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Introduction

Much of the research-based on adoption comes from the perspectives of the parents, adoption agencies, and other scholars, rather than the perspectives of adoptees themselves. My participants and I make up the unique demographic of interracially adopted people currently living in the United States today. The adoptee experience is unique in the sense that identity formation is very different from other people. Interracial adoptions are very visible since the adoptee's physical identity does not match the physical identity of their adoptive family. It leads many researchers to wonder how that racial difference impacts an adoptee's sense of self? My research aims to uncover how adoptees cope with their identities given their unique backgrounds and also ensure that their experiences are shared with others. It is not well known how greatly adoption impacts adoptees and it is especially important to look at their stories when thinking about future generations. My summer research has been aimed at answering the question: How do adoptees cope with the impact that having an interracial adoption background has on their sense of identity especially going into adulthood?

Literature Review

Interracial adoption refers to the act of placing a child of one racial or ethnic group with adoptive parents of another racial or ethnic group. Weegar (2000), Kirk (1964), and Miall (1996) study attitudes and negative stigmatizations surrounding adoptions and the role that race played a role in identity formation of adoptees. They describe the practices parents used to help their children develop a connection to their birthplace. Pinderhughes, Matthews, and Zhang (2016) reaffirm that "When parents raise a child from a different cultural, racial or ethnic background, they face the added task of figuring out how to help their child develop a healthy identity, given his or her backgrounds and the potential lack of expertise possessed by the parents" (157). The adoptees that I interviewed agreed with this view. They reflected on their parents' efforts to make the adoption process as easy and seamless as possible and although they wished more could be done, they recognized the limitations of what their parents could do. To compensate, adoptees have adapted internal strategies to best cope.

Code-switching is the act of changing one's speech or behavior to best assimilate in different spaces. Scholars of code-switching such as Fuller (2007) argue that "While groups and categories themselves are often pre-existent, an individual's memberships are socially constructed through their own language and social behavior" (106). Adoptees use code-switching as a means to negotiate with parts of their identity to fit in spaces they feel they do not fully belong.

Methods

This research builds on my previous research on interracial adoption with 10 students here at the University of Puget Sound. It involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews with 7 adoptees; all Asian, and most of them were adopted from China. All were adopted into predominantly white families. Most of my interviewees were female college students and only two of them were male.

Results

Adoptees experience identity formation as a fluid process that requires constant shifting to fit different spaces and situations over the course of a lifetime. They see identity as negotiable given the fact that they find pieces of themselves in different ethnic and socioeconomic environments. For adoptees, they find it difficult to fit under most labels. They are constantly shaping and compromising parts of their identity to fit into molds constructed by society's standards. This task becomes more difficult when adoptees become young adults and are starting to more clearly conceptualize themselves outside of their family unit. Adoptees' unique experiences present formidable challenges which adoptees have developed different strategies to confront/negotiate.

1. Code Switching

- Adoptees described an intentional process of changing their behavior to try and adapt to different environments and different expectations for their identity in those spaces. Many adoptees experienced identity crises when coming to college which caused them to start code-switching in situations to best "fit in"
 - "I did that all the time... it's like being a chameleon" (Ajjj, 07-19-22)
 - "Everyone [at the cultural clubs were] talking about their experiences growing up with an Asian family. I just didn't know what to say and I would just fake it" (Shen, -08-22-22)

3. "Acceptance"

- Adoptees understand how complex it is for them to think about identity; although they want to have a clearer sense of it, they realize that "it is what it is," and that they have to be content with how things are
 - "I don't think I need to figure out my identity, like right now. And I'm not going to put all my efforts towards that, I think I'm figuring it out as I go and stuff and just thinking about like, my experiences and the future" (Oma, 06-16-22)
 - "It took me a while to accept that I don't need to have answers and like a specific label to what my identity is. It could be just a bunch of miscellaneous pieces tossed together and still not equal me" (Arun, 07-19-22)

2. Settling

- Adoptees want to learn about their birth culture but often acknowledge that they would not be able to develop a connection to that place of origin. Instead, they felt out of touch with those original cultures and did not know how or where to start to make a connection.
 - "I do feel kind of ashamed of being like that [brought up white] but that's just how I was raised and I don't really know how else to be and then also what does acting Asian even mean?" (Shen, 08-22-22)
 - "It was so overwhelming to be in a space with a bunch of people that look exactly like you but you share basically no connection, not even culturally" (Ehuang, 07-29-22)
- When thinking about identity, adoptees resign themselves to settling on the relationships that did feel stable, such as the family.
 - "I really have enjoyed how my parents brought about the subject. It was always like, 'you know, we're White and you're Asian and that doesn't matter. We still love you'" (Ehuang, 07-29-22)

Conclusion

- While adoptees acknowledge the complexity of their identity and efforts to connect to their origins, they accept that it's a lifelong journey with the need for lots of negotiation, and they rely on their families as a stable point of reference.
- Prospective parents need to have the knowledge, finances, and resources to support an interracial adoption
- All of the adoptees expressed that there were some things that they wished their parents had done that would have allowed them to think about their adoption and identity more easily
- More research is needed on interracial adoptions of adoptees within families of mixed, non-white parents
- My participants experiences suggested there is still a lot more that can be learned from the adoptee experience. Some adoptees comments suggested that an area of study could focus on the role of adoption in shaping/mediating family conflicts between adoptees, siblings and parents based on the idea that adoptees are not biological family.

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