

Seattle University

ScholarWorks @ SeattleU

Anthropology, Sociology, & Social Work
Undergraduate Honors Theses

Anthropology & Sociology

6-2022

"THIS IS YOUR TEAM": EXAMINING A SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG TRANSRACIAL INTERNATIONAL ADOPTEES

Sheera Tamura
Seattle University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/assw-theses>

Recommended Citation

Tamura, Sheera, "'THIS IS YOUR TEAM": EXAMINING A SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG TRANSRACIAL INTERNATIONAL ADOPTEES" (2022). *Anthropology, Sociology, & Social Work Undergraduate Honors Theses*. 4.

<https://scholarworks.seattleu.edu/assw-theses/4>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Anthropology & Sociology at ScholarWorks @ SeattleU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Anthropology, Sociology, & Social Work Undergraduate Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks @ SeattleU.

Seattle University

**“THIS IS YOUR TEAM”: EXAMINING A SENSE OF BELONGING AMONG TRANSRACIAL
INTERNATIONAL ADOPTEES**

A Thesis Submitted to
The Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
Departmental Honors in Social Work

By
Sheera Yoshimi Hai Bao Tamura

Committee in Charge:
Professor Anne Farina, Ph.D., MSW, LICSW
Professor Margaret Cristofalo, Ph.D., MSW, LICSW

June 2022

This honors thesis by Sheera Tamura is approved.



_____/_____
Dr. Anne Farina, Ph.D., LICSW Date

Margaret A. Cristofalo 6/10/22

_____/_____
Dr. Margaret Cristofalo, Ph.D., LICSW Date

June 2022

Acknowledgments

Throughout the process of completing this study, I've received an immense amount of support and guidance from a multitude of individuals. Here I honor and thank each supporter for their unconditional acts of love and care in helping me to fulfill this honors thesis.

Mom and Dad, thank you for serving as the inspiration for this project and for always reminding me to do everything with a sense of gratitude, determination, and purpose. Pursuing this project has been a dream of mine since my sophomore year, and I would not have been able to come this far without your unconditional love, support, and guidance. Thank you for allowing me to find and feel a sense of belonging within my life as your Chinese-Japanese American adopted daughter.

To my primary advisor **Dr. Anne Farina**. What an honor it has been to conduct a research study that holds an extensive amount of meaning to both of our adoptive identities. Learning how to conduct empirical research alongside you has been one of the most fulfilling privileges that I have ever had the pleasure of pursuing throughout my undergraduate experience. You have not only helped me to grow as a scholar, but also as a student, a researcher, and as my parent's adopted daughter.

To **Dr. Margaret Cristofalo**, Two years ago, I began my social work education by taking your introduction to social work class and now I have the privilege of concluding it with you as you have selflessly offered to serve as my second reader. Your art in conducting and executing meaningful research has been a significant source of inspiration for me and I thank you for your time and wisdom in helping me to advance my own foundational research skills.

To my honors instructors, **Dr. Mary Robertson and Dr. Rachel Luft**. What an absolute joy it has been to be a student in both of your classes. The amount of patience and knowledge that you've both shared with me is unparalleled to anything I've ever experienced before. Thank you for cultivating a space of comfort and safety throughout this entire research process.

To my **research participants**, this research project would not have been possible without each and every one of you. Listening to and documenting your stories has been such a meaningful experience for me and I will honor and cherish the spaces and interactions that we both shared.

To my **friends and cohort mates**, this year would not have been possible without every single one of you. To all of you who checked in with me throughout this year, who reminded me to eat and drink water, for your hugs, laughter, and cries, thank you for sharing it all with me. I feel so blessed to have shared this journey with every single one of you.

Table of Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	3
<i>Abstract</i>	6
<i>Introduction</i>	7
<i>Literature Review</i>	8
Sense of Belonging	8
Sense of belonging in relation to transracial international adoptees	10
<i>Research Methods</i>	12
Research Design	12
Data Collection	13
Methodology	14
Philosophical Statement	14
<i>Data Analysis</i>	15
<i>Results</i>	15
Participant Demographics	15
Emergent themes and subthemes	16
Primary Theme: Finding a sense of belonging	16
Sub-theme 1: The ability to choose	16
Sub-theme 2: Internal Perceptions	18
Sub-theme 3: Knowing yourself and your origins	19
Sub-theme 4: Unconditional Love	19
<i>Discussion and Implications</i>	21
<i>Limitations</i>	23
<i>Conclusion</i>	23
<i>Conflict of Interest</i>	23
<i>Appendix</i>	24
Appendix A: Interview Guide (English)	24
Appendix B: Informed Consent Information Sheet	25
Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer	27
<i>References</i>	28

Abstract

It has been argued that developing a sense of belonging is a unique process for transracial international adoptees. This qualitative study examines how three transracial international adoptees (N=3) experience a sense of belonging within themselves, their family environments, and their communities. Each participant was thoroughly interviewed about their adoptive experiences and how they find a sense of belonging within their adoptive identities. Once all of the interviews were completed, the interview transcripts underwent a thematic analysis process in which four unique themes emerged. Although there were notable differences in how each adoptee acknowledges a sense of belonging, there were also shared similarities in racial and ethnic awareness and the process of choosing with whom they want to surround themselves.

