

The Development of Culture Within Latin American Transcultural Adoptees: An Exploratory Study.

Adoption is the legal, permanent transfer of a child from the birth parent or parents to new caregivers. In intercountry adoption, this transfer takes place across international borders. The child is usually taken from the birth country and brought to a new country and given to parents with a different ethnicity, culture, and language from their own. The new national identity acquired by the child threatens to replace the original identity the child would have developed had the child not been adopted across borders. A great deal of concern for international adoption results from the fact that most often the adoption is transracial. However, it is argued that children adopted from European countries and children adopted from developing countries face the same problems of ethnic identity due to the loss of their birth culture.

Most of the research that has been done on transracial or transcultural adoption has found that these children do well in that they have a strong sense of belonging within the family, perform satisfactorily in school, and have high levels of self-esteem. It is important to note, however, that ethnic identity and self-esteem do not necessarily go hand in hand. Transracial adoptees can demonstrate high self-esteem regardless of how strongly they identify ethnically. Additionally, some have pointed out that perhaps the only reason empirical evidence is showing support for transracial adoption is because of measurement issues. It is argued that studies use Eurocentric standards of well-being and adjustment, and this may be the incorrect approach. Despite this bit of skepticism, what remains the most discussed and debated question in the adoption field is how children

adopted transracially or transculturally develop a positive ethnic identity, or even if they develop an ethnic identity at all.

This study focuses on interviewing adult adoptees that were adopted from a Latin American country into a white non-Hispanic family in the United States. The primary concentration is on the adoption stories of these people, how well they identify with their native culture, and the importance of their native culture in their lives. A good deal of work has been done looking at the lives and the adoption experience for African-American transracial adoptees and a large literature exists on the adoption experience of Asian transracial adoptees. However, very little attention has been given to Latin American transcultural adoptees and the roles that adoption and culture play in their lives. It is felt that this study could help to begin to fill this gap in the literature.

This study set out to answer two specific research questions. First, do Latin American transcultural adoptees develop different degrees of cultural identification, or do all Latin American transcultural adoptees identify with their native culture with the same intensity? The findings generated from the interviews clearly indicate that not all Latin American transcultural adoptees identify with their native culture with the same intensity. After the interviews were completed and the responses were coded, three patterns emerged from the data. The respondents' cultural identity took one of three forms. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents identified very strongly with being Latino, 57% of the respondents identified somewhat weakly with being Latino and 14% of the respondents did not identify at all with being Colombian.

The fact that 86% of the Latin American adoptees interviewed identified at some level with their native culture takes away some of the firepower of the anti-transcultural

adoption supporters who claim that it is near impossible for transcultural adoptees to develop a sense of culture. However, the fact that only one-third of those who identify with their culture identify strongly lends support to the argument that it is near impossible for transcultural adoptees to develop a strong sense of culture.

The second question of interest in this study was if Latin American transcultural adoptees do identify with the native culture in varying intensities, what leads some individuals to identify more strongly than others? This was perhaps the most interesting of the research questions, and the one whose answer could potentially contribute the most to the adoption world. There was one clear issue that set the identifiers (both strong and weak) apart from the non-identifiers. That one issue was having one's ethnicity questioned or challenged. Those who identified as being Columbian, Latino, or Hispanic all shared moments in their lives where they had difficulty because they did not speak Spanish and because their ethnicity was not easily recognizable to others. One thing that separated the strong identifiers from the weak identifiers is how they responded to this situation. Weak identifiers found it awkward to not be able to speak Spanish on demand and countered this dilemma by learning or attempting to learn how to speak Spanish. When faced with the same issue, the strong identifiers went beyond simply learning the language and met the challenge of their ethnicity by learning the culture. The strong identifiers were also set apart from the weak identifiers by having a very successful and enjoyable trip to their birth country. Each of the strong identifiers indicated that trip as a major turning point in their life. Finally, the strong identifiers set themselves apart from the weak identifiers by displaying some anger at the fact that they were raised in primarily Anglo neighborhoods. Despite the fact that every participant interviewed was

raised in a practically all Anglo neighborhood, the strong identifiers were the only ones who took issue with this and made it a point to seek out Latino culture when older and able to do so.