ADOPTING AN IDENTITY: IDENTITY FORMATION IN TRANS-CULTURAL AND TRANS-RACIAL ADOPTIONS IN ASIA

Junko Ota

The British School, New Delhi

ABSTRACT

Several studies have been conducted from a sociological and psychological standpoint, on the issue of transcultural and transracial adoption. However, there is no consensus among the literature with respect to the exact manner in which identity is formed by transcultural adoptees and adoptive parents alike. Several research approaches and perspectives have however raised valid issues which must be considered from a policy perspective, in order to more holistically address the issue of adoption in itself. This paper will review the existing literature and theories on identity formation in transcultural adoptions. Given the dearth of such studies and general data from Asia and India in particular, the theories and approaches will be examined to arrive at certain policy recommendations which may aid in the healthy formation of identity within the adoptive family unit.

Keywords: Transcultural adoption, Transracial adoption, Child Development, Mental Health, Parents, Child, Asia

INTRODUCTION

Transcultural adoptions are becoming increasingly common, across the world. It is a type of adoption in which an individual or couple becomes the legal and permanent parents of a child who is of a different race of culture (Silverman, 1993). The primary legal instrument at the international level that governs transcultural and transracial adoptions, is the Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption (hereafter referred to as the Hague Adoption Convention), 1993.

Statistically, Asian countries have been the top origins of intercountry adoption, rather than the top receiving countries, which are still Western nations such as the USA and the United Kingdom. As of data available in 2018, China and India remain to be the countries from which the highest number of children are adopted (US Dept. of State, 2018).

In India especially, transcultural adoptions are not common. In fact, the levels of inter-country adoptions in India are also extremely low. Statistics from the Indian Central Adoption Resource Authority (hereafter, CARA) show that in 2010 there were 5,693 in-country adoptions, while in 2017-2018, there were only 3,276 in country adoptions. This is due to several cultural factors, as adoption is usually seen as the last option for Indian couples as there is a skewed perception that the parent-child relationship would not be good, if the child is not of their genes, blood and lineage. Therefore, transcultural adoptions are rare and not well documented. Such a similar cultural mindset is prevalent in other Asian countries as well (Kalra, 2018).

The studies conducted on the issue of transcultural adoptions are from an ethical, psychological, cultural and sociological viewpoint. This paper will attempt to examine the key arguments and questions revolving around the identity formation of children who are adopted across cultures, and identify particular issues in the Indian adoption framework. The paper will then pose policy recommendations to better address the issues that arise when examining transcultural adoptions, and how the Indian framework can better accommodate for addressing these concerns.

BACKGROUND

Theories of identity creation and identity crises among children are best examined by looking at the cases of adopted children, as there are many complex factors involved, such as a lack of knowledge about their pasts, an inability to obtain information, and social attitudes that stigmatize adoption. Further, this is more concretized by the legal process. In most countries, the belief that adopted persons do not need to have basic information about their origins has been formalized in law and policy (Donaldson, 2009).

Various scholars have posed that individuals mostly engage with formation of their identity during adolescence. Many scholars have also studied the development of racial/ethnic identity. Research has defined stages through which individuals progress in exploring the meaning of their own race/ethnicity- moving from denial of differences to an integrated awareness of race/ethnicity that incorporates pride in one's own racial/ethnic identity, as well as the ability to function successfully in larger society (Phinney, 1989). The ecological model holds that racial/ethnic identity is fluid, and constantly changes in response to a range of influences (Root, 1999). Other research integrates the previous two models and holds that race may either hold a high or low salience in the identity of individuals (Cross, et al, 1999). According to this model, the best approach is one of integrating race and culture into one's identity in any manner that supports self worth.

Scholars began to address identity formation with specific focus on adoption since 1964. The scholar David Kirk suggested that adoptive families move from 'rejection of difference' to

'acknowledgment of difference' (Kirk, 1964). In 2004, scholars identified four distinct adoptive identities - unexamined, limited, unsettled and integrated identity (Dunbar and Grotevant, 2004).

Transracial adoption leads to the addition of another layer of complexity in identity formation. Additional factors that influence the same are the extent to which the child's race or ethnicity is represented in the population of where they live, the possibility or outright existence of prejudice against any particular racial or ethnic group, and whether they have been adopted domestically or transnationally (Donaldson, 2009).

The 'transracial adoption paradox' has been coined in research, which is, being a part of a minority group in society by virtue of birth, but then beginning to identify with members of the majority culture by virtue of their adoption (Lee, 2003). The Cultural-Racial Identity Model describes sixteen possible identity statuses for transracial adoptees that reflect the degree to which they identify with their birth cultures, and people from their own racial group vis-à-vis the culture of the adoptive parents and their racial group (Baden and Steward, 2000).

However, the research on the specific aspect of identity formation in transcultural and transracial adoption is still limited, and far more research is required to effectively address the needs of such children and parents from a policy perspective. Furthermore, there needs to be research done from a more complex, intersectional approach which incorporates race, class, caste, language, religion and region together, but has not been satisfactorily achieved in India so far. Furthermore, the majority of the authoritative research as elaborated upon above are not in the Asian context.

