

International Adoption: A Case Review of Korean Children

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ABSTRACT: In contrast to the controversial transracial adoption of African American children by Caucasian families in the U.S., international, transracial adoption of Asian children has not received much scientific or societal attention. There has been a steady increase in this unnoticed minority group, made up largely of Korean children. This paper reviews the developmental characteristics of post-adoption adjustments among Korean adoptees and discusses the dynamics of their positive adjustments. Sociopolitical issues of international adoptions are also addressed.

KEY WORDS: International; Transracial; Adoption; Korean Children.

Adoption boundaries have gradually broadened over the years due to supply-demand economics, humanitarian concerns and the changing cultural climate in the United States. Traditional intrastate adoption practices have extended to well-organized interstate adoption arrangements. After World War II, Americans were eager to bring orphans of war-torn European countries to the United States for humanitarian reasons, as well as to fill the needs of childless couples. Orphans of the Korean and Vietnam war, especially children fathered by American soldiers, were given special humanitarian attention.

Liberalism and racial integration efforts of the 1960's opened doors for black children to be adopted by white parents. However, transracial adoption of black children stirred up many controversies regarding their psychological development, especially with respect to their

Received December 8, 1994; For Revision, December 10, 1994; Accepted December 29, 1994.

The author thanks Drs. J. Zrull and M. Carey for their helpful comments in preparation of this manuscript.

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ethnic identity, or "cultural well-being".¹ While research evidence of the long-term effects, either positive or negative, has been scarce, transracial adoption of black children by white families has never become popular and, in fact, has been discouraged.² Adoption of children from the poverty-ridden, overpopulated African continent has remained minimal, totalling 128 between 1976 and 1981.³ In comparison to the transracial adoption of black children, transracial adoption of Asian children has not received much scientific attention nor controversy. This unnoticed minority group, largely represented by Korean children, has steadily increased.

Backgrounds of Korean Adoption

The U.S. history of adoption of Asian children dates back to the Korean War period. As the war was ending in 1953, an Oregon farmer, Holt, began a small-scale rescue operation of Korean war orphans. The U.S. congress passed the Refugee Relief Act in the same year to allow Korean war orphans and Amerasian children to be brought to the U.S. In 1954, the Korean government established an agency under the Ministry of Social Affairs to assist Amerasian children to be adopted in their fathers' countries. Most Korean war orphans were adopted by U.S. families, but a small number of children were also adopted by families in Great Britain and Scandinavian countries that participated in the Korean War as members of the U.N. forces.

Although the Korean War ended a long time ago and Korea has since become prosperous, the number of Korean children adopted by American families and other countries has continued to increase. During the ten-year period following the Korean War, Korean children adopted by American families amounted to about 20% of all foreign adoptions in the United States: 4,162 children. Between 1976 and 1981, the proportion of Korean adoptees in the United States increased to about 50 percent of all foreign adoptions in the United States.³ In 1986, 6,150 Korean children were adopted, representing 59 percent of all foreign children adopted in the United States, according to the annual report of the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service.⁴

The reasons for the increase of Korean adoptees in the United States were many-fold. The international adoption practice has been well organized in Korea through the placement of war orphans. The

Holt adoption agency became one of the four large adoption agencies in Korea that have been responsible for all foreign adoptions and that are well-connected with Western religious charities. War orphans and abandoned children from poverty-stricken families in the 1950's and 1960's were replaced by babies of out-of-wedlock pregnancies, products of modern industrialization in the 1970's and 1980's.

The arrangement of adoptions often begins with the recruiting of unwed, pregnant, young women through obstetrical clinics. The prenatal and postnatal care before adoption is provided by a well organized network of medical and foster care services supported by the adoption agencies. The prenatal adoption arrangement was a response to demand from abroad, mostly from the U.S. and other Western countries. Relative adoption is much more common in Korea than non-relative adoption due to the traditional cultural values of kinship. However, the social and economic burden of caring for abandoned children in a developing country was relieved through international adoption. The budget for child welfare in Korea, for example, was only 0.06% of the total budget in 1980. The government agencies have very effectively assisted the legal and administrative arrangement of international adoption. The whole system was very efficient and economically rewarding. Koreans' needs were also met by the international demand.

