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Generational Shifts: Adult Adoptee Scholars' Perspective on Future Research and Practice

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Adult adoptees, largely adopted domestically as infants, began to organize and advocate about adoption issues in the 1970s. Over the past 25 years, transracial and internationally adopted adults have also mobilized, reflecting the coming of age of this cohort of adoptees. This latter cohort of adult adoptees has also increasingly entered professional careers as scholars, researchers, and academics. As institutions of higher education face a growing generational shift, what are the implications for adult adoptee scholars conducting adoption research? This paper reflects the experiences of a panel of four adult transracial Asian-American adoptee academics and implications for the future of adoption research and practice.

Since the 1960s, the psychosocial and behavioral outcomes of adoptees, the majority of whom were White and adopted into same-race families as infants, were the dominant subject of adoption scholarship in the United States (Wierzbicki, 1993). During this same period, these same adult domestic adoptees were initiating reform to the American adoption system. However, the efforts of such pioneering adoption activists such as Jean Paton, whose work was foundational to the adoption reform movement in the 1970s, has largely been unrecognized in adoption scholarship until recently (see biography by Carp, 2014). Since the 1990s, adult transracial and intercountry adoptees, mostly from South Korea and adopted by White parents, have similarly organized and coalesced into an adoptee movement initially centered on community building and then activism (Kim, 2010). Some of this latter cohort of adult transracial and intercountry adoptees, reflecting the changing demographics of adoption in the U.S., are now entering professional careers as scholars and academics.

This paper describes the reflections of a panel of four adult transracially adopted Asian-American adoptee academics in the fields of psychology and social work: Dr. Amanda L. Baden (Montclair State University, NJ); Dr. JaeRan Kim (University of Washington-Tacoma); Dr. Hollee McGinnis (Virginia Commonwealth University); and Adam Y. Kim (University of Minnesota-Twin Cities). The purpose of this panel was to share the real-world experiences of transracial adoptees entering and thriving in academia and implications for the future of adoption research and practice. This paper first describes four vignettes of each panelist, beginning with the most senior ranking academic. The paper concludes with implications for the future direction of adoption research, practice, and policy.

Vignettes: Positionality as Adoptees in Academia

These vignettes of the four panelists illustrate how their positionality as adoptees shaped their entry into and experiences within academia and

the ways in which power and privilege intersect with racial and adoption hierarchies in higher education.
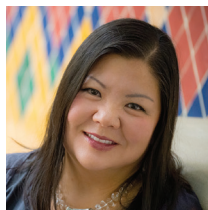
Dr. Amanda L. Baden, Professor, Counseling Psychology

When I entered graduate school, I did not know there was an option to be an adoption scholar. As I began to ask and explore questions related to transracial and international adoption, my mentors encouraged me to enter the academy rather than pursue the clinical positions in hospitals that I had intended. When I was in graduate school in the mid-1990s, adoption scholarship was not yet a burgeoning community. When I completed my PhD in Counseling Psychology and entered academia, I sought to pursue my interest in adoption research. In addition, my decision to become an academic included my decision to also maintain my connection to clinical work. From the time I entered academia, I opened my clinical practice with a specialization in adoption. Support for my clinical work was very important because it was directly related to the scholarly work I was producing.

As a student and a new Assistant Professor, I was always lucky to have scholars of color who mentored me during graduate school and my first academic position. Although they were not adoption researchers, their support and guidance was invaluable. In my first academic position, I had the opportunity to join my mentor as we sought to plan the first scholarly-based adoption conference in 2000 that later became the Adoption Initiative (http://adoptioninitiative.org/). In my role as a conference organizer and the eventual chair of the conference (chairing nine conferences), I had amazing opportunities to meet researchers and practitioners working in adoption, as well as adoption stakeholders (adoptees, birth parents, adoptive parents). These connections allowed me to begin to privilege the voices of adoptees rather than continue to position adoptees as children. Having the opportunity to be the first adoption

practice and research conference to begin inviting adult adoptees to keynote at our conferences in 2000 and adult transracial adoptees in 2006, I was gratified to feel like we were beginning to shift the dialogue in the adoption scholarly community and allow adoption stakeholders to explore the complicated nature of adoption by centering adult adoptees voices. In addition to adoptee scholars being recognized as experts in adoption scholarship, this shift in the dialogue was reflected in the critical lens adoptee scholars brought to the conference. For example, conference topics included the interrogation of the ethics in adoption practice; race, religion, and rescue narratives in adoption; and power, privilege, politics, and class in adoption.

