



# Adopted Chinese girls come of age: Feelings about adoption, ethnic identity, academic functioning, and global self-esteem

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## ABSTRACT

Developmentally salient constructs (e.g., adoption, ethnicity and competence) play important roles in trans-racial adoptees' self-esteem during adolescence. Understanding how adoptees' feelings about adoption, ethnic socialization and academic functioning are related to their self-esteem may help foster resilience in this population. The current study included 234 adopted Chinese youth (95.7% female; Mean age: 13.6 years), 97.4% of whom were raised in families where one or both parents were White. The adoptees' feelings about adoption was assessed with the Adoption Dynamics Questionnaire (ADQ), their ethnic socialization was assessed with the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM) and the Ethnic Marginality subscale from the Belongingness and Ethnic Identity scale, their academic functioning was assessed with the Academic Functioning subscale adapted from the Social Skills Rating System (SSRS), and finally their global self-esteem was assessed with the Rosenberg Self-esteem scale (RSE). Simple correlations showed that scores of all scales were significantly correlated with global self-esteem score. Analyses of variance (ANOVAs) showed that the ethnic labels that the adoptees used to describe their ethnicity did not differentiate their global self-esteem scores. Regression analyses revealed that positive affect towards adoption, ethnic identity affirmation, ethnic marginality, academic functioning, and an interaction between positive affect towards adoption and ethnic marginality significantly predicted global self-esteem ( $R^2 = 36.45\%$ ).

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## 1. Introduction

For over a decade, each year approximately one-third of infants adopted into the United States were from China (United States Department of State, 2011). The adoptive parents are mostly White. Due to Chinese culture's male preference and China's one-child-per-family population control policy, children adopted from China differ from those adopted domestically or from other countries: most adopted Chinese children are girls and recent literature has shown that their social-emotional and academic outcomes are equivalent to or better than their non-adopted peers or US norms (e.g., Dalen & Rygvold, 2006; Tan & Camras, 2011; Tan & Marfo, 2006).

The first waves of Chinese adoptees have begun to reach adolescence and a great deal about this phase of their development and associated developmental processes and outcomes remains unknown. Developmentally, adolescence is characterized as a period in which adolescents actively explore who they really are and how they fit in their social world (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). This is also a period during which the development of global self-esteem becomes

consolidated (Mruk, 1995). For children who are adopted from China, their adoption background, and the trans-racial nature of their upbringing, as well as their academic functioning might be particularly salient elements of their self exploration. In the current study, we investigate how these areas are related to their global self-esteem. We specifically address the following three main research questions: (1) How are the adoptees' feelings towards their adoption related to their global self-esteem? (2) What is the nature of the relationship between their ethnic socialization and their global self-esteem? (3) How is the adoptees' academic functioning related to global self-esteem?

## 2. Theoretical framework on global self-esteem in adolescence

Global self-esteem describes one's self-evaluation of worthiness and competence (Harter, 1993; Mruk, 1995). The key contributor to global self-esteem is an individual's self-evaluation (Rosenberg, 1965; Stephan & Maiano, 2007). According to Brown and Marshall (2006), research on adolescents' global self-esteem is frequently informed by a "Bottom-Up" theoretical framework. This framework stresses that individuals' self-evaluations of their qualities in areas that signify self-worth (e.g., competence, interpersonal feedback) underlie their global self-esteem. For girls, self-evaluations of competence and physical

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appearance are particularly important sources of global self-esteem (Usmiani & Daniluk, 1997).

### 3. Adoptees' feelings about adoption and self-esteem

During adolescence, being an adopted child, trans-racially or not, is a key aspect of most adoptees' life experience. During this period, adoptees will likely incorporate their adoption status in the formation and exploration of their self concept (Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000; Smith & Brodzinsky, 2002). Thus, their feelings about their adoption are likely an important aspect of their self-evaluations. According to Benson, Sharma, and Roehlkepartain (1994), adopted youth's feelings towards their adoption encompass three dimensions, including positive affect towards adoption, negative affect towards adoption, and preoccupation with adoption. While no empirical studies have investigated how each dimension is related to adoptees' global self-esteem, there are two existing studies that can help shed some light on this relationship. Specifically, Basow, Lilley, Bookwala, and McGillicuddy-DeLisi (2008) studied Korean adoptees' self acceptance. They reported that negative emotions towards adoption correlated with lower levels of self acceptance, while positive emotions towards adoption correlated with higher levels of self acceptance. In the second study, Cederblad, Höök, Irhammar, and Mercke (1999) investigated the adjustment of 211 international adoptees aged 13 years or older in Sweden. Their study showed that adoptees who often thought about birth families (which somewhat resembles the dimension of preoccupation with adoption) or who felt uncomfortable with their adoption status (which somewhat resembles the dimension of negative affect towards adoption) scored lower on self-esteem. Although these studies were not conducted with children adopted from China, they do highlight aspects of adoption experiences correlated with self-esteem that warrant exploration in the study of children adopted from China.