Keywords: transracial, adoptee, belonging, racial and ethnic awareness

Introduction

Ever since I was a young girl, my mom would occasionally remind me that I was adopted. As I would run around the living room and play dress-up with my assortment of Barbie dolls, she would constantly tell me that I came from China and that my Chinese mommy and daddy could not take care of me. Throughout these conversations, she always re-emphasized the statement that I belonged with her and that I am unconditionally loved by the family that we have now. Although I was never able to fully comprehend the precise meaning of the term “adopted” at such a young age, I always knew that the word “adoption” would hold a significant meaning to me. As I continued to grow older, my mother began to open up about her adopted identity, and she shared that my grandfather was the one who encouraged her to adopt a child so she could continue the family tradition of giving another child a better life. It was not until I was in my early teens that I realized that her intention behind informing me of my adopted identity from such a young age was so I could feel a sense of belonging with her from the very first time that we met.

Fast-forwarding to the early COVID-19 pandemic, I began taking my first social work classes at Seattle University. Although many concepts within the social work profession stood out to me, I always found myself feeling drawn to the topic of child welfare within the United States. I knew that I felt a sense of connection to that particular subject because I was able to relate to some of the experiences that were documented by the highlighted adoptees. As time went on and I was able to engage with more students from across campus, I realized that my adopted identity was becoming more prevalent with a few of my closest peers. Together, we would bond over our shared adopted qualities as we all identified as transracial international adoptees.

However, despite our similar adoptive origins and Asian American ethnic identities, the most noticeable difference between myself and my adopted peers was that they were adopted into White families, whereas I was adopted into a Japanese-American family. Many conversations that were cultivated between me and my peers stemmed from how difficult it was for them to feel a sense of belonging within a nuclear, White family. Physical differences were much more prevalent as they were

perceived as being racial and ethnic minorities in present-day society. Additionally, the lack of a sense of belonging in relation to their racial and cultural origins was also emphasized in our shared conversations.

As I began to learn more about the myriad of values and principles that influence the social work profession, the ethical principle of, *Social workers recognizing the central importance of human relationships* stood out to me in particular (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). It forced me to reflect upon my own experiences as an adoptee and throughout the reflection process, I've come to realize that the adoptee experience of finding a sense of belonging can feel confusing and enraging at times. Clinicians within the social work profession commit to creating and sustaining inclusive environments in which an individual's identities in association with their experiences can be honored with a significant degree of respect and dignity. Therefore, within the context of this particular research initiative, I have strived to create a study in which adoptees can reflect upon their personal experiences of finding a sense of belonging within their interpersonal environments. Additionally, I have strived to cultivate a space where adoptees can reminisce about their individualized adoption journeys and where they can honor themselves and the individuals who instilled a sense of belonging within them.

The question that guides this research study states, **Among transracial international adoptees, how is a sense of belonging experienced in the context of race and ethnicity?**

Literature Review

Sense of Belonging

A sense of belonging can be defined as, "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment" (Hagerty et al., 1992, p.172). It is a deep connection across social groups, physical spaces, and individual and collective experiences (Allen et al., 2021; Hagerty et al., 1992). Early empirical research has described one's belonging as the recognition and acceptance of a member by other members in a group. Sense of belonging has also appeared to be an important element in developing and managing

one's relationship with others (Hagerty et al., 1996). When physiological and safety-security needs are largely gratified, people hunger for connection with others (Maslow, 1987; Taormina & Gao, 2013). The need for human beings to have interpersonal attachments and to find a sense of belonging with others is a fundamental need (Leary, 1995). A variety of additional factors further emphasize the need to achieve a sense of belonging. For example, forming attachments with other individuals or groups can increase survival for those who develop a sense of belongingness with others (Ainsworth, 1989). Baumeister & Leary (1995) concluded that belongingness is universally initiated as it is found in every human society and that interpersonal bonds are easy to develop for many people. However, the absence of belongingness can result in an array of negative consequences for the individual. Baumeister & Leary (1995, p. 50) also stated, "Social exclusion may be the most common and important cause of anxiety because it co-exists with the feelings of social rejection, isolation, loneliness, and depression."

A sense of belonging can serve as a predictor of numerous physical, social, economic, and behavioral outcomes. Hagerty et al. (1996) proposed that sense of belonging has two defining attributes: (1) the experience of being valued, needed, or important in relation to other people, groups, and environments, and (2) the experience of fitting in with other people, groups, or environments, through similar or shared characteristics. Precursors of attaining a sense of belonging were described as (1) one's energy of involvement (2) potential and desire for meaningful involvement, and (3) potential for shared or similar characteristics. Hagerty, et al. (1992) concluded that a sense of belonging is a psychological experience that implements cognitive and affective components that are associated with affiliative behavior and psychological and social functioning. Anant (1966) posited that the theme of belonging serves as the missing conceptual link in understanding mental health and mental illness from an interactional perspective. A sense of belonging and connection to others impact overall well-being. Feeling like one does not belong has been associated with anxiety, loneliness, feelings of isolation, depression, lack of social support, and conflict (Anant, 1996; Davidson et al., 1995; Hagerty & Williams, 1999). Additionally, Sargent et al. (2022) offered the idea of utilizing a sense of belonging as a buffer against stress and the promotion of psychological adjustment.

Sense of belonging in relation to transracial international adoptees

The concept of belonging becomes more complex when it is used to define the experiences of transracial international adoptees (TRIA's). An adoptee's emotions can have a strong influence on how they assimilate into their new family environments but also on how they process negative perceptions of adoptive identities (Barroso & Barbosa-Ducharne, 2019). Hoffman & Peña (2013) recognize that the sentiments of loss and grief are two core issues in a TRIA's identity development. Adoptees must grieve through adoption-relation loss as they are forced to acknowledge the realization that they were given away. Furthermore, Brodzinsky et al. (1992) found that sentiments of loss and grief stem from feelings of abandonment and the process of understanding the implications of their adoption. As a result, unconscious and conscious grievances could motivate behavioral changes in TRIA's that can include increased anger, aggression, depression, and problems with self-image. These effects have the potential of complicating developmental milestones throughout the stages of a TRIA's lifespan.

