The Racial and Ethnic Identity Development
of Korean American Transracial Adoptees and its Impact on their College Experience

A Doctoral Thesis presented

By

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Abstract

Transracial adoption has created a hidden identity for this population, which in turn has had profound impact on their understanding of self; especially their racial and ethnic identity. This research focuses on the needs of Korean American transracial adoptees in particular, during their transition into higher education. In this portraiture, I explored the lived experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees and their ethnic and racial identity development and its impact on their overall college experiences. Critical race theory guided the research questions used for this analysis. General guide interview were conducted with a total of four Korean American transracial adoptees. Two adoptees are currently attending colleges in Massachusetts and two adoptees are recent graduates from colleges in Massachusetts. Findings from this research may be used by college administrators, staff, and faculty to raise awareness of issues and challenges adoptees may face in college and to better serve these students in college. Furthermore, these findings support the importance of narrative and allowing individuals to find their voice in telling their stories.

Keywords: Korean American transracial adoptee, Ethnic Identity, Racial Identity, Transracial Identity Development, Higher Education
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract 2

Acknowledgements 3

Table of Contents 5

Chapter 1: Introduction and Theoretical Frameworks 6

Chapter 2: Literature Review 18

Chapter 3: Methods 32

Chapter 4: Findings 43

Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications 112

Appendix A – IRB Recruitment Letter to Participants 132

Appendix B – Online Questionnaire 133

Appendix C – Unsigned Consent Form – Northeastern University 134

Appendix D – Primary Interview Questions 136

Appendix E – Resources Document 137

References 138
Chapter 1

Introduction

In the last twenty years, the number of Asian American students grew nearly fivefold on college campuses (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). In response to the rapid growth in the enrollment of Asian Americans in higher education, practitioners, researchers, and policy makers have unfortunately failed to research the experiences and examine the needs of these students (National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2008). The 2010 Census estimated that there were 17.3 million Asian Americans, which is comprised of 5.6 percent of the total population in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). There was a 46 percent growth in the Asian American population between the years of 2000 and 2010. Asian Americans had the highest percentage growth compared to any other major race groups (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). Additionally, it is projected that 40.6 million of the residents living in the U.S. will identify as Asian American by the year 2050.

Currently, there are about 1.3 million Asian American students enrolled in higher education (The National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education, 2011). The Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education (CARE, 2011) believes that college enrollment for Asian Americans will increase by 30 percent between 2009 and 2019 (CARE, 2011). The increased number of Asian American students in education has increased the perception of the stereotype that they are the “model minority” (Museus, 2009). This stereotype perpetuates the notion that Asian Americans are stellar students who are successful in education without need of any help or assistance (Museus, 2009). This myth that exists for Asian Americans often negates any issues Asian Americans may be facing or experiencing. Additionally, Asian Americans are often seen as a monolithic
group without various subgroups and identities that differentiates them from culture to culture (Museus, 2009).

CARE (2011) identified various subgroups within the Asian American community. For example, there are 48 ethnicities, more than 300 languages spoken, and that 69% of Asians were born outside of the U.S (CARE, 2011). As student affairs practitioners, it is essential that necessary steps are taken to properly understand, support, and assist the students who come from the various subgroups within the Asian American community with whom we may come in contact (CARE, 2008). By better understanding the identity development of the different Asian American communities and by examining the varying experiences of Asian Americans in this context, there will be sensitivity to the challenges that these students face and help them overcome these obstacles to further their personal development (George & Aronson, n.d).

One of the subgroups within the Asian American community that needs further examination and research is the Korean American transracial adoptees and their unique experiences. Transracial adoption is the legal means of taking a child who is of a different race or ethnicity into one’s family to raise as their own child (McGinnis, Smith, Ryan, & Howard, 2009). The complex layers of identity for transracial adoptees requires an extensive understanding of identity development, recognition of the importance of racial acknowledgement and integration within a family, and acknowledgement of the impact of adoption on an adoptee’s identity (McGinnis, et al., 2009). Although there is a growing body of research on identity development of adoptees and racial identity developments, these factors have not been combined to form a comprehensive understanding of identity development in transracial adoptees (McGinnis, et al., 2009). Unfortunately, most studies on transracial adoptees are not based on empirical data or evidence but are formed by integrating different models and theories which
have not been able to fully encompass one’s experience as a transracial adoptee (Baden & Steward, 2000, Hoopes, 1990, Phinney, 1992).

