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Discussing the influence of racial/ethnic college identity groups on Asian transracial, transnational adoptee racial/ethnic identity development

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DISCUSSING THE INFLUENCE OF RACIAL/ETHNIC COLLEGE IDENTITY GROUPS ON
ASIAN TRANSRACIAL, TRANSNATIONAL ADOPTEES' RACIAL/ETHNIC IDENTITY
DEVELOPMENT

By

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ABSTRACT

Being able to define your racial/ethnic identity is an important aspect in defining who you are. For Asian transracial/transnational adoptees, racial/ethnic identity formation can be difficult due to a variety of factors. Adoptees undergo many experiences that impact the way they view their own comfortability with their ethnicity and race. Racial/ethnic identity development is also heavily influenced by the college experience. This research studied the potential influence racial/ethnic college identity groups have on the racial/ethnic identity formation of Asian transracial/transnational adoptees. Data was collected through the University of Vermont's REDCap platform and was sent out through a survey to the racial affinity clubs on campus. This survey included data collection on demographics, racial identity formation before college, and racial identity formation since attending college, and took about 15 minutes to complete. The survey had a total of 20 participants who all identified as a transracial adoptee. Many participants in the study referenced the importance of having a space to discuss their racial/ethnic identity through being a part of racial affinity groups on campus. This study was able to highlight participants' views on the impact racial identity spaces had on their own ability to discuss their racial, ethnic, and adoptee identity. Participants in this study also discussed the importance of diversity on their ability to discuss their racial, ethnic, and adoptee identity.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Transracial Adoption - What It Is and Its history

Defined by Castner and Foli (2022), transracial adoption is an adoption that occurs between a child of one race or ethnicity with parent(s) belonging to a different race or ethnicity than their child. Richard Lee writes that transracial adoption can be classified as “the most visible of all forms of adoption” (Lee, 2003, pg 713). The transracial adoptee experience can be more difficult to navigate than other forms of adoption due to the parent and child physically looking different from each other. This study will later explore the complexities of identifying as a transracial adoptee. It should be noted that for the continuation of this paper, the terms *transracial* and *interracial* will be used interchangeably. The terms *race* and *ethnicity* will be used in similarity to each other; it is noted that though they are similar, they do have distinct meanings. Finally, unless otherwise stated, the term *adoptee* will be used in reference to a transracial adoptee.

Transracial adoption dates back to the post-World War II era, and its history is rooted in colorism. Mixed-race Asian and American children of U.S. servicemen and Asian women faced discrimination due to the differences in physical features, having both Asian and American features (Choy, 2013). Adding to their discrimination, mixed children lacked support from both the U.S. and their Asian government (Choy, 2013). On top of this, children of mixed race were abandoned by their American fathers and Asian mothers, leading to their adoption by predominantly white families (Choy, 2013). Thus began the operation of international adoption in the United States.

More than half of the overall number of international adoptions that took place between 1971 and 2001 hailed from Asian countries, such as China, South Korea, Vietnam, India,

Cambodia, and the Philippines (Choy, 2013). In addition, the number of children adopted internationally in the United States increased by 42% between 1998 to 2004 (Choy, 2013). In 2010, adoptees made up approximately 3.8% of the total Asian population in children in the United States, with the majority of these children identifying as a transracial adoptee (Shih and Xu, 2014). Adoptees make up a significant portion of the Asian population in America and many are now young adults, who have attended or are currently attending a college or university. The unique adoptee experience and identity is a concept that is now being analyzed in a critical lens.

Being able to define one's racial/ethnic identity is an important aspect in defining who they are. For Asian transracial/transnational adoptees, racial/ethnic identity formation can be difficult due to a variety of factors and many transracial adoptees struggle with how they define their identity. Racial/ethnic identity development is also heavily influenced by the college experience. This research project looks to study the relationship and the influence racial/ethnic college identity groups have on the racial/ethnic identity formation of Asian transracial/transnational adoptees.

The Impact of Identity Formation on Mental Health

The ability to define identity is a meaningful experience and holds great significance to individuals. How one navigates their identity impacts other aspects of life, including the mental well-being of an individual. Erikson argued that being able to form your identity allows one to feel a sense of agency, responsibility, psychological maturity and more (Hardy et al., 2012). In addition, the ability to do so lowers mental health problems and decreases the likelihood of engaging in risky behavior (Hardy et al., 2012). Not having a sure understanding of identity can be overwhelming and lead to worse mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression. Having a history of adoption greatly complicates the ability to define identity. Like their

non-adoptee counterparts, this inability to define identity has shown to be associated with increased health-related risks (Castner & Foli, 2022). However, the ability to define one's ethnic or racial identity can be considered protective factors for an adoptee's mental health outcomes (Castner & Foli, 2022).

Identity formation is an internal conflict all individuals experience during their lifetime, but there is a greater impact on those struggling with identity who are transitioning from the adolescent stage to young adulthood (Hardy et al., 2012). According to the 2011 National College Health Assessment Survey, almost half of all college students who participated answered they experienced overwhelming anxiety, possibly due to their struggle with their identity development (Fry, 2016). This statistic does not take into consideration the racial influence of identity formation; however, it proves that inability to define identity has a significant impact on college-aged students.

Mental Health in College-Aged Transracial Adoptees

Interracial adoptees must navigate the increased risk of mental illness due to the inability to define their complex identity. In general, first-year college students may experience additional problems with feelings of social self-worth if they come into college with an already existing attachment anxiety (Fry, 2016). Interracial adoptees tend to have increased attachment disorders or anxiety already (Fry, 2016). This puts adoptees at a higher risk than their non-adoptee counterparts for developing additional feelings of social inadequacy.

Adoptees who struggle with defining their sense of self or racial identity in college can go through so much inner-turmoil that it can lead to self-destructive behavior (Fry, 2016). In addition, adoptees are at an increased risk for developing suicidal ideations or behaviors, psychiatric illness, and substance use disorders (Castner and Foster, 2022). Adoptees are also

more likely to be referred to mental health services than their non-adoptee counterparts (Paine et al., 2021). With racial identity formation being such an important aspect in maintaining proper mental health, one must look at the factors that play into how a transracial adoptee racially identifies themselves. This research looks to study the influence racial/ethnic college identity groups have on the racial/ethnic identity formation of Asian transracial adoptees.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Identity Formation

In order to understand the impact of racial/ethnic identity formation on transracial adoptees, the process of how one forms their identity must be understood first. The notion of developing and defining one's identity is complex. There are many facets of life and personal experiences that contribute to identity formation. Due to the many factors that play a part in forming one's identity, the ability to definitively discuss one's identity is difficult for most and may even be a lifelong journey for some. As discussed by Braveman and Parker Dominguez (2021), race can be viewed as a social construct. Theories that explain identity formation in a social construct can help explain why and how an individual forms their own racial/ethnic identity. Many of these theories state the importance of identity formation based on those around them, including the symbolic interaction theory, the identity theory, the social identity theory, and the idea of salience (Kaufman, 2014; Stryker, 1980; Gross, 2017).

How one forms their identity is an intricate process, such that it has been heavily analyzed to understand its process. The symbolic interaction theory looks to explain how identity is formed in the context of the society (Kaufman, 2014). The main proponents of this socially constructed theory state that one's identity is formed based on those around them (Kaufman,

2014). While this theory focuses less on a personal identity formation, and rather a social identity, the symbolic interaction theory can be used to explain the identity of one person based on those they interact with.

The identity theory looks to explain the formation of identity through the concept of self-categorizing one's self into the different aspect of one's world (Stryker, 1980). The identity theory also goes hand-in-hand with the social identity theory, in which both discuss self-identification as something that is affected by social categories or classifications (Stets and Burke, 2000). As race is one way in which people identify or classify groups of people, both the identity theory and social identity theory serve to explain racial identity formation.

Stryker also uses a structural approach to define how one formulates a sense of self. This approach states that one's self is created from the many identities one holds, arranged in a hierarchy of salience (Gross, 2017). An identity becomes more salient when there is a higher chance that particular identity is invoked more. (Gross, 2017). Again, this idea of salience allows one to understand that identity formation is influenced by those around them. While these theories on identity formation are not specific to racial identity, they can still be used to analyze the adoptee identity formation.

Racial/Ethnic Identity Formation in Children of Color

The racial and ethnic identity formation and development process begin at an early age. There is added complexity when it comes to identity formation for children of color, as they also begin to develop an additional identity based on their racial/ethnic group (Iruka et al., 2021). According to Spencer and Markstrom-Adams (1990), this racial-ethnic identity is influenced by the child's racial-ethnic identification, preference and attitude, as well as their ethnic group's experience with prejudice, bias, and racism. One's race greatly impacts their identity formation.