An adoptee's sense of belonging is of great importance as many TRIA children struggle with identity issues due to a lack of physical resemblance to their parents (Hoffman & Peña, 2013). Family systems theory (FST) is a framework that views families as comprised of multiple interdependent subsystems that mutually influence one another and therefore, determine the family function (King & Boyd, 2016). This theory suggests that an adolescent's perception of familial belonging will be deeply influenced by the quality of relationships that co-exist between family members. In regards to TRIA's, openness of communication between adopters and the adoptee is a crucial element when establishing a TRIA's sense of belonging (Hamilton et al., 2015). This consists of creating a space to openly communicate about one's adoptive status as well as the adoptee's racial and ethnic-cultural background. Reports of families who openly communicate with their adopted family members experience positive feelings of self-esteem with their TRIAs. On the contrary, some research suggests that some White adoptive parents tend to avoid discussing discrimination with their transracial children, adopting a colorblind attitude.

Sense of belonging is an important influence when examining racial and ethnic identity (Kim et al., 2010). Hagerty et al. (1992) argue that a sense of belonging is the experience of having valued involvement between themselves and the systems of which they are a part. This concept has been minimally studied in identity research initiatives; however, it is important to recognize it as a crucial element of ethnic identity. Phinney & Alipuria (1990) share that a sense of belonging incorporates feelings toward an ethnic group that may not be recognized based on one's ethnic self-identification. In essence, the concept has not been clearly defined in the context of racial and identity research and therefore, its dimensions need to be explored in further depth. As one's sense of belonging is of particular significance when examining racial and ethnic identity, adoption itself may bring up issues regarding belonging (Brodzinsky et al, 1993). Multiracial and multiethnic experiences are fundamental to transracial adoptions, and acceptance or rejection of the adoptee's race may influence how an adoptee perceives themselves in relation to the people and environments around them (Sueymoto, 2002).

The concept of exclusion is also a key attribute to the experience of belonging among transracial international adoptees (Kim et al., 2010). A sense of exclusion creates the feeling as if one is being alienated from a group and similar to belonging, this concept has also been vastly understudied in empirical research. As a vast quantity of transracial adoptees are classified as ethnic minorities within the U.S., racial socialization serves as an effort to prepare children in developing coping mechanisms to deal with racial prejudice and discrimination (Mohanty, 2013). Racial discrimination is a salient example of exclusion and transracially adopted children who are forced to experience this are at an increased risk for emotional or behavioral difficulties. In an eighteen-year follow-up of parents who adopted transracially adopted children, Fiegelman (2000) found that adjustment difficulties in relation to their adopted children were significantly related to the frequencies of the children's experiences with racial discrimination and negative statements about their racial backgrounds. The idea of racial socialization supports adopted children by preparing them to develop coping mechanisms to deal with prejudice and discrimination. In examining racial socialization, especially with the intent of preparing children to deal with racial bias and prejudice, DeBerry et al. (1996) found that adoptive parents' efforts to educate transracial adoptees about

racial issues predicted their Afrocentric reference group orientation and were related to their psychological adjustment. However, in contrast, Andujo (1998) found that when a transracial parent deemphasized racial socialization, transracial adoptees faced problems identifying with their ethnic group. Past research has shown that parents may downplay racist comments, make derogatory comments about racists, and in fewer cases, take a more active role in the community to promote social justice (Lee, 2003). Racial inculcation has assisted parents by teaching them coping skills to help their children effectively process any feelings of racism and/or discrimination that they may be experiencing. As a sense of belonging strives to mitigate feelings of exclusion for TRIA's, further research must be conducted to comprehensively understand the experiences of TRIA's and the traumas that are inflicted when they are unable to receive the adequate support that they need from their families and social networks.

Research Methods

Research Design

Qualitative methodology was used to examine how each adoptee experienced a sense of belonging. (Leavy, 2017; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). This study was approved by Seattle University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). When beginning the recruitment process for this study, the primary investigator (PI) utilized a purposeful and convenient sampling method so any young adult who met the study's requirements would be eligible to participate. Each participant had to be between the ages of 18 to 25 years old, identify as a transracial international adoptee, and have the ability to read and understand English. For the purposes of this research project, a transracial adoptee was an individual who has adoptive parents of a different race or ethnicity from their own. (Baden et al., 2012).

In order to recruit young adults who fit these particular requirements, the PI joined a nationwide Facebook group entitled "Transracial Adoption - Community of Learning and Support". To immerse themselves into a virtual community of potential research candidates, the PI posted a visual advertisement in the virtual community explaining that the purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of racial and ethnic belonging in transracial international adoptees. They also explained that the benefits of

participating in this study would be assisting in advancing racial and ethnic research in the adoption community and advancing clinical social work practice with TRIAs.

In addition to their social media outreach initiatives, the PI's advisor and personal connections assisted in sharing the study with their personal networks. Once the collaborative outreach was complete, interested research candidates emailed the PI to express their interest in the study. Once their interest was confirmed, each participant was required to review an informed consent document and reply back to confirm their interest. Five individuals decided to participate in the study; however, due to time constraints, the PI was only able to select three (N=3) participants to serve as the primary subjects of this study.