The topic of adoption is both a sensitive and complicated issue; however, with the layer of transracial adoptees, the topic becomes even more complex. With the understanding that not all cases and experiences of Korean transracial adoptees are generalizable the practical goals are to encourage students to find their voice and allow them to tell their stories of their individual experiences. Through these stories the researcher will attempt to find ways in which practitioners and educators can assist transracial adoptees in their identity development process. The intellectual goal of this doctoral thesis is to understand the identity development process of transracial adoptees in hopes to better address the needs of these students. Each individual brings many unique aspects in forming and developing their identity. Through these stories the researcher hopes to find key ingredients and themes that will allow practitioners and educations to better understand the experiences and challenges of Korean transracial adoptees in their journey of identity development in college. In gathering this information the researcher will propose to investigate the research questions: “How do Korean transracial adoptees experience identity development in higher education?” and “How does Korean American identity development shape their overall experience in college?”

There are many complex variables that play a significant role in identity formation and development. Chapter 2 will explore Critical Race Theory (CRT) as the theoretical framework. This framework will help further understand the problem of practice as it relates to Korean transracial adoptees’ identity development and its impact on their college experience, help form additional research questions, guide the literature review, and help define my research methodology. Chapter 2 will also include a thorough review of literature where the process of
identity development, identity development among adoptees, as well as current understanding of identity development in transracial adoptees will be explored. Chapter 3 will include the research methodology as well as the trustworthiness and quality assurance of the overall research.

**Theoretical Framework**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a lens for making sense of race and racism in America (Parker & Lynn, 2002). This theoretical framework will be used to understand how Korean American transracial adoptees develop their racial and ethnic identity. CRT is important to use in this study because it explores the concepts of race and the impact of racism that transracial adoptees may experience in the education system. Additionally, CRT takes into consideration the intersectionality of identities which is crucial in understanding the experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees.

**Development of the Critical Race Theory**

CRT expanded upon Critical Legal Studies (CLS), created in the mid-1970s by activists and legal scholars (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). CLS questioned the legal system and its ways of perpetuating and maintaining White supremacy in America through oppressive social structures (Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw, 1993; Yosso, 2005). Legal scholars like Bell (1987) and Freeman (1978) believed that CLS’s questioning of the legal system could not bring solutions for social transformation, giving reason for CRT to emerge (Yosso, 2005).

Different from CLS, CRT includes conversations about history, experiential knowledge, and contextual relevance (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001). It also focuses on the experiences of people of color (Yosso, Parker, Solórzano & Lynn, 2004). The main goal of CRT is to
deconstruct views on racism and power and to improve race relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Parker and Lynn (2002) believe that CRT has three main goals:

1. Give people of color a voice to tell their personal stories on the issues of race
2. Recognize that race is a social construct and find ways to put an end to race issues
3. Understand that various identities exist such as class and sexuality and address the injustices faced by minorities.

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) introduced the notion that CRT could be applied in education to understand educational disparities and inequalities (Dixson & Rousseau, 2006). They believe that education is a form of property and that there is a relationship between property and race. These relationships foster injustices in our education system; therefore, changes must occur to reform the American education system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Solórzano (1997) and Yosso (2005) have added to the body of knowledge on CRT in education. The five tenets that guide CRT are useful tools in understanding the experiences of students of color (Solórzano, 1997). These five tenets include the beliefs that: racism is natural, normal and permanent; dominant ideologies should be challenged; there needs to be a commitment to social justice; experiential knowledge and storytelling is legitimate; and one must look at interdisciplinary perspectives to gain a holistic understanding.

**Tenet One: The Centrality of Race and Intersectionality of Identities.** CRT states that racism is natural, normal and permanent in America (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). From the CRT perspective, race and racism are deeply rooted and ingrained in our society and have become normalized (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Racism may occur at an individual and societal level and can be overt or subtle in nature (Solórzano, 1997). It also accounts for different forms of racism (e.g., microaggressions and overt acts) and the consequences of systematic racism that
are present in policies and practices (Solórzano, 1997). When applied to education, the framework helps one understand and analyze educational practices (Ladson-Billings, 2005) such as access issues and inequalities in education (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