At my first academic institution, my focus on adoption research was questioned. I saw firsthand that adoption research was seen as a task for social work rather than counseling and psychology. When I chose to join a new institution, I was given the opportunity to integrate my interest in multicultural counseling, racism, and adoption into my scholarly agenda and the support from mentors and administrators for my scholarship was vital in my ability to develop my work in adoption scholarship. As I moved through tenure, promotion to Associate Professor, and ultimately to full Professor, I sought to share the lessons from my mentors through the many opportunities that I have taken to mentor students, fellow adoptees, and those interested in adoption scholarship.

In 2012, I initiated an effort to create a network with two advanced doctoral students in psychology who were adopted and doing adoption research (Drs. Holly Grant-Marsney and Dr. Quade French). The organization was named the Society of Adoptee Professionals in Adoption (SAPA), and was designed to provide mentorship from more senior adoptee professionals to newer adoptee professionals. With 263 followers, this group and others like it will continue to build the necessary community for adoptee scholars and professionals. Inspiration from new scholars as well as from the many adoptees with whom I have worked in my independent clinical practice has enabled me to propose and develop new ideas in adoption as evidenced in my current

work focusing on adoptees' identity, transracial and international adoption, adoption-focused counseling, racial and cultural identity for adoptees, and adoption microaggressions.

Dr. JaeRan Kim, Assistant Professor, Social Work

I chose to enter a doctoral program for some of the same reasons I chose to become a social worker—to have the opportunity to provide additional, and sometimes counter-narrative perspectives on the subject of adoption. Prior to becoming a social worker I was frustrated that adoption professionals only saw me as an N=1, despite my longstanding involvement in the adoption community. I entered academia to better understand the research that had been conducted on adoptees and adoptive families and build on to the existing knowledge. In my post-MSW practice, I had begun to question what evidence we were basing our adoption practices on and, when examining the research, learned that there were gaps in the existing literature. For example, the literature on transracial adoptee identity was based on child reports that were not conducted during the typical age when identity development is a focus (adolescence and young adulthood). I questioned whether we were implementing practices regarding transracial adoption without also looking at how transracial identity affects adoptees in adulthood. Another gap I found was that in some studies, parents responded on behalf of their adopted child's identity; instead of the results being framed as the adoptee's racial identity it should have been framed as adoptive parents perceptions of their child's racial identity. In general, the biggest gaps were related to the lack of adult transracial adoptee perspectives.

I have been privileged to find a position in a university that values my positionality as an adoptee and understands that it adds to, rather than distract from, the body of knowledge on adoption.

I have found it is vital to find a scholarly community that appreciates the perspectives adoptees bring to the larger body of research, in much the same way as other scholars that come from marginalized communities have had to find ways to support each other.

Even more important is the way that organizations and institutions can think about how to share power with adoptees. One example that comes to mind was when I first attended the Alliance for the Study of Adoption and Culture (ASAC) conference in 2010. I was thrilled to attend a conference that looked at adoption through the lens of the humanities, as it greatly helped me to think about history, culture, media, and other lenses in my work as a social work scholar. However, while the ASAC organization had many adoptee and adoptive parent scholars, at the time they were majority White, and many of the transracial adoptees attending the conference felt the lack of racial and ethnic diversity in the presentations. They also felt adoption microaggressions toward transracial adoptee attendees, such as when transracial adoptees' questions about a movie about birth/first mothers, that did not include any people of color, were invalidated by the presenter, or when panels on transracial adoption did not include any transracial adoptees.

The conference organizers were responsive to feedback and made explicit shifts during the conference itself and immediately after. For example, they stated their positionality regarding if they were or were not members of the adoption triad in conference sessions, intentionally sought more diverse presenters and keynote speakers, recruited transracial and intercountry adoptees to the executive committee, and made commitments to stand in solidarity with the political and cultural concerns of indigenous and communities of color. This is an example of how one organization went beyond providing "platforms" for marginalized voices to actively sharing power with transracial adoptees.