DISCUSSION

There has been research on the adjustment of adopted individuals. However, this research does not adequately provide data on the issue of transcultural adoption. The research that exists has primarily focused on the benefits and challenges of adoption, and the psychological and behavioural adjustments of children. Such research has found that adopted children function better and are more well adjusted in society when compared to youth who remain within the foster care system or institutions (Bowman, 1970). Research has also found that there are links between behavioural problems observed in adopted children and adolescents and the identity struggles that they face due to such adoption (Juffer, 2006).

However, this research suffers from methodological constraints. Further, there has been significant heterogeneity of the adoptee population, which has made it difficult to arrive at any concrete conclusions about the link between identity formation and adjustment of adoptees, especially with respect to transcultural adoptions (Donaldson, 2009).

Literature on adoption and identity has not reached a consensus on the impact of adoption on identity. Several studies have been conducted, which can be broadly categorized into outcome based studies, racial/ethnic identity studies, and cultural socialization outcome studies. Outcome studies focus specifically on the psychological problems relating to the adjustment of transracial adoptees, without a direct consideration of racial and ethnic experiences. Outcome based research has indicated that there is not a significant difference between any behavioural issues between transcultural or transracial adoptees, same race adoptees, and non-adoptees (Verhulst & Versluis-den Bieman, 1995). Mitigating factors such as birth country of origin, age at adoption, gender and adverse experiences have been taken into account by some studies as well (Benson et al, 1994). However, a persistent issue with such studies ignore the crucial role that race and discrimination may play in the overall adjustments of transcultural adoptees (Lee, 2003).

Racial/ethnic identity studies are more focused on the relationship between the racial and cultural experiences of adoptees and their subsequent identity formation. This type of research has indicated that the role that race plays in identity formation differs based on a large number of extrinsic factors such as age, gender, and adoptive family functioning. It has been found that such identity formation may also vary according to the social and emotional development of the children. However, results have varied. While some studies have found that race and ethnicity become more salient as the adoptees enter adulthood (DeBerry et al, 1996), other studies have found the opposite result (Freundlich and Lieberthal, 2000). The essential problem with this research has been a reliance on self reporting mechanisms, parent reports on behalf of the adopted children, and the usage of projective measures of racial preference (Lee, 2003).

Cultural socialization studies make an attempt to bring the preceding two types of research together. An underlying assumption of this type of research is that healthy psychological development is contingent on positive racial and ethnic experiences. This is a more appropriate methodology through which to examine how adopted children and their families approach the challenges brought up by transcultural adoption (Lee, 2003). There is emerging research in this area that positive racial and ethnic experiences contribute to the psychological adjustment and comfort of transcultural adoptees (DeBerry et.al, 1996). A longitudinal study of 88 African American transracial adoptees also found that nearly half of all parents were likely to encourage biculturalism in the upbringing of their child, but adoptive parents were more likely to deny or limit the role of race and cultural socialization when the child reached adolescence (DeBerry et al, 1996).

Apart from a few such studies, there is once again little empirical evidence in India or elsewhere about the specific aspects of cultural socialization and adjustment in transcultural and transracial adoptions. However, there has been some research on the process of cultural socialization and

the various strategies that parents and children adopt in order to adjust within the family unit, giving them greater adaptability and competence (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990). Such strategies include cultural assimilation of the child into the majority culture (Gordon, 1964), or teaching the children about their culture through various opportunities (Feigelman and Silverman, 1983), among others. Clearly, such strategies are not exhaustive. From a policy perspective, information must be readily available for parents and adopted individuals to access regarding the issues they may face, and strategies to effectively manage these issues.

The Indian guidelines on inter-country adoption reflect the mindset of racial and cultural homogeneity, that was elaborated upon in the first section of this paper. The CARA guidelines state that it encourages in country adoption rather than inter country adoption, and that trans-national adoption would only be considered in the event that the child finds no suitable home within the country. The law is currently unclear on the exact process with respect to overseas adoptions. Foreign parents must first take the role as guardians, and take the child to their country, and must conclude the adoption process in the receiving country (CARA Guidelines). Therefore this unclear and complex procedure would only exacerbate complications with respect to identity formation of the adoptees as well the integration of the child within the family Further, the guidelines do not mention any penal actions against unrecognized adoption agencies, child trafficking in the name of inter country adoptions, and post adoption negligence.

The Supreme Court of India in *Karnataka State Council for Child Welfare v. Society of Sisters of Charity St Gerosa Convent* has held that the rationale behind finding Indian parents or parents of Indian origin in inter country adoptions is to ensure the well being of the child and so that they may retain their culture and heritage. From the lens of cultural socialization, it is arguable as to whether such an approach in law and policy is beneficial to children and parents in cases of transcultural adoptions, and whether such hurdles will in fact pose more difficulties with respect to identity formation.