From an early age, as young as three years old, children begin to understand some concepts of race and identity (Iruka et al., 2021). In the context of interracial adoptees, this phenomenon is quite interesting. Children categorize race as one or the other, but what are the implications when the child they are judging holds multiple racial identities?

Aboud (1987) and Rotheram and Phinney (1987) established five components that shape the ability to define ethnic identity. These include ethnic self-identification (the ability to identify as being part of an ethnic group), ethnic constancy (an understanding that one's ethnic characteristics do not change over time or setting), use of ethnic role behaviors (partaking in practices that reflect the culture and customs of the ethnic group), ethnic knowledge (understanding the customs and traits that are significant and relevant to the ethnic group), and ethnic preference (preferring one's ethnic culture and values) (Iruka et al., 2021). Similar to the aforementioned theories revolving identity formation as a social construct, racial and ethnic identity formation theories explain that identity is formed by surrounding oneself with aspects of their ethnic culture; they both emphasize that identity is influenced by those around us. One must understand that theories used to describe racial and ethnic identity, specifically, take into account the culture and physical characteristics that racial and ethnic groups share.

Parents and the Colorblind Lens

Put simply, the adoptee experience is complex and navigating the many facets that make up the adoptee identity is difficult. Like all children, the way parents raise adoptive children can make a great impact on how the adoptee views themselves and their identity. For adoptive parents who identify as a different race and ethnicity as their adopted child, there is an added responsibility for parents to teach their children about their children's origin culture. It has been found that adoptive parents understand the importance of their adopted child recognizing and

valuing their origin culture (Park, 2012). Understandably, exploring an adoptee's cultural background and practices can be difficult and overwhelming as there are so many variables to consider when talking about identity. However, this is no excuse for interracial parents to shy away from this responsibility; talking about the adoption experience is healthy for both the parent and child. In fact, it was found that adoptive children who were able to discuss and explore their birth race and culture with their family had more positive psychological adjustments and outcomes (Park, 2012). To promote healthy identity formation, adoptees must be given the space and time to talk about their adoptive experience, especially with those who hold meaning in their life. As mentioned before, mental health is negatively impacted when adoptees do not get that space to do so.

While talking about the adoptee experience and identity seems to be a straightforward solution in promoting and protecting adoptee mental health, adoptees do not always get the chance to have in-depth conversations about their identity with their adoptive family. In many cases, parents view their adopted child through a colorblind lens, in which parents do not adequately acknowledge their child's race due to some form of racial ambivalence (Park, 2012). This racial ambivalence among parents contributes to adoptees' struggle with the concept of race and identity. Due to many transracial adoptions occurring between nonwhite children with white families, adoptees hold a unique perspective on how they fit in with their family and how society perceives them. Parents who downplay their child's racial or ethnic identity due to the belief of not seeing skin color indirectly suggest the issues that are associated with race do not matter or are insignificant (Fry, 2019). If parents are inadvertently denying their adoptee's ethnicity, adoptees are expected to assimilate into a culture they do not physically look like. Thus, leading to complex questions about their identity. In addition, this colorblind approach sometimes leads

Asian adoptees to shelter their experiences with racism from their adoptive parents (Fry, 2019). The colorblind theory relates to a specific form of racism that is systemic, in that the social institutions put in place are designed to put people of color at a disadvantage (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). Colorblind racism may be seen through denying or minimizing the impact of race on an individual's experiences (Toraif et al., 2023). In addition to the colorblind racism an adoptee may face, anti-Asian racism has a longstanding history within America, thus being a core part of the Asian American identity and experience (Kim, 2017). Thus, an adoptee's Asian identity being inadvertently denied by their adoptive family while also facing an experience shared by the Asian-American community can be incredibly confusing to navigate. If adoptees cannot discuss experiences with racism with their family, it becomes an issue they must internalize alone. As Aboud (1987) and Rotheram and Phinney (1987) state, one of the key components of ethnic identity formation includes understanding the shared experiences of one's ethnic group. If parents do not give adoptees the space to unpack their racial experiences, experiences that the Asian American community unfortunately share and understand, parents are not giving their children the means to a healthy discussion about their racial identity.

The colorblind theory, in this context, refers to an adoptive parent's parenting style. However, parents may be unaware of different parenting methods as adoption practices, laws, and regulations are influenced by the principle of maintaining the child's best interests according to the "dominant cultural norms" (Caster & Foli, 2022, para 5). Adoptive parents who are typically part of the dominant culture may have the adopted child's best interests at heart, but may still contribute to identity confusion by raising the adopted child in a manner that is influenced by their own cultural norms, rather than the adopted child's birth culture. It is structurally put in place that in order to achieve an optimal outcome for adoptees, they must

follow a primarily white way of life; thus structurally perpetuating a colorblind effect. This is yet another example of the struggle of balancing an adoptee identity. For adoptees, trying to identify with one's birth culture can be difficult when the adoption system is created based on the fundamentals of a different cultural standard.

The Complex Adoptee Experience

Growing up in a family that identifies as a different ethnicity, interracial adoptees experience the challenge of learning how to develop their own ethnic identity. Arguably, adoptees have ties to two different worlds, leaving identity formation enigmatic. For Asian transracial adoptees, having the outward and physical appearance of being Asian but not the cultural understanding of what it means to be Asian adds to the complexity of what being an adoptee means (Suda and Hartlep, 2016). In a study done by Gross et al. (2017), both transracial adoptees and family members stated that the racial identity of the adoptee greatly depended on the racial make-up of the one's surrounding them. This goes back to the aforementioned identity development theories that state that the people that one surrounds themselves with have a great influence on how they define their identity. Having both the adoptive family and adoptee agree with the sentiment further prove the importance of the surrounding world on a person's identity development.

Referring back to how one's ethnic identity is formed, Asian adoptees living in communities with people that look like them and identify as the same ethnic/racial identity can help the adoptee form their own ethnic/racial identity. However, adoptive families tend to live in communities that lack representation and access to the adoptee's birth culture (Park, 2012). Growing up in a community where there is a disconnect in how a person perceives oneself versus how that person is perceived by others can be complicated. Further, transracial families living in

communities that lack representation of their adoptee's racial identity decreases the amount of time adoptive parents spend talking about their child's ethnicity and origin culture (Park, 2012).

Many transracial adoptees self-identify as white, as their adoptive family are, and possibly benefit from the privileges of being white; however, it can be a culture shock when strangers immediately categorize them as a person of color, even if it is not something the adoptee identifies as (Fry, 2019). To understand white privilege, one must look at the difference in which society is set up to support white individuals versus people of color. American society is structurally built in a way that reinforces the power and ideals of those identifying as white, which thus perpetuates a cycle that encourages white ideals while simultaneously harming people of color (Rothenberg, 2008). It can be difficult to understand the ways in which one holds white privilege, as this privilege is not seen as a "privilege," but rather something that is expected as a part of life (Rothenberg, 2008). However, these guarantees are not extended to those who identify as a person of color (Rothenberg, 2008). For adoptees, the phenomenon of white privilege is interesting as they may experience some of the benefits of being white through their families. Yet, regardless of how the adoptee racially identifies as, many outsiders tend to associate adoptees with experiences associated with lower status, or as a person of color (Fry, 2019). This can be very confusing for adoptees who may not necessarily identify with their racial identity. Identifying as a person of color can be extremely difficult if the adoptee faces two contradictory experiences: racism as a person of color by the people around them and white privilege coming from a white family.

In addition to the contradictory experience of having white privilege and facing racism, adoptees also face the problem of not being able to fully fit in with both their white and Asian communities, thus, impacting the way adoptees view their racial identity. Trying to define an

adoptee's racial ethnicity can be increasingly difficult due to those around them. Many transracial adoptees report that they face prejudice from both white individuals and individuals who share the same ethnicity (Gross, 2017). It can be incredibly isolating for adoptees when it feels like both the racial identities they have ties to do not want or have a space for them. Based on previously mentioned identity formation theories, one's identity formation is based on those around them. However, if the people around them do not accept them, it must be asked how one can continue to form their identity in a healthy manner.

