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## The role of adoptive parents' intergroup contact in fostering the well-being of adoptees: The “extended intragroup contact effect”



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### ABSTRACT

The present study examines the effects of a new cultural socialization strategy on the well-being of transracially adopted adolescents and emerging adults. Specifically, we propose a novel strategy focused on the role of adoptive parents' positive contact with members of their children's ethnic group of origin, which we labelled “extended intragroup contact.” The hypothesis was that observing ingroup members (adoptive parents, belonging to the family ingroup) engaging in contact with another ingroup (members of children's original ethnic group) would be associated with adoptees' meaning in life and, in turn, with well-being. A self-report questionnaire was administered to 120 families, each composed of transracial adoptees (all born in Latin American countries) and their adoptive parents. The results were generally supportive of predictions, showing that knowing of positive interactions between members of two different ingroups (family ingroup and ethnic ingroup) had beneficial effects for the well-being of transracial adoptees. The theoretical and practical implications of findings are discussed, focusing on the importance of investigating extended intragroup contact as a strategy for improving the well-being of disadvantaged group members.

Adoption is a worldwide phenomenon with relevant psychosocial, cultural, legal, and political implications. In recent decades, most Western countries have observed a large influx of internationally adopted children. Italy is currently the first receiving country in Europe for number of international adoptions per year ([Commission for Intercountry Adoptions, 2014](#)). Most adoptions are transracial and entail the placement of a child from a different ethnic group into families with a majority ethnic background ([Baden, Treweweke, & Ahluwalia, 2012](#)). The consequence is that the phenotype of these children is often different from that of their adoptive parents. Transracial adoptees are afforded the benefits of growing up in a majority culture ([Lee, 2003](#)), but also face a unique set of challenges throughout their life. Many adoptees struggle with aspects of their ethnic identity and experience discomfort with their appearance ([McGinnis, Livingston Smith, Ryan, & Howard, 2009](#)); they can, for instance, experience racial discrimination as visible minorities, which in turn is associated with lower self-esteem and greater behavioral problems, depression, and psychological distress ([Arnold, Braje, Kawahara, & Shuman, 2016](#); [Cederblad, Höök, Irhammar, & Mercke, 1999](#); [Lee, Lee, Hu, & Kim, 2015](#); [Lee & the Minnesota International Adoption Project Team, 2010](#); [Rosnati & Ferrari, 2014](#)). A recent meta-analysis integrating 85 studies showed that international transracial adoptees report higher levels of psychiatric and social maladjustment (such as attention deficit, hyperactivity disorders, anxiety disorders, conduct disorders/oppositional defiant disorders, depression, substance use disorders, and psychoses) than non-adoptees and domestic (non transracial) adoptees ([Behle & Pinquart, 2016](#)).

As such, identifying effective means for fostering the transracial adoptees' well-being is a priority for scholars as well as for

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practitioners. This is precisely the aim of the present article. In particular, we test a specific strategy for improving transracial adoptees' well-being, by proposing the novel concept of extended intragroup contact. Moreover, we aim at identifying the process that underlies the extended intragroup contact effect.

### Transracial adoptees and cultural socialization strategies

In order to enhance the psychological well-being of transracial adoptees, recent research has highlighted the crucial role played by adoptive parents in providing exposure to their host-country culture and in giving value to the child's ethnic group membership and cultural background (Mohanty, 2013; Scherman, 2010). The host-country culture is usually "automatically" transmitted intrafamiliarily by adoptive parents, as adoptees are assimilated into their adoptive families' cultural perspective. Instead, the process of transmission of the child's ethnic heritage entails a deliberate effort to engage the child in cultural opportunities in order to promote ethnic awareness, knowledge and pride related to the heritage birth culture (Ferrari, Ranieri, Barni, & Rosnati, 2015b; Kim, Reichwald, & Lee, 2013; Manzi, Ferrari, Rosnati, & Benet-Martinez, 2014). Studies on adoptive families have illustrated the crucial role of cultural socialization strategies used by adoptive parents to expose their children to several aspects of their birth culture, such as preparation for bias and enculturation strategies (e.g., Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, Gunnar, & the Minnesota International Adoption Project Team, 2006; Mohanty, 2013).

