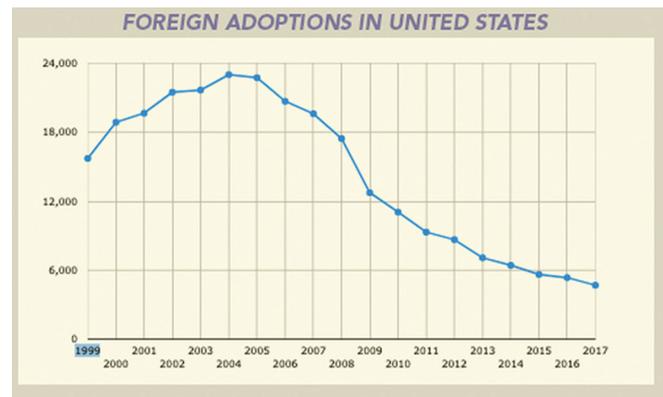


# Intercountry Adoption: The Beginning of the End

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In 2004, the rate of intercountry adoptions within the U.S. reached an all-time high with 22,989 adoptions from abroad and fell to a recent low rate of 4,714 in 2017 (Jones & Placek, 2017), the lowest rate since 1973. These statistics reflect the now well-established pattern of the decline in intercountry adoptions. Scholars and experts have attributed the decline in intercountry adoptions to a number of factors including increased standards for ethical adoptions, stricter guidelines for preventing child trafficking, and shifts in the social, economic, and political concerns of some of the largest sending countries (e.g., China and South Korea). The purpose of this paper is to describe the implications for adoptees as well as the impact of the decline in intercountry adoptions on adoptees. The potential effects of these decreases in intercountry adoptions can be intrapersonal, interpersonal, and even societal for adoptees, especially intercountry adoptees of color.



populations who may be of mixed heritages) (Selman, 2017). These statistics illustrate some of the estimates that have been proffered in the literature suggesting that 40% of all adoptions are transracial (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009) and that 84% of all international adoptions are transracial as well (National Survey of Adoptive Parents, 2009). Given these statistics, we must clearly strive to understand the intersections of multiple factors: adoption, race, culture, social class, and socio-political context.

## International Adoption Statistics

Statistics on the top sending and receiving countries in international adoption worldwide help us best understand this pattern as well as the implications for the impact of this changing in intercountry adoption prevalence. All of the top 10 receiving countries in global intercountry adoption are populated by White people / Western Europeans, whereas the top sending countries are primarily countries whose populations are dominated by people of color (with the exception of some Eastern European countries that have

## Attitudes Toward Intercountry Adoption

Attitudes toward the decline in intercountry adoptions as well as explanations for that decline come from multiple perspectives. Critics of intercountry adoption question the ethics involved in the practice of adoption internationally and cite concerns about child trafficking, misleading and manipulative adoption facilitators and agencies, and sociopolitical oppression (Gibbons & Rotabi, 2013). Proponents of intercountry adoption believe that

adoption is a solution for orphans and needy children worldwide and view the decline in international adoption as resulting from overly rigorous and invasive adoption requirements, barriers enacted by the state department, and requirements enacted by human rights organizations (e.g., UNICEF and the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption) that are too restrictive (Smolin, 2010). Either of these perspectives can impact adoptees' own perceptions of their birth histories as well as their cultural and racial identities.