In the U.S., the decreasing pool of adoptable white children by legalized abortion, acceptance of single parenthood, aids to dependent children and families, and other causes in the 1970's and 1980's turned childless couples to outside sources; the number of non-relative adoptions decreased from about 80,000 a year in the late 1960's to about 50,000 a year in the late 1980's.⁴ Racial tensions and controversies over the transracial adoption of black children turned Americans away from adoptable black children, many of whom also had special needs. The popularity of Korean children stemmed largely from the reliability and efficiency of the adoption practice. The improving economic and political status of Asian countries, the growing size of Asian communities and their success in the United States, and the stereotypic perception of Asians as quiet, trouble-free, responsible and achieving people may also have contributed to the increasing popularity of Korean children.

However, 1988 was a turning point in the flow of Korean adoptees to the United States. The Seoul International Olympics in 1988 attracted the attention of the world press corps, especially that of the United States, regarding many facets of Korean culture and modern

changes after the Korean War. For instance, "Babies for Export," the April 21, 1988 *New York Times* article, caused uneasy, guilt feelings among Korean people and hurt Koreans' pride. As a result, the Korean government delayed the scheduled departure of adopted children into foreign countries in the few months before and during the olympic games. The Korean government has since systematically discouraged international adoption and domestic, non-relative adoptions have increased to a degree. Consequently, the number of Korean children adopted by American families decreased to 3,552 in 1989, 2,310 in 1990, 1,817 in 1991, 1,787 in 1992 and 1,765 in 1993, less than one third of the pre-olympic level. Furthermore, the Korean government has set up a long-term mandate to stop international adoption by 1996.

Review of the Outcome

Although the numbers are now decreasing, about 80,000 Korean children have been adopted by American families. The Scandinavian countries and former West Germany have also adopted sizeable groups of Korean children, about 20,000. Korean children have been the largest segment of international adoptees in the past four decades. How have they fared in countries half way around the globe from their homeland? Among the many issues addressed, one consistent question about adoption in general is how the adopted children eventually fare.

Many studies originating from clinical settings depicted the maladjustment of adoptees, based on the high representation of adoptees seen in child guidance clinics.⁵ Sampling bias and the unique psychosocial backgrounds of adoptees and adoptive parents are thought to be the cause of such overrepresentation of adoptees in clinical settings. The assumption that children given up for adoption are inferior genetically and developmentally to begin with is a commonly held view in light of the increasing birth rate of many young, troubled parents in America today, and the prevalence of abuse and neglect by these parents. However, it is not certain whether this is the case in other cultures, such as in Asian countries. Regardless of the validity of such an assumption that these adopted children are at risk to develop behavioral problems, there are psychological issues inherent in adoption. Conflicts in terms of genealogical bewilderment, identity formation, and parent-child relationship are well recognized issues in

adoptees' development. These sources of conflicts may or may not lead to identifiable psychiatric disorders that require clinical intervention. These kinds of conflicts are presumed to be more complicated and intense in transcultural adoptions. This review examines the validity of such a notion in one group of transcultural adoptions—Korean children adopted in the U.S. and other western countries, summarizing noteworthy studies according to developmental stages and age of adoption.

Early Childhood: Early Developmental and Post-Adoption Adjustments

Studies of Korean adoptees in early childhood have focused on developmental issues: physical, language, cognitive and psychosocial development, and initial adoption adjustment. Clark and Hanisee⁶ found that 25 preschoolers adopted from Korea and southeast Asia scored better than average on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test and Vineland Social Maturity Scale. Small case studies by DiVirglio⁷ and Rathburn⁸ gave a bright view in that Korean children learned new language rapidly, and no child developed overt signs of emotional disorder. In a case study of Korean children placed in the New York area, S. Kim⁹ observed transient, regressive features such as temper tantrums and excessive crying in 16 of 21 children during the initial post-adoption period; however only one child required psychiatric intervention. Learning difficulties in the group of children adopted after the age of 3 appeared to be related to the problems of language acquisition and acculturation. These were seen to be initial adjustment reactions, and most of them did well over time.