Table 1: Table Duration in Minutes per Interview

Participant Number	Interview Date	Interview Duration
Participant 1	February 24, 2022	16.33 minutes
Participant 2	February 23, 2022	13.01 minutes
Participant 3	March 4, 2022	14.46 minutes

*Participant numbers were assigned for confidentiality reasons

Data Collection

Zoom interviews were conducted with each of the three participants. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and each participant was asked the same questions followed by supplementary questions when deemed appropriate.

Interview questions included:

1. Please state the following demographic information
 - a. Age:
 - b. Pronouns:
 - c. Gender:

- d. Race:
 - e. Hometown:
 - f. Place of Origin:
2. As a transracial international adoptee, what does having a sense of belonging mean to you?
 3. How do you know if you've reached a sense of belonging?
 4. How have instances of racial exclusion or discrimination affected your perceptions of belonging?
 - a. Which communities have you immersed yourself in to feel a sense of belonging as a transracial international adoptee?

The purpose of these questions was to examine how each participant perceived their own sense of racial and ethnic belonging as a transracial international adoptee. The common theme of “belonging” was emphasized throughout all of the interviews, as the primary goal of this study is to understand how transracial international adoptees experience a sense of belonging in their interpersonal lives.

Once all of the interviews were completed, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and analyzed. Recurring themes were identified using a grounded theory framework.

Methodology

Grounded theory is an inductive approach that is sensitive to the context of social interactions or experiences. The purpose of grounded theory is to generate a framework that explains phenomena based on the qualitative experiences of participants (Corbin & Strass, 2008; Charmaz, 2000; Morse, 2009). In essence, grounded theory strives to explain how and why an event occurs or why or how individuals may choose to act a certain way. Because no current theory exists that explains the feelings of belonging of TRIA's, we analyzed the data grounded in the perceptions of our participants' experiences to explain the phenomenon.

Philosophical Statement

The social work principle of *dignity and worth of the person* emphasizes the value of respect for every client and their cultural and ethnic backgrounds (National Association of Social Workers, 2021). I have attempted to conduct this study from an anti-oppressive and culturally competent framework. As the transracial international adoptee status is unique, this study serves to represent their experiences.

Data Analysis

Each interview was transcribed three separate times to ensure proper accuracy of each participant’s verbal responses. Each interview was thematically analyzed and coded three times by both the primary investigator (PI) and the investigator’s primary advisor. Once all the interviews were fully coded, the PI created subthemes that emerged from the coded data. Lastly, the PI and their advisor came together to review the constructed themes and finalized the data analysis process by including participant quotes that represented each subtheme.

The author would like to note that the results shared in this thesis are preliminary results, based on one major theme that emerged from the interviews. This study is an ongoing project that is still in the process of data collection and analysis; however, the results that are represented in this write-up reflect my initial findings.

Results

Participant Demographics

All (N=3) adopted participants originated from different countries. Table 1 provides detailed demographic information of each participant.

Table 2: Table of Research Participants

Participant Number	Pronouns	Age	Ethnicity	Country of Origin
Participant 1	she/hers	19	Filipino	Taiwan

Participant 2	she/hers	20	Chinese-American	Nanchang Jiangxi, China
Participant 3	she/hers	22	African American	Ethiopia

*Participant numbers were assigned for confidentiality reasons

Two participants identified as Asian American and one identified as African American. Their ages ranged from 19 to 22 years old. Participants were born in Taiwan, Nanchang, Jiangxi, China, and Ethiopia.

Emergent themes

The overarching theme is participants' characterizations of a sense of belonging. Subthemes that emerged from the data set included the **ability to choose, internal perceptions, understanding yourself and your origins, and unconditional love.**

Theme 1: The ability to choose

Participants discussed experiences when they felt like they could choose with whom and what they surrounded themselves. This idea of choice aided in their ability to feel a sense of belonging. The concept of choice was represented in a way that allowed each participant to choose with whom they wanted to surround themselves, the communities in which they wanted to immerse themselves, and the plethora of activities in which they felt compelled to partake. The ability to choose holds extensive value and power for adoptees as it allows them to self-personalize their definition of belonging.

Participant 1 alludes to this as she recognizes her ability to choose individuals with whom she prefers to connect. Additionally, when reflecting upon her adoptive identity, she defines the concept of "family" as not needing to be derived from her biological origins but instead, she recognizes her choice in being able to select who she would like within her personal circles and family communities.

"I have that choice to pick and choose who I want in my circle and on my team, and in my family, and I mean if anything as an adoptee I've learned that family does not always mean blood, so you know, this is, this is my group, and this is my family." (Participant 1, age 19).

Participant 2 discussed the ability to choose within her academic and extracurricular activities. The ability to choose an academic major that is significant to her has allowed her to reflect upon her intersectional identities; one being an adoptee of color. Additionally, Participant 2 attributes her passion for leadership to her ability to choose as she relishes in the pleasures of being able to cultivate spaces of belonging for marginalized students. Through these interactions, Participant 2 was able to acknowledge her adoptive identity while reflecting upon how her acts of leadership have influenced her personal perceptions of belonging.

"The biggest thing that I've done is I work at the Diversity Center at my school. I've also chosen to study gender, sexuality, and race studies. So I just told myself that I wanted to get more involved with the community itself, not just within my studies. I'm a student leader, I'm doing a lot of things that involve me having to work with other students and other programs and that cross-campus exploration. Personally, for me, I joined what is called Sister Circle, which is a queer feminist, nonbinary, women of color, other you know, gender fluid women of color group, which has been really lovely. Um, and as well as I have joined in on some of the Asian Pacific Islander students association meetings as well. Attending those things helps me to further that identity exploration understanding of myself and how I work in society. " (Participant 2, age 20).

