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Sense of Self: Adult Korean Adoptees' Reunion Journeys

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Abstract: This study uses a qualitative approach to explore how Adult Korean Adoptees relationships with their birth families affect their developing sense of self. From in-depth interviews with the participants, four themes emerged. Two conclusions were drawn from these findings that provide implications for adult educators and practitioners.

Introduction

International adoption in Korea was initiated in 1953 after the Korean War. Korean-born children were raised in European-American adoptive families and have become the first generation and largest group of international adoptees. Several studies have focused on international adoptees' identity development and have suggested that adoptive parents need to play an active role in exposing adoptees to their own culture (Huh & Reid, 2000; Huh 2007). However, these studies only account for the adoptees' childhood, while the quest for identity continues into adulthood. According to Shiao and Tuan (2008), adult adoptees continuously experience identity development over their life spans through cultural exploration and activities, including joining one's own ethnic group, discovering ethnic information, and visiting one's homeland. In fact, the number of adult Korean adoptees from the United States and Europe who visit Korea has risen to between 3,000 and 5,000 a year (Kim, 2007).

Common reasons given by adoptees searching for their biological families are related to five motivations: a desire to look for a sense of belonging; a need to know medical and biological information; the obligation to assure birthparents of the adoptees' well-being (Sachdev, 1992); a need to reduce stigmas (March, 1995); and a wish to have a relationship with their birth families in order to fill the gaps of loss and grief (Howe, Feast & Coster, 2000). Among these motivations, the issue related to identity is the most significant reason for searching and reuniting with birth families (Trinder, Feast, & Howe, 2004; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Through reunion experiences, adoptees may have opportunities to gain information about their birth and roots in order to solve personal mysteries and achieve a better "sense of self" (Passmore & Feeney, 2009, p.101). While this phenomenon remains a vital issue for adult Korean adoptees and for other international adult adoptees, no meaningful and persistent attention has been paid to these groups, nor has sufficient attention been paid to supporting their ethnic and racial development in adulthood. Through exploring adult Korean adoptees' ways of knowing related to their relationships with their birth families, this study can provide supports that are developmentally imperative for adult Korean adoptees. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how Adult Korean Adoptees' (AKAs) relationships with their birth families affect their developing sense of self.

Theoretical Framework

Studies in the field of adult education often view self through a humanistic approach, which seeks out an ideal self, referred to as a unitary self, by emphasizing excessive individualism and a separation from the social world (Clark & Dirkx, 2000). However, self rarely exists outside of society so that it is not appropriate to explain the understanding of self by excluding relationships with others and the broader society (Brookfield, 2002; Fromm, 2004). Indeed, living in the postmodern era, where

increasing complexities, different cultures, and diverse ideas continue to influence individuals, inevitably challenges the conventional view of the self (Gergen, 1991).

Relating the self with others in society, Kegan argues that developing complex ways of making meaning is necessary in order to meet the increased demands of modern life. In order to examine the complexities of adult Korean adoptees and their growth and senses of self, Kegan's (1982, 1994) constructive-developmental theory is used for an explanation of development as our way of knowing ourselves related to our surroundings by articulating transformations in our meaning making. By analyzing the meaning system, this framework permits exploration as a way of looking at self-development. In this process, Kegan (1994) highlights the importance of one's developmental capacities because it describes the relationship between cognitive, individual and contextual factors that all influence or mediate an adult's meaning making. Developmental capacities are described as ways of knowing in which individuals perceive a certain knowledge to claim understanding, construct identity to interpret or form the self, and establish relationships with others as well as self within the milieu (Baxter Magolda, Abes, & Torres, 2009; Drago-Severson, 2004). According to Kegan (1982), increased or changed capacities broaden individual's perspectives on self and others. Exploring one's self development, thus, is essential to look at not only individuals' changes of meaning but also their changing developmental capacities. From this approach, I am interested in exploring adult Korean adoptees' reunification experiences with their birth families, which influence different means of developing their sense of self.