As seen before, adoptees face the duality of judgment from others and themselves. One of the most challenging aspects of the racial identity formation in adoptees is influenced by how those around the adoptee perceive them. Because individuals in the transracial adoptive family do not look the same, many families are often questioned of truly being a *real* family (Hall & Steinberg, 2013). Many adoptees face the question about who their *real* parents are, thus indirectly assuming that the adoptive family is less authentic than a biological one (Kim & Hall, 2013). This is an example of how society unconsciously views the relationship between adoptive parents and children as lesser than one between a biological parent and child. And though this question may come from a place of genuine interest for the adoptee's birth history, it further adds to the isolation an adoptee faces - not fully connecting with their Asian identity, not being able to fully connect with their white identity, and now being told that their relationship with their family is not considered valid.

By the time adoptees reach adulthood, one might question the extent to which an adoptee has experienced in-depth identity exploration. It must be noted that this exploration does not mean an adoptee understands their identity, but rather the question of identity has had a presence in their life. As the adoptee gets older, one must question how the college experience can impact

the racial identity formation of an adoptee. Many adoptees report that they felt the need to find people of the same ethnicity in order to feel a sense of authenticity when discussing their own racial identity (Gross et al., 2017). One must consider how a racial/ethnic college identity group may affect an adoptee's ability to unpack their own racial identity.

Identity Formation in College

To understand how an interracial adoptee can utilize the college experience to help define their own racial/ethnic identity, one must understand how the college experience influences identity formation. Again, identity formation is as much a social construct as it is an individual process. College marks the transition from adolescent to adult developmental stage. It is an important stage of life that gives students the opportunity to learn more about the world around them and how they interact with it, thus helping form their identity (Kaufman, 2014). Using the symbolic interaction theory, which states that individuals are more influenced by the external and social factors around them than biopsychological factors, one can explain how students form their racial and ethnic identity (Kaufman, 2014). For many individuals coming from primarily homogenous communities, college serves as the first time students experience viewpoints that do not align with what they were raised with (Fry, 2016). Seeing as individuals are highly influenced by the world and people around them, those that are able to experience new world views may find that their ability to define their identity may change.

While the college experience has an impact on all student's identity development, there are differences in how the college experience influences students of color versus non-students of color. In general, students of color may not be as well adjusted as their white peers when it comes to adjusting to college and becoming familiar with the campus' culture (Ussher, 2010; Berger, 2000). On top of this, students of color may find that they have increased difficulty in

feeling a sense of belonging than their white peers (Strayhorn, 2012). For students of color especially, visibility and belonging are important on a college campus. Studies find that racial, ethnic, and culturally-based clubs and organizations on campuses positively influence college-aged students of color (Chung, 2015). Further, racial identity based organizations support students by developing a sense of belonging while also validating the student of color's experience with race and ethnicity on and off campus (James, 2017).

The College Experience and Identity Formation for Adoptees

The impact the college experience has on a transracial adoptee's ability to talk about their racial identity varies between adoptees. Adoptees may learn for the first time in college the extent to which they lack knowledge and understanding of their adoption history (Fry, 2019). In addition, adoptees may also feel that being a part of a racial/ethnic identity group on campus may also bring up the insecurities adoptees feel about where they belong ethnically, reminding them of the struggle they face between identifying as Asian or identifying as white (Fry, 2019). While adoptees may be around more people that look like them, they may still struggle with how they identify due to not feeling as authentic as people who grew up with their Asian culture. This can add to the distress of identity confusion. However, this may also be the first time for adoptees to form relationships with other adoptees, as well as examine and dissect their own adoptive identity (Fry, 2019). For some adoptees, the college experience provides adoptees with the space and tools to healthily discuss what it means to identify as an adoptee. Due to the importance of discussing adoption, many college-aged organizations and clubs exist with the purpose of giving adoptees the space to discuss identity. One example is found within the organization of the East Coast Asian American Student Union (ECAASU), which hosted an adoptee caucus in its 2024 National Conference that college students from the East coast could attend. While these spaces

for adoptees to talk about their adopted experience do exist, little information can be found in the literature that discusses the impact these spaces have on a transracial adoptee's ability to formulate their own racial and ethnic identity.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Participants

This study used a convenience sample of undergraduates and graduate students hailing from universities and colleges across the East coast. To participate in the study, each participant had to (a) identify as an Asian transracial adoptee, (b) be a college-aged student above the age 18, (c) currently attend or attended a university or college within the last three years, and (d) provide implied consent. No participant's names were collected to ensure and protect confidentiality. This study was approved by the University of Vermont IRB (00003023).

Materials

The survey used for data collection was divided into three main sections. The first section collected information on participant's demographics. This included the participant's age, ethnicity, and the college or university the participant currently attends or attended. As part of the college/university data collection, participants were asked if their college/university is considered a predominantly white institution (PWI), in which 50% or more of the students identify as white. The first section of the survey also asked the participant information about their adoption, including age at adoption and sex assigned at birth/sex assigned during adoption.

The next section of the survey looked to collect data about the participant's racial/ethnic identity development before coming to college. In this section, participants were asked about their family's ethnicity and their comfortability with talking about their adoptee identity. To do

this, participants were asked about the extent to which they may or may not have felt comfortable talking about their adoptive identity, along with who they felt comfortable talking to and if they had a designated space to talk about their adoptive identity. Participants were also asked in this section to elaborate on their perception of their education on their origin ethnicity taught by family members.

The final section of the survey collected data about the participant's identity formation after being on a college campus and whether or not their ability to define their racial identity changed due to potential participation in a racial affinity group on campus. The questions in this final section asked participants their perceptions of racial inclusivity at the university or college they attend, as well as whether or not the participant is a member of a college/university organization or club that serves as racial/ethnic identity affinity space. To further collect information on the impact of racial affinity spaces on an adoptee's ability to define their identity, participants were asked similar questions as the previous section of the survey. These questions ranged from how comfortable adoptees were with discussing their identity since attending a college or university to how their own perception on their ability to define their racial identity may have changed since arriving.

The questions asked in this survey included both closed-ended questions and open-ended questions to allow participants to elaborate on their own lived-experience, as the adoptee racial identity formation differs between all adoptees. All questions on the survey were optional.

Procedure

The survey used in this study was created through REDCap, a University of Vermont affiliated platform that allowed participants to respond anonymously through their computer or phone. To access the survey, an initial email invitation with the corresponding link to the survey

was sent to racial affinity clubs and organizations at the University of Vermont. In the initial email sent out, participants were encouraged to send the following link to other transracial adoptees; thus creating a snowball effect for data collection. This survey was open to all Asian transracial adoptees who either are in college or have recently graduated college within the last three years and was open between March 27, 2024 and April 15, 2024.

Data Analysis

The data in this study was collected using mixed methods, depending on the question. Quantitative data was collected through nominal questions and likert scale questions. Qualitative data was collected through follow-up questions to the nominal questions and likert scale questions. Charts and figures were made through Google Sheets.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

A total of 20 participants completed this study. Of them, 90% identified that their sex assigned at birth is female (n=18) and the remaining 10% (n=2) identified that their sex assigned at birth is male. The purpose of asking participants their assigned sex at birth is to determine the sex of the adoptee when adopted. The age of the participants ranged from 18 to 24, with the average age of the participants being 21.05 and the majority of the adoptees being 21 years old (n=10) (See Figure 2). Respondents reported their age during adoption between less than a year to two years of age (see Figure 3).

Figure 2

What is your age?