Participant 3 emphasized her importance of choice through her explanation of attending dance classes. Additionally, her choice of surrounding herself with an association of adoptive friends has helped her in feeling a sense of belonging.

"I was a competitive dancer growing up too and I spent basically all my life my entire childhood at the studio, and so I did feel a sense of belonging being on that team and working with those girls and a lot of them I don't talk to anymore, but it was that team environment that I really did enjoy and a lot of them were like sisters because we would be spending all of our time together,

and so I did feel a sense of belonging and when I was a competitive dancer at the studio and now, I do have a really great group of friends that are all adopted as well, and so I do find it's just there is a sense of belonging within all of us, because it's something we've all been looking for a really long time and so the first time we are hung out it just made sense and it just was easy and so that's the group I have now that I really feel a sense of belonging, with and connected to.” (Participant 3, Age 22)

Theme 2: Internal Perceptions

Participants described how they perceived themselves within specific social spaces and conversations. Throughout certain interactions, internal perceptions arose when participants felt a sense of imposterism or when they experienced the feeling of racial and ethnic exclusion. This representation helped participants to understand their intersectional identities in relation to societal expectations.

Participant 1 described her experience of how societal expectations had influenced her internal perceptions as an adoptee. Her statement represented how internal perceptions are influenced by external perceptions when determining an adoptee’s sense of belonging.

“Thank God, for my parents, but you know they do their best, but they are White and so sometimes they don't know what's going on in my head when we're in public as well, and at parties, I can't even count how many times I've been mistaken as a staff member. If we're at a party and like, ‘Can I get a champagne?’ or something like somebody would ask me that question, and I was like I'm sorry I don't work here, and so I always found myself lingering near the kitchen and near staff members and in whatever expensive thing my mom bought me to wear to that party, you know I would find myself belonging and feeling comfortable in the kitchen like doing the dishes or helping clean up because these people look like me and these, and this is where people pushed me because this is where they thought I was supposed to be.” (Participant 1, age 19)

As a Chinese American, Participant 2 was able to reflect upon her identity as an Asian American adoptee. She alluded to how her ethnic and cultural identities influenced her internal perceptions of feeling a sense of belonging.

“As a transracial adoptee, I know, my core belief is kind of like, having that separation. I have this innate feeling of always thinking, like, I don't belong in certain places because of adoption, trauma, and other things. But I think yep, feeling enough definitely is like, it's the disconnection of trying to relate to people's certain people's, usually each other Asian people who have grown up traditionally in Asian households, disconnection from that culture and trying to not one-up it, but like trying to compensate for that.” (Participant 2, age 20).

In the context of engaging in conversations, Participant 2 had also described how internal perceptions impacted her sense of belonging when verbally communicating with others. Understanding and acknowledging her own value while feeling comfortable with herself reinforces the importance of international perceptions for adoptees.

“A sense of belonging for me is feeling like I am contributing to usually a group but contributing to, to a conversation in a way that and doesn't feel like, I need to prove something to myself or prove to other people that I'm “enough”. Or like, I just am not as much in my head. I feel wholly within the conversation. But when I feel a sense of belonging, it's not worrying about whether people are thinking of me but it's feeling comfortable in my skin, and then having the ease of conversation and being able to actually being able to relate to discussion without, without completely understanding or, being uncomfortable with discussion.” (Participant 2, age 20).

Theme 3: Knowing yourself and your origins

This sub-theme emerged from participant stories about learning who “their people” are and where they came from. This theme guided participants through a process of discovering themselves and their biological roots.

Participant 3 shared how she found a sense of belonging in her racial origins. Due to her ability to remain self-aware, she was able to feel a sense of shared pride and belonging within the greater African American/Black community.

"I did find a lot of like belonging in my race, of being an African American in Africa. I've just been more accepting of getting to know more about my Ethiopian culture and embracing the fact that I am adopted, and that it is part of my story." (Participant 3, Age 22)

"Especially with other African Americans and other Black people too that aren't adopted and just there's just some form of like belonging there, even though I'm what wasn't raised by them or with them it's just kind of something like deeper." (Participant 3, Age 22).

Theme 4: Unconditional Love

Unconditional love was represented as ways that individuals or groups embraced the adopted participant such as intentional conversations and actions that were carefully curated to express one's love and affection toward adoptees. Each participant was able to find a sense of belonging in the realization that unconditional love was given by their adoptive family members and close peers.

Participant 1 clearly shared her experiences of how her parents nonjudgmentally chose her to be a part of their family. This allowed Participant 1 to feel safe when exploring her sense of belonging within her family environment.

“As a transracial adoptee you know that's the number one thing I learned as a kid like you know my parents love me unconditionally, even though I don't look like them. They didn't care what I look like. One of the number one questions that they were asked before they sent my picture to them was “this baby is much darker than a lot of Taiwanese babies here and they told and they told them, I was a Pacific highlander like I was from the mountains, and they said “We don't care. That doesn't matter to us” my parents always reminded me that “Nobody in their biological

family looks will look like me, but that doesn't matter, because we all love you no matter what”.

(Participant 1, age 19).

“ The three of us would sit down and she would always say “This is your team, we are your team, this is [Participant 1’s] team and we're here to support you and love you and your interests, and that includes sharing their own interests and excuse me, and God forbid, our interest don't align then you know what, you can just move on and keep going but with my mom especially she is like my best friend, but instilling that comfort and safety and knowing that there's always going to be someone out there who has similar interest to me and somebody who's always going to support me help me find my sense of belonging.” (Participant 1, age 19).

