Birth Family Searching and Meaning: A Korean Transracial Adoptee Perspective

By

Kathryn Eileen Goldstein, B.A.

MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the
School of Social Work
St. Catherine University and University of St. Thomas
St. Paul, Minnesota
in Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

Committee Members
Kari L. Fletcher, PhD, LICSW (Chair)
Lindsey Nelson Donnelly, LICSW
Elana M. Schuster, LGSW

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 the findings of study. This project is neither a Master’s thesis nor a dissertation.
Abstract

The decision and process of initiating a birth family search is truly a unique journey for every adoptee. However, through examining the birth family search process of Korean transracial adoptees themes and patterns emerge surrounding the meaning making process within their own journey. This study sought out to understand how adult Korean transracial adoptees use the process of birth family searching to create meaning of their ambiguous loss and adoption experience. Additionally, this research aimed to give voice to the stories and perspectives of Korean transracial adoptees’ unique experiences and knowledge. Interviews were conducted with eight participants (n = 8) who are Korean transracial adoptees and had participated in a birth family search or been contact by their birth family through a reverse birth family search. This study found that the process of birth family searching effected participants’ experience of ambiguous loss, adoptee cultural citizenship, meaning making, and identity tension. In addition participants explored the experience of traveling to South Korea, navigating language barriers, using support systems, experiencing guilt in relation to the search process, and the use of Facebook for support and searching. The findings of this study indicate that social workers need to become more aware of the dynamics surrounding the experience of being a Korean transracial adoptee in order to support and advocate for the services that would be beneficial for adoptees who are completing birth family searches.

Keywords: Birth Family Searching, International Adoption, Korean Adoption, Post-Adoption Services
Acknowledgments

First off, I would like to thank my chair Kari Fletcher who supported me throughout this entire process. From the very beginning Kari answered all my questions, read all my drafts, and constantly supported that I could do this. I would also like to thank Lindsey Nelson Donnelly and Elana Schuster for being on my committee and providing the support, connections, and ideas that helped this study grow and represent a new social work perspective in researching the experience of adoptees.

I would like to thank all of my classmates who were there throughout this process and provided their perspectives, laughter, motivation, support, edits, and spirit to this process. Going through this with all of you provided a sense of community behind the process that was essential for me to be able to create this finished study.

I also want to thank my participants for without all of your knowledge, voices, and stories this study couldn’t have come to fruition. Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy lives to spend some time talking with me and sharing your stories.

Last but not least, I would like to thank my husband and family. Thank you Nick for all the extra dogs walks, needed breaks, and extra stuff around the house that you did so that I could spend all of those moments working on this study and my other course work. All of your extra help made all the difference in the world. Thank you to my family for listening to all of the stories about this study, helping getting the word out about my study, and giving me the extra support when I needed it.
# Table of Contents

Table of Contents ........................................................................................................... iv

Literature Review ........................................................................................................... 6

Transracial Korean Adoptions ....................................................................................... 7
Adoptee Cultural Citizenship ........................................................................................... 12
Openness vs. Closed Adoption ....................................................................................... 14
Birth Family Searching .................................................................................................. 19
Birth Family Reunion Outcomes ................................................................................... 24
Implications for Social Work Practice .......................................................................... 30

Conceptual Framework ................................................................................................. 33

Methods ....................................................................................................................... 38

Findings ........................................................................................................................ 45

The Experience of Ambiguous Loss ............................................................................. 46
Adoptee Cultural Citizenship .......................................................................................... 49
Moments of Connection that Shift Perspectives in Meaning Making ....................... 51
Identity Tension and Transracial Adoption Paradox ................................................... 56
The Experience of Traveling to South Korea ............................................................... 59
Language Navigation .................................................................................................... 60
Use of Support Systems and Resources ....................................................................... 61
The Experience of Guilt ................................................................................................ 63
Use of Facebook .......................................................................................................... 65
Successful Birth Family Search Experience .................................................................. 66
List of Tables

Table 1: Participant Demographics .........................................................44

Table 2: Thematic Categories of Meaning Making ..................................68
Birth Family Searching and Meaning: A Korean Transracial Adoptee Perspective

Introduction

One of the largest and most historically documented international adoption relationships is that between the countries of South Korea and the United States. This is due mainly to the fact that this relationship was the first government sponsored large-scale adoption initiative of its kind. International adoption existed on a smaller scale previously, however this relationship between South Korea and the United States established international adoption as a large systematic intervention for orphaned or abandoned children worldwide (Jackson & Lee, 1020; Kim & Smith, 2009; Kim, Suyemoto, & Turner, 2010).

Similar to other countries where the origin of adopting children across international boarders arose within historical context of war, Korean adoptions specifically came out of the social and political dynamics of the Korean War. During the Korean War there was a dramatic increase in the number of children that were considered biracial by Korean society. These children were frequently born to Korean mothers and American soldier fathers and were often abandoned by their parents due to their ethnicity given the pressures of a predominantly homogenous Korean society (Han, 2004; Kim, 2010; Kim & Smith, 2009; Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2011). Large numbers of abandoned biracial children in addition to war orphans, increased the number of children in institutionalized care to 48,594 in post-war 1957, compared to the 3,000 children in institutionalized care in 1945 at the end of Japanese rule in Korea (Kim, 2010; Kim & Smith, 2009). Due to the massive overcrowding in orphanages the adoption of
children out of South Korea became the first and largest inter-county adoption movement in the world. Today the largest reason that birth mothers in South Korea are pursuing international adoption plans for their children is based within Confucian influenced gender dynamics and the large stigma against un-wed mothers (Kim & Smith, 2009; Han, 2004).

Throughout the last four decades there has been a significant push on the South Korean government to end its international adoption programs, and work to promote a more supportive domestic adoption program through child welfare and policy reforms. This has resulted in a systematic practice of restricting the amount of children that are adopted from South Korea annually. Most notably this systematic elimination of international adoption has resulted in the establishment of actual quotas restricting the number of children adopted internationally each year. More recently, 2012 legislation was passed focusing on the oversight process of both domestic and international adoptions within South Korea. The hope is that these changes will result in an increase in domestic adoptions and an increase in the number of single mothers that choose to parent their children due to raising the cultural support for single mothers (Holt International, 2012). However, the effects of this recent legislation have yet to be seen and South Korean international adoptions are still moving forward as they were before this piece of legislation. In 2011, the number of international adoptions between the United States and South Korea decreased to 736 children adopted within the program, compared to the 1862 children adopted into the United States in 2001, when South Korea was the largest international adoption program. This resent reduction in the number of children being
adopted from South Korea makes this program the third largest international adoption program today (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2011).

This topic is particularly relevant to the local population due to the fact that Minnesota has the largest number of individuals that were adopted into the United States from South Korea per capita in the world. Between 13,000 and 15,000 children from South Korea have immigrated to Minnesota through the process of international adoption, creating a significant percentage of the Minnesota population (Jackson & Lee, 2012). Hellerstedt et al. (2008) found that Korean adoptees in Minnesota represent nearly one-third of the total pool of international adoptees, twice the U.S. annual rate of adoptions from South Korea when compared to other states. This may be reflective of the fact that Minnesota’s largest international adoption agency has established and longstanding relationships with the Korean government and the largest referring international adoption agencies located in South Korea (Hellerstedt et al., 2008).

In addition to the historical effects of international adoption, the domestic framework of adoption within the United States significantly impacts the experiences of international adoptees within Minnesota. In 1917 Minnesota passed legislation that sealed all adoption records of adoptees thus creating the trend of confidential or closed adoptions (Ayers-Lopez, Henney, McRoy, Hanna, & Grotevant, 2008). Although this secrecy was originally meant to shield adoptees from being viewed negatively by their new community while also giving them closure on their ties with their birth family, this environment bred a sense of secrecy in the context of adoption. However starting in the 1980s there was a movement towards more ‘openness’ within adoption, as domestic birth mothers advocated for a more significant role in the lives of their adopted children.
Research also started to explore the connections between birth family members and birth family culture that would actually lead adoptees to more positive outcomes, including more positive perceptions of ethnic identity and overall self-identity (Bergquist, 2003). By the 1990s the majority of adoption agencies were emphasizing the importance of adoptive parents having some form of contact with domestic birth parents and their child’s birth culture throughout the lifespan of their adopted child (Wolfgram, 2008).

This emphasis towards more openness between members of the adoption constellation, defined as encompassing all of those effected by the adoption process including adoptees, birth families, adoptive families, service providers, teachers, physicians, court systems, social workers, and legislators (Grand, 2010), was difficult to extrapolate into the context of international adoptions with South Korea. Therefore the more modern notion of international birth family searching came in response to answering adoptees questions about their country and family of origin. An international birth family search is defined as the process of an adoptee trying to locate their birth family within their country of origin based on the information gathered from their early history (Andersen, 1989). There have been many studies that quantify the success outcomes of international birth family searches including Howe & Feast (2001), Logan & Smith (2005), Silverman, Campbell, Patti & Briggs-Style (1988), and Pacheco & Eme (1993). In contrast, this current study aims to examine how adult Korean adoptees use the experience of searching for their birth family in South Korea to make meaning of their own ambiguous loss embedded within their adoption experience and identity.
The experience of international birth family searching is becoming increasingly significant to social workers in Minnesota, because the large population of Korean adoptees started to seek out support and therapeutic services in conjunction with their physical search process (Howe & Feast, 2001). Searching for birth family members creates a considerable amount of stress for an adoptee and social workers are uniquely placed to navigate some of the emotional and physiological processes that are tied to physical search process (Valley, Bass, & Speirs, 1999). Rosenzweig-Smith (1988) emphasized that social workers should stay in a central position within the context of the adoption constellation, because social work professionals were in a position to facilitate the reunion experience between adoption constellation members. One of the most significant stressors within the birth family search process is that adoptees are confronting their own meaning making process within their emotional experience of ambiguous loss. For adoptees loss starts at the very beginning of the adoption process where they lose potentially forever their bonding with their biological family and the life they could have had with those family members (Moran, 1994). This process of mourning and accepting the loss associated with adoption is something that all adoptees must face, and social workers often play a significant role helping adoptees through this difficult process.

Therefore by examining how Korean adoptees are using their birth family search experience to create meaning of their own ambiguous loss embedded within their adoption story, social workers can become more effective in meeting the increasing need for therapeutic services surrounding the international adoption experience.
**Literature Review**

The South Korea adoption program has had a long and turbulent history, which has spanned the entire history of the Republic of Korea. This history has been complicated due to the tension between how adoption agencies in the United States view the program in contrast to the worldwide perspectives of international adoption. Kim (2010) described international adoption from South Korea as having the “reputation as the Cadillac of adoption programs” within the adoption agency and American community (p. 3). In contrast, the publicity from the Seoul Olympics in 1988 really placed Korean adoptions on the chopping block because it highlighted much of the economic and medical progress that South Korea had made while simultaneously reinforcing older more harsh social expectations and realities (Han, 2004). In addition to this tension Korean adoption is a transnational movement that affects “a range of nations, institutions, ideologies, laws, technologies, media, and social groups that hold stakes in its reputation and future” (Kim, 2010, p. 4).

The literature examining the experience, law, and changing historical dynamics of Korean adoption are very extensive. However, it is primarily from the perspective of the adoptive parent and adoption agency community. Much of the historical adoption research focuses on identity formation, grief experiences of members of the adoption constellation, post-adoption services, and describing strengths and weaknesses of various methods of adoption. This has developed into the current trend in the state of the literature, which emphasizes the voice of the adoptee. This shift is mainly achieved through narrative stories about individual experiences or reflections often times written by the individuals themselves. There has also been a shift into more theoretically oriented
research, as demonstrated by Kim’s (2003; 2010) current research examining adoptee cultural citizenship and Korean adoptee identity formation.

This review of the literature will focus on examining the research on transracial Korean adoption, adoptee cultural citizenship, contrasting methods of adoption, the process of birth family searches, and outcomes of birth family searches all while emphasizing the perspective of the Korean adoptee. Further this review will examine the implications for social work practice and include a statement of study for this particular piece of research.

Korean Transracial Adoptions

*Transracial adoption* was originally defined as an adoption where black or mixed race children were adopted into white families in the United States. However this term has grown to encompass and be used interchangeably with such terms as *transnational adoption* and *international adoption*, as the majority of these adoptions included children of color being adopted by middle class white American families (Kim, 2010). In South Korea these adoptions were called *kugoe ibyang* and *haeoe ibyang*, or foreign adoption and overseas adoption (Bergquist, 2003; Kim, 2010). During the years between 1954 and 2002, about 96,000 of Korean adoptions between South Korea and the United States were classified as transracial adoptions (Yoon, 2008).

It is also important to mention that there were some organizations and literature that did not actively support transracial adoption practices. In fact, since 1972 the National Association of Black Social Workers has actively spoken against transracial adoption practices to both the adoption and professional social work communities (Kim, 2010). The first negative critique of Korean transracial adoption came from Kim in 1978.
who demonstrated that Korean transracial adoptees worried about their physical appearance and did not accept their Korean ethnic identity. Negative or even cautionary literature about the effects of Korean transracial adoption specifically did not resurface again until the 1990s (Kim, 2010). Kim (2010) suggested that the historical research that illustrated the positive outcomes of transracial adoption focused more on developmental processes of acculturation in contrast to the issues of racism and losing access to ethnic identity.

Transracial adoption presented a unique developmental process for adoptees because there is the added difficulty of integrating their own experience with the experience of losing birth culture and identity (Song & Lee, 2009). This is further complicated for adoptees because they also had to navigate the process of assimilation into the white majority culture of the United States. This process created a tension within an adoptee’s experiences and identity where transracial adoptees gained societal privileges, through their participation in the white majority culture and through living in a white household. In contrast, they were also simultaneously treated as a racial minority (Song & Lee, 2009). Psychologist Richard Lee called this phenomenon the *transracial adoption paradox* (Kim, 2010). Bergquist (2003) described the environment of this paradox as “racial identity [has] been somewhat like the elephant in the room, everyone knows it is there, but no one is sure how to talk about it or what to do about it” (p. 25).

This development of ethnic and racial identity, through the collaboration between the majority and minority groups, set Korean transracial adoptees apart from belonging completely to either racial and ethnic group. White majority culture presented barriers due to adoptees’ physical characteristics and ascribed Asian identity. Where, in contrast, the
Korean American community also presented barriers to group members through cultural knowledge and shared Korean language that Korean transracial adoptees may not have had full access to (Kim et al., 2010). According to Kim et al., (2010),

If there’s a fence and one side is being Korean and the other side is being how you grew up, the American side, Caucasian world, you are sort of in the middle of it. And it’s a hard place to be because the people in the Caucasian American world view you as Korean American and there’s racism or any sorts of prejudices and you deal with that… And some traditional Korean American communities or Korean communities often are prejudiced against adoptees as well, or against Korean Americans who aren’t culturally connected. But Korean Americans don’t like adoptees for whatever cultural reasons—because we are orphans, because we are illegitimate children, because we don’t speak Korean or whatever reasons. We are sort of stuck in the middle (p. 182).

The current environment in relation to Korean transracial adoption has become more accepting, and there have been an increasing amount of resources for questions surrounding racial identity and group membership. In addition, adoptive parents have become more aware of their responsibility to incorporate Korean cultural aspects into their families’ everyday life (Bergquist, 2003). Many Korean transracial adoptees that were raised by white adoptive parents have become involved in Korean culture or Korean organizations within the community. These adoptees tended to identify more readily as Korean American. Further, it was demonstrated that a more positive and distinct ethnic identity for minority group members was associated with a more positive psychological adjustment (Song & Lee, 2009). Korean transracial adoptees who had been actively exposed to Korean culture had the ability to develop pluralistic racial identities where they openly embraced both their Korean heritage and western acculturation. These same Korean transracial adoptees were found to have an increased need for connection and involvement within their own ethnic group, separate from their white adoptive family.
This connection was found within Korean transracial adoptee groups, networks, or through a connection with birth family members in South Korea (Bergquist, 2003). This potential for pluralistic identities allowed for Korean transracial adoptees to quickly assimilate as infants for the purpose of integrating and bonding into their adoptive family. Then as Korean transracial adoptees grew into adulthood this pluralistic identity was often associated with the experience of traveling to South Korea or searching for birth family members in order to establish their autonomy and independence from their adoptive family as a Korean transracial adoptee (Kim, 2010; Song & Lee, 2009; Yoon, 2008).

