Development of bicultural competence: Factors Facilitating Bicultural Identity Amongst Internationally Adopted
Youth (by American Parents) to Develop into Competence

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Adoption is an interesting dynamic created between parent and child, internationally adopted youth must effectively straddle between their native and new culture. In the United States, the majority of transracial adoptions are between European American parents and racial minority children (85% of these are international adoptions, the top country is China) (Thomas & Tessler, 2007). Certain parents may be more likely to adopt children and according to the research found, parental characteristics during childhood/adolescent development greatly impact bicultural competence in adopted youth. Research on international adoption notes that achieving a balance between acknowledging a child's ethnic heritage and permitting a sense of belonging within the family and culture increases the likelihood of becoming competent (Scherman, 2010). Features impacting ethnic identity development leading to bicultural competence revealed from literature reviews revealed impacts of parental characteristics, promotion of bicultural socialization within families, the importance of context, youth perceptions (based on developmental stage), and the importance of ethnic exploration by youth.

Bicultural identity is defined as an extension of ethnic identity defined as having knowledge of language, lifestyle characteristics, and patterns of interpersonal behavior of two distinct cultural groups (Scherman, 2010). Social identity theory expands upon this idea positing that since identification is more likely to occur with groups that are valued, a positive ethnic identity is best facilitated by exposure to information and experiences that communicate the inherent value of the particular ethnic group (Bailey, 2006). Bicultural competence is the process by which individuals are able to successfully meet the demands of two distinct cultures. It includes: knowledge about cultural beliefs and values, a positive attitude towards both groups, bicultural efficacy, communication ability, role repertoire, and a sense of being grounded in both cultures.

Bicultural identity and competence are impacted by socialization: the process by which people learn the attitudes, values, and behavior of their culture; the main ingredients include the family, school, and the community (Thomas & Tessler, 2007). Adopted children ultimately become socialized via their parents and increasingly socialize themselves independently as they develop. Thomas and Tessler hypothesized two main functions of bicultural socialization: to socialize children in the dominant culture to clarify their role in the larger society, as well

as to socialize them in their birth culture.   This concept promotes bicultural competence as it allows children to negotiate between two cultures.

Being culturally competent is a difficult enough task and bicultural competence seems that much more difficult to achieve. It should be noted that various research articles mentioned the lack of explicit study to determine if children can and should develop bicultural competence. A literature review by Scherman concluded that bicultural identity is not probable in all adoption cases, even when the parent's are committed to facilitating that development in their child (Scherman, 2010). Thomas and Tessler stress positive results from bicultural socialization showing results of higher self-esteem, more positive racial and ethnic identities, higher educational achievement, and overall higher levels of adult adjustment. Infinite factors, between the individual, family, and other contexts impact this adjustment in straddling between two cultures impacting positive and negative psychological outcomes.

Overall, research discusses the theoretical debate concerning possible positive and negative outcomes of bicultural identity and concludes the positive effect of allowing for 'psychological flexibility' which allows the person to select features of the two cultures that enhance their adaptability to different situations (Scherman, 2010). Flexibility to pick both cultures allows for endless combinations of ways to encourage bicultural competence. This allows the youth to transition from various environments as well, enabling them potential to develop appropriate coping skills and resource-use to bolster resiliency. Variables relating to adoptive parents greatly impact achievement and promotion of bicultural competence.

Bicultural identity is strongly encouraged by parents of internationally adopted youth. Parenting style of the majority of parents who adopt is a mixed approach, they want their children to learn about and appreciate diverse groups of people. Smaller percentages minimized group differences, utilizing a color-blind approach, which emphasizes shared human qualities and individual self-worth (Scherman, 2010). The Minnesota International Adoptions Team uses a past parenting model to propose parenting styles utilized on internationally adopted children. Enculturation beliefs and racialization beliefs serve as two paths parents may choose which lead to direct and indirect methods used on children. Racialization beliefs refer to the parent's belief in the importance of making the child aware of racism and discrimination and developing appropriate coping skills to manage these experiences.