Research Design

Focusing on meaning and how meaning is constructed, narrative inquiry guides my study and enables me to explore Adult Korean Adoptees' (AKAs) reunion experience. This paper addresses the following research questions: (1) How has adult Korean adoptees' sense of self developed through their relationships with their birth families? (2) In what ways are the developmental capacities of AKAs connected to their sense of identity?

The adoptees' narratives of the events and their continued relationships with their birth families present explorations of their meaning making and what that means to them. Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002). For this study, the criteria guiding participation include: a) AKAs who had reunion experiences at least three years ago and b) AKAs who have had continued contact with their birth families since their reunions. Three participants were interviewed, and an unstructured interview format was used in order to capture in-depth narratives of AKAs' complex and detailed experiences with their birth families. For data analysis, the constant comparative method was used to sort and categorize the data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In the next phase of analysis, I used thick description, which allows me to capture detailed situations and backgrounds of the stories of AKAs (Denzin, 2001). This method presents not only the facts of a person's experience but also its "context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join persons to one another" (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). To enhance the internal and external validity of this study, triangulation, researcher's memos, and member checks were used (Merriam, 2009).

Findings

Four themes are garnered from this study. The first theme, identity confusion, indicates participants' emotional difficulties with confusion over their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities throughout their childhood to adulthood. The second theme is resolving lifelong questions. By asking

questions related to their birth, origin, and reasons for adoption, participants commonly indicate that they feel a more complete sense of self by gaining information. The third theme, barriers and resilience, describes the continued relationships between the adoptees and their birth families and the difficulties in facing language and cultural gaps. The last theme, reconstructing a sense of self, indicates adoptees' ways of accepting these relationships and reflecting on the self in relation to the experience. It highlights the participants' reflections on their status as adoptees and their meaning making of their sense of self.

Identity Confusion

Throughout their childhood, the participants commonly experienced identity confusion because of their different physical appearance compared to their adoptive parents, adoptive family, and friends as they lived in white dominated communities. During their childhood, they asked themselves questions such as where did I come from, who am I, and why was I adopted? Ashley experienced emotional difficulties and some levels of anger and sadness because of her confusion over her identity and remembered that

When I was in 7th grade I questioned. I just had immense sadness inside of me, but I didn't know why. It was just sadness, anger, and just rage. I knew I was adopted. Told people that I was adopted. But I didn't understand what it meant to be adopted. I didn't know who I was.

Similar to Ashley, David and Maria described their curiosity about their birth origin and birth family as they recognized themselves as trans-racial adoptees. Maria lived in an ethnically diverse place and had opportunities to be involved in cultural activities since she was in middle school. As Maria engaged in Asian culture specifically Korean culture, her curiosity about her origin increased, and she wondered more about her birth family. Overall, the data revealed that the participants experienced identity confusion over their race, ethnicity, and culture, and this confusion motivated them to initiate a reunion by searching for their birth family.

Resolving Lifelong Questions

It took some time—sometimes a few months, sometimes years—for the participants to find their birth family. David visited Korea when he was 22 years old and went to the adoption agency where he was adopted when he was six months old. He was able to get information from the agency and contacted his birth family. However, David only met his uncle because his father was dead and his mother was missing. David's uncle told him about his parents, his family story, and the reasons for his adoption. Although it was a very sad and emotional moment, the family's story helped David resolve questions that he had for a long time. Maria met her birth family when she was twenty-three years old and described the first meeting.

I had written all the questions on the list that I ever had. And the very first question was why did you give me up for adoption?, and then I asked questions that I've always been wondering about...it was so overwhelming to meet them and hear the family story.

Ashley also explained that meeting her birth family for the first time brought her mixed feelings of joy, sadness, love, and relief because it was the opportunity to meet her birth family and discover the reasons why she was adopted. Ashley felt more complete within herself after she met her birth family and heard about her family story.

Resilience and Barriers

The first reunion meetings are not where the reunification ends. It is only the beginning of lifelong stories that will lead adoptees and birth families to make choices to either continue or cease their relationships. All three participants have chosen to continue their relationships with their birth families. Ashley indicated a strong attachment with her birth family after their first meeting, explaining “I do perceive that I would have a relationship with them the rest of my life. I mean unless something bad happens, there is not, there is no way that they would not be part of my life”. A similar response came from David. Although David did not express a strong bond with his birth family, he described his enjoyment of being with his birth family.