In contrast to adoptive parents that were more active in regards to adoptees racial development, some adoptive parents took a stance where they did not address cultural, racial, and ethnic issues until concerns were raised by Korean transracial adoptees themselves (Song & Lee, 2009). This parenting style of Korean transracial adoptees was not completely understood, however it manifested itself as a feeling of being culturally transplanted, where knowledge regarding Korean culture or language must be learned and talked about outside of the home (Bergquist, 2003). This process of being culturally transplanted had negative consequences in relation to Korean transracial adoptees development including poor psychological well-being, poor self-concept, problems regarding psychosocial development, and maladaptive psychological behavior (Yoon, 2008). Korean transracial adoptees that have not experienced connections with their historical or biological roots also experienced a profound sense of loss surrounding not only their cultural identity, but also their sense of belonging to a membership group (Kim et al., 2010). In addition, research surrounding international adoption demonstrated that
the majority of adoptive parents in transracial adoptions have sought out professional help surrounding social problems and difficulties related to grief for their adopted children (Yoon, 2008).

It is also important to note that there was significant within group differences between Korean transracial adoptees in regards to their individual experiences (Song & Lee, 2009). For example, Yoon (2008) hypothesized that adopted children that received more parental support surrounding ethnic socialization would have more self-esteem, more positive relationships with adoptive parents, more positive well-being, and lower distress levels. This study identified both Korean adolescent adoptees and adoptive parents to participate through examining Holt International Children’s Adoption Service’s case records from 1980 to 1984, identifying 800 potential participants from 28 states. Survey’s containing measures for parent-child relationship, adoptive parental support of adoptee’s ethnic socialization, self-esteem, and subjective well-being were mailed to all potential participants and there was a 30 percent response rate, which was considered satisfactory (Yoon, 2008). This study found that despite the lack of Asian peers, Korean transracial adoptees had acceptable performance and adjustment within their schools. Korean transracial adoptees adopted by white European families were also found to have similar or higher achievement within academics than their white non-adopted peers. In addition, warmth, closeness, consistency, and structure within families acted as one of the primary sources of both self-concept and self-esteem development in Korean transracial adoptees (Yoon, 2008). Bergquist (2003) has also demonstrated that transracial adoptees score high on measures of self-esteem.
Adoptee Cultural Citizenship

Eleana J. Kim (2003; 2010) developed the concept of Adoptee Cultural Citizenship within her anthropological ethnography research. Eleana Kim interviewed Korean adoptees and adoption researchers in both the United States and South Korea as her main source of data. Kim (2010) used conceptual frameworks from the disciplines of anthropology and sociology to examine the interviews and find patterns regarding the topics of identity, kinship, origins of Korean adoption, morality in adoption, and the manifestation of a Global Korea.

Adoptee cultural citizenship described the position where Korean transracial adoptees were inevitably transnational, their identity and life spans two countries, two families, two cultures, and two histories. This place of being constantly split between two opposing forces, while simultaneously not having full membership in either space is an experience that was unique to transracial adoptees (Kim, 2010). This tension between opposing forces was particularly significant for Korean transracial adoptees after the establishment of the F-4 visa or more commonly called overseas Korean citizenship. This official recognition of Korean transracial adoptees as overseas Koreans or segyehwa was established by former president Kim, Young Sam and was continued under president Kim, Dae Jung. This visa legally incorporated Korean transracial adoptees as members of the global family of South Korea and recognized that their immigrant status was involuntary (Bergquist, 2003; Kim, 2003; Kim, 2010). This legal form of citizenship allowed Korean adoptees to stay in South Korea for two years with the ability to work, make financial investments, buy real estate, and obtain government medical insurance. This citizenship also developed further into a new cultural identity that reflects the
ambiguous position of Korean transracial adoptees (Kim, 2003). The Korean adoptee
cultural citizenship reflects a voice and global community that has needed to establish
meaning from the “central tension between opposing notions of identity as either
biologically given or cultural achieved” (Kim, 2003, p. 61).

A global movement of using autobiographical accounts established cohesion
within this Korean transracial adoptee cultural identity and was due mainly to the
increased ability and use of technology and the internet. The 1990s brought to Korean
transracial adoptees the ability to find each other and connect through organizations that
used the Internet as an outreach tool (Kim, 2010). This allowed Korean transracial
adoptees to connect despite their geographic location in the world. The first officially
established Korean transracial adoptee organization of this kind was founded in
Minnesota and was called Minnesota Adopted Koreans, which is now called Adopted
Korean Connection (Kim, 2010). This manifestation of a Korean transracial adoptee
citizenship was solidified at the The Gathering, which was the first in person event and
gathering of Korean transracial adoptees from all around the world and was organized by
Korean transracial adoptees for Korean transracial adoptees (Kim, 2003; Kim, 2010;
Song & Lee, 2009). The Gathering was described as “a time for us to celebrate that which
we all share” and took place in Washington D.C. in 1999 (Kim, 2003).

The new form of Korean adoptee cultural identity or personhood was
characterized by adoptees common experiences of disconnection, disidentification,
involuntary exile, expression of loss, and displacement from Korea and their Korean
families (Kim, 2010). Kim (2003) described the identity of an adoptee as being
“increasingly articulated by a collective, global, and deterritorialized community,
collective histories, constructed through shared storytelling, constitute a kind of ‘disidentificatory’ practice out of which Korean adoptee cultural citizenship emerges” (Kim, 2003, p. 61). Despite varying legal citizenships, languages, geographic locations, personality types, likes and dislikes, Korean transracial adoptees have expressed a feeling of instant connection and sense of belonging with other Korean transracial adoptees. They have also defined themselves in stark contrast to non-adoptees in an effort to give voice to their own experiences and narrative separate from adoptive parents’ and social workers’ “objectifying and instrumentalizing agenda” (Kim, 2010).

Due to the varying experiences and locations of Korean transracial adoptees, there are no concrete characteristics of the Korean transracial adoptee cultural identity. It is more easily understood as a counterculture that was present for members to receive support and find roles models in order to navigate the specific needs of Korean transracial adoptees that adoptive families were not in the position to meet. However, the avenue where common characteristics between Korean transracial adoptees were reflected was within introductory ritual. At first meeting, Korean transracial adoptees usually asked each other four questions which included: 1) when were you adopted? ; 2) where did you grow up? ; 3) have you gone to South Korea? ; 4) have you done a birth family search? These questions correlated with and described the developmental stages that Korean transracial adoptees faced across their lifespan in relation to their identity formation and membership experience within the Korean adoptee cultural identity (Kim, 2010).

**Open vs. Closed Adoptions**

Within the literature on adoption there was significant debate between which method of adoption, open or closed, was the best evidence based practice for the adoption
process today. Both of these types of adoptions presented unique variables and situations that lead to different experiences for members of the adoption constellation. The underlying conflict within the debate stemmed from the question of whether contact between birth family members and adoptees was beneficial or detrimental to both of their developmental processes across the lifespan (Wolfgram, 2008).

**Open adoption.** An *open adoption* was a term that referred to a large continuum of options that allowed for some type of communication between adoptive parents and birth parents. Despite the exchange of information, birth parents were still required to legally relinquish parental claims to the adopted child (Wolfgram, 2008). Proponents of open adoption suggested that open communication between birth family members and adoptees allowed the adoptee to gain a realistic picture of their birth family situation and environmental reasons for moving forward with an adoption plan. This was actually a protective factor for an adoptees development, because adoptees grew up with the understanding that rejection or a lack of love from their parents did not influence their birth parents to decision to make an adoption plan (Pannor & Baran, 1984). Wolfgram (2008) also suggested that collaboration between adoptive parents and birth family members was the best way to promote an adoptees healthy development because it gave a more natural pathway for conversations surrounding adoption and normalized the experience into the everyday practice of the family.

On the other end of the spectrum, there were advocates against open adoption that worried that open communication with birth family members would cause the adoptee to be confused about who their real parents were, and that their identity and self-esteem would become conflicted through having to navigate their role within both
families (Wolfgram, 2008). In addition, advocates against open adoption worried that openness gave the birth mother mixed messages that it was both necessary to make a permanent decision to relinquish rights to parenting while also keeping options for contact and a relationship with the child available (Fravel et al., 2000). These role confusions, defined as boundary ambiguity, added additional stress for all members of the adoption constellation throughout the lifespan. In particular adoptive parents feared that it would cause constant worry about birth family’s intrusion into their ability to be the adoptees’ parents (Wolfgram, 2008).

Fravel et al. (2000) specifically examined openness in adoption and boundary ambiguity through asking the question, “is the adopted child on the birthmother’s heart or mind differently according to level of adoption openness? If so, what is the nature of the child’s psychological presence in her life in different levels of openness? How does it manifest itself?” (p. 426). The participants in this study were 163 birth mothers who were recruited through the Minnesota and Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP), which was a large qualitative domestic research project aimed at examining openness in adoption. The participants were asked over 300 open-ended interview questions regarding their experiences and views related to their children’s adoption. The conceptual framework of this research was ambiguous loss (Fravel et al., 2000).

Fravel et al. (2000) demonstrated that in relation to openness in adoption birth mothers reported conflicting experiences of ambiguous loss. The study demonstrated that regardless of the level of openness, birth mothers did not forget their child that was adopted. However, it was demonstrated that birth mothers experienced this physical absence with psychological presence as both positive and negative. Fravel et al. (2000)
also found that birthmothers in the most open form of adoption, or *fully disclosed adoptions*, had significantly more positive experiences of psychological presence compared to birth mothers in confidential or time-limited-mediated adoptions. *Time-limited-mediated adoptions*, are adoption plans that start with a period of openness however progress into a closed adoption after an agreed upon period of time. This study also found that a factor affecting the experience of boundary ambiguity was the lack of socially institutionalized roles for adoptive children and birth mothers in society and the media today. Each birth mother regardless of level of openness felt this lack of societal feedback regarding role definition, and birth mothers experienced their role as being ignored or ambiguous in greater society (Fravel et al., 2000).

**Closed or confidential adoptions.** In contrast to an open adoption there are also *closed or confidential adoptions*, where birth parents were still legally required to relinquish their parental rights and only very general and non-identifying information was initially passed between birth parents and adoptive parents (Wolfgram, 2008). The vast majority of international adoptions were closed adoptions due to geographic constraints on the ability for contact. Traditionally the purpose of closed adoptions was to protect the rights and emotions of the birth mother. It was thought that by not having any identifying information pass between birth parents and adoptive parents it would eliminate the possibility of either party interfering with the life of the other. This was supposed to give birth mothers the chance at a new life, while simultaneously giving adoptive parents security within their new role as the child’s parents (Blanton & Deschner, 1990). Proponents of closed adoptions viewed grieving as a necessary step for birth mothers and believed that a clean break limited the mediating factors that could lead to complicated
grieving (Blanton & Deschner, 1990). It was also thought that confidential adoptions limited stress within the process due to the absence of the necessity to define specific terms of openness, roles, communication levels, and levels of face to face contact (Fravel et al., 2000).

According to Pannor and Baran (1984), closed adoptions came out of an environment where social workers viewed the adoptive parent as the primary client within the adoption process. Closed adoptions gave adoptive parents the ability to pretend that their adopted child was actually born to them in the case where there was unresolved loss and grief surrounding infertility (Pannor & Baran, 1984). In addition, Wolfgram (2008) demonstrated that closed adoptions bred a sense of secrecy regarding adoption issues, which actually created a pathological lens within the adoption field. Studies showed that closed adoptions were a “deficit model of adoption,” that created higher risks for disruption within placements, psychopathology among adoptees, trauma, and conflictual interpersonal relationships (Wolfgram, 2008, p. 136). Last, the literature suggested that closed adoption actually denied adoptees rights to their personal medical, family, and genetic history, which then punished adoptees for being adopted (Pannor & Baran, 1984).

Valley, Bass, and Speirs (1999) aimed to identify the major issues that were facing members of the adoption constellation in closed adoptions and evaluate how social workers were able to respond to those identified issues. This study came out of the Triad-Group Pilot Project in Quebec in response to previous research findings from the Adoption Triad Search and Reunion Pilot Project and Quebec adoption disclosure project, which suggested that social workers were not adequately prepared to address
post-adoption issues. Valley et al. (2000) invited seven participants to join a support group for members of the adoption constellation that were in closed adoptions and were in the process of searching for other biological relatives. Data was collected through both pre- and post-intervention surveys in addition to process notes from each group meeting. This study demonstrated that the major themes in closed adoptions were confusion surrounding legal and ethical rights, desire for increased contact, loss, and divided sense of loyalty (Valley et al., 2000).

The idea that closed adoptions were a deficit model of adoption in conjunction with the increased domestic presents of open adoption lead adoptees to consider alternatives to filling the void that closed adoptions presented within their lives. Therefore this motivation and increasing awareness lead Korean transracial adoptees in closed adoptions to pursue birth family searching as a way to ratify or bring more openness to their experience within a closed adoption (Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988).

**Birth Family Searching**

Birth family searching and birth country tours have become a standard practice among adoption agencies in both the United States and South Korea since the 1970s (Bergquist, 2008). *Birth family searching* was defined as the process where an adoptee tried to locate individuals in their birth family based on their initial adoption documents (Han, 2004). *Birth country tours* were organized trips to South Korea that included visiting Korean adoption agencies, meeting foster and birth families, and site seeing throughout South Korea (Children’s Home Society and Family Services, 2012). During the first wave of adoptees returning to South Korea, the idea of birth family searching came at quite the surprise to Korean adoption social workers at the few agencies that
provided international adoption services. Korean social workers never anticipated that adoptees would want to return to South Korea, as they believed adoptees were being given a better life in the United States.

Historically, social workers in South Korea improvised in order to accommodate adoptees returning to South Korea, because records were not well documented and were often lost if documentation existed originally (Bergquist, 2008; Children’s Home Society and Family Services Post-Adoption Korea Program Searching Manual, 2012). Fifty years ago adoptive parents were also told that no records of birth existed for Korean transracial adoptees, and were told that searching would be impossible due to adoptees’ abandoned status in South Korea (Bergquist, 2008). The first birth country tour group through Children’s Home Society and Family Services was in 1986 and had fewer than 30 people interested in participating in the tour to South Korea (Han, 2004). The majority of large adoption agencies started organized birth land tours and searching services as adoption agencies started to view adoption as a lifelong process where adoptees would forever be connected to their birth history. Korean adoption agencies also re-examined and created new policies in order to respond to the increasing motivation to search from Korean transracial adoptees (Bergquist, 2008).

Children’s Home Society and Family Services search process manual (2012) has outlined the actual process and steps of a birth family search for practicing social workers at the agency. The various methods of initiating a birth family search in South Korea included hiring a private detective, using post-adoption services at an adoption agency, and using Korean Broadcasting System (KBS) television. The majority of birth family searches happened through an adoption agency or through the use of KBS television. In
the case of using an adoption agency, the first steps surrounded finding out information from both an adoptees American and Korean adoption agency. Then based on the information found at the Korean agency mainly, social workers in South Korea tried to locate birth family members directly based on both that information and any update information they located through the Korean police system (Children’s Home Society and Family Services Post-Adoption Korea Program Searching Manual, 2012). The other option for adoptees was using KBS television, which is a Korean television station that airs a specific show, which highlights adoptees looking for their birth families. Adoptees came onto the show and read off all of the information they knew about their birth family and hopefully birth family members in South Korea were watching and called into the show. Both of these methods of searching were very unpredictable and it could take months to many years if adoptees ever heard anything from their birth families (Children’s Home Society and Family Services Post-Adoption Korea Program Searching Manual, 2012).

According to Lichtenstein (1996) there were two specific characteristics that are associated with the majority of searching adoptees, including being a woman and being between the ages of 25 and 34. Searchers were also found to be well educated, although there were searchers that did not fall into these categories (Lichtenstein, 1996). Research also suggested that the majority of searchers were mainly looking for their biological mother, in contrast to their biological father. Pacheco and Eme (1993) described a study done by Sachdev (1992), where only one-fifth of the sample reported thinking about their biological father during adolescence and while searching, in contrast every adoptee in the study thought about their biological mother.
There were multiple manifestations of reasons or motivations to search found within the literature. Common motivations for Korean transracial adoptees to search for their birth families included needing medical information, pregnancy, giving birth, cultural experiences, wanting a deeper connection, disruptive change in relationship with adoptive parents such as divorce or death, and to fill a void that adoptees felt within their lives (Bergquist, 2008; Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988; Pacheco & Eme, 1993). This void or lack of connection manifested itself as adoptees using a birth family search as a therapeutic tool where they were looking for their original name, medical history, and family roots in order to find out who they were and instigate their own personal change (Anderson, 1989). This therapeutic nature within searches allowed adoptees to learn from and respond to their past in away that allowed them to take action and grieve the irrevocable losses associated with adoption. The adoptee initiated the search and took action within their adoption story in away that was denied to them as children where their birth parents were the ones making choices. This whole process was intertwined with giving the adoptee the ability to grieve and make sense of their adoption story (Anderson, 1989). During the first task of grieving, an individual demonstrated searching behavior to seek confirmation that the object or individual in question was really lost. This confirmation that the individual or object was not coming back lead the griever to accept the reality of the loss and move into the next task of grieving (Worden, 2009). Birth family searching, or trying to locate ones birth family members that were lost, was the manifestation of being stuck at this initial stage of grieving and not being able to accept the reality of the loss (Simone, 1996).
Other major motivations to search for birth family members included the perspective that the search was an adventure and that the search was a way to either rebuff or confirm an adoptee’s fantasies about their birth family. Andersen (1989) coined the term *search as an adventure* for cases where adoptees had straightforward motivations to search for birth family in order to locate them and continue forward as if no interruption happened within the family environment. These adoptees were not searching with the notion that the goal of the search was in the process, as in the case of using searching as a therapeutic tool. These searchers saw a definitive goal where they developed a strong relationship with their birth family and moved forward with their birth family in their life (Anderson, 1989). Some adoptees also searched because they wanted to confirm or deny all of the fantasies they had regarding their biological family (Lichtenstein, 1996). Schilling (1985) found that during childhood 19% of adoptees were thinking about or fantasizing about their birth family and that during adolescence this number increased to 25%. This same study reported that adoptees that were searching recalled a higher degree of fantasizing about their birth family compared to adoptees whom simply contact adoption agencies for birth families non-identifying information (Rosenzwig-Smith, 1988).

