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Associations between discussions of racial and ethnic differences in internationally adoptive families and delinquent behavior among Korean adopted adolescents

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ABSTRACT

Internationally adopted adolescents may have more delinquent behavior than non-adopted adolescents. One explanation is that these adolescents experience discrimination and loss of culture, and adoptive parents are not adequately addressing these experiences. However, studies have not examined the effects of family discussions of racial and ethnic differences within adoptive families on adopted adolescents' delinquent behavior. To test this relationship, this study utilized data from 111 U.S. internationally adoptive families with 185 South Korean adopted adolescents (55% female, *M* age = 17.75). During an observational assessment, families discussed the importance of their racial and ethnic differences, and adolescents completed a delinquent behavior questionnaire. Analysis of covariance showed differences in adolescent delinquent behavior across three ways adoptive families discussed racial and ethnic differences; adolescents whose families acknowledged differences had the fewest mean delinquent behaviors. There were no significant differences in delinquent behavior between adolescents whose families acknowledged or rejected the importance of racial and ethnic differences. However, adopted adolescents whose families held discrepant views of differences had significantly more problem behavior than adolescents whose families either acknowledged or rejected the importance of racial and ethnic differences. Clinicians, adoption professionals, and other parenting specialists should focus on building cohesive family identities about racial and ethnic differences, as discrepant views of differences are associated with the most adoptee delinquent behavior.

1. Introduction

Worldwide, nearly a million children have been adopted internationally since 1945 (Selman, 2012). In the United States, the largest number of international adoptions involves South Korean children. It is estimated that more than 110,000 Korean children have been adopted by predominantly White American families. Today, 59% of internationally adopted children are from Asian countries (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013), with more than 105,000 Asian adopted children living in U.S. households with White parents in 2009 (Krieder & Raleigh, 2011). More than 80% of international adoptions are considered transracial with White parents and children who are racial and ethnic minorities in the United States (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013). This study focuses on families with at least one adolescent who was adopted internationally and transracially as a young child from South Korea.

In recent years, the adjustment of internationally adopted children has been prevalent in research (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005). Although most adoptees function well, several studies suggest that internationally adopted persons who were adopted as young children may have higher rates of delinquent and criminal behaviors in adolescence compared to non-adopted adolescents (Hjern, Lindblad, & Vinnerljung, 2002; Verhulst, Althaus, & Versluis-den Bieman, 1990a). Moreover, externalizing behaviors, including delinquency, increase at a faster rate among internationally adopted persons who were adopted as young children than non-adopted children as children age into adolescence (Verhulst & Versluis-den Bieman, 1995). The aforementioned faster trajectory and higher rates of delinquency in adolescence are often attributed to pre-adoption adversity (e.g., adverse living conditions in countries of origin; Verhulst, Althaus, & Versluis-den Bieman, 1992) and poor self-regulatory behavior compared to non-adopted or domestically adopted children (Rutter, 2005). However, adoption scholars (Lee & The Minnesota International Adoption Project Team, 2010; Mohanty & Newhill, 2006) have noted that there is a need to look beyond pre-adoption adversity and self-regulatory difficulties in childhood as precursors to delinquent

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and other externalizing behaviors in adolescence (Loeber, Burke, & Pardini, 2009; Stevens et al., 2008).

In support of this position, racial or ethnic discrimination may be related to externalizing behaviors, including delinquency, among internationally adopted children even after accounting for pre-adoption adversity (Hjern et al., 2002; Lee & The Minnesota International Adoption Project Team, 2010). Moreover, prominent scholars examining race-related issues in Asian internationally adoptive families have suggested that greater delinquency and other externalizing behaviors in adolescence may be related to the family's ability or inability to constructively discuss racial and ethnic differences (Lee, 2003; Mohanty & Newhill, 2006). Presently though, there is limited research on the relationship between family discussions about racial and ethnic differences and adopted adolescents' delinquent behavior. Guided by a cultural socialization framework (Hughes et al., 2006), this study examined the association between how international, transracial adoptive families discuss racial and ethnic differences and South Korean adopted adolescents' delinquent behavior.

1.1. Cultural socialization in internationally adoptive families

The cultural socialization framework suggests that parents of ethnic minority children engage in activities or discussions about their cultural history and racial discrimination that improves children's heritage awareness and assists children in working through discrimination, resulting in better behavioral development (Hughes et al., 2006). Importantly, cultural socialization is more complicated in international, transracial adoptive families, because ethnic minority children are adopted into predominantly White families (Krieder & Raleigh, 2011). White adoptive parents are more likely to have limited knowledge of the child's birth culture and less first-hand experience with discrimination (Lee, 2003). Thus, White adoptive parents must be intentional about seeking opportunities to engage with the adopted child's racial and ethnic heritage (Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, Gunnar, & The Minnesota International Adoption Project Team, 2006).