A Swedish study of 27 Korean children¹⁰ reported that Korean children were initially underdeveloped physically (below standard deviation in height and weight), but their development was within the norm of Swedish children within three years. Minor physical ailments such as skin disease and parasites were also observed initially. These children also lost the Korean language in 12 months and were able to speak fluent Swedish in 6 months. At first, 21 of 27 children were demanding, fearful, and aggressive, but only 4 of 27 were distressed one year later. A Dutch study of 144 4-to-7-year-old children from Korea and India found no learning or behavioral problems.¹¹ Ninety-six percent of parents were satisfied with the adoptee's adjustment, according to this survey. A study of 18 Korean adoptees and 9 biological children of adoptive parents showed no significant clinical

differences between the two groups except lower social scale scores with the adoptees on the parents' form of the Child Behavior Checklist.¹²

Later Childhood and Early Adolescence: School and Behavioral Adjustment

Studies during this developmental period focused on school and behavioral adjustment. Studies surveying a wide range of age groups included self-esteem and identity issues. In a study of 372 adoptive families by questionnaires, Feigelman & Silverman¹³ compared and contrasted the long-term adjustment of Columbian, Korean, and Afro-American transracial adoptees with those of in-racially adopted whites. They reported that 10% of 161 Korean children (two-thirds of them ranging from ages 7 and 12) received professional care for problems, which was less frequent than for black or white adoptees. Fifty-eight percent of Korean children achieved above average school grades, which was a higher rate than for white (48%) and black (43%) adoptees. When Korean adoptees whose ages were 13 and over were compared with white adoptees, Korean adoptees functioned better in emotional, developmental, social, and academic areas but showed more discomfort about their appearance than white adolescent adoptees.

Winick¹⁴ studied effects of malnutrition and environmental enrichment by early adoption in 141 Korean children adopted by middle-class American families. They were all adopted before age 3 and were in elementary school (grades 1 through 8) at the time of the study. Malnourished children whose weight and height were both below the 3rd percentile at the time of admission to the adoption agency scored lower on IQ tests than the healthy group whose weight and height were both above the 25th percentile. They also scored lower on achievement tests than the healthy group and lower in height. There were no differences of weight between the two groups. However, it was emphasized that there was no difference between the malnourished group and the moderately nourished group (weight and height both from the 3rd through the 24th percentile) on any measurement, and all the groups were doing at least as well as would be expected from an average population. All the groups had surpassed the expected mean for Korean children in both height and weight, although their means all fell below the 50th percentile of American children.

In a survey of 406 12-to-17-year-old Korean adoptees, D. Kim^{15,16}

noted good progress in all areas of their lives. Only three children (0.74%) had a history of previous placement failures, which was far better than the rate in other adoption studies. There were ten children with learning disabilities, but none of the subjects were receiving psychiatric care at the time of the study. Standardized assessments of self-concept and various socialization processes were remarkably similar to those of other American teenagers. A group of 12-to-13-year-old Korean children ($n=78$) adopted by Norwegian families also did well behaviorally, but 11%, 21%, and 30% of them were reported to have problems in reading, writing, and arithmetic, respectively.¹⁷ More adopted than non-adopted children had problems with arithmetic. Verhulst et al.^{18,19} studied several different ethnic groups of the international adoptees ($N = 2,143$) in the Netherlands using cut-off scores derived from the 90th percentile of the Child Behavior Checklist for non-adopted Dutch children ($N = 933$). The proportion of 10-to-15-year-old Korean children, 304 boys and 384 girls, who exceeded cut-off scores was 16.8% for boys and 10.2% for girls. These rates were lower than the average of the total international adoptees, which was 19.7% for boys and 12.0% for girls. As a group, adopted boys, especially between ages 12 and 15, obtained high scores on the Delinquent and Hyperactive subscale. Kühl²⁰ in a study of 145 13-to-18-year-old Korean, Vietnamese and Latin-American adoptees in West Germany found no behavioral and educational deficits unique to the international adoptee.