One of the barriers that some adoptees perceived to the searching process was that locating birth parents would present a threat to their bond with adoptive parents or hurt adoptive parents feelings (Kim, 2010). A study done by Pacheco and Eme (1993) examined this barrier though targeting 72 participants from a Chicago area adoption reunion support group who had completed their search for their biological parents. This study aimed to identify characteristics and qualities of successful outcomes to a birth
family search. This study used a questionnaire that was given to participants over the phone to gather data that used both quantitative and qualitative questions. Pacheco and Eme (1993) reported that 58% of adoptees in their study wanted to search for their birth family earlier, however they were concerned about adoptive parents’ reactions and causing anxiety in adoptive parents’ lives. It was also reported that 38% of the adoptees kept the search process secret from their adoptive parents and 19% of adoptee’s adoptive parents were deceased at the time of search initiation (Pacheco & Eme, 1993).

The literature suggested that ambivalence by adoptees to tell adoptive parents about the search process was due partly in order to avoid bringing up an adoptee’s sense of loss with their adoptive parents. Adoptees were often told by their adoptive parents that they were, “special or chosen,” therefore adoptees worried that searching for another family would hurt their adoptive parents (Lichtenstein, 1996, p. 64). Research also suggested that adoptive parents that were open to discussing adoption related issues and loss were more likely to be included in the search journey by their adopted children. This open dialogue assured adoptees that their adoptive parents understood the need for both a connection with their birth family and space to mourn the losses of their birth family and birth culture (Lichtenstein, 1996). Pacheco and Eme (1993) also found that the majority of adoptees had a good relationship with their adoptive parents and that the desire to search was not a reflection of the adoptees relationship with adoptive parents.

Birth Family Reunion Outcomes

Much of the literature surrounding birth family reunions and openness exist in reference to domestic adoptions, however the research community has started to recognize the need for more long-term examination of international adoption searching,
particularly in regards to Korean transracial adoptions. In order to examine the literature that exists regarding birth family reunion outcomes, this study will examine the experience of birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptees in relation to the experience of reunions.

The literature suggested that birth parents experienced a significant amount of concern and fear surrounding potential reunions with adoptees. Silverman et al. (1988) examined this manifestation of concern and fear in relation to reunions through analyzing data collected from a self-selected sample of 170 birth parents who completed a questionnaire with both quantitative questions and qualitative open ended questions. This study found that the ambiguity between methods of searching, types of reunions, respectful ways to search, and individual difference between reunion experiences caused great anxiety and excitement for birth parents. In fact many birth parents did not consider pursuing reunions because of the fear of the unknown and possible negative outcomes from the experience (Silverman et. al., 1988).

In contrast, Silverman et al. (1988) also found that some birth parents actually initiated reverse birth family searches, which has been defined as situations where the birth family initiates the process of locating on adoptee. The majority of these birth parents were motivated to search due to the inspiring stories that were present within the media portraying happy outcomes from these reunions. When these birth parents learned news of their children they described feelings of, “‘indescribably excited and shaky,’ ‘catharsis,’ ‘fantastic,’ and ‘the end of mourning, no more wondering where he was’” (Silverman, et al., 1988). Logan and Smith (2005) also discussed a tension between the anxiety surrounding the particulars of the reunion verse the healing potential of knowing
what happened to their child. Despite this anxiety surrounding reunions 98% of birth parents said they would have a reunion with their child if possible (Silverman et al., 1988).

The experience of direct contact during the reunion process presented a unique situation for birth family members, particularly if adoptive parents were also present or part of the reunion process. Logan and Smith (2005) explored adoptive parents, adoptive children, and birth families experiences in face-to-face reunions after the formal adoption process had been completed. This study recruited participants from eight adoption agencies or authorities, where 61 families defined as including adoptive parents, birth family members, and adopted children participated. This study gathered data through using a semi-structured interview schedule for birth family members, adoptive parents, and adoptive children separately (Logan & Smith, 2005). The majority of birth family members reported positive feelings towards adoptive parents after getting to know them through the reunion process. One of the underlying motivators that developed these positive feelings was the gratitude that birth family members felt towards adoptive parents for caring for their children (Logan & Smith, 2005). Birth mothers also reported that learning that their children were healthy, well-loved, and cared about produced a healing effect that allowed birth parents to develop appreciative feelings for adoptive parents role within the adoption process (Silverman et al., 1988).

In contrast to the more positive feelings expressed by birth family members, birth mothers in particular had some difficulty navigating relationship dynamics with adoptive mothers. Initially during the period of adjustment within a reunion, birth mothers expressed difficulty surrounding giving adoptive mothers full permission to parent their
children, which created a sensitivity on the part of adoptive mothers about the legitimacy of their ability to parent the adoptee (Logan & Smith, 2005). Over time this dynamic settled as both adoptive and birth mothers realized they were not a threat to each other. However Logan and Smith (2005) described this initial relationship struggle as a “conflict of motherhood,” where both birth and adoptive mothers expressed significant fear regarding role definition within an adoptee’s life (Logan & Smith, 2005, p. 21).

Adoptive parents experienced a large continuum of emotions and dynamics when present during an adoptee’s reunion with their birth family members. Silverman et al. (1994) examined the left side of a continuum of adoptive parents through exploring the adoptive parent view of reunions between their adopted children and adoptee’s birth parents. This study asked, “how do adoptive parents feel the reunion affects the integrity of the adoptive family” (Silverman et al., 1994, p. 543). Data for this particular study was gathered through mailing questionnaires individually designed for adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoptees found through an adoption reform organization. Twenty-four families consisting of adoptive parents, adopted children, and birth parents responded to the mailing and participated in the study. Adoptive parents specifically in this study expressed being more comfortable controlling the birth family search process, so that they could be informed about the reunion process. These adoptive parents were found to have a significant fear that they would lose their adopted child and managed that anxiety through seeking control. These adoptive parents were also concerned that a reunion could only hurt an adoptee, as birth family members would not meet an adoptee's expectations (Silverman et al., 1994).
In the middle of the continuum were adoptive parents that experienced neutral feelings regarding contact with birth family members. These adoptive parents were able to include birth family members in an adoptee’s life, however they did not push relationship building or more contact after an initial reunion (Logan & Smith, 2005). Logan & Smith (2005) found that three out of four adoptive mothers with neutral feelings about birth family members expressed a preference for a life without a reunion or ongoing contact with birth family members. On the right side of the continuum, adoptive parents expressed being very open to adoptees having a reunion with birth family members, whether it included the adoptive parents or not. Some adoptive parents were almost as curious about birth family members as adoptees, therefore these adoptive parents welcomed reunions and were happy for adoptees during the reunion process (Silverman et. al., 1994). Although there was a large continuum of emotional experiences of adoptive parents, across the literature they all acknowledged that their legal rights presented a sense of security within all of the unknowns in the reunion process (Logan & Smith, 2005).

Rosenzweig-Smith (1988) aimed to examine adoptees’ relationships with adoptive parents, adoptees’ motivations to search, and successful reunion outcomes that were related to adoptees’ grief resolution. This study developed a questionnaire called the Adult Adoptee Inventory for Social Workers (AAISW), which was mailed to adult adoptees who had initiated a search through a large private voluntary child welfare agency on the East Coast. Thirty-nine participants completed the questionnaire, which were predominantly female. In regards to adoptive parents fears surrounding reunions Rosenzweig-Smith (1988) actually found that 67.7% of adoptees in the study reported
that their reunion with birth parents had no effect on their relationship with adoptive parents. Further 22.6% reported that their relationship with adoptive parents actually improved through the search and reunion process. Only one participant reported that their reunion with birth family members negatively affected their relationship with adoptive parents (Rosenzweig-Smith, 1988).

The majority of the literature on birth family reunions examined domestic adoptees’ experiences. One of the central themes that stood out amongst the literature was that adoptees considered all reunion outcomes to be successful simply because a reunion was possible and happened. Adoptees would repeat the reunion process even if they experienced significantly negative reactions from adoptive parents, birth parents, or themselves (Howe & Feast 2001, Moran, 1994; Pacheco & Eme, 1993). Pacheco and Eme (1993) quantified this tendency for the majority of adoptees to define reunions as successful through finding that 1) 86% of adoptees studied viewed their overall experience as positive, 2) 85% of adoptees believed a birth family reunion improved their self-concept, 3) 71% of adoptees believed their self-esteem was improved, 4) 74% reported an improvement in emotional outlook, and 5) 62% reported an increase in ability to relate to others. Researchers believed that no matter the specific outcome of the reunion experience adoptees were working through their search for identity and resolution of loss, therefore the reunion experience inherently presented a catalyst for change. This ability to progress or gain information allowed adoptees to feel control of their lives for possibly the first time. It also could help complete the autobiographical story of an adoptee’s life, which can then be processed by the adoptee (Howe & Feast, 2001). In other words after the reunion, “the puzzle is solved is the bottom line,” even if
the reunion itself is a negative experience the knowledge generated is positive (Pacheco & Eme, 1993).

Not all adoptee reunion experiences were without difficulty. Many adoptees found that differences in class and culture were significant barriers to building relationships, and therefore they would lose contact with birth family members after the initial reunion (Howe & Feast, 2001). Moran (1994) used her own experience of birth family searching in collaboration with adoption literature to raise the awareness of counselors regarding the emotional experience of birth family searching. Moran (1994), described four stages that adoptees progressed through after initial reunions with birth family members, and the first three stages could be quite distressing. Stage 1, or paralysis, is experienced as extreme stock. There was extreme fear right before the reunion and followed by the feeling of being, “emotional paralyzed” (Moran, 1994, p. 52). The second stage is eruption, or just a flood of emotions that are difficult to predict or control. The third stage is grief and loss. During this stage adoptees fantasies about their birth parents were tested and the validation of what had been lost was realized for adoptees. The experience of a reunion could bring up the loss of bonding with birth family, loss of culture, loss of language, loss of the life that was biologically their right to live, and that these losses might be lost forever (Moran, 1994). The final stage is empowerment and Moran (1994) describes that in this stage, “there is peace in understanding” (p. 53).

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

The literature suggested that there were multiple implications for social work practice, because social workers are not only included within the adoption constellation
but play a significant role (Rosenzweig & Smith, 1988). Social workers were often the professionals that were facilitating the adoption process, birth family searches, adoption support groups, and reunions (Logan & Smith, 2005). Through becoming more educated about the adoption process and the various dynamics effecting international adoptees particularly, social workers could provide more culturally competent services. The literature also suggested that social workers needed to be aware of the many historical, cultural, racial, and ethnic dynamics that could be present within the context of international adoption (Bergquist, 2003).

Bergquist (2008) found that the majority of post-adoption services within adoption agencies were not evidence-based practices. Therefore through adding more research to the body of knowledge surrounding international adoption and particularly Korean international adoption, social workers could be more informed surrounding the services that were provided for clients whom are members of the adoption constellation. Transracial adoption has also become an increasing part of our society, and more research that touches upon these topics could help social workers be prepared to navigate the difficult conversations of race, ethnicity, and culture that were present within adoption practices. Last, many adoptees believed that social workers have a hidden agenda, or are participating in the objectification and commodification of adoptees (Kim, 2010). Therefore, through becoming educated in the lens of the adoptee in addition to the lens of the adoptive parent social workers could help lower barriers that limit the ability the build relationships with adoptees and the adoptee community. Through joining with the adoptees voice and story in future research, social work could act as a significant resource for not only adoptive and birth families, but also adoptees.
This particular study sought out to understand how adult Korean transracial adoptees use the therapeutic process of birth family searching to create meaning of their ambiguous loss and adoption experience. Additionally, this research aimed to give voice to the stories and perspectives of Korean transracial adoptees unique experiences and knowledge.
Conceptual Framework

Grief and loss are central to the adoption process; in fact without the presents of loss there would be no adoption. In order for the adoption process to take place one must lose a child, the dream of giving birth to a biological child, or the family one was born into. Loss is what brings all members of the adoption constellation together. This presence of loss was also an evolving process that created themes of loss within an adoptee’s life and family experiences (Silverstein & Kaplan, 1982). Therefore the conceptual framework of this research will be centered around the lens of ambiguous loss, which is particularly suited within grief and loss literature for the context of adoption. As a second conceptual framework, social constructionism is also used due to its ability to understand ambiguous loss within the context of environment.

Ambiguous Loss

*Ambiguous loss* is a conceptual framework that is defined by an experience of loss that is somehow undefined or unclear. The two particular forms of ambiguous loss are based upon the principle that there is a lack of information or the information is unclear surrounding the particulars of the loss (Boss, 2007). The first type of ambiguous loss was defined as a loss where there is a *physical absence with psychological presence*. This type of loss was typified in a situation where a loved one is physically missing or not presently involved in a person's life, however that loved one is still psychologically present due to a lack of proof that the loved one is actually dead (Boss, 2007; Walsh & McGoldrick 2004). This is the specific form of ambiguous loss that was associated with adoption, as adoptees have mental images or fantasies about what their birth family is like and often times think about their birth family through their lifespan (Lichtenstein,
Therefore for Korean transracial adoptees their birth families are psychologically present within their lives through their fantasies, thoughts, and perceptions, however the closed nature of international adoption created a barrier to a physical presence within their lives.

The second type of ambiguous loss was defined as a loss with *psychological absence with a physical presence*, as in losses surrounding dementia and depression for example (Boss, 2007; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). Within the experience of ambiguous loss there was no possibility for closure, rather one strives to construct a sense of truth and meaning from the information that was known. This was particularly difficult for individuals and lead to more complicated grieving. Ambiguous loss presented barriers that made it more difficult for individuals to process the tasks of mourning and therefore they become stuck within their grief process (Boss, 2007; Worden, 2009). The experience of ambiguous loss was extremely stressful for individuals and caused family conflict, family secrets, ambivalence, depression, anxiety, repressed emotional expression and guilt (Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004). The goal within the framework of ambiguous loss was to somehow find meaning within the loss despite not having all of the information. This was found through not changing any of the particulars surrounding the loss, but through somehow finding a way to shift one’s perspective and find some level of control of the event causing the ambiguous loss (Boss, 2007; Walsh & McGoldrick, 2004).

This particular framework of organizing grief was present throughout the literature surrounding Korean transracial adoption and birth family searching. Birth family searching in many ways could be thought of as a therapeutic intervention for processing the ambiguous loss related to adoption. Through the search process an adoptee
could gain more information surrounding the particulars of the loss and hopefully find a
different perspective surrounding their adoption. In addition, for adoptees one of the only
ways that is available to take some control over the adoption process is through initiating
a birth family search (Anderson, 1989).

**Social Constructionism**

Boss (2007) suggested that when examining ambiguous loss within the lens of
qualitative research it’s highly beneficial to also use the framework of social
constructionism as a way to examine the broader contextual environment in which the
ambiguous loss takes place. Social constructionism as a framework brought in a way to
conceptualize the perceptual shifts, meaning, and hope restoration that was present within
the process of healing from an ambiguous loss (Boss, 2007). Social constructionist theory
centralized around the process of how people describe and making meaning of their
experience of the world. It described how the common knowledge or “taken-for-granted
world” come to be in society and how that knowledge was dependent and reflected upon
manifestations within a particular culture, history, and social context (Gergen, 1985, p.
267). Social constructionist theory further explained that understanding was not shaped
through inherent natural forces, but was in contrast created through a cooperative
interplay between individuals and systems within social contexts (Gergen, 1985).