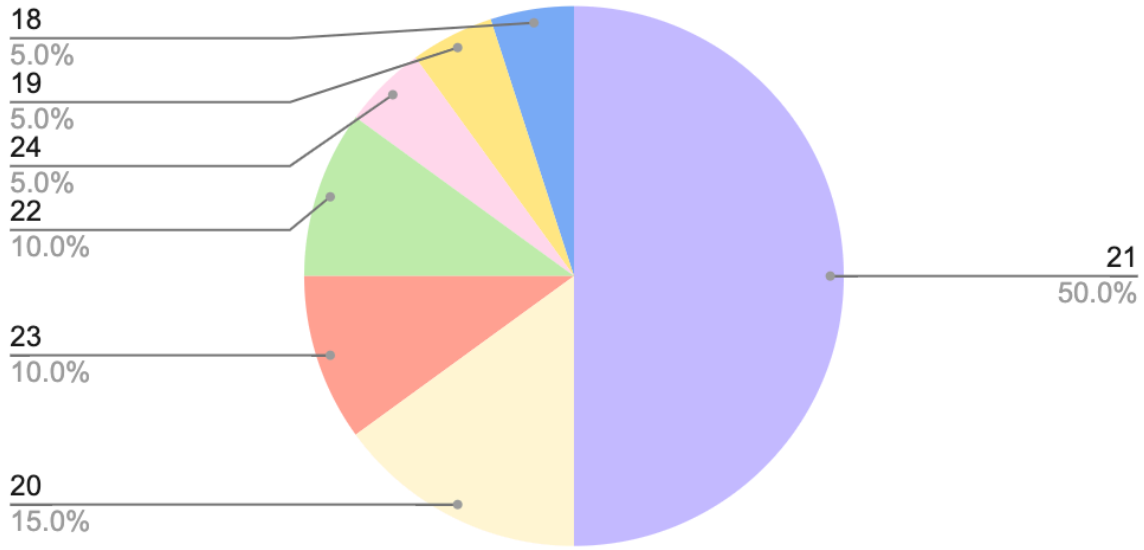
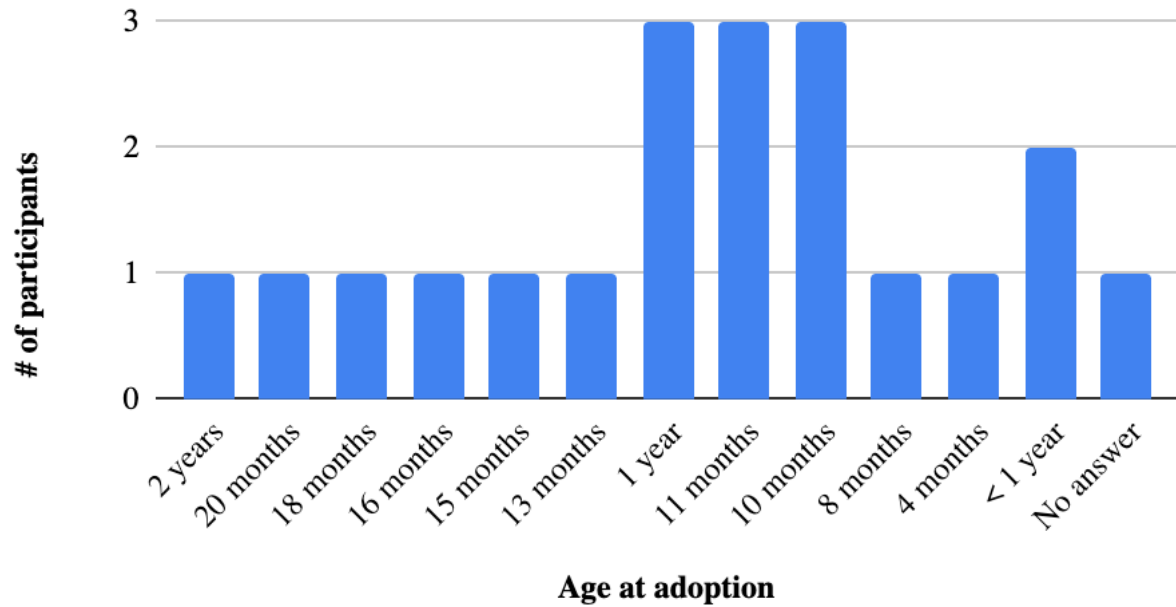


Figure 3

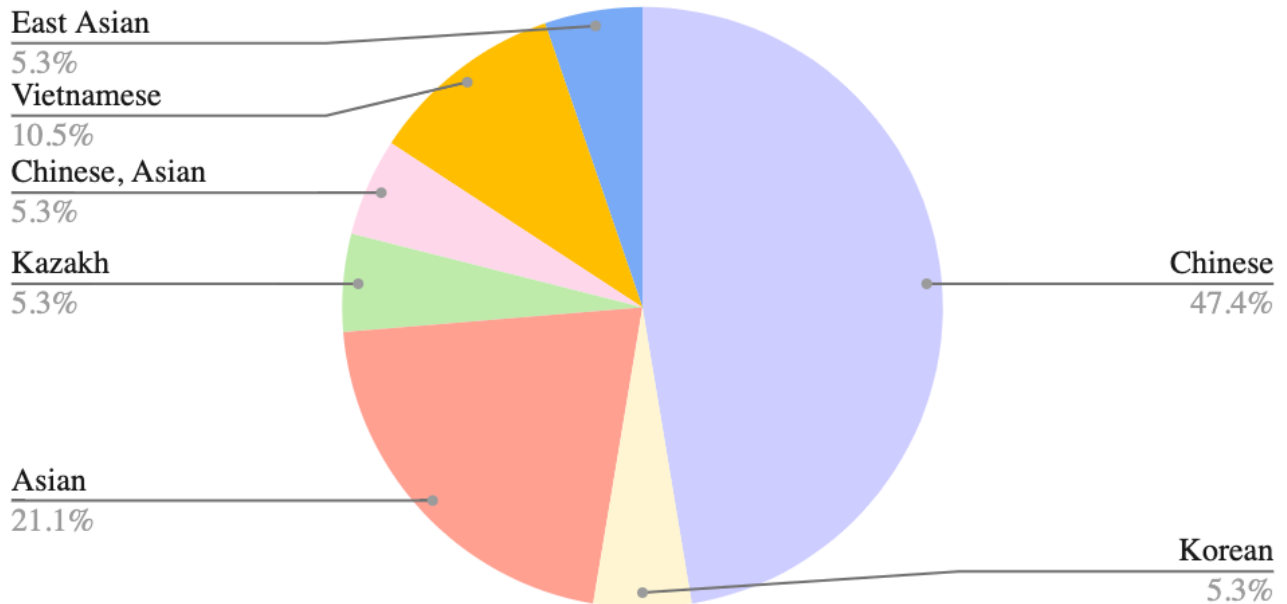
What was your age at adoption?



Of the 20 participants that completed the survey, 50% identified as Chinese (n=10), 10% identified as Vietnamese (n=2), 5% identified as Korean (n=1) and 5% identified as Kazakhstani (n=1) (see Figure 1). The rest of the participants either responded as Asian (n=4), East Asian (n=1), or did not answer (n=1) (see Figure 1). 85% of the respondents reported attending the University of Vermont (n=17), while 15% reported going to different schools across the East Coast (n=3) (see Figure 4). The schools that the participants attended or currently attend include the University of Vermont, the George Washington University, SUNY Brockport, and UNC Charlotte. It should be noted that all of the listed universities are considered a predominately white institution (PWI).

Figure 1

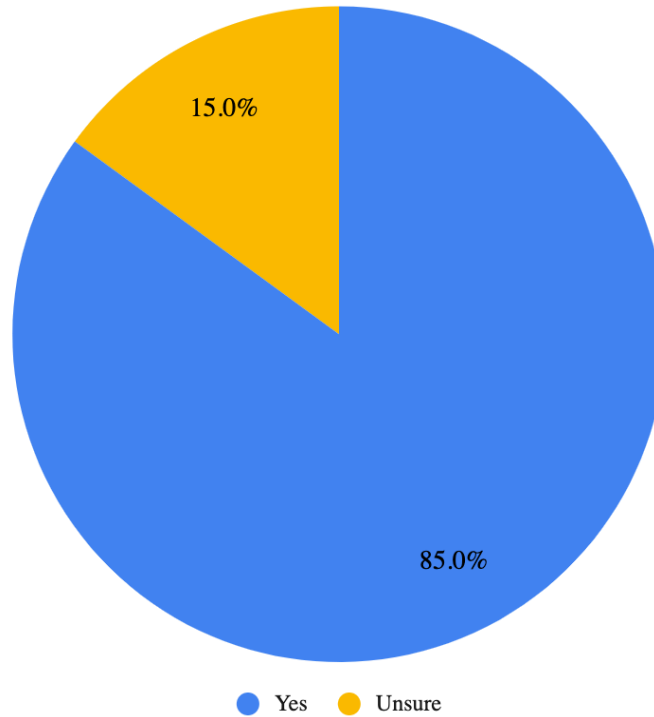
What is your ethnicity?



It should be noted that one participant included both "Chinese" and "Asian" as their ethnicity, thus changing the way the data is depicted on the chart. Their answer is considered only as "Chinese" in discussion.

Figure 4

Is the school you attend/attended considered a PWI?