Enculturation beliefs refers to the parent's belief in the importance of providing the child with cultural opportunities that promote ethnic awareness, knowledge, pride, identity, values, and behaviors. These two paths lead to direct opportunities for their children (i.e. celebrating cultural holidays (enculturation) or teaching coping strategies (race)) and indirect opportunities for their children (i.e. post-adoption support groups (enculturation) or talking with teachers about child's adoption (race)). (Lee, et al, 2006). Results from Lee about parenting beliefs and behaviors (parents were ethnically different from internationally adopted children) showed that parents had low mean scores on color-blind racial attitudes and high mean scores on enculturation and racialization parenting beliefs.

Bailey promotes assessment of adoptive parents' cultural understanding, education of children's identity needs, and provision of resources and support for their education of the child's birth culture. The relative value placed upon various aspects of the child's birth culture varies but the key is that "parents appreciate the culture, communicate the value of the culture, and possess the knowledge and resources to facilitate the child's ethnic identity at a level congruent with the child's age and interest (Bailey, 2006)." Various authors also point out that psychological adjustment of adoptees is maximized when parents acknowledge their children's physical differences but emphasize their psychological similarities. Parents of adopted children may refer to the family based on the child's birth country, for example, referring to the family as Brazilian American. This construction serves to reduce the child's sense of isolation or differentness. Most adoptive families were open to human diversity, yet differed in their perspective and approaches towards race and ethnicity; there are limitless ways to educate children about multiculturalism. Parents classified as sensitive-to diversity want their children to learn about/appreciate people from many cultures, whereas universalist approaches emphasize individual self-worth and shared humanity. Both classifications anticipated that providing these lenses for their children to view the world from would bolster self-esteem and help the children cope with racial insults, bias, or discrimination aimed at them (Friedlander, et al, 2000).

Many adoptive parents seem aware of their child's changing identification utilizing both cultures. In a qualitative study, one parent stated: "Early on, they were just kids…but to the extent that the differences became apparent to them and they looked for explanations as they grew older…we gave them explanations and so, yes, it has changed from being just a kid in a house to being an Asian kid in an Anglo world." (Friedlander, et al, 2000).

This expectation that their children's self-identification with the birth culture will grow stronger with age influences the comfort ability and perhaps pressure placed on resolving bicultural confusion and uncertainty.

Three components largely shape bicultural competence: parents, communities, and networks. Parental attitudes about bicultural socialization do predict children's engagement in bicultural activities; the more positive parent beliefs and attitudes are the more likely the youth are to participate in birth-culture activities (Thomas & Tessler, 2007). Community impacts the parent's social networks; if a community provides contact with immigrants from the children's birth country the levels of bicultural competence should also increase especially if parental social networks facilitate this contact. The parent's social network serves as the groundwork for the child's development of future social networks, serving as role models. A key component for internationally adopted children is to be exposed to positive role models from their own birth country (Thomas & Tessler, 2007). Thinking about the larger community leads to discussion of city demographics and racial composition; overall racial diversity does not support ethnic socialization. Thomas and Tessler found that it is the presence of one's own ethnic group that tends to be crucial to ethnic socialization.

Parent social networks and exposure to role models from origin country are mediated by the adopted parent's economic status. Middle- and upper-class children have significantly more interaction with adults than working-class and poor children; therefore adopted children from more privileged backgrounds will have more opportunity to form their own social networks (Thomas & Tessler, 2007). Household income of the adopted family greatly determines the availably of resources such as money, time, and access to learning opportunities.