Gergen (1985) also suggested that self-identity is socially constructed within the
context of environment and social conditions. Everything happened within a context, and
for Korean transracial adoptees there were a significant number of social contexts all
coming together to inform their experiences. Therefore through using social
constructionism to frame the experience of ambiguous loss, this research acknowledged
the influence of those various cultural contexts upon experience. Using social constructionism as a theoretical framework also allowed for the ability to examine the experience of Korean transracial adoptees and their development of self, racial, and ethnic identities as a reflection of their social and societal contexts (Kim et al., 2010).

**Professional Lens**

This current study came out of the researchers experience within a foundation field placement in the post-adoption department at a major adoption agency. Specifically this researcher worked within the Korean post-adoption department, helping adoptees gain access to their adoption information, paperwork, and facilitating the physical search process for Korean birth family searches. During this field placement the researcher noticed that there were themes that came out from various searching experiences that were not only based on historical context but also seemed related to an adoptees process of meaning making. Due to the legal requirements and constraints in place within an adoption agency context these observations couldn’t be further explored within the researchers specific role at the organization. Therefore in order to further explore the patterns and meaning making process of Korean transracial adoptees doing birth family searches this researcher designed this study within the context of the St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas Masters of Social Work program.

**Personal Lens**

Adoption has always been a part of this researcher’s family environment and dynamic. This researcher has childhood memories of cousins being adopted and traveling from South Korea, and has always had a close relationship with extended family. Growing up there were discussions about adoption, birth families, transracial adoption,
and racism adoptees experienced as normal topics of conversation. Therefore despite the fact that this researcher is not an adoptee, adoptive parent, or a birth parent, international Korean adoption has always been a piece of family life. More recently, domestic transracial adoption has become a hallmark of this researchers family life, as immediate family members pursued domestic adoption plans. This researchers connection and distance from adoption creates a unique bias to this research study. This dynamic has made the researcher particularly aware of the fact that they are not adopted and that many adoptees believe this presents a limitation to the ability to completely understand the experience of adoption. This awareness has influenced this research significantly in that the method and literature used was organized to promote the voice of the adoptee and to place the adoptee in a position of power that has been previously denied in some cases. Therefore this researcher’s personal goal is to use their position as a graduate social work student in the St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas Masters of Social Work program to give Korean adoptees an opportunity to have their voice and experience heard by the research community.
Methods

Research Design

One of the core assumptions embedded within the lens of ambiguous loss and social constructionism was that meaning and information comes from analyzing the narrative story of participants (Boss, 2007). Therefore for the purpose of this study qualitative interviews were used in order to capture meaning from within the narratives and words of participates. A semi-structured interview was used in order to provide structure to the interview process with predetermined questions, and also allowed space for the researcher to ask follow-up questions (Berg, 2009). A qualitative method of research also allowed for Korean transracial adoptees to share their own perspectives, experiences, and voices which made the research process a more collaborative and empowering experience. This research also took place within the confines of the St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas Master of Social Work Program clinical research requirement, in which this research was conducted within a nine-month independent project requirement necessary for graduation from the program. This research was also presented to the public on May 20, 2013, and published electronically through St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work.

Sample

There were eight individuals who participated in this current study, who all met prior inclusion criteria set by both this researcher and through previous research. Participants were chosen for interviews if first they were Korean adoptees that were adopted into White (non-Hispanic) families, and were therefore transracial adoptees. Second participants were chosen if they had previously participated in a physical search for their birth family in South Korea through an adopted agency, KBS Television, or
other private searching method. The third inclusion criteria was that participants were adults, over the age of 18, and two years time had passed since their birth family search was initiated. The specific demographics of the participants are summarized in Table 1 (see page 44).

The participants consisted of seven female participants and one male participant. Therefore, in order to protect the identity of the one male participant in the current study female pronouns were used to describe each participant in this study. Four participants who were interviewed for this study had actively searched for their birth families in South Korea. In contrast, four other participants were initially contacted by their birth family members in South Korea and participated in a reverse birth family search that was first initiated by their birth parents. All of the participants in this current study had traveled to South Korea during their birth family search process, three of the participants traveled through a birth country tour, and five participants traveled privately with their families. Last, one participant in this current study spent significant time living in South Korea during her birth family search process.

**Recruitment**

Participants were recruited for this research through both a snowball sample and the use of flyers. *Snowball sampling*, a nonprobability sampling strategy, was employed: participants were asked to identify other potential participants at the conclusion of their interview (Berg, 2009). This researcher distributed flyers (see Appendix A) that asked potential participants to contact this researcher through e-mail in order to discuss participation in this research. The researcher also posted flyers at local coffee shops, restaurants, and e-mailed electronic versions of the flyer to potential participants. This
research used snowball sampling, and asked participants to pass along information regarding this research to other potential participants and organizations. Last, participants received a $10 gift card to Target as an incentive for their participation in this research study. Participants were also informed that they would receive the incentive even if their participation in the study was terminated during the interview or during the following week timeframe. No participants in the current study chose to terminate their participation in the study during the interview or during the following week timeframe given to all participants.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic of transracial adoption the protection of the participants in this study was of great importance. Care was taken to reduce the risks associated with exploring the topics that are embedded within adoption discussions while increasing the protection of participants’ information through using strict confidentiality practices. This researcher checked for inclusion criteria when scheduling interviews with participants and at time of the scheduled interview. This researcher gave participants the option to receive the consent form (see Appendix B), interview schedule (see Appendix C), and description of study (see Appendix D) through e-mail prior to the interview for their review. All participants chose to receive these documents through e-mail prior to the scheduled interview time. The researcher also interviewed participants at a location of their choosing in order to make participants more comfortable, including both participants’ homes and local coffee shops.

At the time of the interview this researcher verbally went over the consent form and discussed the sensitivities of the subject. This researcher also informed participants
that they could stop their participation in the research at any point during the interview and up to one week after the scheduled interview time by contacting the researcher through e-mail or phone. The participants were also informed that they may skip any questions within the interview schedule and that participation in this research was completely voluntary. In addition to the discussion of confidentiality within the consent form, this researcher described the steps that would be taken to ensure ongoing confidentiality of participant data. At the end of interview process, this researcher provided participants will a list of mental health and adoption related resources (see Appendix E) that were available for psychoeducation and therapeutic support following participation in the study. This list was provided in the case that participation in this study caused any emotional distress for participants by answering questions related to their adoption and birth family search process.

Last, to ensure the protection of participants this research was reviewed and approved by the research committee and University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to any contact or outreach to potential participants. An expedited level of review was required for this study meaning that two IRB members in addition to the IRB chair examined and approved this study.

**Data Collection**

The method of data collection for this study was semi-structured interviews, which lasted 40 to 60 minutes depending on the particular interview. The interview consisted of 10 open-ended interview questions (see Appendix C) that were reviewed by the research committee and University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB). The interview questions were developed by this researcher for the purpose of this
particular study, and were based on qualitative interview questions and studies from previous adoption literature. The participants choose the locations of their individual interviews, two were conducted in private homes, two were conducted over the phone, and four were conducted in public coffee shops. This researcher asked that participants chose a private or quiet location in order to protect confidentiality.

Interviews were audio-recorded on the researcher’s computer into a password-protected folder for transcription purposes. In order to protect participants information no identifying names were audio-recorded, and this researcher personally handled all information gathered from the interview. After the interviews were gathered, this researcher personally transcribed each interview using Dragon Software 3.0 for Mac to aid in the transcription process. This software allowed for the researcher to listen to the audio recording of the interview while speaking aloud the context of the interview to the software. The software then transcribed the spoken interview to text. Following this process the researcher went through the transcription manually to ensure accuracy. Dragon Software 3.0 for Mac comes with security measures within the software that kept all audio recordings and transcribed text in a password protected folder. The audio recordings were kept in a locked cabinet at the researchers home until May 20, 2016. On May 20, 2016, three years after the completion of this study and public presentation, all audio recordings were destroyed.

Data Analysis

The researcher used content analysis with an interpretative approach in order to examine the transcribed text gathered from the interviews. Content analysis, a systematic examination of a body of material in order to identify patterns, themes, biases, and
meaning (Berg, 2009), was used in order to allow for the themes to come from within the transcribed interviews. These themes were then compared to the current state of the literature. The interpretative approach orientation suggested that the data be interpreted through the theoretical framework that was driven by both the researcher and state of the literature (Berg, 2009). Therefore, based on the theoretical framework of ambiguous loss and social constructionism, a data reduction analysis was used to move from the specific accounts within the transcribed data to more general interpretative organization of themes and meaning. Boss (2007), also suggested that terms in which themes and meaning are described need to “imply movement, paradoxical possibilities of change, and diverse paths to resiliency” when using an ambiguous loss framework (p. 109). Therefore during the analysis of research data the researcher used the examination process of context analysis and the language terminology from ambiguous loss to identify meaning from the data.
Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>(n = 8) (100%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>International Adoptees</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Korean Adoptees</td>
<td>8 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transracial Adoptees</td>
<td>8 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7 (87.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Birth family searches</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiated by participant</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reverse birth family search</td>
<td>4 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducted through adoption agency</td>
<td>5 (62.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducted through Facebook</td>
<td>3 (37.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Traveling to South Korea</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Been to South Korea</td>
<td>8 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birth country tour</td>
<td>3 (37.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traveled privately with family</td>
<td>5 (62.5%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lived in South Korea</td>
<td>1 (12.5%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* This table reflects the demographics of the participants.
Findings

This research aimed to understand how adult Korean adoptees use the therapeutic process of birth family searching to create meaning of their ambiguous loss and adoption experience. This portion of the study begins with a brief overview of the participants who were interviewed, which is then followed by an overview of the ten themes that emerged from the data. The 10 themes that emerged from the data are as follows: the experience of ambiguous loss, adoptee cultural citizenship, moments of connection that shift perspectives in meaning making, identity tension and transracial adoption paradox, the experience of traveling to Korea, language navigation, use of support systems and resources, the experience of guilt, use of Facebook, and successful birth family search experiences (see Table two). Table two provides a consolidated overview of this study’s themes and example quotations from participations to describe each theme.

The participants consisted of eight individuals who were all adopted from South Korea into the greater Midwest area through the process of international adoption. All of the participants were members of transracial families, where their adoptive parents were Caucasian and American. In addition all participants had completed a birth family search, where four participants had actively searched for their birth families in Korea, and four participants reunited with their birth family through a reverse search, where they were contacted through either Facebook or an adoption agency by their birth families in Korea. Last, all of the participants traveled to South Korea during various stages of their search process, three of the participants traveled through birth country tours, and five participants traveled privately with their families. Table one provides a summary of the demographics of the participants of this current study.
The Experience of Ambiguous Loss

Every participant discussed their experience of ambiguous loss in some way during their interview process. This manifested itself in different two forms. First as the existence of ambiguous loss described as a physical absence with psychological presence where participants thought about their birth families throughout their lifetime, or after searching discovered the ambiguous sense of loss felt previously throughout their lifetime. In contrast, the lack of ambiguous loss due to the age when participants were adopted and traveled to the United States was the second form in which ambiguous loss was processed throughout the interviews.

Existence of ambiguous loss. The existence of ambiguous loss was mentioned by five participants through processing both their motivations to search and discussing the aspects that changed after the completion of their birth family search or reunification.

Participant C described thinking about her birth family during childhood as,

*I basically started getting really curious, I wanted to see like if what’s in the file is the truth or if like I go over there will I find something different. After all the new information would the file still hold up?*

Participant E mentioned a similar experience reflecting on an experience at a mother’s home in South Korea that brought up memories of questioning,

*Then it was our chance to ask questions, one of the little boys started crying and said do you know why, please tell me why my mom gave me up. That was one of the moments where everyone has that question, but to see that kind of come out and be brought out and hear them respond to it, I don’t know it was like one of those moments for me that was a real surprise.*

Participant G reflected upon her motivation for searching stating, “I’ve always been interested in wanting to know about my families whereabouts, and curiosity, and everything.” Later in the interview the same participant reflected,
My whole life since I was little girl I had so many questions and so much interest in what my life was life before I was adopted... I felt like there was a void that was filled, but then there were so many questions for so many years and to be able to understand who I am a little bit better defiantly helped. I think going into this there is always a moment of apprehension and some underlying fear too, like are they going to accept me, how are they going to react towards me.

When discussing her motivation for searching and moving forward with traveling to South Korea, Participant F reflected,

When my mom had gone to Korea previously umm she had looked for my file, but they said they had lost it. Oh this is all coming back to me, and that was kind of upsetting, like I don’t even exist over there anymore... I didn’t realize then how much I felt like then I don’t belong anywhere. You know there is no file there, so even if someone looked for me it wouldn’t be there.

Last, Participant H reflected upon her process stating, “so I mean, the whole thing was literally taken out of my hands, to this day I don’t. I still don’t know how I feel about that.”

When discussing aspects of their lives or perspectives that have changed post-reunification or post-searching four participants reflected upon the manifestation of ambiguous loss or a new sense of understanding their loss post-reunification. Participant A reflected upon changes after her birth family search through sharing,

When you do find them and you do meet them there is kind there is kind of that closure. It’s kind of hard but like when you go in you sit there and there are people who look like me, but I feel no underlying relationship with them.

Participant D reflected upon her process of completing her birth family search through stating,

Growing up, I can honestly say that growing up I knew I was adopted, of course I knew I was adopted. But (pause) I didn’t really think about it that much, but then after you know I’ve done a lot of reading myself recently and they say that there becomes a time when you’re an adolescent or an adult where you start processing
the whole adoption. Well it sort of snowballed for me and was like bam it hit me. You know things that others have said about the past now make a lot of sense, like there is a loss, the fact that there was no choice.

Participant E also reflected upon a sense of clarity within her process of resolving her previous unsettled feeling about the adoption process through stating,

*So it was just one of those moments um where it was just all part of the process of adjusting and kind of coming to a not resolution, but a place where those other people are out there, there are good reasons for all the birth moms and what they did... I would say afterward there was some processing that went on afterward. It wasn’t like life changing, but I would say there was a small piece of me that left a little more settled.*

Participant H also reflected on her post-reunification process of coming to acceptance surrounding the adoption process through discussing her experience in counseling after returning to the United States, “*I have a lot of underlying issues that were never really processed... she started talking about you know the past stuff with things I hadn’t really thought about it in a while.*” Last, Participant F described the resolution that came from completing her birth family search,

*It was like a weight I didn’t even know existed lifted, just to know that they hadn’t even met me and didn’t even know me, but that [my birth family] still cared and were supportive. It was a huge deal. So yea and I think coming back really changed, just that I had more people to talk to. And again, like it’s just nice to know that there are other people like me and similar and these things that I just didn’t even really think about before and now I have them and it’s great.*

**Absence of ambiguous loss.** In addition to the participants who evoked the experience of ambiguous loss within their childhood or birth family search experience, there were three participants who discussed the absence of the experience of ambiguous loss within their transition into their adoptive family. All three of the participants who mentioned the absence of ambiguous loss had information surrounding their adoption story through either having memories of their lives in Korea previous to their adoption or
from socialization and resolution of the loss within the adoption process by adoptive parents. Participant B stated,

*I was seven and [Participant A] was four when we were adopted, so I have some memories of Korea and knew a little bit of what was going on when our adoption was happening. Because of that we never went searching for more information or focused on what the paperwork had to say.*

Participant A reflected upon a related dynamic when she echoed similar thoughts,

*We were never really interested in searching and making contact with our family in Korea. Our adoptive parents I guess sent letters and pictures of us growing up through the adoption agencies for them to look at, and because I kind of knew the circumstances of why we were adopted and knew they were really poor, I didn’t think about searching.*

Participant F reflected upon both her socialization into her adoptive family and process of adapting to her new environment through stating,

*And it didn’t occur to me to care, like I even thought about it and I never felt bad about it, it was like this thing that happened to me that didn’t affect my life on an everyday basis… I remember we had this book called why I was adopted, and I don’t know who it was by but, um, it was funny because I remember in one of the pictures its like a giant gum ball machine and like a man and a woman are putting a quarter in so the whole book was like so this is where babies come from, and this is why you were adopted, and families are different, and I read that a lot. So I bet subconsciously that had a lot to do with me being like so this makes sense and it’s not bad and it’s not a sad thing, it’s just the way it is.*

**Adoptee Cultural Citizenship**

Another theme that came from the interviews was the manifestation of a connection to other Korean adoptees, or adoptee cultural citizenship. This was mentioned in various forms by three participants in this study, including a greater connection to adoptees, a sense of understanding from other adoptees, and a sense of kinship with other adoptees. When discussing the most significant support surrounding the birth family search process Participant D stated, “*the best support I probably had was one the social*
worker who I worked with during my search, she is also an adoptee. She is an adoptee, so she was really great.” This same participant later reflected about the sense of belonging with other adoptees,

And it’s hard for me, like the people I trust the most, just talking about some of the things that I feel, are only adoptees... one day this last year I was talking to my mentor friend and she just said at one point that you are not alone. And I mean I think a lot of people feel like they are alone.