Participant 3 had to personally seek a place where she could feel unconditionally loved. In analyzing this interpretation of unconditional love, the element of *safety* contributed to her ability of feeling *a sense of belonging*.

“To be completely honest, this is still something I’ve been working to figure out for several years, mostly within the last three years, but I found a place where I like unconditionally loved and a place where it's okay for me to talk about my past experiences in Ethiopia” (Participant 3, Age 22)

Discussion and Implications

The primary goal of this study was to understand the various processes in which transracial international adoptees find a sense of belonging within themselves and their interpersonal environments. As there is a scant, present-day empirical research that discusses how adoptees find a sense of belonging within their daily lives, this study serves as a preliminary attempt in introducing this important topic. Within a social work context, adoption agency professionals should consider a sense of belonging when providing and delivering services for adoptees. Since many adoptees struggle with their physical

appearance, risk and protective factors in the development of belonging should be examined due to the potential impacts that they can have on an adoptee's overall mental health and wellbeing.

The subtheme of the ability to choose seems to be related to power and autonomy. Adoptees should be granted freedom of choice for who they want to surround themselves with in addition to any activities that they want to pursue. This will help them in finding a sense of belonging in the spaces that are of significant interest to them.

As adoptees frequently reflect upon internal perceptions of themselves, they typically experience challenges of being perceived as "different". It is important for adoptees to be given opportunities where they can freely express their thoughts and feelings. Social work clinicians should work to foster inclusive spaces where adoptees can feel holistically embraced for their adoptive identities. The harmful sentiments of guilt, unworthiness, and shame can be associated with societal and individualized stigmas of adoption therefore, it is essential for social service professionals to understand the importance of belonging for adoptees.

The ways in which adoptees are able to understand themselves and their origins served as an essential step in acknowledging their adoptive identities. This supports the idea that adoptees yearn for a safe space in which they can safely discover their biological and cultural roots without the fear of judgment. Furthermore, it portrays that the self-discovery process for adoptees requires a specific level of vulnerability and intimacy. Group environments where adoptees of similar origins and identities should be created so adoptees can find a sense of belonging in the process of collective self-discovery.

Feeling a sense of unconditional love can help establish a sense of comfort and trust for adoptees. When an individual expresses their unconditional love towards an adoptee, the adoptee is able to acknowledge that they were chosen to be loved and cared for. Making adoptive parents aware of the complexity and importance of belonging and unconditional love can help them in their expression of love towards their adoptees.

Limitations

It is important to note that this study has some limitations. Due to the small sample size of the study, the results cannot be generalized to the broader transracial international adoptee population. Moreover, the study's findings were unable to reach theoretical saturation due to the limited quantity of participants. Therefore, the final results of this study are considered preliminary and the stated themes and findings warrant further examination.

Conclusion

As a transracial international adoptee myself, conducting this study has been an enlightening experience from beginning to end. My findings are particularly significant because there is very limited empirical data that analyzes how transracial international adoptees are able to find a sense of belonging within themselves and the individuals and communities with whom they choose to surround themselves. As Participant 1 and Participant 2 identified as college students, further research should focus on how university programs assist young adoptees in finding a sense of belonging on their campuses. Similarly, further research should also expand to encompass how different extracurricular and leadership activities can contribute to adoptees feeling a sense of belonging.

This study provided a space for my adopted participants to internally reflect upon what it means to be a transracial international adoptee and how they found a sense of belonging in the spaces that they choose to occupy.

Conflict of interest

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest in relation to this study.

Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Guide (English)

1. Demographic information
 - a. Age:
 - b. Pronouns
 - c. Gender:
 - d. Race:
 - e. Hometown:
 - f. Place of Origin:
2. As a transracial international adoptee, what does having a sense of belonging mean to you?
3. How do you know if you've reached a sense of belonging?
4. How have instances of racial exclusion or discrimination affected your perceptions of belonging?
 - a. Can you give me an example?
 - b. Has this ever happened in high school? Or college?

Appendix B: Informed Consent Document



CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE: A study of racial and ethnic belonging amongst transracial international adoptees

INVESTIGATOR: Sheera Tamura, Seattle University School of Social Work, Bachelor of Social Work with Departmental Honors Candidate, tamurasheera@seattleu.edu, 808-282-7266

ADVISOR: Dr. Anne Farina, MSW, PhD, afarina@seattleu.edu, (206)-296-5497

PURPOSE: I am inviting you to participate in a research study “**A thematic analysis of transracial international adoptee’s perceptions of racial and ethnic belonging**”. This study aims to better understand how transracial international adoptees find a sense of belonging in relation to their race and ethnicity. You will be interviewed about your experiences as a transracial international adoptee and will be asked how your biological race and ethnicity impact your perceptions of belonging. The interview will take approximately 45 – 60 minutes and will be conducted via Zoom (accessible through a computer with internet access or via smartphone). Participation is completely voluntary, and participants may stop at any time.

SOURCE OF SUPPORT: This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the School of Social Work’s 2021-2022 Departmental Honors program at Seattle University.

RISKS: You may find some questions personal or upsetting. You can skip any questions that you don’t want to answer, or you they may stop participating in the interview entirely. If requested, the I (the primary investigator) can provide you with a list of mental health resources.

Only my advisor and I will have access to the information that you provide. If I decide to share your findings in publications or presentations, the results will be grouped, and we will be discarding individual results. If we decide to quote any part of your interview, we will not include any identifying information that could connect your words with the information that is being shared.