For an internationally adopted child, when s/he is still relatively young, the family socialization process typically involves attending to restaurants, reading books and watching videos related to the child's ethnic culture and eating foods from his/her country. At later ages, more developmentally appropriate activities might be performed such as learning the language of his/her country of origin, as well as visiting his/her birth country (Lee et al., 2006; Scroggs & Heitfield, 2001; Song & Lee, 2009).

The studies presented above suggest that the family is an important agent of socialization for transracially adopted children, a speculation supported by evidence that parents' values and behavioral patterns profoundly influence those of their adoptive children (Basow, Lilley, Bookwala, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2008; Mohanty, 2013). Adding to this evidence, Vonk, Lee, and Crolley-Simic (2010) took into account the contact experienced by the family with the child's birth family. However, this is not contact as intended in the general intergroup contact literature, and is mostly indicative of interest in the child's birth origins and family. The question posed by the authors in fact did not examine frequency or positivity of contact, rather whether such contact with the family of origin existed (the response option was dichotomous). Moreover, effects on adoptees' well-being were not taken into account.

It is worth noting that Vonk et al. (2010) also assessed contact that parents had with individuals of the same cultural background as the adopted child. However, they tested this as a desirable outcome of cultural socialization practices, rather than as a strategy in itself potentially contributing to adoptees' well-being. Overall, we argue that the adoptive parents' close social network and their contact with people coming from the birth country of their children, as a specific type of cultural socialization strategy, has been neglected by adoption research. Before turning to the role of adoptive parents' intergroup contact in predicting beneficial effects among adoptees, we review literature on meaning in life and well-being, which represent the mediator and dependent variable of our proposed model.

### Meaning in life and well-being

Previous research has identified meaning in life as an important antecedent of well-being (e.g., Vignoles, 2011). Meaning in life refers to the need to find purpose in one's own existence (Baumeister, 1991) and to the "sense made of, and significance felt regarding, the nature of one's being and existence" (Steger, Frazier, Oishi, & Kaler, 2006, p. 81). It has been conceived as a universal and fundamental need that drives individuals' identity processes (Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006). Research revealed that fostering meaning in life may be especially important among adolescents and emerging adults. For instance, when considering adolescent samples, there is evidence that greater meaning in life is associated with higher self-esteem, better academic adjustment, stronger stability in daily emotionality and well-being (Kiang & Fuligni, 2010). Having more meaning in life in adolescence turned out to be a protective factor against health risk behaviors and poor psychological health, and a crucial factor in promoting identity development (Brassai, Piko, & Steger, 2011, 2012). Besides, the sense that one's existence is meaningful is a core feature of psychosocial functioning also for emerging adults (Dezutter et al., 2014).

Kiang and Fuligni (2010) highlighted that the degree to which an individual finds his or her life to be meaningful is particularly salient to those with ethnic minority backgrounds: having an ethnic minority background presents social challenges, including discrimination and prejudice, that adolescents must face and ultimately derive meaning from. Turning to the present article, this process may be especially relevant among transracial adoptees: ethnic identity and adoption histories are intrinsically interrelated because, for adoptees, exploring one's own ethnic background entails negotiating some aspects of their adoption histories and origin to define their identity (Garber & Grotevant, 2015; Langrehr, Yoon, Hacker, & Caudill, 2015).

Despite the advances in research on meaning in life among ethnic minorities, there is a lack of research focused on the meaning in life among transracially adoptees as a specific group. The search of meaning in life can entail new complexities for adoptees during adolescence and young adulthood: these life stages constitute key transitions in shaping one's own identity and adoptees have the additional challenge to integrate their personal adoptive history into their identity, while coming to terms with their different ethnicity (Greco, Rosnati, & Ferrari, 2015; Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011). We aim to fill this gap, by proposing a novel strategy for improving the meaning of life of transracial adoptees and, ultimately, their well-being. Below we will focus on extended intragroup contact as the novel proposed strategy.

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