### The Sociopolitical Context for International Adoption

News stories that depicted the sociopolitical context in which intercountry adoption occurred since its peak in 2004 help us further understand the decreases in international adoption. Stories about the disturbing practice of “rehomeing” (predominantly internationally adopted children (Twohey, 2013), a young Russian adoptee who was sent back alone to Russia by his adoptive mother without warning (Cave, 2010), child trafficking in China (Custer, 2013) and various adoption scandals in Vietnam, Guatemala, China, Russia, Cambodia, and Ethiopia were just a few of the factors that likely interact with the decline in intercountry adoptions and thereby impact adoptees themselves. As these stories shine the spotlight on ethical and moral issues that can plague adoption and on the complexity of the intercountry adoption marketplace, adoptees may start to question their own adoptions leading to questions about their own personal histories and to first family searches. Adoptees may also find that incorporating these adoption stories into their conceptions of adoption are particularly complex and shift their narratives about the ethics and practice of adoption. News of child trafficking from multiple sending countries can create existential and emotional crises regarding the legitimacy of their birth and adoption stories as depicted in their social history reports (i.e., the narratives in adoptees' regarding how each came into care and the backgrounds of their first/birth families). Moreover, some international adoptees who have reunited or made contact with first/birth families, particularly



those adopted before 2000, have revealed that their social history reports contained inaccurate and sometimes blatantly false narratives about their first/birth families (Kim, 2007).

**Impact of adoption decline for intercountry adoptees' identity processes.** Adoptees' process of identity formation includes several factors that are unique to intercountry adoptees. Given the decrease in adoptions, international adoptees' navigation of these challenges may also be impacted. Intercountry adoptees must cope with negative attitudes toward birth countries, lack of knowledge about birth country's history and culture, apprehension toward birth country and culture, and experiences with racial and adoption microaggressions (Baden, 2016; Sue et al., 2007). For example, Baden

(2016) described two adoption microaggression themes, *cultural philanthropy* and *cultural limbo/invalidation of heritage*, that illustrate some of the identity challenges for adoptees. *Cultural philanthropy* refers to comments or attitudes that suggest that adopting children from other countries to the U.S. is both a charitable act and it will lead to a better life due to American exceptionalism (Baden, 2016). Adoptees from developing countries can believe that their birth countries are somehow deficient in comparison to the U.S., thereby framing birth countries as less desirable and making identification with birth cultures and countries more challenging.

Similarly, *cultural limbo/invalidation of heritage* refers to the microaggressive comments directed towards international adoptees that suggest adoptees are not sufficiently authentic or representative of their birth cultures but also not White American (Baden, 2016). The messages sent to adoptees about their culture and heritage consign them to a state of uncertainty or limbo, feeling neither fully White American nor fully a member of their ethnic group. Identification for these adoptees, especially racial and cultural identity, becomes complex.

Since the vast majority of international adoptees are transracially adopted and people of color, they also face challenges associated with the shift during adolescence from “honorary white status” granted due to adoptive parents’ White identities to oppression experienced as adolescent and adult people of color. Intercountry adoptees also typically experience challenges related to authentic cultural connections to their birth cultures, made more complex by their adoptions primarily by White parents. The experiences of racial and adoption microaggressions (Baden, 2016; Sue et al., 2007), or the subtle slights, invalidations, and insults that adoptees experience regarding their adoptions and their racial ethnic heritage, often become salient to adoptees, particularly as they grow into adulthood. These experiences of oppression combined with being raised in families usually dominated by White adults, can further complicate intercountry adoptees’ development of their own racial consciousness and identities.

As the trends in international adoption increasingly signal, intercountry adoptions have been gradually decreasing each year so that, as noted above, they are at the lowest level since 1973. Predictions that intercountry adoption may end along with recommendations from adult intercountry adoptees, some of whom have publicly endorsed ending adoptions from particular countries (e.g., South Korea), have mixed effects on adoptees. Some adoptees exemplify a complex perspective in which they endorse a narrative that paints intercountry adoption as a rescue from deprivation and dire circumstances. Other adoptees, however, may view this rescue narrative as both a byproduct of the adoption industry as well as a symptom of an unexplored personal adoption history. Another example of the complex narrative can be found in *The New York Times Magazine* article by Jones (2015) below where she describes her adoption of a child from Guatemala and experience she had on her adoption trip:

“One night at a restaurant, a well-dressed Guatemalan man in his 50s or 60s passed my new daughter and me and muttered, ‘There goes another baby taken from our country.’