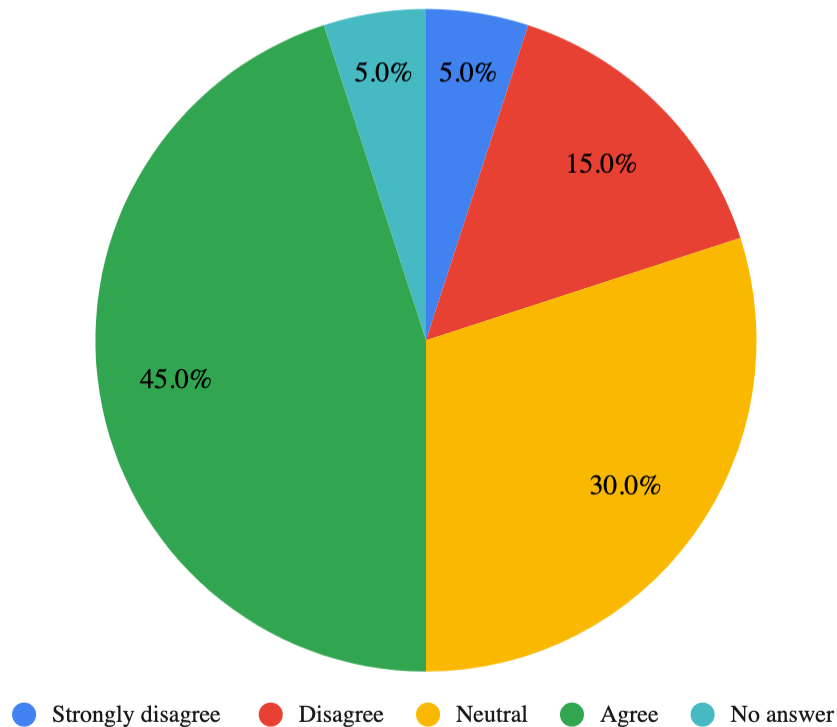


To understand the complexity of the transracial adoptee experience, this study asked participants about their adoptive experience before going to college. This included many aspects including their family’s ethnicity. 80% of the participants in the study answered that their family were non-Hispanic white (n=16), 15% identified that their families consisted of multiple ethnicities (n=3), and one person did not answer. 80% of the participants believed that their family educated them about their origin culture while growing up (n=16), while 15% did not (n=3), and one person did not answer. 18 of the participants stated that they felt comfortable talking to others about their identity with others before coming to college, while 2 participants stated they did not feel comfortable. Before college, only 40% of participants stated they were a part of some form of an organized space dedicated to talking about racial identity (n=8).

Participants were asked about the ways in which they viewed their identity in college within the last section of the survey. The first question used a five-point likert scale to determine participant's attitudes towards the statement "The university I attended or attended is racially inclusive." Regarding the statement, 5% (n=1), 15% (n=3), 30% (n=6) and 45% (n=9) reported they "strongly disagree," "disagree," are "neutral" and "agree," respectively. No one in the study strongly agreed with the statement and one person did not answer the question (see Figure 5).

Figure 5

The university I attend or attended is racially inclusive.



80% of the participants answered that they were a member of a college/university club that is an affinity space for students who share the same racial/ethnic identity as themselves (n=16) (see Figure 6). Another five-point likert scale was used to determine participant's attitude with the statement "I feel comfortable discussing experiences related to my racial/ethnic identity

with others.” 60% of participants shared they “agree” with the statement (n=12) and 25% of participants “strongly agree” with the statement (n=5). The remaining 5% and 10% reported they “disagree” or are “neutral” about the statement, respectively (See figure 10). There was no correlation between those who were not part of an identity club in college and those who did not “agree” or “strongly agree” with the previous statement regarding comfortability in talking about racial and ethnic identity.

Figure 10

I feel comfortable discussing experiences related to my racial/ethnic identity with others.

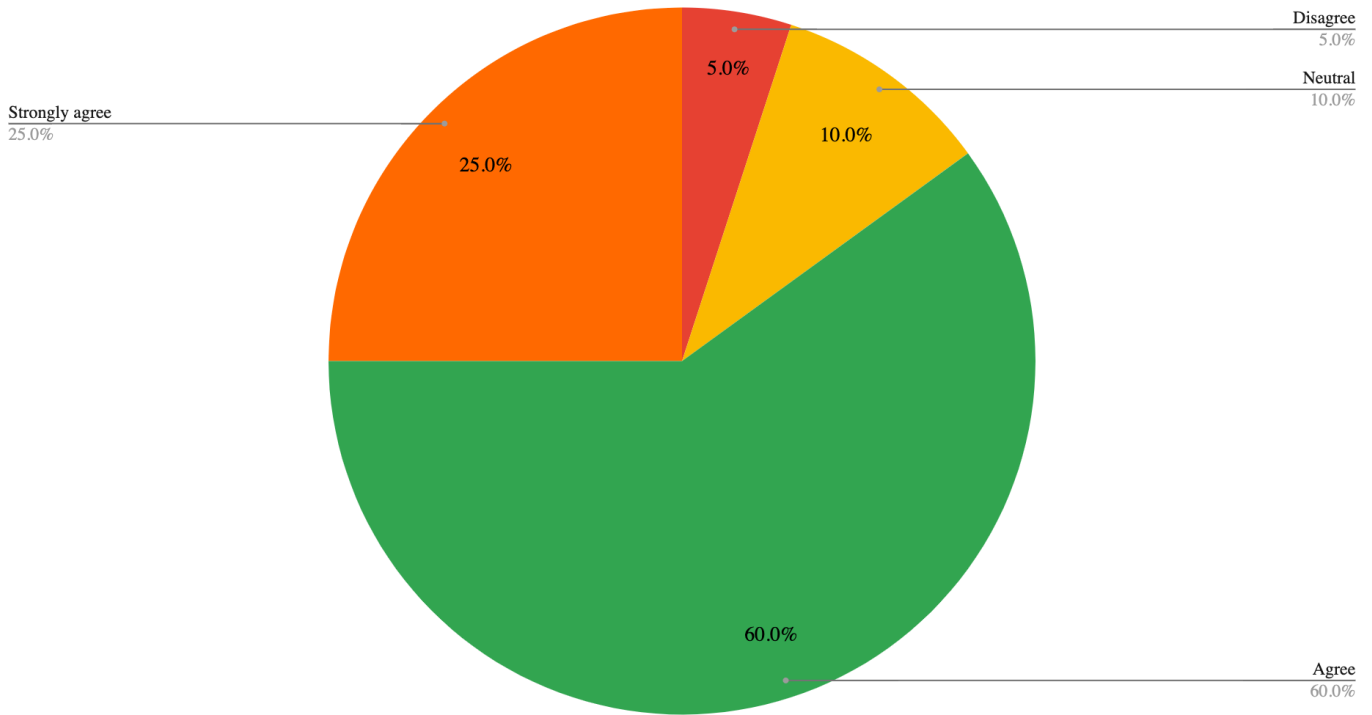
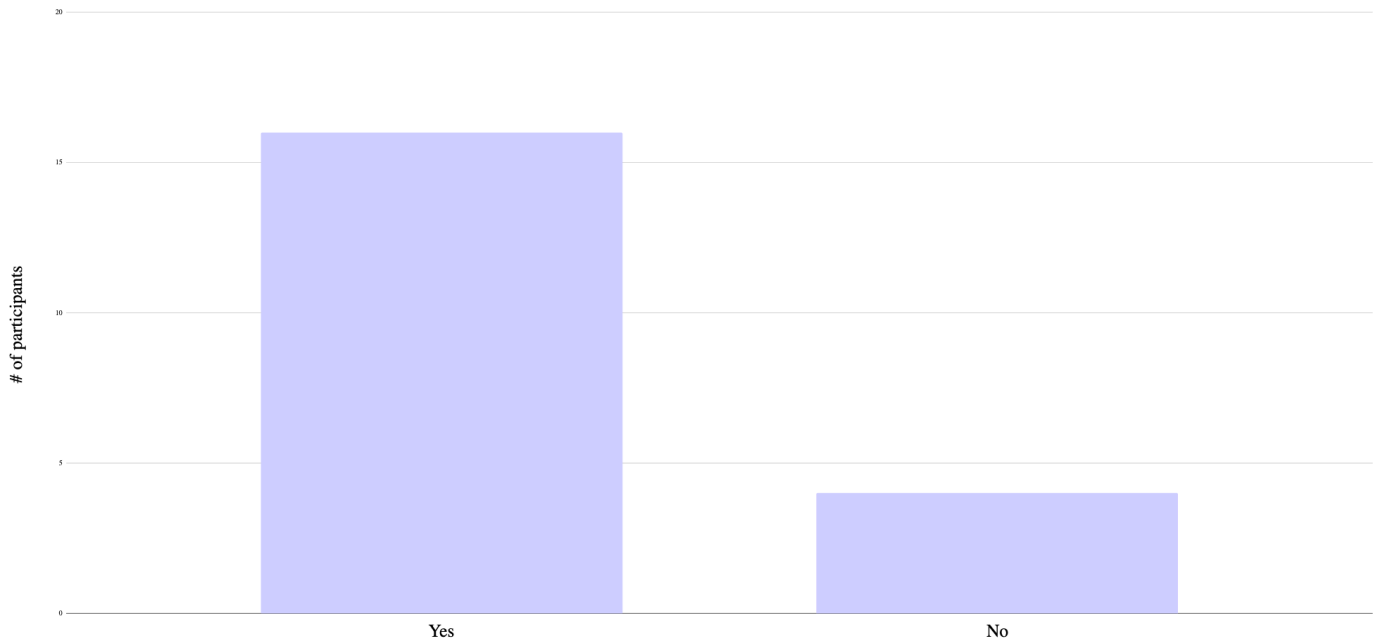