If the parents adopting are not from the same culture, they often seek education to learn more about their adopted child's birth country. Becoming more educated about the culture may also reflect the parent's education levels. Parental education levels are positively correlated with promoting the children's learning in a variety of ways, i.e. library visits, museum tours, and providing educational materials (Thomas & Tessler, 2007). Friedlander and colleagues research on bicultural identification found that parents often choose a birth country to adopt form based on the convenience or a feeling of comfort with people from that culture or because they wanted their second adopted child to be from the same country as the first. Many adoptive families within the United States are white

middle class couples living in middle-class communities and attend adoptive family support group functions (Friedlander, et, al, 2000). These variable and contexts are evermore changing, however it is important to look at this historical base of parent characteristics and comfort level with knowledge of birth country as it correlates to the parent's follow-through for continued education and positive immersion experiences related to their child's birth country.

Parental age influences bicultural outcomes; as parental age increases, children experience greater developmental progress in resolving bicultural identity events. Greater autonomy of late adulthood may allow them more time to support their children's exposure to [Chinese] culture and allow them to spend more time with their children. However, older parents may experience reduced energy limiting the cultural support they are able to provide (Thomas & Tessler, 2007). As today's family structures change and more single-parents adopt, preliminary research shows that being a single-parent is linked to increased risk of a variety of negative developmental outcomes compared with children who grow up in two-parent families.

Socialization in the birth culture depends on the parent's motivation to do so for children adopted in infancy/early toddler hood. Scherman mentioned a study by Tessler, Gamache, and Liu (1999) on families adopting children from China which showed that if parents showed a strong interest in their children knowing about American culture, they also exhibited a strong desire for their children to know Chinese culture (Scherman, 2010). Scherman extrapolated further and noted the extreme difficulty for a family to become truly biculturally competent. This would require more family foundation in the Chinese culture than most adoptive parents realistically have available to them in their surrounding community. Parents can only do 'so much' to socialize and educate the secondary culture for their children; it is understandable that the children would be reared in the American belief system rather than their international birth country's belief system (i.e. parents could convey the Eastern concept of collectivism but will most likely raise children in Western tradition of individualism).

Lee showed that adoptive parents with children considered minority in the United States were more likely to engage in cultural socialization practices (than parents with children racially more similar to whites). Bailey's research showed that U.S. parents that internationally adopted, as compared to U.S. parents who inter-ethnically

domestically adopted, were more active in adoption support groups. He suggests that parents adopting internationally, especially those attending support groups, may be more attuned to their children's cultural needs. Freidlander and colleague's research confirms this as well, finding that parents make significant efforts to relate to their children's birth culture: being actively involved in promoting diversity in their children's school, attending a culture camp, bring culture into the home (food, dance, music), and making efforts to create ties with people from their child's birth country.

The Minnesota International Adoption Project Team claims two important determinants of cultural socialization as parents' attitudes about the salience or race and their belief in the value and importance of cultural socialization. Such beliefs impacting parenting styles (low-color blind racial attitude) alone are not sufficient to ensure cultural socialization; parents must give conscious and specific thought to whether they want to engage in cultural socialization with their children. These cultural socialization experiences, in turn, have been found to contribute to ethnic identity and well-being (Lee, et al, 2006). Parental awareness of the value in ethnic identity and well-being offers a strong relationship between adoptive parents and their internationally adopted child.

Separating a child's bicultural socialization from identification with their own parents is almost impossible. Since most children internationally adopted are a minority population within the United States, oftentimes the children are physically different from their parents. Same-race and transracially adopted children begin to become aware of racial differences, as well as their adoptive status, around 4-5 years old (Lee, et al, 2006). Knowledge of adoption may come earlier for children of color with white parents because of the visible physical differences (Friedlander, et al, 2000). According to Thomas and Tessler this awareness encourages children to test causal hypotheses related to bicultural socialization. As these youth grow older they develop a more concrete understanding of what it means to look physically different from their parents.   The child's cognitive understanding of being adopted, being an immigrant, and being an ethnic minority develop simultaneously; resulting complex and multi-determined feelings can be overwhelming because of the intense feelings and emotions surrounding this complicated awareness surrounding a possible bicultural identity (Friedlander, et al, 2000).