Late Adolescence and Early Adulthood: Ethno-cultural Identity Formation

How transracially adopted children incorporate their own color with that of the parents and form their identity, especially during adolescence, is an intriguing process. A ten-year follow-up study by Lydens & Snarey²¹ of 101 Korean-born adoptees examined self-concept and identity formation during adolescence (age 12 to 17) and young adulthood (age 22 to 27). They reported the development of a positive self-concept and positive social adjustment. As noted earlier, D. Kim¹⁶ also reported normal development of self-concept. While some of the adopted children were interested in their ethnic and adoptive identity, they often identified themselves as American rather than Korean-American or Korean. Feigelman & Silverman¹³ observed that 28% of Korean adolescents and young adults felt sometimes un-

comfortable about their appearance, and some of them were even ashamed of their origin, although overall they adjusted well.

Across the Atlantic, Kühl²⁰ noted that all international adoptees including Korean adolescents identified with being German while about one third of them had some interest in their country of origin. Rorbech²² noted similar findings in a large sample of 18-to-25-year-old Asian adoptees including Koreans in Denmark. Almost all of these individuals identified themselves as being Danish. Yet one third felt different from others, and one quarter felt uncomfortable about their differences. Twenty-seven percent were teased at school and 18% continued to be teased as adults. Two thirds did not show any attachment to their country of origin, and two thirds did not want information about their family of origin.

Age of Adoption

Some studies examined the influence of age at the time of adoption on future adjustment. S. Kim⁹ reported more behavioral symptoms for children adopted before age 3 than after age 3. This report dealt more with the initial adjustment reaction than the long-term adjustment. Even though Korean children were adopted at older ages than U.S.-born Caucasians (average 5.3 versus 3.2 years), and only 4% of Korean children were adopted at infancy in contrast to 50% of the U.S.-born Caucasians, Korean children were better adjusted than the U.S.-born Caucasian adoptees.¹³ The Korean adolescents adopted before age 1 showed somewhat better self-concept and socialization than the group adopted after age 6.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the differences were not marked.

As described earlier, Lydens & Snarey,²¹ who conducted a longitudinal study of 101 Korean adoptees, reported that age at adoption emerged as an influential factor for the adoptee's identity development. Adoptees were divided into two subgroups: early adoptees (adopted at one year of age or earlier) and late adoptees (adopted at age six or older). They were surveyed during adolescence (age 12 to 17) and then 10 years later (age 22 to 27). Late adoptees had significantly lower self-concept scores at adolescence, although the difference subsided by early adulthood. Late adoptees, however, had somewhat more difficulty than the early adoptees with their family relationships at both time points. The later adoptees were also significantly more interested in their ethnic identity and adoptive identity than those adopted early. Parents of late adoptees were significantly

less satisfied with their children than parents of early adoptees during adolescence, but 10 years later parents reported being almost equally satisfied with their children, regardless of the age at adoption.

While Verhulst¹⁹ found clear evidence of age influence, Andresen¹⁷ noted no correlation between age at adoption and outcome in a mixed group of international adoptees in Norway. Verhulst et al. reported that the older the child at placement, the greater the risk for behavioral problems and poor academic performance, but they did not make a separate report on children's age of adoption according to ethnic group. Although Andresen did not see any overall relation, he speculated better adjustment of Korean children in relation to early adoption and gender; the majority were girls adopted at infancy.

Discussion

The number of studies on Korean children is limited, and some studies included adoptees of different national origins in addition to Korean children. While a few studies compared groups according to national origin,^{13,17,18,19} the majority did not make such a comparison. The author attempted to extract information available about the Korean adoptees when group comparisons were not made by researchers. In addition, earlier studies were simply case observation, and some studies did not employ rigorous research methodology using standardized assessments or case control designs. In spite of these limitations, earlier observations by DiVirglio⁷ and Rathburn⁸ of "almost incredible resiliency" in the transcontinentally, transracially transplanted adopted children have been borne out by more recent scientific studies.