CONCLUSION

Having examined the various sociological and psychological approaches to the study of transcultural and transracial adoption, it is clear that there has not been much research or conclusions drawn from an Indian, or Asian perspective. This is largely because of the fact that Asian countries are major origin nations of adoption and are not receiving nations. Further, as elaborated in previous sections, the inter country rate of adoption itself tends to be low. Therefore, policy in India must first address these low rates of adoption within the country, along with making provisions for transcultural adoptions that are more specific, clear and accessible

than the current procedures. The CARA guidelines could be divided into two chapters, addressing in-country and inter country adoptions separately. This will serve to make procedures far more easier and accessible. From a sociological and psychological standpoint, it is worth questioning whether the approach of first promoting adoption from parents of Indian origin would in the long term be conducive to healthy identity formation within the family unit.

There is no concrete manner in which to determine definitively whether transcultural adoptions harm the mental health of children or parents. However, the cultural socialization approach provides a promising direction through which to think about future policy. The government should engage in a process of in depth consultations with mental health professionals to accommodate for the unique experiences of transcultural adoptees, in order to prevent the possibility of negligence or abuse of the child. Professional counselling must be incorporated into legislation for adoptive parents (Robinson, 2012). Further, awareness needs to be created within society and educational institutions to remove the apprehensions and stigmas associated with adoption (Kalra, 2018).

In conclusion, further studies and research is also the need of the hour to effectively address and identify the challenges with respect to identity formation, especially in the Asian context, as the current body of literature is largely from the USA, United Kingdom and Europe.

REFERENCES

Baden, A. L., & Steward, R. J. (2000). A framework for use with racially and culturally integrated families: The Cultural-Racial Identity Model as applied to transracial adoptees. Journal of Social Distress and the Homeless, 9, 309-337.

Benson PL, Sharma AR, Roehlkepartain EC. 'Growing up adopted: A portrait of adolescents and their families'. Search Institute; Minneapolis, MN: 1994.

Cross, N. E., Jr., Strauss, L., & Fhagan-Smith, R. (1999). African American identity development across the life span: Educational implications. In R. Hernandez Sleets. & E. Hollins (Eds.), Racial and ethnic identity in school practices: Aspects of human development (pp. 29-47). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.

DeBerry KM, Scarr S, Weinberg R. Family racial socialization and ecological competence: Longitudinal assessments of African-American transracial adoptees. Child Development.

Dunbar, N., & Grotevant, H. D. (2004). Adoption narratives: The construction of adoptive identity during adolescence. In M. W. Pratt & B. H. Fiese (Eds.), Family stories and the life course: Across time and generations (pp. 135 - 161). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Evan B Donaldson Adoption Institute, 'Beyond Culture Camp: Promoting Healthy Identity Formation in Adoption', November 2009

Feigelman W, Silverman AR. Chosen children: New patterns of adoptive relationships. Praeger; New York: 1983

Freundlich M, Lieberthal JK. The gathering of the first generation of adult Korean adoptees: Adoptees' perceptions of international adoption. 2000. Retrieved October 16, 2002

FY 2018 Annual Report on Intercountry Adoption, March 2019, USA Department of State

Gordon MM. Assimilation in American life: The role of race, religion, and national origins. Oxford University Press; New York: 1964.

Guidelines for Adoption, Central Adoption Resource Authority, Government of India

Harrison AO, Wilson MN, Pine CJ, Chan SQ, Buriel R. Family ecologies of ethnic minority children. Child Development, 1990

Juffer, F. (2006). Children's awareness of adoption and their problem behavior in families with 7- year-old internationally adopted children. Adoption Quarterly, 9 (2/3), 1-22.

Kalra, S., 'Adopting a Child is a Revolutionary Act', Open Democracy, 13 November 2018

Kalra, S., 'Why India's adoption rate is abysmal despite its 30 million abandoned kids', The Wire, October 30, 2018

Kirk, H. D. (1964). Shared fate: A theory of adoption and mental health. New York: Free Press.

Lee, R. M. (2003). The transracial adoption paradox: history, research, and counseling implications of cultural socialization. The Counseling Psychologist, 31 (6), 711-644.

Phinney, J. S. (1989). Stages of ethnic identity in minority group adolescents. Journal of Early Adolescence, 9, 34-49.

Robinson, L. 'Identity development and transracial/ethnic adoption: some challenges for practice', Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work and Development , Volume 22, 2012 - Issue 1-2

Root, M. P. (1999). The biracial baby boom: Understanding ecological constructions of racial identity in the 21st century. In R. H. Sheets & E. R. Hollins (Eds.), Racial and ethnic identity in school practices: Aspects of human development (pp.67-89). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Silverman AR. Outcomes of transracial adoption. The Future of Children: Adoption. 1993; 3:104–108.

Verhulst FC, Versluis-den Bieman HJ, Developmental course of problem behaviors in adolescent adoptees., Journal of American Academic Child Adolescent Psychiatry. 1995 Feb; 34(2): 151-9.