Overall, as a central aspect of adoptees' experience, being adopted has not been shown to jeopardize the self-esteem of domestic, international or trans-racial adoptees, according to the meta-analysis of 88 studies (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007a). Although many studies have focused on adoption status and children's development, not much is known about how adoptees make sense of their adoption status. More research is needed to determine how one specific aspect of being adopted, namely feelings about adoption, is related to global self-esteem.

### 4. Adoptees' ethnic identity and self-esteem

Ethnicity is a particularly salient component of self-concept, especially when one is a member of a minority group (McGuire, McGuire, Child, & Fujioka, 1978; Phinney, 1991). According to both Phinney (1992) and a recent review (Ponterotto, Gretchen, Utsey, Stracuzzi, & Saya, 2003), ethnic socialization is a process that includes ethnic identity search and ethnic identity affirmation. The two processes do not seem to have the same relationship with global self-esteem. For instance, using the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM, Phinney, 1992), Galliher, Jones, and Dahl (2011) recently showed that while ethnic identity affirmation significantly predicted global self-esteem, ethnic identity search did not. Most studies, however, have only looked at ethnic socialization as a one-dimensional construct. There is a need to closely examine how each process is related to self-esteem, especially among trans-racially adopted youth.

For trans-racially adopted children, the "visible" nature of their adoption places them at a unique intersection of race and ethnicity (Wilkinson, 1995). What they think they are might be different from what other people think they are (Wilkinson, 1995). Trans-racially adopted children are thus required to cope with issues stemming from physical differences between themselves and their parents as well as physical appearance between themselves and the larger society

(Brodzinsky, Schechter, & Henig, 1992; Hollingsworth, 1997; Tigervall & Hübner, 2010). How trans-racially adopted youth make sense of their ethnic experience might have implications for how they evaluate their self-esteem (Mohanty & Newhill, 2006). A close inspection of the literature shows that in existing studies the construct of ethnicity has usually been operationalized as ethnic self-identification (e.g., McRoy, Zurcher, Lauderdale, & Anderson, 1982; Vroegh, 1997) or as a socialization process (e.g., Hollingsworth, 1997; Mohanty, Keokse, & Sales, 2006).

In studying how trans-racial adoptees ethnically identify themselves might be related to their self-esteem, McRoy et al. (1982) studied two groups of Black teenagers (13.5 years old on average, 30 children in each group) adopted domestically by 30 Black families and 30 White families. They found that children who were adopted into Black families exclusively used "Black" to describe their ethnicity while those who were adopted into white families used "Black", "Mixed or part White" or "White" to describe their ethnicity. Children adopted into the two types of families, however, did not differ on self-esteem. This finding was later replicated by Vroegh (1997). These findings seemed to suggest that the ethnic labels that trans-racial adoptees used to describe their ethnicity were not indicative of their self-esteem. However, for international adoptees, ethnic labels seem to matter. For instance, Cederblad et al. (1999) found that international adoptees in Sweden who described themselves as Swedish scored higher on self-esteem than their peers who described themselves as non-Swedish.

In studying the process of trans-racial adoptees' ethnic socialization, Huh and Reid (2000) found that the way adoptees navigate between their birth culture and adoptive culture plays an important role in their ethnic identity development. A recent study by Kim, Suyemoto, and Turner (2010) also showed that Korean adoptees experienced belonging and exclusion with both their birth and adoptive cultures. A possible consequence of difficulties integrating both birth and adoptive cultures is that adoptees may feel that they do not fully belong to either culture and experience feelings of ethnic marginality. According to Mohanty et al. (2006), adult international adoptees who reported a stronger sense of ethnic marginality scored lower on self-esteem. Additionally, their study showed that adoptees who reported a stronger sense of ethnic identity scored higher on self-esteem. Unfortunately, there are no other studies that have focused on the relationship between ethnic socialization and international adoptees' global self-esteem.

Overall, while trans-racial adoptees do not seem to lack self-esteem (Castle, Knight, & Watters, 2011; Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007a), there is actually very little literature on the relationship between adopted youth's self-evaluations of their ethnic identity and their global self-esteem.

### 5. Adoptees' academic competence and self-esteem

Competence is an important component of youth's self-esteem (e.g., Harter, 1985). In the general literature, academic competence has been widely documented as an important source of global self-esteem (see the review by Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). For adopted children, existing meta-analyses have concluded that they perform more poorly than non-adopted children academically (van IJzendoorn, Juffer, & Klein Poelhuis, 2005), although they do not lack self-esteem (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2007a). To our knowledge, no literature on children adopted from China was available when these meta-analyses were conducted. Currently there is no research on how adopted children's academic functioning is related to their self-esteem. The above meta-analytic conclusion that adoptees do not lack self-esteem but have poorer academic performance than their non-adopted peers might suggest that adoptees' academic performance is less critical to adoptees' self-esteem, or that other areas of adoptees' experience serve as additional sources of self-esteem. Further complicating the relationship between adoptees'

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