I strongly believe that being an insider to adoption as an adoptee is an advantage. In the same vein as other minoritized scholars, those of us who have an insider position often feel ethically

obligated to state our positionality. What I find troubling is the ways in which adoptee scholars are sometimes positioned as doing "me-search" while adoptive parent scholars are not. Among adoptee scholars, we tend to know which adoption scholars are adoptive parents and we look for their positionality statements, or lack thereof. Having an insider perspective can be useful in identifying the gaps in the research and asking questions that others who do not have that insider status can miss. The disadvantage, of course, is that one can make assumptions and have biases—but that would be true of any insider scholar. It is also true that having assumptions and biases is something that all researchers must acknowledge and work to minimize, whether you are in insider or an outsider, to the population you are studying.

Dr. Hollee A. McGinnis, Assistant Professor, Social Work

I entered my doctoral program after 13 years of being an active community organizer for adult transracial and intercountry adoptees, having founded the adult adoptee group Also-Known-As, Inc. (http://www.alsoknownas.org) in 1996, and five years of post-MSW work as the policy director at the Donaldson Adoption Institute (https://www.adoptioninstitute.org/). While I told myself that I wanted to pursue my doctoral program because I saw much of policy development was based on empirical evidence (hence I wanted to produce the evidence), I also knew I was burned out. I specifically chose my doctoral program because I knew it would provide me with the training necessary to become an independent scholar, but I also chose it because there were no adoption researchers. I did not want to feel like I had to pursue this line of research. Furthermore, I felt discouraged because scholars told me there was no funding for adoption research, and in the modern academy, the ability to bring in grant and funding dollars is very important to many institutions. I also wanted to be seen as someone who could do more than "just" adoption research. Therefore, I attempted to

frame myself as a child welfare scholar, as a child mental health scholar, as a trauma-scholar, and as an interventions scholar.

However, my adoption knowledge informed my work throughout my graduate training. In my dissertation on the mental health and academic outcomes of adolescents in South Korean orphanages, I posed adoption related questions. Specifically, I explored the extent to which adolescents growing up in orphanages also experienced negative emotions and cognitions resulting from the loss of connection with their birthparents, as found in studies of adoptees in the U.S. My research affirmed that these youth did struggle with the loss of connection with their birthparents and that this loss was significantly associated with post-traumatic stress disorder and depression. Now, as a junior faculty member I have decided to return to my line of adoption research because it is the source of my originality. As Julia Cameron (2002) wrote in her seminal book on creativity, *The Artist's Way,* "We are the origin of our art, its homeland. Viewed this way, originality is the process of remaining true to ourselves" (Kindle Locations 3313-3314). Hence, my originality as a researcher stems from my positionality as an adoptee, who has training in theory, measurement, and research methodologies that extends my expertise beyond my personal experience of adoption.

Yet, it is important to attend to the problem of burn-out for adoptees. Anecdotally, many of my adoptee friends who launched professional careers in adoption 20 years ago, working in agencies or clinical practice, have now left the field. What we whisper to each other is how exhausting the work is. The exhaustion did not stem from the labor of helping adoptees or adoptive parents. The exhaustion came from being the "token" adoptee on staff, asked to share our "voices" and personal experiences, but not our expertise; of not being asked to lead an organization, or offered to sit in positions of power and influence. So our "voices" were heard, the research was conducted on us, but no substantial changes in practice and policies reflecting our "voices" were made.

Just as adoption scholars over 60 years ago were driven by questions stemming from the perspective of parents (e.g., Is adoption somehow harmful to my child? What can I do to promote the adjustment of my adopted child?); now adoptee scholars have the opportunity to center research questions stemming from their perspectives (e.g., What does adoption look like over the life course of adoptees? What are the intergenerational impacts of adoption on adoptees' children?). Unfortunately, if there continues to be a lack of funding for this line of research, such questions will not be privileged and studied; hence, changes to policy and practice that would reflect a life course perspective of adoption will continue to fail to develop.

Adam Y. Kim, Doctoral Candidate, Psychology

Early on in my graduate studies, I realized that being an adopted-adoption researcher presents me both with opportunities to advance research and give back to my community, and unique struggles. As a researcher, I am able to directly impact my community through access to exclusive spaces and position. For instance, I have been involved in panels and workshops on adoption, spoken to adoptive parents, advised adoption groups, and been invited to write community-oriented articles. I have also had the privilege of working with multiple adopted individuals in the university setting, as they explored both adoption research and their own identities. Finally, my positionality as an adopted-adoption researcher allows me to directly connect the community's needs with research. This has led to research projects that advance new constructs or new perspectives on the experiences of adopted individuals. For instance, introducing a domain of identity that more directly captures the experiences of transnationally adopted individuals as global migrants, or advancing an understanding of the adoptive experience that includes the psychological presence of birth family.