Despite birth country, adopted children seemed to have more Euro-American cultural identities, therefore making their birth country the second culture. Scherman noted that the children rarely reported feeling pressure to "choose" one identity over another-this supports the concept in bicultural competence, providing children with flexibility to "use what works" from both cultures and integrate these pieces effectively and efficaciously into their life functioning. Similarly, research by Friedlander and colleagues found that the majority of children reported feeling "different" from others, yet most reported little or no pressure to choose one ethnicity over the other. American parents seem to exhibit what Lee calls "child choice", a mix of freedom and responsibility towards ethnic exploration. The lines of communication are kept open within families but the ultimate decision to explore is the child's to act upon (changes with age).

During this time children may begin to experience feelings of loss of birth culture and family history and the growing awareness of racism and discrimination in their everyday lives; these feelings of loss are associated with lower self-worth particularly in pre-adolescent years (Lee, et al, 2006). However, if positive messages about birth culture are communicated to the child the child's evaluation of their ethnic identity and of their own personal worth and feelings of competence will tend to be positive (Bailey, 2006). Previous discussion of adoptive parents and community offering positive same-race role models for their adopted children would also promote well-being and hopefully higher self-worth. Young children tend to unquestioningly view themselves as biracial if they are exposed to both cultures and their parents foster an open dialogue on the topic, however by the age of 13-14, these youth often feel peer pressure to choose a single racial designation. Perhaps once proud of their birth heritage, many adopted children are uncertain about their race. Negative effects on child well-being increase if the youth find themselves ill equipped to handle bias, discrimination, and racial insults (Friedlander, et al, 2000).

Bicultural stress in adolescence is commonplace in both adoptive and non adoptive populations. Bicultural stress is associated with more depressive symptoms and less optimism, additionally lower SES, male gender, and not speaking English are associated with more stress. Being female was significantly related to expressing more depressive symptoms when assessing impacts of bicultural stress (Romero, et al, 2007). Simply *being* an adolescent impacts perceptions and purposefulness of ethnic exploration in all youth. Going through adolescence specifically

presents internationally-adopted youth with higher levels of exposure to ethnic status, racial stereotypes, personal independence, and opportunities for both experimentation and maturity (Shiao & Tuan, 2008).

Stressors related to bicultural stress include: discrimination, negative stereotypes, intergenerational acculturation gaps (perhaps seen in adoptive family), and pressure to speak multiple languages. The acculturative stress model encompasses these variables and involves stress stemming from adaptation to the majority culture and maintaining the culture of origin. Additionally, these youth may notice other youth who do not have one ethnic majority influencing their perceptions and self-concept. Increasingly more locations in the United States do not have an ethnic majority, this leads to more ambivalence regarding how to "fit in", or even if "fitting in" is necessary (Romero, et al, 2007). These psychosocial tasks are extremely difficult and complicated for any human being to undergo!

A hopeful finding by Friedlander and colleagues shows a major theme that international adoptees see their adoption as "good" or "better" than remaining in their birth country. One teen stated: "You can do two things, like you can have two cultures and keep them equally balanced if you try to or you want to." A negative aspect mentioned by the children interviewed involved being annoyed from others (peers) continually questioning them; this can create feelings of ambivalence and requires appropriate coping skills (Friedlander, et al, 2000).

Peer discriminations may be the most salient for adolescent adopted youth. Pressure is usually placed on "fitting into" the majority ethnic group; however adolescents put pressure on those within their own ethnic group to maintain their culture of origin when not part of the majority culture. This conflicting 'tug of war' atmosphere parallels the "*transracial adoption paradox*" discussed later on in this paper. Romero and colleagues found no interaction between ethnicity and stress suggesting that the experience of bicultural stress by majority groups may have similar impacts on mental health as the experience of minority groups. However, European Americans experienced bicultural stress significantly less frequently than ethnic minority youth (Romero, et al, 2007).