Figure 6

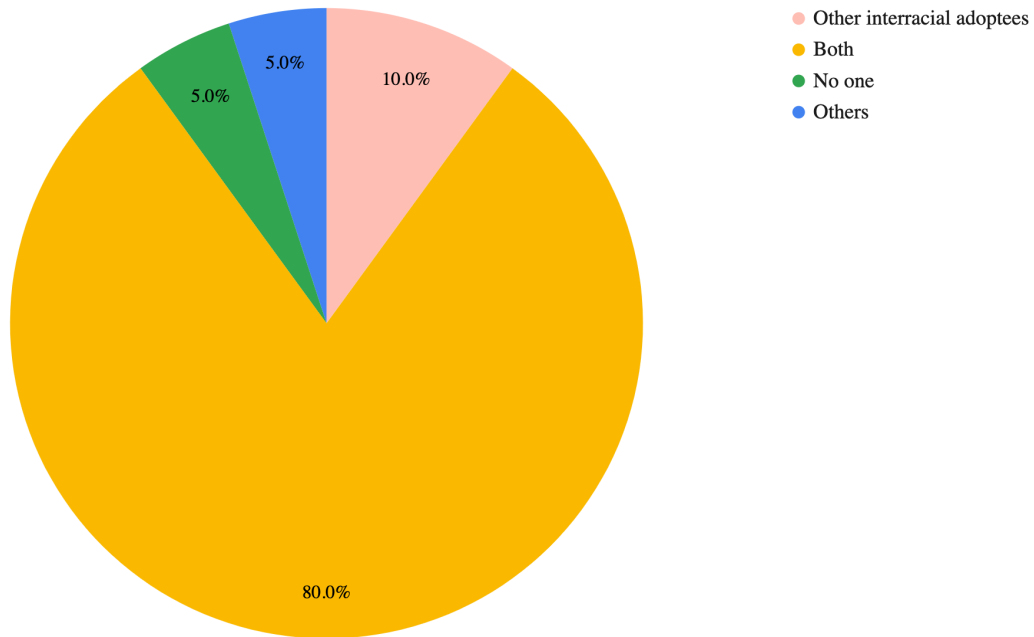
Are you/were you a member of a college/university or club that is an affinity space for students who share the same racial/ethnic identity as yourself?



When talking about their racial identity, 80% of participants stated they felt comfortable talking to both non-adoptees or family and other interracial adoptees (n=16). 2 participants stated they only felt comfortable talking about their racial identity with other interracial adoptees. 5% reported feeling uncomfortable talking to anyone (n=1), while 5% reported they felt comfortable talking to people not listed in the aforementioned options (n=1) (see Figure 7). Participants were asked to elaborate on their answers to the previous question. It should be noted that the participant who chose “Others” commented that they “rarely discussed” their racial identity with “other Asian individuals” and “tend to avoid it.”

Figure 7

Who do you feel comfortable talking to about your racial identity since starting college?



Another five-point likert scale was used in similar fashion, this time to gauge participant’s attitudes towards the statement “My ability to discuss my racial/ethnic identity has changed since coming to college.” The majority of participants responded that they “agree” or “strongly agree” with the statement, with 30% (n=6) and 45% (n=9) selecting those options, respectively. One participant stated they “strongly disagree” with the statement, 15% (n=3) stating they “disagree,” and one participant feeling “neutral” about the statement (see Figure 8). Participants were asked to elaborate on their answer. To determine if there was an influence on the college experience and ability to talk about racial/ethnic identity, participants were asked directly if they believed their college experience did influence their understanding of their racial/ethnic identity. 70% reported their college experience did influence their racial/ethnic identity development (n=14), 20% reported it did not (n=4) and 10% answered “unsure” (n=2) (see Figure 9).

Figure 8
My ability to discuss my racial/ethnic identity has changed since coming to college.

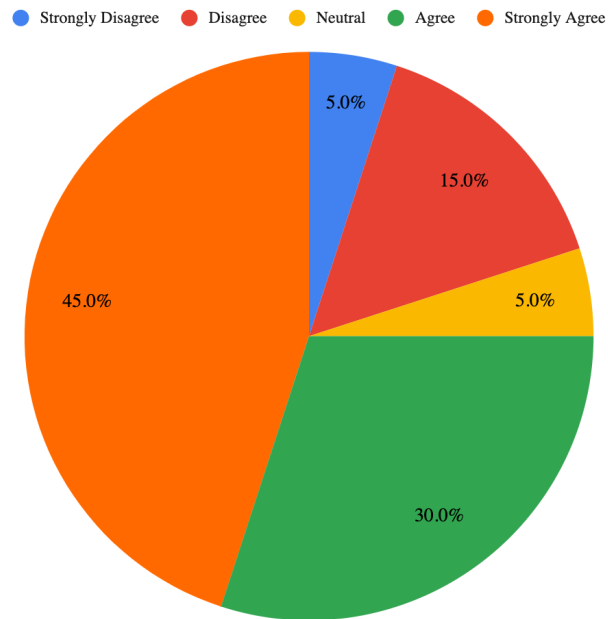
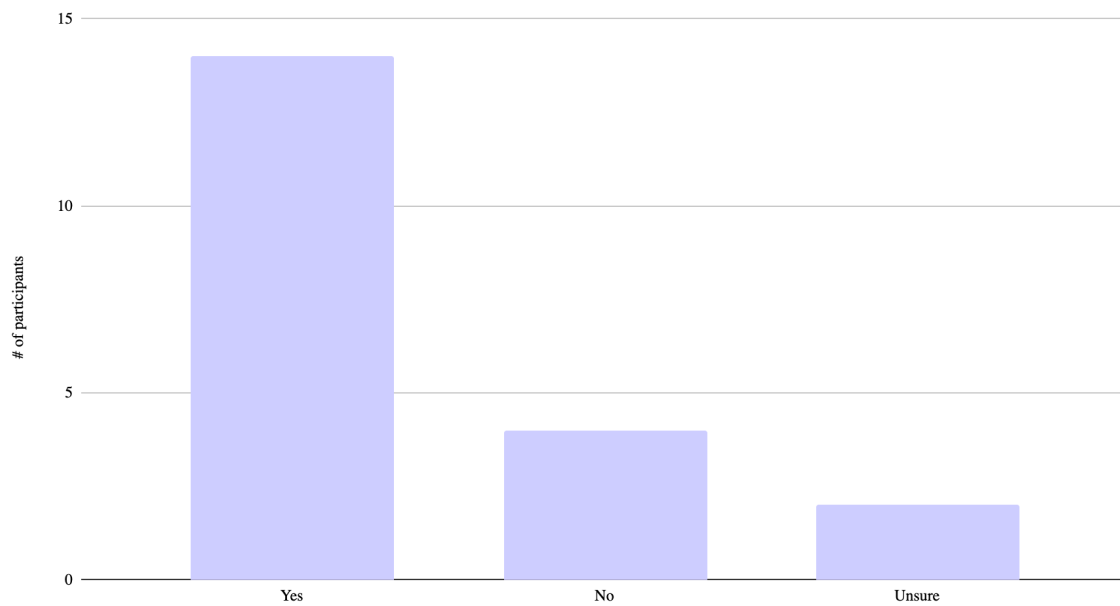


Figure 9
Do you feel as though your college experience has influenced your understanding of your racial/ethnic identity?