Regarding the interview itself, we will only be keeping the audio recording of the interviews and deleting the video recording. The audio recording will be used to transcribe the interviews using a secure version of Microsoft Excel. To minimize the risk of anyone seeing your data who shouldn’t, we will make sure that all of the transcriptions are anonymous. This data will not be kept for a span that is greater than 5 months.

BENEFITS: Through this study, I hope to better understand the experiences of transracial international adoptees. This study will also help to enhance racial and ethnic identity research, and it will assist social work clinicians to advance their practices.

INCENTIVES: All participants will receive a \$20 e-gift card as a thank you gift for your time and contributions. Your email will only be collected to send you your gift card. Once your gift card has been sent, I will delete your email and no information regarding your name or identity will be obtained or used within the publication of this study. Participation in the project will require no monetary cost to you.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your name will never be used in any public dissemination of these data (publications, presentations, etc. All research materials and consent documents will be stored in a password-protected folder using Seattle University's One Drive system. When this research study ends, any identifying information will be destroyed. All the information you provide will be kept confidential. However, if we learn you intend to harm yourself or others, we must notify the authorities.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW: Your participation in this study is completely *voluntary*. You may withdraw your consent to participate at any time without penalty. Your withdrawal will not influence any other services to which you may be otherwise entitled to.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS: A summary of the results of this research will be supplied to you, at no cost, upon request. Please feel free to contact me, Sheera Tamura via email: tamurasheera@seattleu.edu or by calling 808-282-7266.

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES: Should you need any mental health resources throughout the duration of the study, please refer to these supportive websites:

1. **Grow Beyond Words Psychological Services:**
<https://www.growbeyondwords.com/adoptee-therapist-directory/>
2. **The center for adoption support and education:** <https://adoptionssupport.org/>.
3. **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:**
<https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>
4. **Mental Health America:** <https://www.mhanational.org/finding-help>

These resources will also be available throughout the entire duration of each interview.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT: I have read the above statements and understand what is being asked of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my consent at any time, for any reason, without penalty. On these terms, I certify that I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if should I have any concerns about my participation in this study, I may call Sheera Tamura, who is asking me to participate in this study, at 808-282-7266. If I have any concerns that my rights are being violated, I may contact Dr. Michael Spinetta, Chair of the Seattle University Institutional Review Board at (206) 296-2585.

To advance to the interview process, please email tamurasheera@seattleu.edu to receive a doodle poll link. Once you fill out the poll, Sheera will contact you to confirm your interview date and time and she will send you additional information regarding the interview format.

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer



**SEATTLE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK**

DO YOU IDENTIFY AS A TRANSRACIAL INTERNATIONAL ADOPTEE?

I am conducting an undergraduate research study that will investigate a sense of racial and ethnic belonging amongst transracial international adoptees.

PARTICIPANT CRITERIA

- 18-25 years of age
- Must identify as a transracial international adoptee
- Must be able to speak in English
- Must consent to participate in a 40-60 minute zoom interview

PRIMARY INVESTIGATOR

Sheera Tamura
tamurasheera@seattleu.edu
808-282-7266
BSW Candidate with Departmental Honors

*All participants will receive a \$20 e- giftcard as a token for participating

References

- Ainsworth, M.,D. (1989). Attachments beyond infancy. *The American Psychologist*, 44(4), 709-716. doi:10.1037/0003-066X.44.4.709
- Allen, K-A., Kern, M. L., Rozek, C. S., McInerney, D. M., & Slavich, G. M. (2021). Belonging: a review of conceptual issues, an integrative framework, and directions for future research. *Australian Journal of Psychology*, 73(1), 87-102. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00049530.2021.1883409>
- Anant, S. S. (1967). Belongingness, Anxiety and Self-Sufficiency: Pilot Study. *Psychological Reports*, 20(3_suppl), 1137–1138. <https://doi.org/10.2466/pr0.1967.20.3c.1137>
- Anant, S.S. (1966). The need to belong. *Canada's Mental Health* 14, 21-27.
- Andujo, E. (1988). Ethnic Identity of Transethnically Adopted Hispanic Adolescents. *Social Work*, 33(6), 531–535. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23715675>
- Barroso, R., & Barbosa-Ducharne, M. (2019). Adoption-related feelings, loss, and curiosity about origins in adopted adolescents. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 24(4), 876–891. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104519858117>
- Baumeister, R. F., & Leary, M. R. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. *Psychological Bulletin; Psychol Bull*, 117(3), 497-529. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.117.3.497
- Berger, R. (2015). Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*, 15(2), 219–234. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794112468475>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. doi:10.1191/1478088706qp063oa
- Brodzinsky, D. M., Schechter, M. D., & Henig, R. M. (1992). *Being adopted: The lifelong search for self*. New York, NY: Anchor.
- Charmaz, K. (2000). *Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods*. (Handbook of qualitative research.) Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Coleman, P. (2019). In-depth interviewing as a research method in healthcare practice and education: value, limitations, and considerations.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. *Organizational Research Methods*, 12(3), 614–617. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428108324514>
- Davidson, L., Hoge, M.A., Merrill, M.E., Rakfeldt, J., & Griffith, E. (1995). The experiences of long-stay inpatients returning to the community. *Psychiatry*, 58, 122-132.
- DeBerry, K. M., Scarr, S., & Weimberg, R. (1996). Family racial socialization and ecological competence: longitudinal assessment of African-American transracial adoptees. *Child Development*, 67, 2375–2399

Feigelman, W. (2000). Adjustments of transracially and inracially adopted young adults. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 17, 165–183.