Participant F held a similar viewpoint when she was stated,

It was good it was nice to meet other adopted people. It was a really eye opening experience... I didn’t know people like that really existed, so even outside of meeting my birth family it was really great meeting other adoptees in a close environment.

Participate H reflected strongly on her connection to other adoptees and a sense of belonging and togetherness amongst adoptees. When specifically discussing thoughts about meeting with a counselor in relation to processing the adoption and reunification process, Participant H stated,

I’m sure if there were Korean adoptee therapists, or counselors, I’m sure I would be much more open to talking with them. Especially if they had gone back and gone through the reunification process. I just can’t bring myself to talk to people who don’t know and can’t say. No you can’t so don’t say anything... but with other adoptees it’s really rough for them, so we kind of take care of each other, even though no one has any training.

In contrast to feeling a sense of belonging with other Korean adoptees, one participant reflected that prior to her search and traveling in South Korea, it was a struggle to be around and included with other Korean adoptees. Participant F reflected that prior to her searching experience,

I choose to be really removed from the idea of being adopted, I don’t really identify with it at all, and I don’t really have a lot of Asian friends and I’m really weary of other Asians, it sounds really awful... I didn’t talk to other adoptees, I know somebody had talked about me going to a group of older like adults that has searched and I was like maybe, but no.
In addition this participant mentioned an experience describing a discussion surrounding adoption with her family-in-law,

*His family knew I was searching, too. And his mom had actually given up a baby when she was younger and I remember she wanted to talk to me about it and I was like nope I don’t want to touch it. I’m really, at the time I was very guarded about this thing that I was doing and just being adopted in general.*

**Moments of Connections that Shift Perspectives in Meaning Making**

One of the central themes that came our of the interviews was the presence of these moments of connection that shifted participants’ perspective in meaning making within their adoption story and birth family search. Each participant was able to identify at least one moment in their birth family search experience where they were able to make a connection to their birth family, to their birth culture, or to a more complete understanding of themselves. For the majority of participants, this was a theme that cut across questions throughout the study, despite not being specially asked about these moments within participants search. Examples given included connecting with birth family members, connecting with the adoption process through either adopting or escorting other adoptees, learning that birth parents were not responsible for making an adoption plan, and creating new memories with birth family members. The moments of connection that were discussed by participants were all instigated by the birth family search process and led to a deeper connection with both the process and birth family members.

**New understanding of the dynamics surrounding the decision for an adoption plan.** Participant A and Participant B discovered a new understanding of the motivation and dynamics surrounding the decision to make an adoption plan, which
provided clarity surrounding their birth fathers emotional ties to them. Participant A described this when she shared,

\[
\text{We also learned that our father didn’t really agree to the adoption, and had second thoughts about the adoption once we were gone, but wasn’t able to go back to the orphanage. So it was nice to know that they were still thinking about us and it felt good to let them know that we were okay and had good lives here.}
\]

Participant G echoed similar sentiments regarding coming to a deeper understanding of the circumstances surrounding the decision to make an adoption plan. Participant G reflected,

\[
\text{My mother had to deal with me being given me up for adoption, and that’s another part, she wasn’t even the person who had given me up for adoption. She was traveling I think… her sister 21 years her senior had seen that there was a neighborhood boy that had been given up for adoption, so she thought I’m going to give [Participant] up for adoption and give her a better life. So my mother came back home to see that I was in the orphanage, so they had gone back for six months every day to see if they could try to get me out, but I’m not sure if the adoption paperwork was already in progress or if I was basically in a way sold, I’m not sure exactly how the exchange takes place, but, um, I was there already and they would not let me go.}
\]

Participant F also discussed how finding understanding in the reasons behind her birth parents decision to stay together helped her make a connection to her role within the birth family system,

\[
\text{I didn’t think I would find my mom, let alone my mom and dad still together and a family. So that like blew my mind, umm, and then just from the information shared like trickling in more and more, because then I started corresponding with my family via letters and I found out that, my dad’s letter to me said your mom came to me and I didn’t even recognize her because she had been crying so much and believed that in order for you to find us we would have to be together, so essentially they got back together for me… then in that I found out that my mom had run away from the birthing home the next day to like go and find me… so hearing that is like insane, and how I interpreted that as whichever this decision was it had to have been made really quickly and under a lot of pressure, because}
\]
I don’t think, it didn’t sound like a choice that she made with a full comprehension with what would happen, or maybe a lack of support.

**Connection with the life cycle of the adoption process.** Another dynamic that was present within the theme of moments of connections that shifted perspectives in meaning making for participants was a connection to the adoption process, including becoming an adoptive parent, escort, and participating in rituals surrounding the adoption process. Participant D described her motivation to search and find a deeper connection with her Korean heritage, “what really started this process is that my husband and I decided to start the adoption process and adopt a son from Korea.” Participant E described her emotional experience and connection made within the process of escorting another adopted child to the United States for a family in her local community,

*So I actually escorted their baby back... which was a really full circle kind of experience for me um they actually asked me to be one of her godparents... It was a really cool experience to kind of see it from the other side, and I just still remember even that maternal thing started kicking in where I had taken her from her foster mother, orphanage, and carried her with me for almost 24 hours by the time flight stuff happened and delivered her to her adoptive mom. I mean the bond that you establish early on; even knowing that she wasn’t mine was amazing. So I could see how from my mom’s eyes how that probably worked and people talk about blood and blah but it doesn’t matter a baby is a baby."

In addition to finding a connection to a new role within the adoption process Participant F found new understanding within the adoption process through a ritual that was repeated throughout her childhood that celebrated being adopted. Participant F stated that,

*We’ve always celebrated our anniversaries of when we got to come and would watch our arrival video and pick what we wanted for dinner. And have chocolate cake and then we would make popcorn and like watch the video together and then we also when my parents were really good, we would get the videotape and then put it in the camera and then record a new section of like me or my sister and be like what is today, well today’s*
my anniversary and what did we do, so like we got to see, so like our video’s now are like our arrival video and then us when we were young and then last time we did it was my sister’s anniversary and she was, like, seven [years old].

**New memories.** The last manifestation of this theme was described as participants creating new memories and connections with their birth families in the present moment, which started the process of meaning making of both their relationships to South Korea and their birth families. Participant E described finding this connection to South Korea when traveling to the site of her orphanage,

> What I was able to do is meet the little guy that was in charge of the orphanage, he no longer ran it as it’s not an orphanage. But he was able to pull down, because I gave like the time frame that I was born in, he pulled from his huge shelf of books the entry line of like when I was brought in, my height and weight, which I have never known. Like so many people talk about how much they weighted when they were born, but I had no idea. So that was really cool, so that kind of made it real for me to be able to see that in the book. To see the entry, to see the same little picture from the referral that it’s in my baby book... it did hit me, it was like the most emotional part for me, actually connecting with the fact that I was really here this is where I was brought in, and this man at the orphanage is the man who gave me my Korean name, so it was a cool experience.

This same participant described another moment where she was able to make new meaning in relation to a birth mother’s decision for pursuing an adoption plan. Participant E described the process of talking to the single mothers at a mother’s home that she visited during her trip to South Korea,

> I mean I was older than some of these girls by almost 10 years, and their pregnant and scared, and you know even the questions they were asking were very immature questions, because they were teenagers. Um, asking like were you loved by your family, just basic questions, and I appreciated their honesty. And knowing it was kind of one of those moments where I was like yes that was the right decision if that was what was happening in my mother’s life. She couldn’t handle it, she didn’t have support, not many of their families knew that they were there and pregnant. Definitely was a,
you know, you were brought up with your adoptive mother telling you that your birth mother loved you and this was the best thing for you, but it's also one of those mantras you just always tell yourself, but this was the moment where it wasn't just words it was true.”

In addition to making new memories in relation to South Korea and adoptees lives there prior to immigrating into the United States, two participants spoke specifically about the new memories that were created with their birth family members. These memories enabled these participants to make meaning within their relationships and develop emotional bonds with their birth family members. Participant G spoke about new memoires multiple times throughout the interview process, including describing a typical day drinking coffee with birth family members. Participant G stated,

There were times where we would sit there um basically drinking coffee or having lunch and she would just cry and my adoptive or my birth name was [Korean name] and she would just say oh [Participant’s Korean name] I cried everyday because I missed you so much, and still miss you so much. [Participant’s Korean name] I miss you, you were my only friend, um and she told me this story, kind of interesting, where we were playing with some neighbor kids and a kid had I think pushed my sister and I came up and tried to protect her and I think I scratched the girl and she said it was so cute because you were so little...yea, and she just said you were trying to protect your older sister.

This same participant later described being with both their adoptive and birth family on one of the last days of her trip to South Korea. Participant G shared,

That last day that we were there it was really amazing. I was hand and hand, women and girls are very affectionate there, they will hold hands and loop arms, so we had our arms, I had my arms looped with both my sisters, then my father, I had like um uh, I had my step father and uncle um he had his arms looped with my dad, my adoptive dad, and my mothers were both holding hands. Yea, you I remember just being in the back and thinking my dad and my step dad, and they were so just so gracious and at one point, my step father just got down on his hands and knees and started doing the like I thank you so much for taking care of [Participant’s name] and you know what you did was truly amazing.
Participant F had the experience of spending some time sleeping at the home of her birth family. Throughout the interview with this particular participant themes of new memories and how she had made connections to a place within the birth family structure kept coming through in her answers to many questions. Participant F described these new experiences with birth family members through sharing a story about going to the mall,

So we made plans that we would go to the mall again or something and then they asked me if I wanted to spend the night... I’m here, this is the only chance I will get for a long time, lets just do it. I go to meet my mom and then in the cab, [the translator] was like your mom is maybe concerned that you’re not feeling well. I was like can you just like let them that I’m not feeling well, so they just so that they don’t think that I’m upset or uncomfortable, or not feeling good about staying over, then instantly my mom was like oh what’s wrong, are you okay? Are you eating well? Are you sleeping well? This must be very stressful for you.

Participant F further spoke about the evening spent at her birth families home, including staying up late talking with siblings, having a huge Korean breakfast, and looking through family pictures. Participant F further described that evening sharing,

So they had made me a family album, put a bunch of pictures together. Then they said you can pick other ones, so we’re just looking at photos of family, it was a very strange experience to be looking at these photos of my brother and sister who look exactly, now I don’t think they look like me at all, but when we were babies my brother looks like me when we were babies, my sister looks exactly like me from like ages 4 to 15, so that was one of the most surreal moments, having these other people that look like me in world and like having it in front of me.

Identity Tension and Transracial Adoption Paradox

Another one of the prominent themes that came from the interviews surrounded the tension of being torn between the identity of being Asian and the identity of being American. Each of the participants in this study spoke to being torn between two worlds and needing to find a way to navigate the tension between being born in South Korea, but living with Caucasian families in the Midwest. Participant F mentioned this dynamic
when responding to how she identified herself ethically, racially, and culturally.

Participant F stated,

*Korean American, because I’m not Korean and I’m not American. I get ratted on for being too Korean and trying to hard, and I get ratted on for being American or not trying hard enough... It’s come up a couple times and truthfully even though I can say that I’m Korean American and it’s due to these reasons, it’s not something that I’ve come to in conclusion personally... I’m just like well I’m this, but there is no feeling.*

Participant C mentioned this dynamic when she stated, “So you know it’s kind of like a catch 22, you kind of like stuck in the middle somewhere.” Participant D echoed similar feelings when responding to the same question regarding ethnicity, race, and cultural identity,

*I mean I’m definitely American. I think, even thought I look Korean... But it wasn’t until I saw myself by my siblings and took pictures of us together that okay your definitely Korean; there is no question about it, at least on the outside. I think that because of this birth family search reunion I knew that I grew up American and I am American, because there were lots of mistranslations and it was a cultural thing... I know I look Korean but I know that I really am American.*

The idea of being stuck in the middle and experiencing identity tension also resonated with Participant B when stating,

*When I was in [Korean Cultural Group], they used the term banana to describe Korean adoptees, you know we’re yellow on the outside and white on the inside... I grew up with my adoptive parents and their cultural beliefs, so I just wanted to fit in with the family and people around me.*

In addition to the dynamic of identity tension within participants self-identity and experience, multiple of the participants spoke out how when they were younger they coped with this tension by ignoring the Korean aspects of self while embracing the American mainstream culture of their adoptive families. Participant E reflected that,

*I didn’t participate in any cultural experiences and it was a very conscious decision. I grew up in a very small rural community and it was*
very Caucasian and I never wanted to draw special attention to myself or be singled out as different.

Participant G expanded upon this worry of drawing special attention to her Korean identity when stating,

"My mom tried to get me to do Korean camp and different Korean based organizations, but I really had no interest in it what so ever... You know overall I felt like I would be not necessarily stigmatized but put into a subgroup that I didn’t necessarily want to be in, I just wanted to do the part of American.

Participant G further went on to explain her identity development from childhood through adulthood, describing that,

“When I was younger, I always wanted to look like everyone else. One of my best friends had blond hair, blue eyes, and um that I always imagined whenever I was playing house that I had blond hair blue eyes and that my name was Cindy or something like that, common name. Now I do like having a more unusual name and looking different, I suppose at times. I also kind of surprise myself, I obviously know I’m Korean, but I’ll be walking along the street and then I’ll catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror, like when I was in college, and it was like wow I really am Asian... now overall I feel a sense of pride.

Lastly, a few of the participants shared that sometimes the experience of identity tension was brought to their awareness in a more direct way when they were either confronted or questioned regarding their identity and cultural background by strangers.

Participant E shared that,

“I used to travel a lot for a previous position and I was out in a hotel out east and sitting at one of those deals where you’re at a restaurant having breakfast and I was eating some yogurt and just reading the label and one of the workers, like a bus boy or something, come up to me and was like try, you’ll like it. It’s Y-O-G-U-R-T, like trying to educate me on what it is and I looked up at him and I was like “thanks.”

Participant E further explained the coping mechanism that she used to approach situations like this throughout her lifetime,
You know different people chose to handle it differently, I find humor in it because what else are you going to do... I choose to bring it up with people and make light of it rather than give them an opportunity to make fun of me.

Participant F brought up a similar situation in which the experience of identity tension came to light from an experience while traveling. Participant F shared that,

*I went to India with school and apparently there are a lot of Koreans that live in India, and I didn’t know that and I was really pissed at my professor for not telling me. Because I remember they were, like, we were at some function and this woman was, like, “where are you all from?” and we were like, “America”, but then she was, like, “but where are you from?”. And I was like, “me, America,” and then again she was like, “but where are you from?” And I had to say Korea, and I had never been singled out like that before... it didn’t occur to me that going to a different country I don’t belong with everyone else.*

The Experience of Traveling to South Korea

Every participant interviewed for this study traveled to South Korea at least once during his or her search process. Additionally, roughly half of the participants have been back multiple times or have spent time living in South Korea. However, three participants mentioned traveling to Korea as particularly significant in either motivating them to search, or helping them find meaning in cultural experiences in relation to their heritage.

Participant F reflected on her motivation to search through stating,

*I was going to go and then I remember thinking I would feel like a total idiot if I go over there and I haven’t even tried. Because I don’t want to get there and walk down the street thinking like this could be my mom and this could be my sister, and this could be anybody, or maybe I have no ties.*

Participant E provided some information regarding her tour when reflecting upon the physical process of the birth family search process, “so when I went over with the tour I think I was 23 or 24, I was the oldest adoptee on the tour... there were kids ranging from
“six to 10, then 16-18.” Lastly, Participant C reflected upon how living in South Korea effected her perception of identity,

There is a big difference between visiting Korea for like lets say up to two months and then living in Korea from three months to a year, I feel like. And I feel like a lot of adoptees their whole mind gets distorted…but after you live in a society of, just in Korean society your view of your self-identity just changes a little bit. Not necessarily after everything with like meeting your birth family, but after living in Korea, your whole view of yourself changes a little bit.

Language Navigation

Another theme that came out of the interviews was the existence of barriers caused by language differences between adoptees and their birth family members. Participants discussed using translation services, using translation devices, birth family members speaking English, and trying to learn Korean prior to meeting birth family members. Participant B reflected that,

Something that I learned through the adoption groups, which was definitely true, is that communication with our family is also very difficult. They don’t speak any English, and we don’t speak any Korean. We have one cousin that knows how to write in English, so we can e-mail with him, but it isn’t the same as being able to talk to our direct family, like our father. So we can’t like talk to them on the phone or even really speak to them directly when we meet them.

