

Overlooked Adoptees: The Effects of COVID-19 Racism and Ethnic Identity on the Psychological Well-Being of Chinese Transracial Adoptees in the United States

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Background

Transracial Adoption History and Adoptee Identity

The majority of current adoptions in the United States are international and transracial. From 1990 to 2005, there was an increase from 7,093 international adoptees to 22,728 (Lee, 2006; McDermott, 2021; Park, 2012).

Parents who have adopted transracially sometimes reject or downplay their child's racial or ethnic differences, leading them to assimilate into white culture, both consciously and subconsciously (McDermott, 2021; Lee, 2003). Research has shown how it can be difficult for transracial adoptive parents to engage their children in cultural exploration activities due to location as well as their own beliefs and views on race (Park, 2012). Having a lack of awareness and understanding about where they come from might lead to self-hatred and internalization of negative stereotypes about Asians and Asian Americans, including the model minority myth, which leads them to feel even more like an outsider (Chen, 2020; Li & Nicholson, 2020; Remy & Barreto, 2020). This identity conflict leads to a paradox of feeling in-between and is something that transracial adoptees struggle with. In Asian Americans, race-related stress can drain cognitive resources that help to manage mental illnesses, such as anxiety or depression. Over time, this can harm adoptees' overall mental well-being (McDermott, 2021).

Anti-Asian Racism in the United States

Key Events: Increase in immigration for work including the California Gold Rush, Chinese Exclusion Act, The Page Act, increase in anti-Asian xenophobia during the COVID-19 pandemic including use of racial slurs.

From March of 2020 to now, over 11,400 incidents of Anti-Asian hate have been reported to the Stop AAPI Hate organization. The increase in anti-Asian hate has led to significant negative impacts on overall mental health (Litam, & Oh, 2020; Cheah et al., 2020).

Psychological Well-Being and Social Identity Theory

Life events are "incidents that can significantly interfere with ongoing life, necessitating adjustment to habitual life either temporarily or on a permanent basis" (Cleland et al., 2016, p. 2) and different life events can have different effects on mental health. Psychological Well-Being is made up of collective well-being and subjective well-being. Self-esteem has been shown to be a strong predictor of subjective well-being. In addition to self-esteem, self-worth can also be derived from collective well-being. Research has demonstrated that for those who belong to minority or stigmatized groups, group membership is an important aspect of the self (Crocker et al., 1994).

Social Identity Theory (SIT) is a social psychological theory developed by Tajfel and Turner (2004) that explains intergroup conflict through group-based self-definitions. In a study done on Minimal Group Paradigms, we have seen how in-group favoritism and categorization play a role in racism and discrimination (Brown, 2020). This relates heavily to what we see today with the rise in anti-Asian racism during the pandemic.

Hypotheses

H1: Ethnic identity and perceived discrimination will be strong predictors of psychological well-being

H1a: Those who have a strong ethnic identity will perceive higher levels of discrimination and will have lower psychological well-being.

H2: The relationships described in H1 will differ based on adoptee identity category. Specifically:

H2a: For participants with an integrated adoptee identity, stronger ethnic identity and higher levels of perceived discrimination will be associated with lower levels of psychological well-being.

Method

In the year 2021, a series of twenty-six interviews were conducted with adult Chinese adoptees living in the United States. These interviews were recorded and transcribed, and participants remained anonymous. In these interviews, participants were asked questions pertaining to their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included financial changes, experiences of racism and discrimination, and hopes for the future. From these interviews, overarching themes were drawn from the responses. The following themes were taken from the interviews: connection to Chinese identity and culture, connection to adoptee identity, and reactions to the pandemic and discrimination. Additionally, participants took an anonymous Qualtrics survey, that asked questions related to personal self-esteem, collective self-esteem, perceived prejudice, and adoptee identity.

Results

Hypotheses Testing

Ethnic identity and perceived discrimination were not significant predictors of psychological well-being in adoptees. Furthermore, this relationship did not differ based on adoptee identity (i.e. ethnic identity and perceived discrimination were not significant predictors of psychological well-being in all adoptee groups).

Table 3
Linear Regression Model with Predictors of Psychological Well-Being

Predictors	R ²	b	Standard Error	p
Model	.10	-	-	-
Prejudice	-	-.16	.07	.04
Ethnic Identity	-	.13	.09	.15

Table 4
Linear Regression Model with Predictors of Psychological Well-Being in Only Integrated Adoptee Identity Participants

Predictors	R ²	b	Standard Error	p
Model	.16	-	-	-
Prejudice	-	-.39	.09	.07
Ethnic Identity	-	.37	.14	.10

Table 5
Linear Regression Model with Predictors of Psychological Well-Being in Only Unsettled Adoptee Identity Participants

Predictors	R ²	b	Standard Error	p
Model	.38	-	-	-
Prejudice	-	-.29	.14	.24
Ethnic Identity	-	.23	.15	.34

Additional Results

Given that the measure of psychological well-being was comprised of both collective self-esteem and personal well-being, I decided to run additional regression analyses with those measures separately. Ethnic identity was found to be a significant predictor of collective self-esteem.

Interview Themes

Three themes became apparent during the interviews. These themes are connection to Chinese identity and culture, connection to adoptee identity, and reactions to the pandemic and discrimination.



Conclusion

As a Chinese transracial adoptee, this research is able to open people's eyes to a perspective that is often overlooked, downplayed, or completely shut down. Many times, as adoptees, we are told by both family and friends, to be grateful for what we have and for the life we are given. When we try to discuss topics such as race-related discrimination, we may not always feel that we "fit in" or "belong to" the ethnic community of our birth country. I personally never felt like I could relate to the Asian community or the white community growing up. During COVID, this sense was heightened, especially when events such as the Atlanta spa shooting happened.

This study not only shows how important ethnic identity is to psychological well-being when perceiving discrimination, but also how important adoptee identity is as well. If I was not in touch with my adoptee identity and denied the fact that I was adopted, I probably would have a very different reaction to Asians and Asian Americans being attacked and killed. It is important to realize that while we may not have ancestors who immigrated to the United States and faced exclusion, we are still a part of this community and discrimination against Asians and Asian Americans affect us too. We may not be "fully Asian" or "fully American", but we are human, and we deserve to be heard just the same.

Check Out My I.S. Website!

To read a more detailed version of my I.S., you can check out my website!