Participants were given the opportunity to elaborate on their answers. Due to a variety of factors that could play into identity development, participants were directly asked if they believed there would be a change in their identity understanding if they did not participate in an identity group or club. 45% believed there would be a change in understanding (n=9), 35% were unsure if there would be a change (n=7), and 20% identified that they did not participate in an identity college/university group (n=4). None of the participants answered “No” to this question. Participants were given the opportunity to elaborate on their answers. The final question was aimed at those who were not in a college-affiliated identity group and asked if they believed their identity understanding would change if they were to be in one. While only four students reported they were not in a racial/ethnic affinity club affiliated to their university or college, 11 participants answered this question. Of the total responses for this question, 30% answered “Yes” (n=6), 5% answered “No” (n=1), and 20% were “Unsure” (n=4). Of the four participants who identified that they were not a part of an identity club on campus, 50% reported “Yes,” their identity understanding would change if they were part of an affinity group on campus (n=2), 25% reported “No,” it would not (n=1), and 25% reported they were “Unsure” (n=1). Participants were asked to elaborate on the previous answer.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Understanding of the Adoptee’s Origin Country and Culture Growing Up

Participants in this study were asked to describe any experiences they had discussing their origin country’s culture or history. Many of the participants in the study answered that as a child they had some form of introduction to their adoption history or origin country’s culture. Many participants discussed that this introduction was through reading books with their family

or celebrating traditional Asian holidays celebrated in their country of birth. Many participants who had some formal introduction to their adoption history also reported attending speaking lessons. 12 of the participants reported their parents tried at least one of the aforementioned methods to introduce them to their country of birth and their adoption history. Participants reported experiences of having “adoption kids books,” “placing emphasis on Chinese holidays/Adoption day,” and being a part of “weekly Chinese dance and language” classes. Five other participants reported similar experiences of their family being open to talking about their child’s adoption history; two of these participants stating their family would always be “transparent” about the adoption process and where they were born from.

While many participants were able to discuss their adoptee identity with their family, some reported not having the ability to do so due to their family’s discomfort in talking about it. One participant stated that they “never learned to speak the language, never interacted with other Asian individuals, and my parents treated my ancestry like it was ornamental.” Another participant answered that they did not believe they received education about the birth culture, elaborating that their “mom shuts down every conversation that involves my ethnicity or adoption. . . [interpreting] it as a direct insult to her parenting.”

When discussing what opportunities they had to learn about their birth culture and adoption status, many participants reported some reluctance to learn about their identity or that their studies were not kept up with. When asked to elaborate on their experiences growing up, a majority of participants used terms like “attempted” or “tried ” when discussing their experiences learning about their identity. For example, one participant discussed how their parents “tried to get me to learn Vietnamese as a child but I didn’t want to.” Another participant said that their parents “tried involving [them] in Chinese speaking lessons.” Another stating that “[their]

parents attempted to get [them] acquainted with the culture.” The terms “tried” or “attempted” imply that an effort was made but was possibly not achieved or achieved in the way expected, in this case, the adoptee’s cultural upbringing. Some participants stated their own difficulties with keeping up with their education and learning. One adoptee stated they were “quite reluctant to learn” about their adoptee history and culture. Another answered that while their parents “tried to get [them] to learn Vietnamese as a child but [they] didn’t want to.”

When referring back to the aforementioned literature, adoptees have a more positive psychological adjustment and outcomes when they are able to discuss their birth country and culture with their families (Park, 2012). The participants in this study reported feeling comfortable in discussing their adoptive identity both before and after attending college and 80% of participants reported having some form of cultural education growing up (n=16); thus, aligning with the current literature regarding education growing up and personal outcome. Interestingly, many of the participants reported that while they had some form of education, they did not keep up with or were reluctant to accept and learn the education from their families. This research project did not have the capacity to understand the relationship between the amount of education adoptees received on their birth culture and their psychological outcomes; however, this and future relevant research could serve to support identity development among interracial adoptees. From the data collected in this study, it seems that those who received some sort of education, even if they did not continue said education, were more likely to feel more comfortable in talking about their adoptee identity. Likewise, many participants who were comfortable in talking about their identity had parents that were open to discussing their child’s adoptive identity. Although this research did not delve into adoptee identity development

growing up, adoptees would benefit from future research that did look at the experiences that affect racial identity discussion for developing adopted children.

Comfortability with Discussing the Adoptee Identity Before College

Participants in the study were asked about their comfortability with talking about their adoptee identity; the majority of participants listed they were comfortable talking about their adopted identity before college (n=18). Many discussed an increased comfortability in talking with other adopted individuals. One participant agreed, stating that they “feel more comfortable” talking about their identity “with fellow adoptees.” Another participant who answered that they were comfortable in discussing their adoptee identity stated that they “always knew” they were adopted and had “other friends from home who are also adopted.” The question this participant answered served only to gauge respondents' comfortability with adoptee identity discussion; this participant chose to discuss their adopted friends unprompted, highlighting the importance of having someone who shares a similar experience in identity discussion, in this case other adoptees. Another participant mentioned having “several adopted friends” when asked to elaborate on their answer of being comfortable talking about the adoptee identity.

Three of the respondents reported that their ability to discuss their adoptee identity came around the age of being in high school. One participant stated that they began reflecting on their adopted identity at the beginning of high school due to visiting their birth country. Another stated they believed their “extremely diverse” high school allowed them to be comfortable in discussing topics related to the adoptee experience. The last of the three respondents who mentioned high school in their response reported doing a “lot of personal work to understand [their] stances on [their] own adoption in high school.”

As discussed in the literature, many adoptees grow up in communities that lack representation of their birth country; thus, adoptees feel a sense of authenticity when talking about their racial identity with people of the same ethnicity (Park, 2012; Gross et al., 2017). In this study, many participants discussed that they felt comfortable talking to people with similar backgrounds, in this case other adoptees. Having someone who can share similar experiences allows adoptees to feel more comfortable in talking about their identity, as seen in this study. Some of the participants discussed personal motivations for self reflection around high school, which was not found in the literature. Learning more about this self reflection may give more insight as to what helps adoptees discuss their identity but was not assessed in this study.

While the majority of participants did select “Yes,” they were comfortable talking about their adoptive identity with others before entering college, some elaborated that they still felt out of place growing up. One responded that they “felt like an imposter;” another said they “knew [they] were different,” especially growing up in a state legitimately lacking in diversity. The word “weird” came up in multiple responses. One participant responded that although they felt comfortable in discussing their adoptive identity, talking about their identity “felt weird or unexplored”; this participant contributed these feelings towards a lack of education on adoption and the adoptee experience. Another participant who answered that they felt comfortable discussing the adoptee identity also answered that talking about their adoptee identity felt “weird because it sometimes makes me feel guilty that I want to know where I came from” and that it could possibly be seen by their parents as ungrateful. One of the participants, who responded “No” to being comfortable in talking about their adoptee identity growing up, stated they “did not talk about it and always felt weird when [they] did.” The use of the word “weird” was used multiple times but also highlights different perspectives on the adoptee experience growing up.

Two respondents reported feelings of being lesser than when it came to interacting with their peers' Asian parents, despite the fact they both answered that they felt comfortable in talking about their adoptee identity. One reported feeling “a little less sure about [their] identity” around friends with Chinese parents, adding they “sometimes felt like [they] were missing something.” The other respondent explained they had “negative experiences with their friends' Asian parents” and that they felt “alienated from the community” and “not Asian enough.”

Due to the complexity of the adoptee experience, adoptees must learn to balance two worlds (Suda & Harlep, 2016). In this study, participants highlighted the various perspectives of not feeling as though they fit in with one of their identities. Some participants wrote about feeling like an outsider with the communities they grow up in, which are usually white communities. On the other hand, some adoptees, in the presence of other friends with Asian parents, felt like they could not relate to their community and identity. This study did not look to understand the extent to which adoptees felt a sense of belonging, but future research that looks at this phenomenon may benefit adoptees by helping explain the complexities of the adoptee identity.

Shared Experiences with Others in College

A majority of the respondents expressed that college changed the way they perceive their adoptive identity. One participant wrote “college has been mainly where my identity development has happened especially in regards to racial identity.” Many participants responded that since attending college, it has been easier to talk about their racial and adoptive identity due to the fact that there are more people with similar backgrounds that respondents can relate and talk to. A common theme found in the data is that the college experience gave participants the ability to “share” experiences with others. One participant wrote that “becoming friends with

even more people of shared and different ethnic identity at college has helped me discuss my own better. My college is more diverse than my high school.” Likewise, another respondent stated that their “hometown is not overly diverse, while college is, so [they] felt more comfortable in sharing and exploring” their identity. Another respondent answered that in college, they “have met people who have shared similar experiences and have made [them] feel comfortable enough to share [their] own.” One participant answered that they “Strongly Agree” with the statement “My ability to discuss my racial/ethnic identity has changed since coming to college,” attributing their answer to the fact that they “have friends that share a similar ethnicity” and that they feel “more comfortable in talking about things” like identity due to this shared ethnicity and experience.

