information and possible results that can be applied more generally. Second, since the participants were all raised in similar situations, it might be helpful to see if there are differences in identity development in urban areas where there is more diversity in schools and neighborhoods or other places in the country. Third, there seemed to be a difference in experience between the male participant in this study and the three female participants. Because there was only one male, it cannot be concluded that there are gender differences, but further research could look at if there are significant gender differences in identity development of international adoptees.

Another implication for further research might look at the how adoptees' experiences differ based on their birth country. This study compared experiences from adoptees of different countries, but their experiences could differ because of the racial hierarchy or structure in American society. Different races are treated differently in the United States, and so adoptees of different races may have very different experiences than one another. Additionally, since adoption education and services have been promoted among adoption social workers to adoptive parents, further research might look at how this additional education of adoptive parents might affect the adoptees identity development.

Conclusion

Although adoptees views on their adoption and how they develop their ethnic and adoptee identity is similar over time, there are many factors that contribute to their identity development. They all experienced similar feelings about being and looking different from those around them and how it made it difficult to understand, but there were also factors each participant brought up that also affected their development. It

seems similar to each person, whether adopted or not, that their identity is influenced by all the experiences they have had throughout their life.

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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

Are you an international adoptee willing to participate in research about identity development?

I'm a Master of Social Work (MSW) student at the University of St. Thomas looking for participants for my research on the identity development of international adoptees. It will consist of one in person interview that will be audio taped about what factors contributed to your identity development. If you are interested please contact me, Natalie Sinkler, at sink5508@stthomas.edu or 612-720-5983.

Appendix B: Interview Questions

1. Tell me about your adoption. Where were you born? When were you adopted (how old were you?) Where did you grow up? What is the makeup of your family?
2. What was the ethnic makeup of your neighborhood? Community?
3. How do you describe your ethnicity?
4. When did you first learn about your adoption? Do you remember how your parents told you?
5. How did you feel about your adoption as a child?
6. Did you participate in cultural/ethnic activities as a child? Did your parents incorporate anything from your birth country into your life?
7. How did your ideas about your adoption change as you moved into adolescence?
8. How did your parents contribute to your ethnic identity development as an adolescent?
9. Have you searched for your birth parents? Why or why not?
10. How have you developed your ethnic identity as a young adult?
11. Have your ideas changed about your adoption over time?
12. How do you feel about being connected to your birth culture?
13. What was the most important factor in developing your sense of identity as an adoptee from ____?
14. What kind of pre- and post-adoption services did your parents receive? How did they perceive those workshops/resources?

Appendix C

CONSENT FORM
UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS
GRSW682 RESEARCH PROJECT

Identity Development Among International Adoptees

I am conducting a study about ethnic identity development among international adoptees. I invite you to participate in this research. You were selected as a possible participant because you are an international adoptee. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by: Natalie Sinkler, a graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas and supervised by Dr. Felicia Sy.

Background Information:

The purpose of this study is to understand what factors influence identity development among international adoptees.

Procedures:

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following things: You will participate in a 45-60 minute interview that will be audio recorded. I will also present findings from the study to the public on May 14th, 2012 at the University of St. Thomas.

Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:

The study has a risk because it will include sensitive topics about your experiences as an international adoptee.

The study has no direct benefits to you except that you are helping further research about international adoptees.

Confidentiality:

The records of this study will be kept confidential. I will also keep the electronic copy of the transcript in a password protected file on my computer. I will delete any identifying information from the transcript. The audiotape and transcript will be destroyed by June 1, 2012.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may skip any questions you do not wish to answer and may stop the interview at any time. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with St. Catherine University, the University of St. Thomas, or the School of Social Work. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without penalty. Should you decide to withdraw, data collected about you will be destroyed.

Contacts and Questions

My name is Natalie Sinkler. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact me at 612-720-5983. You may also contact my professor Dr. Felicia Sy at 651-962-5813. You may also contact the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at 651-962-5341 with any questions or concerns.

You will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I consent to participate in the study and to be audio taped.

Signature of Study Participant

Date

Print Name of Study Participant

Signature of Researcher

Date