Fishler, E.H., Sperling, M.B., & Carr, A.C. (1990). Assessment of adult relatedness: a review of empirical findings from object relations and attachment theories. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 55, 499-520.

Floersch, J., Longhofer, J. L., Kranke, D., & Townsend, L. (2010). Integrating Thematic, Grounded Theory and Narrative Analysis: A Case Study of Adolescent Psychotropic Treatment. *Qualitative Social Work*, 9(3), 407–425. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325010362330>

Gray, D. (2018) *Doing Research in the Real World*. 4th Edition. London. Sage.

Hamilton, E. R., Samek, D. R., Keyes, M., McGue, M. K., & Iacono, W. G. (2015). Identity Development in a Transracial Environment: Racial/Ethnic Minority Adoptees in Minnesota. *Adoption quarterly*, 18(3), 217–233. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2015.1013593>

Hagerty, B.M., & Williams, R.A. (1999). The effects of sense of belonging, social support, conflict, and loneliness on depression. *Nursing Research*, 48 (4), 215-219.

Hagerty, B. M., Williams, R. A., Coyne, J. C., & Early, M. R. (1996). Sense of belonging and indicators of social and psychological functioning. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing*, 10(4), 235-244. doi:[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-9417\(96\)80029-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0883-9417(96)80029-X)

Hagerty, B. M. K., Lynch-Sauer, J., Patusky, K. L., Bouwsema, M., & Collier, P. (1992). Sense of belonging: A vital mental health concept. *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing; Arch Psychiatr Nurs*, 6(3), 172-177. doi:10.1016/0883-9417(92)90028-H

Hoffman, J., & Peña, E. V. (2013). Too korean to be white and too white to be korean: Ethnic identity development among transracial korean american adoptees. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 50(2), 152-170. doi:10.1515/jsarp-2013-0012

Jamshed S. (2014). Qualitative research method-interviewing and observation. *Journal of basic and clinical pharmacy*, 5(4), 87–88. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0976-0105.141942>

King, V., & Boyd, L. M. (2016). Factors Associated With Perceptions of Family Belonging Among Adolescents. *Journal of marriage and the family*, 78(4), 1114–1130. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12322>

Kim, G. S., Suyemoto, K. L., & Turner, C. B. (2010). Sense of belonging, sense of exclusion, and racial and ethnic identities in korean transracial adoptees. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology; Cultur Divers Ethnic Minor Psychol*, 16(2), 179-190. doi:10.1037/a0015727

Leavy, P. (2017). *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. New York, New York; London England]: New York, New York; London England: The Guilford Press.

Lee, R. M. (2003). The transracial adoption paradox: History, research, and counseling implications of cultural socialization. *The Counseling Psychologist; Couns Psychol*, 31(6), 711-744. doi:10.1177/0011000003258087

- Malhotra, P. (2013). An Autoethnographic Journey of Intercountry Adoption. *The Qualitative Report*, 18, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2013.1480>
- Maslow, L.A. (1954). *Motivation and Personality*. New York: Harper. & Row Publishers
- Mohanty, J. (2013). Ethnic and racial socialization and self-esteem of Asian adoptees: The mediating role of multiple identities. *Journal of Adolescence (London, England.); J Adolesc*, 36(1), 161-170. doi:10.1016/j.adolescence.2012.10.003
- National Association of Social Workers. (2017). *Code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847>
- Phinney, J. S. (1992). The multigroup ethnic identity measure: A new scale for use with diverse groups. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 7(2), 156-176. doi:10.1177/074355489272003
- Phinney, J. S., & Alipuria, L. L. (1990). Ethnic identity in college students from four ethnic groups. *Journal of Adolescence*, 13(2), 171-183. doi:https://doi.org/10.1016/0140-1971(90)90006-S
- Sargent, J., Williams, R. A., Hagerty, B., Lynch-Sauer, J., & Hoyle, K. (2002). Sense of belonging as a buffer against depressive symptoms. *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*, 8(4), 120–129. <https://doi.org/10.1067/mpn.2002.127290>
- Silverman, A. R. (1993). Outcomes of transracial adoption. *The Future of Children: Adoption*, 3, 104-108
- Suyemoto, K. L. (2002b). Redefining “Asian American” identity: Reflections on differentiating ethnic and racial identities for Asian American individuals and communities. In L. Zhan (Ed.), *Asian voices: Vulnerable populations, model interventions, and emerging agendas* (pp. 195–231). Boston: Jones and Bartlett.
- Taormina, R. J., & Gao, J. H. (2013). Maslow and the motivation hierarchy: Measuring satisfaction of the needs. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 126(2), 155-177. doi:10.5406/amerjpsyc.126.2.0155
- Thornberg, R. & Charmaz, K. (2014). Grounded theory and theoretical coding. In *The SAGE handbook of qualitative data analysis* (pp. 153-169). SAGE Publications Ltd, <https://www.doi.org/10.4135/9781446282243>
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2001). The AFCARS report: Interim FY 1999 estimates as of June 2001 (6). Retrieved November 1, 2021, from <http://www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/cb/publications/afcars/june2001.pdf>
- Watkins, D. C., & Gioia, D. (2015). *Mixed methods research*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199747450.001.0001>
- Van Der Walt, Johannes L. (2020). Interpretivism-constructivism as a research method in the humanities and social sciences -more to it than meets the eye Online. doi:10.15640/ijpt.v8n1a5