The overall impression is that Korean adoptees have done very well consistently, study after study, when surveying the literature spanning four decades and on both sides of the Atlantic. It confirms what Tizard²³ summed up, "While the evidence is patchy and incomplete, it does suggest that in 75-80% of intercountry adoptions the children and adolescents function well, with no more behavioral and educational problems at home and at school than other children." Moreover, Korean children seem to be doing better than adoptees of other ethnic groups. Feigelman & Silverman¹³ stated, "We were surprised to find that the Korean adoptees were better adapted than white U.S.-born adoptees." D. Kim¹⁵ reported, "The adopted Korean children

were similar to other American teenagers in many respects, and they were doing just as well or even better than others, although they seemed to have had some initial adjustment difficulties." Even when malnourished in the first year of life, which is a well documented risk factor, Korean children did at least as well as would be expected from an average U.S. population.¹⁴

Why have Korean children done so well in spite of different and serious adverse factors? Are there genetic differences? It does not appear that there is a great deal of difference in both adults' and children's incidence of psychiatric disorders between Korea and the U.S.²⁴ Are Korean children more intelligent and academically superior? There is no evidence to support such a supposition although cultural climate and educational methods in Asia have been speculated as reasons for higher achievement of Korean children in Korea than American children.²⁵ Then why have they performed and functioned well in the U.S. and European countries? One may examine this question from several different perspectives. First, Korean children may have been less traumatized prior to adoption than children of other ethnic origins. Effective and efficient adoption arrangements from the prenatal period by adoption agencies have provided good prenatal, neonatal, and pre-adoption care through a well organized network of medical and foster care services, thus reducing the incidence of malnutrition, deprivation or abuse. In addition, Confucian ethics value children a great deal, and often family life centers around rearing children. Corporal punishment has been a well accepted discipline method in Korea. Child maltreatment and physical discipline by caring and concerned parents are not easy to distinguish. Nevertheless, the data points to a lower prevalence of potential child abuse in Korea than in the U.S.²⁶ This was especially true in the 1950's and 1960's before the rapid industrialization and urbanization of the 1970's and 1980's. During those periods, many war orphans and abandoned children from poverty-stricken families were adopted abroad, and abandonment was done sometimes out of love by distraught parents who could not feed and educate their children to their satisfaction and in the hope of getting them to a Western country for a better environment and better education. Children adopted at an older age in earlier studies did well, too, dispelling the suspicion of a higher risk for older adoptees. A Korean-American scholar suggested that older Korean adoptees came to have very positive expectations of their American homes, and these expectations became self-fulfilling prophecies, equipping the Korean adoptees with high morale to over-

come adversities created by their difficult, pre-adoptive environments and by transcultural transplantation.¹³

On the other hand, Korean adoptees of the 1970's and 1980's during the rapid social changes brought by modern industrialization are often babies of out-of-wedlock pregnancies. The majority of Korean children in the past two decades were adopted during infancy. For instance, 78% of 3,552 Korean children adopted in the U.S. in 1989 were infants. There is a strong notion that the earlier the adoption, the better the bonding between the child and parents and the better outcome.²⁷ Another important demographic factor is the preponderance of adopted Korean girls.^{13,14,17,18,19} Perhaps for cultural reasons, in Korea more girls than boys have been available for adoption. Epidemiological studies have consistently shown a lower risk of emotional and behavioral problems in girls than boys. The overrepresentation of girls among Korean adoptees in various studies may partly account for the positive post-adoption adjustments of Korean children.