“His comment might have referred to corruption: It would become increasingly clear that Guatemala’s adoption system was, like those in Ethiopia, Vietnam, Cambodia and elsewhere, plagued with illegal payments, coercion of birth mothers and in some cases outright stealing of babies. (Guatemala’s program shut down seven years ago.) Or maybe he was thinking about the fact that birth mothers, typically indigenous women who faced discrimination, had little access to counseling and no official waiting period after birth during which to change their minds. He may have been imagining what would happen if the thousands of dollars each family handed over to their adoption agency was used instead to help children stay in Guatemala. And then there was the issue that Kim Stoker has since raised: Should adopted children be brought up by people of a different race?”

The final question raised in this quotation is one that may eventually shape the adoption identity of international adoptees as they reflect on the history of international adoption and the trends represented by sending and receiving countries.

**Reculturation.** To explicitly address the impact on adoptees' identity, I developed the framework for *reculturation*, or the reclamation of birth culture lost to adoptees after they were placed internationally and/or transracially (Baden, Treweeke, & Ahluwalia, 2012). Briefly, the reculturation process begins at birth. At birth, a child is born into his/her birth culture and enculturation (the transmission of cultural knowledge and experience) begins in utero and continues with some changes in caregivers through relinquishment into temporary care within the birth country. However, upon placement with adoptive parents, enculturation stops and assimilation begins during which adoptees assimilate to their adoptive parents' culture (often White American). This assimilation is forced and necessary for survival. Adoptive parents may seek reculturation activities for adoptees whereby they get exposure to birth culture, but adoptees must essentially reclaim, relearn, and adopt their birth cultural practices. Outcomes vary but can range from full reculturation into birth culture to continued assimilation in adoptive culture, and variations exist between these poles. The sociopolitical context as well as all of the factors described above likely impact adoptees reculturation efforts, experiences, and outcomes.

### Impact on Intercountry Adoptees' First/Birth Parent Searches and Contact

As adoptees navigate the influence of the decline of intercountry adoption on their identities, their decisions regarding in first/birth parent searches and contact are likely affected. For example, revelations of ethics violations and trafficking of children in various countries could spur searches and could impact the dynamics of reunions that do take place. As adoptees reculturate, cultural and racial factors may impact outcomes. Factors such as the following can complicate both searches and contact or reunion meetings: social class differences between birth and adoptive families; the financial means to travel; cultural responsibilities of children in birth countries (i.e., regardless of adoption status—bloodlines endure adoption); gaps in cultural attitudes toward bloodlines and adoption; complications due to hierarchical attitudes toward

adoptees' birth cultures (e.g., culturally disadvantaged or cultural anthropologist); and challenges due to race, culture, and language differences.

### Implications for the Future of Adoption: Research

- Scholarship should begin to focus on the meaning that adolescent and adult international and transracial adoptees make about the decline of intercountry adoption.
- Studies developing clinical approaches to treat international adoptees' coping with microaggressions and reculturation challenges are needed.

### Implications for the Future of Adoption: Practice

- Given the complexity of identity for intercountry adoptees, practitioners must prepare to address the various layers of identity and adoption presented by these clients.
- Effective counseling practice includes utilizing a multicultural counseling lens to process the transracial complexity. Therapists should approach treatment with an explicit emphasis on adoption in therapy.
- Practitioners should also assist clients in the conceptualization and analysis of international adoption using a Critical Race Theory (CRT) informed adoption perspective to effectively promote adjustment (Annamma, 2012). Viewing adoption from a CRT perspective encourages practitioners to analyze the institutions and systems of power that are enabled by racism and white supremacy (Rollock & Dixson, 2016) and thereby better understand the dynamics inherent in transracial and international adoption.

### Implications for the Future of Adoption: Policy

- Policy initiatives to support adoptees searching internationally for birth/first parents can contribute to adoptees' well-being and support their contact efforts.
- Policy makers can work to require adoptive families and birth/first families to take courses that will help them parent vulnerable, at-risk children who were adopted internationally.

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