While continuing relationships between the adoptees and their birth families became apparent, difficulties in continuing these relationships were revealed in their narratives. As the adoptees and the birth families have lived in different countries, they experienced gaps in culture and language. In particular, language was the main barrier for communicating between adoptees and their birth families. Ashley mentioned that:

When we are not together, language is a barrier. They don't speak English; I don't speak enough Korean. They tell me to learn Korean; I tell them to learn English. Without language, we cannot communicate, feelings, emotions, and understand what each other is saying. But, I know that it's not the way they are.

Indeed, language appeared to be a major issue to the adoptees in continuing their relationships with their birth families. Besides the language barrier, cultural gaps emerged as another barrier between adoptees and their birth families. Maria mentioned differences in cultures and difficulties in understanding the Korean culture. Although she wanted to contact and visit them more often, cultural differences made it hard for her approach her birth family and establish a deeper relationship with them.

Reconstructing a Sense of Self

Searching and reuniting with one's birth family is motivated by wanting to know more about an adoptee's roots, origins, and reasons for adoption. Through reunification with their birth families, Ashley, David, and Maria gained an understanding of self, because these meetings helped them answer questions that they have had since they were young. Their continued relationships with the birth families made them reflect on their racial and ethnic identities. Ashley's identity as a Korean was mentioned seven times during the interview as she recollected her memories from childhood to the present. After her reunion experience, Ashley stated, “I saw myself as I am Korean. Not like I am Korean, I am 'KOREAN'. It's more definitive. I know where I came from. Understanding all of the pieces, it just gives me a better sense of self.” As Ashley reconstructed her identity, she became more confidence about herself.

Maria mentioned that by meeting and knowing her family, she gained a certain internal peace for which she had longed. Her relationship with her birth family helped her change her negative perceptions about adoption, as she was beginning to understand the why and how questions about adoption and gaining a better understanding of who she is. Although continuing her relationship with her birth family is continually challenging, she felt more complete and is able to accept her life for what it is.

Conclusion

Findings of this study highlights that the key outcome of the reunion was redefining their sense of self. Based on the four themes, two conclusions were drawn from this study.

The first is that adult Korean adoptees' sense of self has developed through their evolving relationship with their birth family. Through the continued relationship with their birth family, they gained information about their past and their family that helped them understand their origins and roots better. However, as AKAs continued relationship with their birth family, it was inevitable that they faced cultural and linguistic differences and encountered gaps that exist between the two different cultures. By recognizing the differences, AKAs experienced challenges in continuing the relationship in which they gradually accept the differences, adjust their communication methods, and redefine their relationship. Thus, AKAs' sense of self was developed by multidimensional and mutual experiences within their evolving relationship with their birth family.

The second conclusion is that through their evolving relationship with their birth families, AKAs were able to widen their perceptions about self and re-construct their racial and ethnic identities as well as increase their acceptance of others into their relationships. In other words, their developmental capacities of understanding the self have been developed. This is evidence of transformation as they step forward to gain a better sense of self and make connections between the self and their birth families, and between the self and others. This transformation leads them to increased levels of experiences in regard to being open to new perspectives on themselves and understanding who they are.

As the number of adult international adoptees' searching for and reuniting with their birth family has increased (Tiemann, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2008), several implications can be offered from this study. By acknowledging how adults negotiate their ways of knowing and develop a sense of self within a certain relationship, this study can broaden adults' learning and developmental perspectives so that they can more actively engage interaction in cultural contexts between the self and others. This study, thus, suggest knowledge for understanding adults who are in a particular context, including social identities of race, ethnicity, culture and gender. Also, as adult Korean adoptees continue their relationships with their birth families, their need for participatory language learning, such as KSL (Korean as the Second Language), and cultural programs will increase. Adult educators and practitioners can support these adoptees by understanding their unique cultural and racial backgrounds and can attempt to meet their special needs by empowering these adoptees' growth and continued learning.

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