Involvement in a Racial Affinity Group on Campus

Many participants of the study attributed that having and being involved in a college affinity space has made it easier for them to talk and find people with shared experiences. In addition, many participants reported that their involvement in a racially affiliated club or organization has had an impact on the way they view their identity. Many participants from the University of Vermont mention being a part of the campus’ Asian Student Union (ASU) and/or the Interracial Adoptee Group (IRAG), attributing their participation in these racially affiliated groups to their ability to talk about their racial identity. One participant answered “Yes” to the question “Do you feel as though your college experience has influenced your understanding of your racial/ethnic identity?”, but further elaborates that their answer can be attributed to being a part of the Asian Student Union on campus. Another participant writes:

“since attending UVM and ASU and connecting with other Asian people and other interracial adoptees, I have been able to gain more of a perspective regarding the importance of race in this day and age as well as how my experiences as an interracial adoptee may influence all that I do.”

More participants identify similar feelings about being a part of a racial identity group. Multiple participants wrote that having spaces like ASU and other racial affinity spaces has validated their Asian identity. Three more participants mentioned the IRAG club on campus, attributing their participation in the club to their ability to discuss their adoptive identity, as it gives them the space to talk about adoption and also introduces them to people with shared experiences. One participant wrote “having set spaces such as IRAG has been really helpful to me” and that these spaces allow them to have “more productive conversations” about their racial and adoptive identities. The three participants who identified not going to the University of Vermont answered that they were not a part of a racial affinity group on their own campuses; however, all three participants believed that their perception of their own adoptee identity would change if they were to be in one.

The Impact of Diverse Spaces in Home Towns Versus On Campus

The majority of participants discussed the importance of their own identity development based on the diversity of their surroundings. For participants coming from places with little to no diversity, the college experience was the first time they were exposed to people with similar and different backgrounds as themselves. It should be noted that while many of the respondents discussed being exposed to a more diverse environment while at college, all of the participants attended or currently attend a PWI (n=20). Alternatively, the participants who grew up in a diverse environment reported that coming to a PWI made it more difficult for them to discuss their identity due to being “surrounded by a less diverse crowd.” While participants were not specifically asked about the diversity of the environment they grew up in before college, this contradictory view highlights the importance of having a diverse space for adoptees to discuss their racial and adoptee identity. One of the participants, who believed attending a PWI had a

more negative impact on their ability to talk about their identity, mentioned that spaces provided by the Asian Student Union did allow them to feel comfortable talking about their identity.

Implications for Future Research and Practice

This research serves as the basis of beginning to understand how or why a racial affinity space on a college campus impacts interracial adoptees' ability to discuss their own racial identity. From this, more research can be done on the many aspects that form the adoptee identity. Current research, as previously mentioned, discusses that identity formation is formed by the people one surrounds themselves with (Kaufman, 2014). And specifically, ethnic identity can be defined by self-identification as part of an ethnic group; put simply, just the ability to identify one's self as a part of their ethnic group allows individuals to feel like they belong in said group and form their ethnic identity (Iruka et al., 2021). Just by participating in a racial affinity group on a college campus, the adoptees in this study were able to acknowledge and affirm their racial and ethnic identities. Racial affinity groups have the ability to influence an adoptee's racial and ethnic identity by not only providing safe spaces for adoptees to discuss their identity, but also validating their identity in terms of classifications; to be a part of a racial affinity group insinuates that one is a part of that race or ethnicity.

Existing literature discusses the importance for adoptees to have the ability to talk to people with similar experiences (Gross et al., 2017). When given the opportunity to elaborate on how their racial/ethnic identity has changed since coming to college, many participants chose to speak on their relations with other adoptees; thus, signifying the importance of having a representative community for adoptees to talk about their racial identity. For these participants, the college experience was effective in changing their ability to discuss their racial/ethnic identity as it gave them the opportunity to meet and talk with people who, more or less,

understand similar experiences related to the adoptee identity. Adoptees in college would benefit from having more intentional spaces in racial affinity clubs to discuss their adoptee experiences and identity.

From this data in this study, it can be implied that the presence of diversity affects the levels of comfort adoptees have in discussing their own racial identity. Though participants coming from a more diverse background discussed having a harder time with identity discussion in college, racial affinity clubs on campus gave participants the space to have discussions regarding race, adoption, and subsequent identity that they would otherwise be lacking at their university. Thus showing that the lack of diversity on their college campus had a negative effect on the participant's ability to talk about their adoptee identity; yet, joining racial affinity spaces, which serve to bring diversity to campus, seemed to be a protective factor for the ability to discuss adoptee, racial and ethnic identity. On the other hand, many of the participants who grew up in areas lacking cultural and racial diversity reported that coming to a college campus with more diversity than they were previously exposed to increased their comfortability with discussing their own racial identity. It seems as though college racial affinity groups and clubs benefit adoptees in their racial/ethnic identity development, especially on campuses that identify as a PWI, as it provides them with an intentional space to discuss their own experiences and foster representation.

This research project did not have the capacity to discuss the intersectionality or impact of participation in a racial affinity club on an adoptee's mental health. However, future research on such a topic can help identify if there is a possible relationship between participating in a college racial affinity group and mental health in adoptees. As seen in the literature, adoptees are at higher risk of suicidal behavior, psychiatric illness and other mental illness (Castner & Foli,

2022). Additional research may contribute to the development of future practices or tools, relating to adoptee development, that can reduce the inequities of mental illness in transracial adoptees versus their non-adopted counterparts.

As there seems to be an overall positive impact of participating in a racial affinity space for adoptees to discuss their own identity, one must ask whether these spaces are accessible for all college students identifying as adoptees. While the Asian Student Union on the University of Vermont's campus is a recognized student organization, the Interracial Adoptees Group is not. This study did not have the capacity to acknowledge if there may be more knowledge on IRAG if it were a recognized student organization at the University of Vermont. Future research should look to understand students' knowledge on the available resources, specifically the racial affinity spaces, they have on college campuses. Going further, one might study how the ways an adoptee forms their racial identity formation during college affects their racial identity formation or understanding in adulthood.

While there are many avenues for future research on the adoptee experience, this is not meant to minimize or take away from the importance of discussing the impacts of a college racial affinity space on the transracial adoptees' ability to talk about their own racial/ethnic identity. Rather, it highlights the complexities of the adoptee experience and that more research should be done in order to understand this identity better.

Limitations

Like all studies, this research study is not without its limitations. The main limitation in this study is a low response in the number of participants, potentially impacting the generalizability of these findings, especially towards transracial adoptees of different races or ethnicities other than Asian. This may be attributed to the small time frame in which the survey

was open. A larger, more diverse sample size may change the ways in which the data is interpreted. The low number of responses in this study could also be attributed to the convenience sample used, in that the survey was initially sent out to University of Vermont students who were already members of a racially affiliated organization on campus. That being said, in general, the University of Vermont does not boast a large number of interracial adoptees on campus. In addition, due to the complexities of the research topic, it is possible that mainly the adoptees who do feel comfortable talking about their racial identity felt comfortable in filling out this survey. While some of the participants who completed the survey listed they are not comfortable discussing their racial identity even after being on a college campus, they only make up 15% of the demographics in the study (n=3). The sample size also did not list any adoptees from a university not considered a PWI. Future research may look at whether the impact of a college racial affinity space changes between colleges that are classified as PWIs and those that are not.

The questions in this study may also have led to some limitations within the research. Participants were asked many open-ended questions that relied on self-reported data, which may not be completely valid for various reasons or may increase the difficulty of analyzing data compared to data analyzed by quantifiable measures. Another limitation comes from the specificities within the questions asked. For example, one question asked participants about their ethnicity but did not specify to answer the specific country in which the participant identifies with, thereby not getting a clear understanding of the different ethnicities of Asian adoptees in the study. Another question asking about the age at which the participant was adopted did not specify the scale that should be used to answer said question.

Conclusions

Overall, the interracial adoptee identity and experience is complex. According to the literature, there are many aspects that contribute to the Asian interracial adoptee experience and identity formation before and after attending college. This study was able to highlight the ways in which college racial affinity groups serve to further develop the racial and ethnic identity formation of Asian transracial adoptees. Many of the participants in this study discussed the importance of having a place on campus where they could share their experiences with people who understand and hold similar identities; for these participants, racial affinity clubs on campus served to provide that opportunity. This study also calls attention to the impact of diversity and an interracial adoptees' comfortability in discussing their racial/ethnic identity. Looking at the data, it was found that having representative and diverse environments impacted the way interracial adoptees viewed their own comfortability in discussing their racial, ethnic, and adoptee identity.

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