The struggle through language navigation and barriers was echoed by both Participant H and Participant F. Participant H stated, “It’s still so hard because she doesn’t speak English, I don’t speak Korean. Really there’s just pictures.” Participant F reflected surrounding the difference between interacting with her brother, where there is a language barrier and her sister, who speaks English,

My brother was in the army doing his service, so I didn’t get to meet him, but I did talk to him on the phone, sort of, I said words in English and he didn’t know what I was saying... My sister says she doesn’t [speak English], but she like totally does. We, because I was nervous that I
wouldn’t have [a translator], but my sister totally knew exactly what she was doing all the time and if she didn’t know a word, she like looked up the word mosquito, so she had her phone and was using a translator.

In addition to mentioning that language was a potential barrier to conversing with birth family members, there were two participants who tried to learn Korean in an effort to ease the language and cultural differences experienced during the reunion process.

Participant G stated,

*When I went over both times I tried to brush up on some conversation English, I mean Korean, and I did have a translator that I was able to speak into and then that helped translate. Yea, I tried to learn as much of the culture and I was a bit nervous about how they would receive me.*

Last, Participant D reflected that,

*These past few years I’ve been trying to learn, on top of everything else, I’m trying to learn Korean. I actually learned how to read and write it, like the symbols… I’m actually planning on going back and staying with them, even through there is a language barrier.*

**Use of Support Systems and Resources**

In response to questions surrounding the support systems that were in place during the search experience, many of the participants mentioned family members, including husbands, adoptive parents, and birth family members as being their central support systems during the process. In addition to more personal support systems one participant sought counseling after the completion of the birth family search process, and six participants sought support from social workers through adoption agency services including support groups or birth country tour services. Participant A stated,

“*[Participant B] and I, we joined a group at [adoption agency] where everyone was at a different point in meeting or finding their family in Korea.*” Participant B further explained,
In college, I also belonged to [Korean adoptee group] and there is also a group at [my employer], where I went to a few meetings before actually traveling to Korea... the group at [my employer] is an adoptive kinship group that some of my co-workers were in.

Participant F further discussed specific activities that were supportive within the adoption agency community, when describing that her adoption agency, “they had that fair every summer, that like adoption fair, and we would go to that. So I got like a hanbok [Korean formal dress], and a fan, and dolls, and a crown.” Last Participant C echoed a similar theme stating, “My parents were like they are always like supportive and stuff like that, so they were always there to talk to and converse with.”

In addition to receiving support from family members or social workers through adoption agencies, participants mentioned support services and groups on Facebook that provided support during their search and reunification process. Participant C explained, “I’m like part of an online group, like Korean American adoptee website, or just Korean adoptees on Facebook.” Participant D also found support prior to traveling to meet her birth family through Facebook,

*I mean before that I found this group on Facebook of Korean’s that have reunited, and even that gives you kind of an understanding of what might happen... I didn’t know any other adoptees until rather recently through like Facebook and stuff like that.*

Participant H further explained the importance of Facebook and the online community for adoptees when she stated,

*Within the past year or two years I’ve started going online more and there a bunch of Korea adoptee groups, and I got invited to one in particular that has really been a life safer, it’s especially only for Korean adoptees who then reunited with birth family, and that was a huge save for me.*
The Experience of Guilt

Along with the positive experiences and information that were discussed throughout the interview process with participants, there were five participants who also explored feelings of guilt surrounding their experiences within the search journey. This theme manifested itself in many different ways, where guilt was experienced slightly different for each participant. Two participants shared their feelings of guilt in relation to their relationship dynamics with their adoptive mothers during the search process.

Participant G shared,

*I remember sitting in the bath tube, crying and crying, thinking what an emotional experience, but then to feel this underlying guilt because of the way my [adoptive] mother was treating me and reacting to me. Then my birth family kept asking do your parents want to come and see us, I would like to spend more time with them, but it wasn’t until the very last day that my mom, my adoptive mother finally I guess gracious enough to say “Oh yea, well, I can see them again.”*

Participant H mentioned the guilt that was experienced in relation to her adoptive parents, particularly adoptive mother, during the search process, traveling in South Korea, and after returning home from their travels. Participant H shared that when deciding to start a birth family search in collaboration with her adoptive mother,

*I can’t tell her no, and then a few weeks before or the week before going I made a comment to her about not feeling comfortable about it, or something and she just flipped her shit on me. Like I did all of this planning, why didn’t you say something before, why did you tell me to even get the tickets?*

This same participant stated that during her actual travels within Korea, “they said no to anything I wanted to do, and insisted on the last day I meet with my family, which was that last day, that she couldn’t eat any more Korean food, we have to get American style food.” Last Participant H reflected about her relationship with their adoptive mother after the trip to South Korea and reunification meeting,
In the aftermath she changed—her support changed. I think she didn’t think, neither of us realized just how life changing it would be... I started distancing myself; in my defense I think what I did was fairly normal. I wasn’t too off the board with anything, but I should have taken a break, but we just didn’t think that far ahead or think the repercussions of meeting would be as substantial as they were. But I think she got sick of it, so I mean even to this day here we are a couple years later, I can’t talk to her about anything Korean-related... because she just gets this look of disinterest or like why are you even talking about this...in her mind she almost thinks I’m going to lose her over this and, sadly, in some small aspect she probably has.

In addition to the experience of guilt previously mentioned in relation to relationships with adoptive parents, two participants reflect upon the guilt experienced within the new relationships with birth family members after the initial meeting and reunion. Participant F reflected that,

> Since then it’s been weird what happened since then so I got back in July and then I wrote them in October and then I haven’t heard anything since then two years ago. So one I need to like get on my game and write them again, but I don’t really know what happened.

Participant B expanded on this dynamic stating, “I think that there is some guilt though now, because I should probably be better about keeping in touch with them. It’s always kind of back there, but I’m not always very good at acting on it all the time.” Lastly, Participant D mentioned the experience of guilt in relation to relationships with other adoptees,

> I was joking with a friend, whose also another adoptee, I never, there are some adoptees that go their whole life wanting their birth family, and I never ever thought about that. But this one friend, I was joking with them I love air conditioning and that they don’t have air conditioning and I’m going in the summer. Well I was talking to this guy friend of mine and he got very upset with me and said “you need to focus on what’s important,” and I know it sounds trivial, but I’m going way outside of my comfort zone, I want to be as comfortable as possible. He got very upset and he was like “you need to focus on what you have. You don’t know what I would do to switch our positions.”
Use of Facebook

One unexpected theme that came out of the interviews with participants was the use of Facebook in the process of actually locating birth family members or adoptees. The use of Facebook and the online community was previously discussed as a way in which various participants accessed support during their search process. However three participants were actually contacted by or used Facebook to locate birth family members.

Participant A explained,

Well we were actually contacted by our family through Facebook, we didn’t search for them... when I got the message and I called [Participant B] like I don’t know when you get back but I think maybe you should check Facebook.

Participant B further explained that,

Well, they knew our Korean names, and our adoptive parents names, and we are all connected on Facebook, so it was easy for them to figure out our American names. Then they just sent us a message saying that our birth family was looking for us... it was a [Korean] agency that contacted us through Facebook saying that our family was looking for us. Then we went through more steps to make sure that it was really them since it was quite a shock.

Participant H was connected to her birth family members accidentally through the online community of Facebook. Participant H reflected that,

I was at home for the summer and pulled out these pictures and was just randomly looking at it was like I wonder what she would look like. Are we identical? Are we fraternal? So on a whim I scanned it and posted it on Facebook. I’m like so this is a picture of the family I have and this is my twin...but I went to high school with a Korean native; she came over for high school and part of college. And she saw my post on Facebook and she got ahold of me maybe like two days later. And she was like “I don’t know how to tell you this, but I did a Korean search for the name of your sister and your birthdate and I think I found her”...So I was like “Okay, send me the link and you know I’ll just keep checking back on it.” So it took less than a week, maybe a couple of days before she actually posted a picture of herself. And totally, shit, she looked like me.
Successful Birth Family Search Experiences

All eight participants at some point in the interview process discussed their viewpoints on the level of success within the outcomes of their birth family searches. All eight participants reflected on the outcomes and information gained for their birth family search as successful. Six participants in the study focused on only on successful outcomes from their birth family search, where as in contrast two participants reflected on both the successes and difficulties within their birth family search experiences. Participant D reflected that her search was successful due to the fact that the search was a catalyst to processing her adoption story, “I think that I view it as very successful and I mean it made me think and process a lot of things that I would never have done before, which I think will help me with my son.” Participant F shared that her search was successful due to the reunification meeting, “I’m really glad that did it and I’m so glad that I met them, and I’m so glad that I went there, and so glad that I got to spend as much time as I did.” Participant C reflected similar feelings when she stated, “but for me, I had a positive experience. And then I feel like I’m really blessed for that.” Participant G reflected that her search was successful due to the resolution of the sense of loss created through the adoption process,

Yes it was extremely positive and I’m so happy that I have that part of my life that seemed like such a missing piece of my life, so yeah, definitely positive. Yea there, and I like to be able to talk about it and express to people so just, I guess in a way they can understand who I am also.

Participant A then reflected upon being contacted by her birth family as, “I thought we were really lucky to be able to meet them.”

In addition to the positive sentiments expressed by the majority of participants, two participants mentioned both the successes and difficulties surrounding the birth
family search experience. Participant E reflected more neutrally stating, “yea, I would say that it was you know um I guess successful, don’t know if that is the word that I would use. It was more information than I had before.” Participant H further expanded upon the tension within defining the outcome of the birth family search experience through stating,

_When you go back to Korea, because you don’t know what going to happen. They all think it’s butterflies, rainbows, and unicorns, and it’s not for a lot of people. There are some aspects that are good and some aspects that are life changing and you can’t always say that because then you get attacked._
### Table 2

**Thematic Categories of Meaning Making among Korean Transracial Adoptees in the Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub theme</th>
<th>Sample responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous loss</td>
<td>Existence</td>
<td>“My whole life since I was little girl I had so many questions and so much interest in what my life was like before I was adopted... I felt like there was a void that was filled, but then there were so many questions for so many years and do be able to understand who I am a little bit better defiantly helped.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Absence</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I have some memories of Korea and knew a little bit of what was going on when our adoption was happening. Because of that we never went searching for more information or focused on what the paperwork had to say.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoptee cultural citizenship</td>
<td></td>
<td>“And it’s hard for me, like the people I trust the most, just talking about some of the things that I feel, are only adoptees... one day this last year I was talking to my mentor friend and she just said at one point that you are not alone. And I mean I think a lot of people feel like they are alone.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moments of connection that shift perspectives in meaning making</td>
<td></td>
<td>New understanding of the dynamics surrounding the decision for an adoption plan &lt;br&gt;“My mother had to deal with me being given me up for adoption, and that’s another part, she wasn’t even the person who had given me up for adoption.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Connection with the life cycle of the adoption process &lt;br&gt;“So I actually escorted their baby back... which was a really full circle kind of experience for me um they actually asked me to be one of her godparents.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>New memoires &lt;br&gt;“I had my arms looped with both my sisters, then my father, I had like um uh, I had my step father and uncle um he had his arms looped with my dad, my adoptive dad, and my mothers were both holding hands.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Identity tension and transracial adoption paradox &lt;br&gt;“Korean American, because I’m not Korean and I’m not American. I get ratted on for being too Korean and trying to hard, and I get ratted on for being American or not trying hard enough.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. This table includes the themes and subthemes found in this study. Sample responses for each theme and subtheme are provided in this chart.
Table 2 (continued)

**Thematic Categories of Meaning Making among Korean Transracial Adoptees in the Study**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub theme</th>
<th>Sample responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The experience of traveling to Korea</td>
<td></td>
<td>“But after living in Korea, your whole view of yourself changes a little bit.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language navigation</td>
<td></td>
<td>“It’s still so hard because she doesn’t speak English, I don’t speak Korean. Really there’s just pictures.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of support systems and resources</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I’ve started going online more and there’s a bunch of Korea adoptee groups, and I got invited to one in particular that has really been a life safer.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The experience of guilt</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I think that there is some guilt though now, because I should probably be better about keeping in touch with them.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Facebook</td>
<td></td>
<td>“Well, they knew our Korean names, and our adoptive parents names, and we are all connected on Facebook, so it was easy for them to figure out our American names. Then they just sent us a message saying that our birth family was looking for us.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful birth family search experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td>“I had a positive experience. And then I feel like I’m really blessed for that.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. This table includes the themes and subthemes found in this study. Sample responses for each theme and subtheme are provided in this chart.*
Discussion

The purpose of this research study was to explore how Korean adoptees use the process of birth family searching to create meaning of their ambiguous loss and adoption experience. Secondly, this research aimed to give voice to the stories and perspectives of Korean transracial adoptees themselves as the method for understanding this unique experience and knowledge. The majority of the findings from this study support and further confirm the base of knowledge from previous research. However, some of the findings point to new possible areas of research that are not currently found in the research literature at the time of this study. This discussion section will compare the existing research literature surrounding the adoption experience and birth family searching process with the findings of this particular study.

The Experience of Ambiguous Loss

The experience of ambiguous loss was expressed in two different ways within this study, including both as an underlying motivation to search for birth family members, and as a new realization of the sense of loss previously experienced throughout the lifespan that was brought to awareness by the birth family search process. The first manifestation of ambiguous loss came through the study when participants were reflecting on the motivation to search, including wanting to fill a void, having unanswered questions, or the experience of being curious throughout their lifetime regarding their birth family. This finding is supported by previous literature including Andersen (1989), which found that many adoptees search to fill a void or missing piece in relation to their sense of cohesiveness or identity. In addition, Song and Lee (2009) found that the loss of birth heritage and knowledge regarding ones ethic identity of birth
leads to frustration and questioning throughout the lifespan that can not be solved within the environment of the White majority culture. This was confirmed within this study when many participants reflected on their lack of connection with Korean culture and Korean identity. The majority of participants reflected that the minimal Korean cultural influences they were exposed to could not compete with the socialization process of the White Midwestern culture within their transracial families.

In addition to ambiguous loss being communicated through participants’ motivations to search, multiple participants mentioned that growing up they were not consciously aware of the sense of loss that accompanied their experiences. However, that the birth family search process actually raised their awareness of how loss had been integrated into their previous life experiences. In many of the participants’ voices it became apparent that the process of resolution surrounding their ambiguous loss, made the presence of loss consciously known to participants. This finding is echoed by Silverstein and Kaplan (1982) where they described ambiguous loss as an evolving process, which gets expressed through themes across the lifetime and can often times become unconscious until reawakened by another loss or emotional experience. This was the case with multiple participants, where the ambiguous loss within the initial split from birth family members was awakened by the multiple losses that became apparent during the search process.

The study also found that participants who were adopted at older ages had a difference experience in terms of their manifestation of loss. The participants who were adopted at older ages reflected that they did not experience a profound sense of ambiguous loss, and hypothesized that this was because they were old enough to have
some sense of understanding surrounding why an adoption plan was pursued by their birth parents. While there is some research that comments upon the generalized experience of ambiguous loss and how a lack of clear knowledge or understanding is necessary for the manifestation of ambiguous loss by definition (Boss, 2007), there is no known research at the time of this study that comments on how the age of an adoptee effects the manifestation of ambiguous loss. This is an area of research that could be further explored in future research studies.

**Adoptee Cultural Citizenship**

The majority of participants in this study reflected multiple times throughout the interview process about the sense of connection and understanding they felt with other adoptees. Some of the participants also reflected that this sense of connection with other adoptees was a gradual process, where during childhood adoptees actually sought out a level of separation between themselves and other Korean adoptees. However throughout adolescence and adulthood, which ultimately culminated in traveling to South Korea with other adoptees in multiple cases, participants felt drawn to and connected with other Korean adoptees due to their shared experience of being adopted. This sense of connection to other Korean adoptees is reflected across the research of Kim (2003, 2010), where the concept of adoptee cultural citizenship as a separate Korean adoptee identity that particularly describes the identity experience of adoptees is explored. Kim (2003) explains that the unique experiences of Korean adoptees, including disconnection, disidentification, and displacement, expressed throughout the lifespan as either loss, involuntary exile, or just a fact of life brings Korean adoptees together into their own cultural group and identity. This was echoed across the participants’ reflections and
stories surrounding their adoption and birth family searches, where their biggest level of support often came from other adoptees. In fact, seven of the eight participants reflected that it was easier to talk about adoption and birth family dynamics with other Korean adoptees who could relate to their experiences and emotional responses. This was even true for participants who during childhood specifically avoided acknowledging the fact that they were adopted or knew other Korean adoptees.