Cultural socialization has primarily been studied in terms of whether adoptive parents support and adopted children engage in activities related to their ethnic background, such as eating ethnic food and attending culture camps (Vonk, Lee, & Crolley-Simic, 2010). Although some internationally adoptive families engage in these activities (Crolley-Simic & Vonk, 2008), many White adoptive parents downplay the importance of the adopted child's birth culture and racial experiences (Bergquist, Campbell, & Unrau, 2003; Samuels, 2009). Adoptive parents that suggest that cultural socialization is important tend to engage in these activities only a few times per year (Kim, Reichwald, & Lee, 2013). Yet, cultural socialization is related to positive outcomes for internationally adopted persons, including ethnic identity development (Basow, Lilley, Bookwala, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2008) and well-being (Mohanty, Keokse, & Sales, 2006).

In spite of literature suggesting that delinquent behaviors may be a prevalent negative outcome among internationally adopted adolescents (Hjern et al., 2002; Verhulst et al., 1990a), there is limited research on the association between cultural socialization and externalizing behaviors, including delinquency, for international adoptees. Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater-Deckard, and Petrill (2007) found parental cultural socialization efforts were linked to fewer externalizing behaviors among youth adopted from Asia. Manzi, Ferrari, Rosnati, and Benet-Martinez (2014) suggest that parental cultural socialization is indirectly related to fewer behavior problems among adolescents and young adults adopted from Latin America. Looking beyond international adoption, DeBerry, Scarr, and Weinberg (1996) found family racial socialization was indirectly associated with an aggregate measure of delinquent, academic, and social problems in a study of domestic transracially adopted African American youth. Similarly, Hughes, Witherspoon, Rivas-Drake, and West-Bey (2009) found cultural socialization was indirectly associated with less antisocial behaviors among non-adopted African American and White youth. Parental efforts in helping the adoptee learn about his/her heritage and address discrimination may be negatively related to externalizing behavior, including delinquency, for internationally adopted adolescents.

Previous cultural socialization studies have relied on parent or youth self-reports of engagement in cultural socialization activities, but these studies have not captured how families discuss the child's heritage, discrimination, and racial and ethnic differences within the family. Using a mixed-method approach, Hughes et al. (2008) reported that same-race families' self-reports of cultural socialization do not always align with actual conversations and behaviors related to cultural socialization. Parent self-report of cultural socialization has also been found to not match with actual observed family discussions about race and ethnicity in a small sample of internationally adoptive families (Kim et al., 2013). In other words, self-reports of parent cultural socialization efforts may not adequately capture each family member's experiences with cultural socialization. This suggests that more research attention must be given to actual family discussions about racial and ethnic differences in internationally adoptive families.

1.2. Acknowledging racial and ethnic differences within the family

One method to examine how cultural socialization discussions occur within adoptive families is to investigate the extent to which families are able to acknowledge racial and ethnic differences during family conversations. Stemming from theoretical work about the importance of how families discuss adoption-specific differences (Brodzinsky, 1987, 1990, 1997; Kaye & Warren, 1988; Kirk, 1964), how racial and ethnic differences within the family are discussed and acknowledged is considered a fundamental but understudied component of cultural socialization in international, transracial adoptive families (Kim et al., 2013; Kirk, 1984; Lee, 2003; Rojewski, 2005; Shiao & Tuan, 2008). In some families, racial and ethnic differences between family members are comfortably acknowledged and the importance of each person's background is supportively discussed among family members. In other families, the existence or importance of racial and ethnic differences to their families is rejected. Finally, some other families are unable to agree about the importance and extent to which they discuss their racial and ethnic differences, resulting in “discrepant views of differences” within the family.

International, transracial adoptive families acknowledging the importance of their racial and ethnic differences embrace their multiracial and/or multi-cultural family status (Kim et al., 2013; Kirk, 1984; Shiao & Tuan, 2008). This may be manifested through open discussion about the importance of the adopted adolescent's racial and ethnic heritage or familial engagement in cultural socialization activities. To acknowledge the importance of the families' differences, non-adopted family members also accept and actively support the adolescent's racial and ethnic experiences. Indeed, they may interpret the adopted adolescent's discrimination experiences as discrimination against the entire family. In short, all family members must accept, participate in, and support cultural activities or conversations that acknowledge the importance of the adopted adolescent's heritage. Moreover, the theory suggests that parents must do more than send the adopted adolescent to learn about his/her culture sans parental or sibling engagement with the adoptees' birth culture, as these efforts may make the adopted adolescent feel different from the family.

In other international, transracial adoptive families, families reject the importance of talking about racial and ethnic differences (Kim et al., 2013; Kirk, 1984) and use a color-blind approach in conversations about racial and ethnic differences (Lee, 2003; Shiao & Tuan, 2008). That is, these families suggest that racial and ethnic differences are not important considerations within their family by quickly ending conversations about their families' racial and ethnic diversity. In addition to not seeing racial and ethnic differences as important, families who reject differences may diminish the importance of the adopted adolescent's