As part of bicultural identity, youth begin exploring their ethnicity, acting as scientists testing hypotheses and learning about their biculturalism. Primarily nonwhites engage in ethnic exploration and only among whites do

findings show that self-esteem is not correlated with ethnic identity development (Shiao & Tuan, 2008). Internationally adopted youth typically feel a threat of marginalization and concern about not fitting into either culture. Ethnic misidentification is difficult to overcome perhaps causing the child to feel excluded from both cultural groups. An example being: a black child raised by white parents who ethnically self-identify as white may experience rejection from the white community due to the fact that physically he presents as black. On the other hand, since his racial group orientation is white, he may be shunned by the black community (Scherman, 2010). Another example is having a Chinese phenotype and an American name which increases the difficulty in negotiating between the two cultures. Thomas and Tessler title this the *"transracial adoption paradox"* and also emphasize the impact the degree of "fit "between adoptive families and their community context has on affecting children's identity development.

The child's age influences the frequency and type of cultural activities they engage in, impacting cultural competence. As a result of cognitive development, older children are better equipped to participate in a broader range of activities related to bicultural socialization (Thomas & Tessler, 2007). They may become more vocal and express which activities they enjoy doing and would like to increase experience/mastery in. Adoptive parents with younger children may be more likely to engage in cultural socialization practices because younger children are often more receptive to these activities and opportunities. There are more postadoption resources available to families who adopted more recently as well (Lee, et al, 2006). It is important for parents to remain sensitive to the child's level of interest in the birth culture.

Interest in the birth culture is likely to ebb and flow throughout childhood and even into adulthood, some international adoptees may not hold great interest to ethnically explore. As these adoptees age they become part of various social groups (categories) and the resulting social identity likely reflects the construction of their social identity (Bailey, 2006). Many of these journal articles noted that ethnic identification is not important for some youth, but very pertinent in other adoptee's lives but stressed the overall efficacy of becoming aware of bicultural identity.

Shiao and Tuan researched Korean adoptees and how the social environment mediates ethnic exploration upon entering adulthood.   They saw motivation for exploration related to crisis events (overwhelming beliefs about social belonging) or to a growing awareness of group membership (conflicting views/attitudes between themselves and groups in contact with). Korean adoptees that deliberately reflected on ethic exploration displayed gradual motivation and those that internalized the norms and perspectives from participating in new networks displayed dramatic motivation (an emergent strategy for social belonging). Nonexploration in Korean adoptees resulted in three factors: absence of opportunities, inability to partake in existing opportunities, and a lack of interest. Ethnic exploration demanded: "personal freedom from family responsibilities and significant personal problems, an institutional proximity to opportunities for exploration, and the combination of two attitudes (the sense that their racial visibility limited their social acceptance and openness to (or at least neutrality about) the prospect of interacting with other Asians)). (Shiao & Tuan, 2008)."

Across all the contexts measured, higher education was the most fertile setting for these adults to continue ethnic exploration because of the vast amount of opportunities and events offered. When adult adoptees were not enrolled in a University, ethnic exploration was an "all or nothing" situation. Motivations become increasingly independent as adopted youth enter adulthood. Some even engage in homeland visits, however these visits did not encourage a closer identification with nonadopted Asian Americans, it strengthened distinctive identity as adoptees (Shiao & Tuan, 2008). In sum, exploration into adulthood depends on class, therefore one's likelihood to enter a University.

As a professional counselor in-training I feel an obligation to think about ways of interacting with adoptive families and internationally adopted youth. This population is increasing in our society today and this current research is sure to change in the future. Currently, however Lee stresses that agencies tailor services to address these aspects of cultural socialization. Prospective parents might be encouraged to think beyond racial awareness toward self-examination of their cultural belief systems and what it means to engage in culturally competent parenting and to nurture cultural competence in their children. Adoptive parents whose children are currently

struggling with ethnic and racial issues may benefit from learning additional ways to engage in cultural socialization (Lee, et al, 2006).