However, along with the benefits, there are also obstacles associated with being an adopted-adoption researcher. Adopted individuals are a minority within adoption research and practice. Therefore, I am frequently the only adopted-adoption researcher in the room. This has led to conference presentations where I have received feedback of a more personal nature, questioning my objectivity, rather than scientific. This "objectivity check" has also played out at workshops and panels, where researchers and practitioners have pointed to my apparent bias while suggesting that they could be impartial (which, as Dr. Kim noted above, is a fallacy). I have also been faced with situations where I felt an added responsibility to speak for adopted individuals who do not have the privilege to be in that space. One example is advocating for the centering of adoptee voices within adoption research. Throughout these obstacles, I have been supported and inspired by many of the more established adopted-adoption researchers—including those with me on this panel—and by allies and adoption researchers such as my advisor, Dr. Rich Lee. These opportunities to both connect with my community and to shape the body of adoption literature, and the support I receive, motivate me to continue advancing adoption research.

Conclusion

Future of Adoption Research, Practice, and Policy

Through these vignettes, several common themes emerged that have important implications for the future of adoption research, practice, and policy. These may be summarized as follows:

Adoptee Positionality: Advantages of "Insider" and a Post-Positivist Perspective. Adoption related research, practice, and policy should recognize the opportunities and strengths of having adoptee scholars engaged in these arenas. This means understanding that their position as adoptees is not a liability, or a reason to question

adoptees' "objectivity", or ability to conduct rigorous research, or engage in practice or inform policy. Rather, it is an opportunity for the field to embrace a post-positivist research perspective and accept that all researchers (and practitioners and policymakers) are influenced by their own experiences and knowledge. We need only to turn to qualitative methodologies to affirm the benefits of acknowledging such biases. Hence, the task is for adoption researchers, practitioners, and policymakers is to acknowledge the biases with which they engage in their work and to make such biases transparent.

Connected Research: Bridging Academia and the Real World. Adoptee scholars in this paper showed they are engaged in connected research that bridges academia and the real world. This is reflected in their positionality as adoptees, which allows them access to certain spaces inaccessible to non-adopted scholars, their commitment to doing work that honors the lived experiences of the adoptee community, and engagement with interdisciplinary perspectives on their scholarship. Working with adopted adults also requires that adoptee scholars not take advantage of their position within the community, but consciously engage with the adoptee community from identifying research questions to disseminating findings. This positionality as adoptees also means future adoption research, practice, and policy may need to shift from parent-focused questions relating to how to raise adopted children, to a life-course perspective of understanding the lifelong and intergenerational impact of adoption on the lives of adopted persons. Like much of the past research on adoption, future scholarship will be applied with an intent to have real-world impact, while still building new and important knowledge.

Shared Power: Beyond the "Token" Adoptee. Like other historically oppressed groups, adoptee scholars face a history in which they have been the observed, not the observer. Shifting this paradigm will require thinking about the ways in which power intersects with adoption hierarchies, but other hierarchies like gender and race. The notion of shared power in adoption means a recognition of the privileging (via funding) of research questions posed by (mostly White) adoptive parents, over the research on adult adoptees or birthparents. In research, this means being aware of how scholars critique each other's' work. For example, we need to be conscious of whether work that is conducted by adoptees, or insider-led scholars, or utilizes qualitative methods, are more frequently criticized for being "me-search" or lacking "objectivity" or "rigor", than work conducted by adoptive parents, or outsider-led scholars, or utilizes quantitative methods. In all areas of adoption, those in positions of power can look beyond providing a "platform" or "voice" for adopted adults, but seek to elevate and be sponsors of qualified adopted adults to enter into positions of power and influence. Shared power is possible, but must be addressed consciously and purposely by leaders in adoption research, practice, and policy circles.

Mentorship: Supportive Communities and Mentor Networks. Throughout these vignettes, having a supportive community of mentors and scholars who believed in the work of adoptee scholars were critical to their success in their doctoral education and development as academics. Furthermore, through those experiences, adoptee scholars are now in positions to nurture the next generation of scholars and practitioners. Such a tradition of mentorship is long in academia, but finding such supportive mentors can be difficult. Efforts to help connect students who might have an interest in adoption, whether they are a member of the adoption triad or not, will be critical to the future of adoption research, practice, and policy. Formal and informal opportunities must be pursued, particularly for students who are not at a university with adoption scholars. Technology can facilitate such collaborative communities across geographic distances, and efforts to build more formal networks, such as Society for Adoptee Professionals in Adoption (SAPA), are exciting examples of how such future mentorship networks could develop to support adoption research, practice, and policy for the next generation.