**Moments of Connection that Shift Perspectives in Meaning Making**

Each of the participants in this current study reflected at least once how specific memories, stories, or experiences resonated with them and affected their perspective surrounding their adoption. There were three specific themes within these moments of connection that further described the dynamics surrounding these experiences, including new understanding of the dynamics surrounding the decision for an adoption plan, connection with the life cycle of the adoption process, and new memories. These moments of connection seemed to effect the way participants viewed the adoption process, their birth family, and themselves. Participants described it as a feeling of being more settled, finding a place within their birth family, and having more understanding and answers surrounding their life story and identity. This finding is supported by the previous literature surrounding birth family searching. Anderson (1989) describes that adoptees have the motivation to search in an effort to fill the hole created by the loss of adoption. Anderson (1989) further describes that therapeutic birth family searching changes an adoptees experience towards a trajectory of cohesiveness within identity, which had been previously disrupted by the adoption process.
This study supports previous findings in that each participant described in their own way this loss and disruption associated with the adoption process, despite having positive and meaningful experiences with their adoptive families. Then through the narratives that described each participant’s moments of connection, participants reflected upon this new sense and mastery of their identity and adoption story. Pacheco and Eme (1993) found similar findings where it is described that the majority of adoptees felt a significant change in their self-concept, self-esteem, emotional outlook, and ability to relate to others after the completion of their search process. Pacheco and Eme (1993) found that, “the feeling that the ‘puzzle is solved’ is the bottom line,” (p. 60).

Participants in this current study processed these changes across reflections surrounding their adoption story, adoptive family, and birth family. However, many of the participants described that the dynamic that effected their ability to increase self-concept, self-esteem, emotional outlook, and ability to relate to others, as described by Pacheco and Eme (1993), was not as much a change in themselves, but more filling a void that was a part of themselves. The majority of the participants in this study reflected that the word change was not quite the right description, and that filling a void or finding a missing piece was more descriptive of the dynamic surrounding the effects of these moments of connection. This lens of redefining the language of change into filling a void or a missing piece describes the same concept as manifested by Pacheco and Eme (1993), however it expands upon the language used within that study into language that is more in tune with the voice of the adoptee. Rosenzweig-Smith (1998) described similar dynamics and used language that describes the tone and voice of filling a void, searching for unanswered questions, and desire to fill that biological piece.
Identity Tension and Transracial Adoption Paradox

Identity tension and the transracial adoption paradox in relation to Korean transracial adoptees have a significant presence in the literature. Kim et al. (2010) describes this dynamic when reflecting that Korean adoptees belong to a racial minority group due to their physical characteristics and birth country, however they are simultaneously a family member within the dominate racial and cultural group due to their transracial family dynamics. The majority of participants in this study reflected upon this dichotomy or tension, where they were simultaneously Korean and Caucasian, due to their biological and cultural influences, respectfully. Many of the participants also described that this tension within their identity shifted throughout their lifespan, and was experienced differently during childhood, adolescence, and post-birth family search. As previous literature reflects (Berquist, 2003; Kim et al., 2010; Yoon, 2008), adolescence and young adulthood is the time in adoptees’ development where they start to question their experience of identity tension and seek resolution of this tension. This was also demonstrated in this current study as manifested by both participants age when first initiating a birth family search and through their reflections surrounding their racial identity across their lifetime.

In addition, this study found that across the lifespan the participants in this study emphasized the experience of culture over the biological or racial influences within their identity. Three of the participants mentioned specifically that when describing their identity they placed their cultural identity before their racial identity, for example describing themselves as Scandinavian Koreans. This finding is also supported by the literature, where Kim et al. (2010) describes this dynamic where in contrast to the more
Caucasian and Western viewpoint of placing more significance of race over culture, Korean transracial adoptees emphasize the cultural aspects of their adoptive family over the racial group of their birth family when creating the dynamics of their identity process.

The current study also found that despite adoptive parents’ efforts to include Korean cultural experiences for adoptees that participated in this study, many of the participants chose to actively avoid those situations that would provide more exposure to Korean cultural aspects and experiences during their childhood years. This differs slightly from the previous research examining the impact of Korean cultural experiences on Korean transracial adoptees. The majority of the previous research by Yoon (2004), Berquist (2003), and Song and Lee (2009) focuses on how identity is formed within the environment of an adoptive family that did not place significant emphasis on an adoptee’s birth culture. In contrast, many of the participants in this study reported that their adoptive parents were very supportive and wanted them to attend Korean cultural camps for example; however participants in this study specifically avoid situations where they could be labeled different or Korean throughout their childhoods.

Kim et al. (2010) explores that negative experiences of discrimination during childhood can particularly influence an adoptee’s sense of both exclusion and belonging. Bergquist (2003) also suggests that the need to assimilate with Caucasian American peers and avoid situations that differentiate Korean adoptees from their peers is a normative developmental stage. Therefore, more research is necessary to explore this dynamic of rejecting one’s birth culture despite an adoptive families openness and willingness to incorporate Korean cultural aspects into their families’ environment. Some of the participants reflected upon not wanting to be a part of a subgroup that was different or
seen as an Asian adoptee compared with being just another student in school. Therefore it is possible that subtle and unconscious messages from American society came to influence adoptees’ experience of their identity during their childhood more powerfully than their adoptive families messages surrounding the importance of Korean cultural experiences. More research on this dynamic is necessary prior to drawing conclusions surrounding these participants hesitation towards Korean cultural experiences in childhood.

The Experience of Traveling to Korea

Bergquist (2003) explores the impact that birth country travel had on Korean adoptees and found that prior to traveling Korean adoptees were more concerned with fitting in with their Caucasian American peers than identifying with their Korean identity. However, Berquist (2003) also found that after traveling to South Korea and experiencing Korean culture in a more personal way, Korean adoptees started feeling an increased need to differentiate themselves from their Caucasian American peers. In this current study multiple participants mentioned the significance of traveling to Korea and experiencing the culture. One participant in particular emphasized the significance that living in South Korea for many years had on her identity development, suggesting that actually living in South Korea changes the way one thinks about their self-identity and how they embrace Korean cultural aspects into their lives.

Song and Lee (2009) further supports the findings in this current study as it was found that cultural encounters, like traveling abroad or searching for one’s birth family, increase opportunities to develop autonomy within a Korean ethnic identity. Kim et al. (2010) also supports the idea that racial and multiethnic experiences, like possibly
traveling to South Korea, influences an adoptees acceptance or rejection from the adoptees racial and ethic reference group, which may then influence how an adoptee relates to others. This finding was echoed within this current study, where the majority of participants found that after the experience of the birth family search and traveling to South Korea they became more interested in connecting with other Korean adoptees. In addition, two participants spoke to feeling more settled relating to all other people not just other Korean adoptees after the experience of traveling and learning more about their culture and country of birth.

**Language Navigation**

The presence of a language barrier was mentioned by multiple participants in this study, and was manifested as a relational barrier where participants struggled to connect with birth family members due to the inability to communicate. Kim et al. (2010) describes a language barrier as the significant marker for “ethic boundary drawing,” (p. 180). Kim et al. (2010) further identifies knowledge and understanding of the Korean language as the primary factor in either the sense of belonging or sense of exclusion for Korean adoptees. This study supported these findings, as the three participants who had a basic understanding of the Korean language or their birth families had an understanding of English, felt more connected to their birth family members and actually stayed with their birth families overnight during their time in South Korea. In contrast, participants who commented on the lack of ability to communicate had less ongoing contact with birth family members and reported less changes overall after the completion of their search.
In addition, Bergquist (2008) found that traveling as part of an organized tour or group of Korean adoptees insulated adoptees from some of the negative experiences associated with language barriers. In this current study none of the participants specifically mentioned the tours influence in relation to lowering language barriers. However, the participants who traveled as a group or with an organized birth country tour were more positive about their ability to both navigate cultural exchanges with Korean society and with birth family members. In contrast, participants who traveled to South Korea on their own were more likely to mention the difficulty communicating with birth family members and navigating their travel experience.

**Use of Support Systems and Resources**

The majority of the participants in this study found support through both their adoptive parents and social workers that were associated with birth country tours and adoption agencies. Pacheco and Eme (1993) describes that despite the fact that the vast majority of adoptees had a good relationship with their adoptive parents, the concern or worry surrounding adoptive parents reaction to the search process prevented over half of the participants to either delay their search process or not inform their adoptive parents of their birth family search. In the current study, each of the participants had informed and included their adoptive parents in the search process and about half of the participants included adoptive parents in the reunion with birth family members. It is important to note that some of the participants spoke to the added difficulty of including adoptive parents in the process, however the same participants were able to find a deeper meaning through including their adoptive parents. Pacheco and Eme (1993) also found that only one third of adoptees felt supported by their adoptive parents during the search process,
and reported that the majority of adoptive parents’ initial reaction was either negative or uncertain. This study’s findings are slightly different from Pacheco and Eme (1993) in that the couple participants that spoke to negative reactions by their adoptive parents took place during the actual birth family reunion process, where as they were initially very supportive in the process. It is possible that actually being confronted by the physical presence of an adoptee's birth family members is more emotionally difficult for adoptive parents then supporting an adoptee through the search process. More current studies that reflect searching as a more established institution would be necessary in order to further examine this dynamic for adoptive parents experiencing birth family reunions with their adopted children.

Another major support system that was identified by participants in this study were the social workers that led groups at various adoption agencies and supported participants prior to traveling, while in South Korea on a birth country tour, and post-reunion. About two-thirds of the participants in this study mentioned the support of an adoptee group led by a social worker. One of the identifying characteristics of the support groups that were most supportive to participants was the presence of other adoptees and only other adoptees as members of the group. Participants reflected that being with others whom shared similar backgrounds and experiences was extremely helpful throughout the search and reunion process. Much of the literature on search and reunion support groups emphasizes the importance of including all members of the adoption constellation (Valley et al., 1999). However, this current study found that participants found significant value in being with other adoptees separate from adoptive parents and birth family members. For example, a few of the participants reflected that the additional presence of
adoptive parents created a different dynamic compared to the more open environment created by everyone being an adoptee and sharing the experience of having been adopted.

The Experience of Guilt

Participants who reflected on the experience of guilt in relation to their search and reunion process found that there were two dynamics at play within the larger experience of guilt. First there was guilt in relation to their adoptive mothers, in terms of both the process of initiating a search and within the experience of traveling to South Korea for a birth family reunion. Logan and Smith (2005) called the tension surrounding guilt between adoptees, birth mothers, and adoptive mothers a conflict of motherhood, where adoptive mothers are particularly sensitive about the legitimacy of their mothering role. This sensitivity then can lead to adoptive mothers feeling like they would prefer a life without contact with birth family members, causing significant tension for the adoptee positioned between their adoptive mother and birth mother (Logan & Smith, 2005). This study supports this previous finding in that a few participants reflected upon the guilt that was created due to their adoptive mothers not wanting to participant fully in either a relationship with birth family members or Korean culture in more general terms in the aftermath of the search process. Pacheco and Eme (1993) further support this finding, suggesting that the majority of the participants in their study reported concern and guilt surrounding disrupting adoptive parents lives by instigating a search for their birth family members.

The second manifestation of guilt that was expressed by multiple participants occurred after the actual birth family reunion where they experienced guilt surrounding both keeping in contact and how to involve their birth family members within the context
of their life in the United States. Many participants expressed feeling a sense of guilt surrounding the length of time that lapsed between writing, calling, or traveling to visit birth family members in South Korea. Howe and Feast (2001) found that 63 percent of Korean adoptees were still in some form of contact with birth mothers after the initial reunion eight years previously. The remaining percent of Korean adoptees that were no longer in contact cited reasons such as having mixed or negative emotions surrounding experiences with birth mother, adoptees perceived lack of positive emotions from birth mother, lack of a shared history, clashes in personality, and large mismatches is social and cultural background (Howe & Feast, 2001). Therefore Howe and Feast (2001) support this study’s findings and help understand some of the motivations to lose contact with birth mothers. However this study expanded upon the motivation to lose contact further and found an underlying emotional experience of guilt that may be another potential barrier for consistent ongoing communication with birth family members.

Use of Facebook

One of the more surprising themes that came out of this study was the significance of online communities where participants could connect with other Korean adoptees or birth family members, specially the importance of Facebook. Many of the participants in this study specifically mentioned how influential and significant online communities within Facebook were to both locating their birth family members and providing support throughout the search and reunion process. Many of the same participants that spoke to the importance of Facebook when looking for support surrounding their search and reunion, also reflected on their difficulty relating to other Korean adoptees throughout their childhood. Therefore this researcher hypothesized that
future research may look at the various dynamics that create such a safe and effective environment for adoptees to process their adoption and search experiences. The online community allows for access to other adoptees while also providing a level of removal to those same adoptees that is lacking in more traditional avenues for support groups. This researcher could not locate research literature that examines the use of Facebook specifically among adoptees seeking support surrounding their search and reunion process. Kim (2003) examines how organized groups of adult Korean adoptees have been increasing across the Internet in the last two decades. Kim (2010) found that the Internet functions as a way to connect adoptees that were previously isolated due to their geographic location. The Internet in general also allowed for adoptees to find each other and establish communities within their online experience that were difficult to create within their local communities (Kim, 2010). However, there is no research that specifically examines the use, significance, or growth of using online communities in contrast to more traditional support services.

**Defining “Successful”**

The research literature is fairly consistent when examining the success rate of search and reunion outcomes as defined by an adoptee’s perspective. Moran (1994) describes that the majority of adoptees, regardless of the outcome of their search, would reflect back thinking that they would do the search again. It is further described that all reunions are successful simply because the search and reunion took place (Moran, 1994). Anderson (1989) found similar findings, suggesting that the action involved in the searching process creates a dynamic where any search is better than no search, because the adoptee establishes some sense of control and action in relation to their adoption
story. Pacheco and Eme (1993) further quantified this dynamic within the literature through finding that 85 percent of adoptees in their study found the search and reunion process to be a positive experience. Every adoptee in the remaining 15 percent reflected that despite the worst-case scenario and stress, they would all complete the search process again if given the opportunity. This current study supports these previous findings in the literature when it found that all of the participants viewed their search experience as positive, successful, or beneficial to their development in some way. A few of the participants in this study used language that described a definite life changing success, like feeling blessed, lucky, thankful, and grateful to have found more information and their birth family members. However, the language used by the majority of the participants communicated to this researcher that despite viewing the search process as successful it was also still full of stressful and emotionally taxing moments. Therefore this current study further confirms that participants viewed their search experiences as generally positive and successful, despite the emotional roller coaster that is associated with the search and reunion journey.

**Strengths and Limitations**

One of the strengths of this current study, which is particularly emphasized, was the use of qualitative measures that allowed participants to communicate their story and voice in their own unedited language. Through using qualitative measures the participants’ voices were the driving force in the analysis of their process of creating meaning from their adoption experiences. Through using participants’ voices and stories this research was able to engage with participants in a collaborative process inviting the
participants to gain some access to sharing their process and stories within the environment of academic literature.

Another strength of this current study was using a snowball sampling method, which allowed for this researcher to achieve the proposed amount of participants, while also using the connections between participants to establish a relationship with participants prior to their scheduled interviews. Some of the participants reflected that hearing about the process and experience of participating from another adoptee made them feel more comfortable during communication with the researcher and participation in the study.

One of the limitations of this particular study was the lack of ability to generalize the findings to further studies and populations due to use of a non-probability sampling method. Another limitation facing this particular study was the lack of diversity in relation to gender, as there were seven female participants compared to one male participant. Previous research literature establishes this disproportionate gender dynamic within the research literature suggesting that the majority of adoptees who participate in birth family searches are female and therefore the literature reflects a predominantly female adoptee perspective (Lichtenstein, 1996). However, the male perspective and experience in relation to birth family searching is still significant and should be reflected in the research literature surrounding birth family searching. Last, one of the questions within the interview schedule seemed to be unclear or worded awkwardly for participants in this current study. When initially responding to question number one or “Please tell me about your adoption story?” the majority of participants asked for clarification regarding what this researcher meant or was looking for within this question. This question may
have been better understood if stated as “Please tell me about the information you knew about your adoption prior to your participation in a birth family search?”

**Recommendations of Future Research**

This current study revealed several areas of future research that would be beneficial to further understanding the experiences of Korean transracial adoptees completing birth family searches. One possible area of future research is examining specifically the experiences of adoptees that were located by their birth family members through reverse birth family searches, or where their birth family actually contacted them without initially being initiated by the adoptee. In this current study half of the participants experienced a reverse search. Silverman et al. (1988) examined the motivations and experience of birth parents that initiated a reverse search, however little research literature examines the adoptees experience specifically during a reverse birth family search. Historical trends surrounding birth family searching suggest that the majority of individuals who search are the adoptee themselves, therefore more research is necessary to examine if there is a growing trend towards birth families searching for adoptees.