Social workers, counselors and other social service professionals can better assess cultural understanding and a desire to learn to better foster bicultural competence in adopted clients. Suggestions from the Bailey article focus on counselor education, assessment, support/resources, and monitoring/support. Being aware and educated about cultural resources and the provision of specific services both increases their involvement in the community and increases the client's support network. Sufficient knowledge about the theories of ethnic identify development throughout the lifespan will help keep professionals grounded in the individualized process of ethnic identity formation and understanding the connection of ethnic identity to psychosocial adjustment and well-being. Professionals "must utilize their evaluative skills to determine the parents' ability and readiness to parent an internationally adopted child in a way that upholds the children's right to their ethnicity (Bailey, 2006)." Social service organizations must also research and maintain appropriate resources that support parents in becoming cultural educators. After children have been adopted monitoring and support, with assessments evaluating the children's knowledge of/appreciation for their culture or origin and levels of interest in exploring both cultures, provide continued support and tailored services promoting healthy psychosocial adjustment (Bailey, 2006).

Encouraging clients to identify themselves biculturally and gain more knowledge about the birth culture after assessing the family/individual needs is a counselor 'must'. This cannot be done if a counselor ignores the developmental appropriateness of interventions used. Reminding and focusing on strengthening family psychosocial bonds also should be implemented to help parents understand that their children's sadness and sense of loss is normal under the circumstances and may ebb and flow per events occurring in various social microcosms (i.e. school, daycare, work). (Friedlander, et al, 2000).

Implications for future research suggest that it is imperative to move beyond the "tendency to see ethnicity, culture, and even acculturation, as relating only to minority populations (Scherman, 2010)." In ethnic socialization literature, theories of ethnic identity development pertain almost exclusively to people of color. Research on ethnic socialization within same-race intercountry adoptions could ask questions such as: Are the issues surrounding

biculturalism in intercountry adoption different when the parties involved are racially-and likely visually-similar?, To what extent is the cultural identification process different for children of color adopted by parents of color or for white children from European countries? (Friedlander, et al, 2000), and how factors related to parenting internationally adopted youth are different if the parent identifies with a minority population?

Much of the research saw promise in developing more valid assessment tools that can reliably measure biculturalism. It will be tricky to agree on what constitutes any given culture and therefore what leads to competence in the multi-faceted cultures the world is made up of (especially heterogeneous European culture), however there is great value to create an assessment, for example we could then better answer questions regarding if internationally adopted youth can bring culture with them, retain/loose (to what degree), and if the birth culture can be learned once living in America. Development of assessment tools measuring biculturalism would complement further research about the developmental process by which older international adoptees (who bring memories of birth culture with them into new families) acquire their second culture.

We should conduct more research on mental health implications, according to Romero and colleagues: "There is a need to understand youth resiliency in the face of discrimination, prejudice, and adolescent acculturation transitions at home and school (Romero, et al, 2007)." A better understanding of positive buffers for bicultural stress and develop health promotion programs to prevent or limit negative effects on adolescent mental well-being would make agencies better able to educate clients and prevent or treat issues related to bicultural competence.

Achieving bicultural competence is a complicated task, however current data glistens positively towards internally adopted youth being well-equipped with a foundation for ethnic exploration. American parents seem to exhibit supportive factors and environments for their children to grow up in, there is "something special" about parents who want to adopt. Aside from individual differences in children, bicultural competence increases well-being in youth. Motivation to explore biculturalism in youth depends on the salience of racial visibility and the conditions for exploration within particular life stages. The developmental tasks and processes children are undergoing are extremely important to remain cognizant of as parents, teachers, counselors, and social service agents work with adoptive populations.

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