Little talked about but an important factor may be the temperamental fit of Korean children in general. The stereotypic views of Asians and Koreans as quiet, reliable and resilient people may have a certain validity. Thomas and Chess,²⁸ and Kagan,²⁹ have demonstrated that difficult temperamental traits make children vulnerable to develop various emotional and behavioral problems. Perhaps Korean adopted infants may be easier to raise, but this kind of temperamental theory has yet to be examined by empirical research. Another side of temperamental fit is what kind of people have adopted children from Korea. Although their political ideology may be liberal⁹ or conservative¹⁵ or unclear, the general consensus is that they are middle- to upper-middle-class white Americans who are religious and motivated by humanitarian causes. In the early years of Americans adopting Korean children, adoptive parents were not necessarily childless couples but were family oriented with strong marital bonding and their own biological children. They were viewed as more racially tolerant when compared to parents who adopted U.S.-born white children or South American children.³⁰ One may speculate that the characteristics of parents who adopted Korean children may have had a positive influence. The distinctive physical and racial differences between the adopted child and the adoptive parents make adoption obvious and may have a positive influence on the parent-child relationship by reducing extraneous tensions in dealing with the information or secrecy of the adoption.

While it is encouraging to find overwhelming positive adjustments of adopted Korean children in Western countries, one wonders whether the so-called good adjustment has been accomplished at the cost of their unique ethnocultural heritage and identity, partially reinforced by parents who may be innocent and caring, but inept in their expectations. The fact that two thirds of Korean adoptees do not have much interest in their heritage during their adolescence and young adulthood is surprising and intriguing. They may be so well integrated that they may not face the psychological dilemma of identity formation, especially ethnic identity. But, the author's experience with some Korean adoptees in the U.S. and reading of Korean newspaper reports published both in Korea and the U.S. indicate that many adoptees in their late 20's and 30's, when they become truly independent and established, look for their "lost" birth parents. Studies beyond adolescence and young adulthood will be able to illuminate complex psychological issues unfolding throughout the life span. In comparison to the emphasis on "blackness" of black children adopted by white families and white adoptive parents' familiarity with black culture,³¹ there has been little discussion of ethnic heritage of foreign-born children adopted by American families. It appears that a genuine interest in the unique qualities of their ethnicity should also be stimulated, fostering historical continuity and social linkage with the children's background, although the mainstreaming of these children into American culture is equally important.

Another important finding of this review is the fact that sociopolitical forces operate strongly in the flow of international adoption. For the first time in more than three decades, in 1991, the U.S. adoption of foreign children was led by children from Romania: 2,552 versus 1,817 Korean children out of 9,008 of all foreign adoptees in the U.S.⁴ The Korean government had planned to abolish international adoption in 1996 and instead to promote intracountry adoption. This abrupt change was brought about by the intimidating and critical U.S. press reporting on Koreans' "export" of her abandoned children and Koreans' emotional reaction to such negative press. Historically, adoption in Korea has been viewed as a means of continuing family lines, rather than one of aiding children in need of a permanent home. Because of this and other reasons, attempts to promote intracountry adoption have met with limited success, and international adoption has been used as an alternative way of meeting children's needs.³² It is not certain whether the cultural atmosphere in Korea is going to change in a short time period to achieve the goal of meeting

the psychosocial needs of abandoned children internally, although Koreans are now able to economically afford to care for them. Therefore, the Korean Government began to reconsider its policy in 1994 and decided to continue international adoption arrangements for a limited number of biracial and handicapped children.

Summary

Adoption, whether it's international or intracountry adoption, seems to be the best alternative method of raising homeless children. This paper reviewed various studies and presents the point that Korean children do very well in various parts of the world against tremendous odds. Sociopolitical considerations appear to play an important role in the flow of international adoptees, in both sending and receiving nations as well as in transracial adoptions in the U.S. The controversial transracial adoption of black children by white families may need to be re-examined in light of the favorable outcome of the Korean adoptees, although the racial issue is perhaps a more complex one influencing black children's development in the U.S. Other nations replacing Korea as a source of intercountry adoption and adoption agencies in the Western countries could also learn from the long history of Korean adoptees, in terms of well organized pre-adoption and adoption arrangements and their satisfactory adjustment in host countries.

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