Another important aspect of future research would be to examine the use of Facebook, online communities, and blogs in relation to how Korean adoptees process and support each other through the various adoption experiences that they face across their lifetime. Through examining the Internet and various online communities, there is a clear presence of Facebook groups, online communities, and blogs that are specifically tailored towards processing and sharing adoption experiences. Kim (2003; 2010) mentions the increased presence of online communities and their increasing use by Korean transracial
adoptees. However, there is little research on the specific dynamics within exploring the motivations for pursuing support through the online community in contrast to more traditional forms of support groups.

Last, this study suggested some variation in the experience of loss in relation to the age that a participant actually immigrated into the United States. A couple of the participants who had been adopted at older ages still had memories of their birth family and lives in South Korea. During the interview process they reflected that they did not experience the same sense of loss as other adoptees due to having some information about their previous life in South Korea. Therefore, more research is needed to further examine this dynamic and explore how memories of experiences in South Korea effect motivations to search and ask further questions about adoptees adoption story. This is particularly significant, as the age of traveling to the United States for Korean adoptees has increased dramatically in recent years. Adoptees are now traveling at older ages compared to historical Korean adoptions where the majority of adoptees were young infants when immigrating into the United States and assimilating into their adoptive families. This is partly due to the Republic of Korea (ROK) Special Adoption Act, which is a policy passed in 2012 which emphasizes set time periods before a child is eligible for international adoption. This policy promotes both the development of domestic adoption and allows time for a domestic adoption match to be found for a child (U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Consular Affairs, 2013).

**Implications of Future Social Work Practice**

One of the most significant implications for future social work practice that was brought up by multiple participants in this study is the importance of the Korean
transracial adoptee perspective when providing therapeutic services and support to adoptees across the lifetime and during the birth family search process. Therefore it is implied that social workers that are not adoptees themselves need to participate in adoptee communities and understand the Korean adoptee perspective prior to working with Korea adoptees in a therapeutic or social work capacity. This finding also suggests that more networking among social workers may be necessary in an effort to connect Korean adoptee clients with therapists who are adoptees themselves. It is important for social workers to understand the connection between adoptees based on their shared experiences of being adopted, and foster relationships between adoptees.

The majority of participants in this current study reflected upon how meeting and hearing other adoptees stories helped their own process and understanding of their previous life experiences. Therefore social workers who are not adoptees and working within adoption services need to promote and help provide access to adoptee communities for their adoptee clients. Another important dynamic for helping adoptees connect with the greater adoptee committee is integrating the experience of online and Facebook support communities into their practice. Participants in this current study named online communities, in particular Facebook, as providing significant insight and support surrounding the search and reunion experience. Therefore social workers need to be aware of these online communities and the messages that are being communicated throughout the Internet community of Korea adoptees.

**Implications for Future Policy**

Two significant implications for future policy were brought to this researcher’s attention throughout the process of this current study, including the importance of
information for the meaning making process and the lack of literature being published in academic journals written by researchers who are adoptees themselves. Within adoption literature there is significant debate over the benefits and potential harmful effects within open and closed adoptions (Wolfgram, 2008). However, this current study supports significant previous research literature (Anderson, 1989; Howe & Feast, 2001; Pacheco & Eme, 1993; Moran, 1994) suggesting that no matter the difficult emotional experiences Korean adoptees define their searches has successful and gaining more information about their adoption story and birth family members was a positive meaningful experience. Therefore this previous research may imply that more openness in both adoptions and adoption records may help lower the negative side effects of the ambiguous loss experience of Korean adoptees. Policy that reflects an adoptees right to know information about their adoption experiences and birth family members may be positive to Korean adoptees further development in the United States.

Second, through examining the literature that is published in academic journals there is currently a lack of journal articles that are researched by adoptees. Korean adoptees that are currently doing research and publishing information surrounding the Korean adoptee experience are currently choosing to publish their studies in online communities, in contrast to academic journals. This distinction between publishing within the context of academic literature and within online communities creates a barrier between specific professions and significant research information. Future policy may help lower this barrier through either promoting the legitimacy of Korean adoptee online communities or promoting the ability and ease of publishing within the context of academic journals.
Conclusion

This research study provided an exploration of the birth family search experience of Korean transracial adoptees from the viewpoint of the adoptees themselves. The purpose of this current study was to understand how adult Korean adoptees use the therapeutic process of birth family searching to create meaning of their ambiguous loss and adoption experience. The process of birth family searching was seen as a way to find new information and experiences that would lead to a greater sense of understanding and sense of control in relation to the adoption experience. Participants in this current study shared during the interviews both stories and reflections that manifested significant themes illuminating the experience of participating in a birth family search and reunion. Therefore this current study examined the experience of ambiguous loss, adoptee cultural citizenship, moments of connection that shift perspectives of meaning making, identity tension and transracial adoption paradox, the experience of traveling to South Korea, language navigation, use of support systems and resources, the experience of guilt, the use of Facebook, and defining success within the birth family search process.

This study found that the experience of participating in a birth family search impacted an adoptees sense of self, identity, manifestation of loss, and relationships. Prior to the experience of searching for ones birth family, participants in this study reflected a sense of unknowing in relation to their adoption story. Many participants reflected that there were unanswered questions, unknown pieces of the puzzle, and a general sense of wondering despite being adopted into loving adoptive families. These same participants reflected that prior to searching they identified more with the majority White Midwestern culture of their adoptive family in an effort to avoid being singled out as different.
However, this study found that the experience of participating in a birth family search effects both participants’ sense of unknowing and their sense of their own identity. After the completion of their birth family search, participants reflected that they became more involved in Korean cultural groups and activities. In addition, the majority of the participants reflected upon a new sense of being more settled in their relationships, families, and own skin after the completion of their search.

This study has significant implications for the social work profession and implies that social workers need to become aware of the adoptee perspective in relation to all adoption related work. Through coming to a greater level of understanding surrounding the experience of adoptees social workers can provide more support and psychoeducation surrounding this transformational experience. In addition, social workers are in a unique position within the adoption constellation to be able to advocate for Korean transracial adoptees in the academic and professional environments to ensure increased access and representation within academic and professional literature.
References


Are you a Korean Adoptee? Have you searched for your birth family?

Are you over the age of 18? Has it been 2 years since you started your birth family search?

If the answer is yes, please contact me!

My Name is Katie Goldstein and I’m currently a Master of Social Work Student at University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University. I’m interested in researching the experiences of adoptees searching for their birth families in South Korea.

* The interview would take place in a private location or over the phone
* Your participation is completely voluntary and your information will be kept confidential
* Interviews will be audio-recorded for transcription purposes only
* $10 gift card to Target will be given as a THANK YOU for participation

I would love to share more information about this study and answer any questions you may have. Please contact me through e-mail at Gold7526@stthomas.edu for additional information regarding participation in this study!!

This study has been approved by the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board (IRB). Eleni Roulis is the chair of the board and can be reached at (651) 962-5341 if you have any concerns or questions regarding the review process or the University of St. Thomas IRB.
Appendix B: Informed Consent

Birth Family Searching and Meaning Making within Korean Transracial Adoption

RESEARCH INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Introduction:
You are invited to participate in a research study that aims to explore how the birth family search process helps adult Korean Transracial adoptees making meaning of their adoption experience. This study is being conducted by Katie Goldstein a Master’s of Social Work Student in the School of Social Work, St Catherine University and University of St. Thomas. You were selected as a possible participant because you are over the age of 18, a Korean Transracial Adoptee, and have initiated a birth family search at a minimum of two years before participation in this study. Please review this form and ask any questions you may have before consenting to participate in this study.

Background Information:
The purpose of this study is to examine how adult Korean adoptees make meaning of their adoption process through initiating a search for their birth family members. Approximately eight to 10 participants are expected to participate in this study.

Procedures:
If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to do a one-to-one interview with me in person or over the phone that takes approximately 45-60 minutes. You will have the option to receive the complete schedule of interview questions, letter of introduction, and consent form prior to the scheduled interview time. If you do not feel comfortable or do not want to answer any particular question you may skip that question. Our meeting will take place in a private area, such as an office, and will be decided through a collaborative process between you and the researcher. For purposes of transcription the interview will be audio recorded, and the audio recording will only be accessible to me as the researcher. You confidentiality and privacy are my highest concern; therefore audio recordings will be kept in a locked location at my home and will be destroyed on May 20, 2016 or 3 years after completion of this project. During our interview I will read the interview questions, and may ask some follow up questions depending on your answers. You may terminate participation in the study at any point within the interview and up to one week after completion of the interview by contacting me through e-mail or phone.

Risks and Benefits to Participation:
There are minimal risks associated with participation in this study. First, the study may bring up difficult or emotionally charged memories. Secondly, participation in the study may cause some emotional distress. There are no direct benefits to your participation in this study. Some resources are listed below and will also be handed to you at the completion of the scheduled interview in case you are in need of further information, crisis counseling services, or on-going counseling services. In addition if you have any...
questions regarding these resources you may contact me. Complete descriptions of resources can be found on the resource sheet given during the scheduled interview.

**Resources**
1. Crisis Connection Minnesota 612-379-6363 or Toll Free MN 1-866-379-6363
2. MN Adopt HELP Line 612-746-5137
3. Children’s Home Society and Family Services Post-Adoption Helpline 800-952-9302, ext. 2320 or pashelpline@chsfs.org
4. AdopSource! 651-270-8169 or info@adopsource.org
5. Walk in Counseling Center 612-870-0565
6. Interprofessional Center for Counseling & Legal Services 651-962-4820

**Compensation**
A $10 gift card to Target will be given to participants of this study. Receiving this gift card is not contingent upon full participation and completion of this study. As a participant you may skip any questions and terminate your participation in the study up to one week after completion of the scheduled interview process. Terminating your participation in the study does not effect receiving the $10 gift card. This is done to prevent any feeling of cohesion and protect your right to voluntary participate in this study.

**Confidentiality**
Care will be taken to protect all of your information ensure your confidentiality. There will no identifying information given in any written report or oral presentation of this study. As previously mentioned, only this researcher will handle and transcribe information gathered from the interview process. In addition all information will be kept locked and in password protected files in the researchers home and computer. All information gathered from your participation will also be destroyed on May 20, 2016, or 3 years after completion of this project.

If at any point during the interview process you want to skip questions you may do so. If at any point, up to one week following the scheduled interview, you wish to terminate your participation in the study you may do so. If during the interview you express emotional or physical distress the interview process will be ended, we will debrief, and then connect you will one of the resources listed previously. In this particular case, your information and data will be destroyed immediately and will not be used in this study.

**Voluntary Nature of Study**

Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Your decision to participate in this study or not will not effect future relations with the University of St. Thomas, St. Catherine University, or this researcher. Termination of participation in this study will have no effect upon these relationships and no further data will be collected.

**Contacts and Questions:**
If you have any questions about this study or consent form please feel free to contact me at (xxx)xxx-xxxx or xxxxxxxx@stthomas.edu. You may also ask any questions now. If you have further questions you may contact my supervising faculty member and Chair of my research committee Kari Fletcher at flet1660@stthomas.edu or (xxx)-xxx-xxxx. If you have other questions or concerns and would like to contact someone other than the researcher and research Chair you may contact Eleni Roulis, PhD, the Chair of the University of St. Thomas Institutional Review Board at (xxx)xxx-xxxx. You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent**

By signing below you are giving your consent and making a decision to participate in this study. Your signature confirms that you have read the information in this form and all of your questions have been answered. Even after signing this form, you may terminate your participation in this study up to one week following the scheduled interview.

I consent to participation in this study and I consent to be audio-taped during my interview.

_________________________________________  ____________________
Signature of Participant                      Date

_________________________________________  ____________________
Signature of Researcher                      Date
Appendix C: Interview Schedule

1. Can you start off by telling about your adoption story?
2. Can you tell me about your adoptive family?
3. Can you tell me about any cultural experiences or conversations you participated in while growing up?
4. Can you tell me about what motivated you to start a birth family search?
5. Can you tell me about what happened with your birth family search?
   a. For example, did you learn any new information?
   b. Did you make contact with birth family members through letters, phone, in person?
6. Can you tell me about any support systems that were in place for you during your search process?
7. Did anything change for you after completion of your birth family search process?
8. How would you define the outcome of your birth family search?
9. How would you identify yourself racially, ethnically, and/or culturally?
   a. Did this change after your birth family search process?
10. Is there anyone that you could pass my information to that might like to participate in this study?
Appendix D: Letter of Introduction
Potential Interview Participants

October 19, 2012

Name of Potential Participant
E-mail Address

Dear Adoptee,

My name is Katie Goldstein, and I am a Masters of Social Work student at University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University, under the supervision of Assistant Professor Kari Fletcher, Ph.D., LICSW. I have contacted you because you are a Korean Transracial Adoptee in Minnesota. I would like to invite you to participate in an interview study exploring how Korean Transracial Adoptees make meaning surrounding their adoption through the process of searching for birth family members.

I would like to invite you to participate in my study because of your experience as an adoptee and your previous experience doing a birth family search. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may terminate your participation in this study up to one week following your participation. There will also be a $10 gift certificate to Target given at the scheduled interview time, however this gift certificate is not dependent upon completion of the interview process. You may terminate the interview process at any time during the interview and keep the gift certificate for your willingness to participate. The Interview process will be audio-recorded for purposes of transcription. Care will be taken to keep your participation in this study and information confidential. I will apply your non-identifying information to my project presentation and final research paper, which will be published electronically through the University of St. Thomas and St. Catherine University.

I hope you will agree to participate in this study, where you can help contribute the body of information surrounding the experience of Korean Transracial Adoptees in the social work and research community. Included with this letter of introduction is the schedule of interview questions and informed consent form for your consideration before the scheduled interview time. Before scheduling an interview for this study please verify that you are an adult (over the age 18), a Korean Transracial Adoptee, and at least 2 years have passed since you originally initiated a birth family search.

Thank you once more for your time and consideration. Please do not hesitate to contact me by email at xxxxxxxx@stthomas.edu or telephone at (xxx) xxx-xxxx if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Katie Goldstein, BA
School of Social Work
St. Catherine University / University of St. Thomas
Appendix E: Mental Health and Adoption Resources

Crisis Services

- **Crisis Connection Minnesota** 612-379-6363 or Toll Free MN 1-866-379-6363

  Crisis connection is a 24 hour/7 days a week support line that is available for anyone at anytime, and specializes in crisis counseling, intervention, and finding referrals. This is a free service and more information can be found at http://www.crisis.org/

Adoption and Mental Health Services

- **MN Adopt HELP Line** 612-746-5137 (Monday - Friday 9:00 AM- 5:00 PM)

  MN adoption HELP line specializes in providing phone assessments and resources to avoid or reduce crisis, make referral to local adoption competent therapists, and help find connections to other community resources. Their website also lists local support groups and organizations specifically targeted for adult international adoptees. More information can be found at http://www.mnadopt.org/HELP.html

- **Children’s Home Society and Family Services Post-Adoption Helpline** 800-952-9302, ext. 2320 or pashelpline@chsfs.org

  Children’s Home Society and Family Service Post-Adoption Helpline is available Monday through Friday 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM. If outside regular business hours you may leave a message and receive a call back. This is not a therapeutic helpline, however it can provide adoption psychoeducation and referrals to adoption competent resources. More information can be found at http://www.chsfs.org/pashelpline

- **AdopSource!** 651-270-8169 or info@adopsource.org

  AdoptSource is an organization that provides resources and services to adoptees in Minnesota. Some of their services include support groups, post-reunion services, language classes, cultural classes, and birth search readiness services. This organization is not a crisis or helpline, however they provide more ongoing support services. More information can be found at http://www.adopsource.org/

Mental Health Related Services

- **Walk in Counseling Center** 612-870-0565

  Walk-in Counseling Center offers free counseling services. No appointment is necessary and no insurance is necessary. It’s located at 2421 Chicago Avenue S
Minneapolis, MN 55404. Their walk in hours are Monday, Wednesday, Friday from 1:00- 3:00 PM and Monday through Thursday 6:30- 8:30 PM.

- Interprofessional Center for Counseling & Legal Services  651-962-4820

Interprofessional Center for Counseling & Legal Services is an organization developed through the University of St. Thomas in collaboration between the School of Law, Graduate School of Professional Psychology, and School of Social Work. This organization offers free counseling services and is located at 30 S. 10th Street, Minneapolis, MN 55403. More information can be found at http://www.stthomas.edu/ipc/