Words of Advice to Present and Future Adoptee Scholars

We wanted to provide some parting wisdom to both present and future adoptees who are pursuing, or who are considering pursuing, a career as a researcher and academic. Much of this advice would be relevant to any person deciding to pursue a career in higher education, but is also pointed for those who belong to marginalized groups. Foremost, you do not have to be smart to get a PhD; what you do have to be is someone who has grit. The road to a PhD and access into academia are not intended to be inviting, open, and available to all. So, what you must know is that you have something to say; that you belong here; and that you are not alone.

To these ends, we encourage you to embrace what you know and pursue the research questions that have not been asked. As a scholar who is an adoptee, you have an opportunity to articulate the adoption experience from multiple alternative perspectives, rather than perpetuating the traditional "rescue" narrative of adoption. This opportunity comes with the responsibility to conduct research that reflects the lived experiences of adoptees and not perpetuate the pathologizing of adoptees. You might not feel like you belong in academia, which is why who you choose to mentor you and what institution you ultimately choose to work at matters, a lot. Choose people and institutions who will support you and the work you will want to do; and yes, while it might not feel like you have choices, you always do. This may mean lowering other expectations (i.e. maybe you will not work at a tier-one research institution because they do not support community based participatory research), but being in an environment that is committed to you and your work means you will be have a long and fulfilling career.

Finally, you are not alone. There are now many adoptee scholars who have walked this road who are willing and wanting to help you along it too. Reach out and seek opportunities to collaborate with established adoption scholars, who are members of the adoption triad or not. Find other new adoption scholars developing their careers—reach out and form writing groups, peer support, and inspiration. Collaborate with scholars from other disciplines to expand your lens of understanding. There is something to learn from everyone, and it is in the unexpected that true innovation can be sparked.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Research

- Future adoptee scholars who choose to conduct research on adoptees, should recognize the unique opportunity their insider-status provides; and the research community should weigh the merit of such work for the opportunity it affords to develop novel theory and practice models for understanding the experience of adoption over the life-course.

- Future adoption research should continue to seek to bridge the gap between academia and the real world. This means sharing the power of knowledge with the communities we study such that they are involved in all aspects of the research enterprise, from developing research questions to disseminating study findings.

- Future adoption research should be framed within a post-positivist perspective that acknowledges all researchers are influenced by their own experiences and knowledge; hence, disclosure about one's positionality within the adoption constellation (e.g. adoptive parents, birthparents, adoptees, adoption agency staff), or not, is critical for achieving this end.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Practice

- Future adoption practice should be informed by adoptee professionals who are trained within their disciplines and are elevated within their organizations into positions of power and influence that goes beyond providing just their "voice" as an adopted person.

- Future adoption practice should seek to be Allies with adoptees and adult adoptee organizations and other marginalized groups. Rather than responding to critiques of adoption practices as a threat, future adoption practitioners should see them as an opportunity for a richer discussion about the complexity of adoption and the myriad of ways adoption impacts those involved.

Implications for the Future of Adoption: Policy

- Organizations and institutions should recognize that those impacted by adoption are a marginalized group against the dominant biological family structure. Furthermore, within adoption, there exists hierarchies that have traditionally privileged adoptive parents' voice over those of adoptees or birthparents that reflects the intersectionality of racial and class hierarchies. Hence, future organizational and institutional policies should make explicit plans to share power, representation, and voice with those from marginalized groups within society and address hierarchies within marginalized groups as well.

- Federal, state, and local agencies should push for policies that will fund adoption research that centers on understanding the life-long and intergenerational impact of adoption over the life course of adoptees and other members of the adoption triad.

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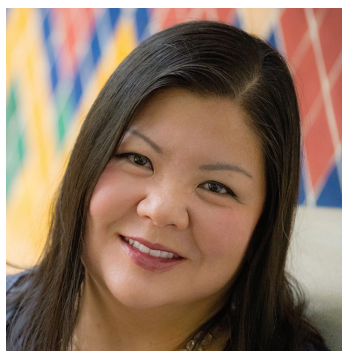
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