Racial microaggressions are one form of racism that is subtle in nature and have affected campus climate in higher education (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Microaggressions can occur in various forms such as microassaults, microinsults or microinvalidations (Sue, Capodilupo, Torino, Bucceri, Holder, Nadal & Esquirlin, 2007). Microassaults are conscious and explicit verbal or action based behaviors (Sue, et al., 2007) such as calling an Asian American a “chink” or “gook.” Microinsults are unintentional words or actions that degrade one’s racial identity (Sue, et al., 2007) such as asking an Asian American if they are good in math since they are Asian. Microinvalidations are acts that do not acknowledge the racial experiences or feelings of a person of color (Sue, et al., 2007) such as stating “you speak English so well” to an Asian American student.

The model minority myth associated with Asian American students and stereotypes that come with this myth is a form of microaggression. This myth is a social construct that disregards the experiences of a variety of ethnic groups within the Asian community with different languages, cultures, and histories (Buenavista, Jayakumar, & Misa-Escalante, 2009). It supports the idea that racial minorities can work through challenges they face due to their minority status and overcome inequalities in America (Takagi, 1992). Buenavista, et al., (2009) believe that the model minority status goes beyond it being a myth and perpetuates norms created by White, middle-class Americans. The model minority stereotype as a form of microaggression alienates Asian American students from other minority groups and hides the issues that they face. The
stereotype of Asian Americans adds to the larger racial issues of White dominance and supremacy in the U.S (Buenavista, et al., 2009).

CRT recognizes the intersectionality of race with other identities, including class, gender, and age among others (Crenshaw, 1993). For instance, the experiences of a Korean American woman may be different than a gay man who is a Korean American transracial adoptee. In this particular study, intersectionality of identities will be important in understanding the experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees and their identity development. Some scholars noted that women and people of color challenged the Black/White dichotomy that often occurs when discussing race relations (Yosso, 2005). They argue that oppression in law and society cannot be fully understood when looking at it from a Black/White dichotomy because it limits the understanding of racism and oppressions that occur from other identities (Yosso, 2005). This notion helps expand CRT to include experiences of women, Asian Americans, Native-Americans and Latinos/Latinas. CRT work with offshoots, such as AsianCrit and LatCrit to acknowledge the challenges that various oppressed groups face in addressing issues of racism (Yosso, 2005).

**Tenet Two: The Challenges to Dominant Ideologies.** CRT challenges dominant ideologies that continue to foster structures of power that are unequal. The dominant ideologies that are present in society as well as our education system are color-blindness, meritocracy, objectivity, race neutrality, and equal opportunity (Solórzano & Bernal, 2001). These dominant ideologies are concepts created by the dominant group and are used to maintain White power and privilege (Buenavista, et al., 2009). Solórzano (1998) states, “a critical race theory in education challenges the traditional claims of the educational system and its institutions to objectivity, meritocracy, color and gender blindness, race and gender neutrality, and equal opportunity” (p. 122).
One dominant ideology in particular has been highlighted in the work of Bonilla-Silva. He identified four themes or “frames” of color-blind racism: abstract liberalism, naturalization, cultural racism and minimization of racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Abstract liberalism is the false belief that there is “equal opportunity” for all including people of color. This belief is used to rationalize the status quo. An example of this is White people against affirmative action because they believe that everyone has equal rights and opportunities. Naturalization is the belief that racial inequality is a normal occurrence and used to justify certain acts or incidents such as segregation. Cultural racism and minimization of racism is beliefs and comments made about racial minorities that undermine and blame their culture (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). An example is when describing a Professor who has a hard accent, saying, “I can’t understand a thing my Professor says, he’s not from here and doesn’t know how to speak English.”

In education, scholars believe that current practices misrepresent or limit the experiences of students of color (Ladson-Billings, 2000). In order to understand the experiences of Asian American students in higher education a framework is needed to recognize the various racial identities within the Asian American community as well as their positions in society (Teranishi, 2002). The racialized experiences and ways in which students navigate their racial experiences differ among Asian Americans based on their ethnicity. The second tenet asserts that race matters and disparities can influence how people of color experience education (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Often, students of color see themselves as being at a disadvantage and without resources while their White counterparts benefit from it (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Teranishi’s (2002) research uncovered that educational opportunities among Asian Americans varied based on their ethnicity and their immigration status. For example, the social climate and the connotations associated with this affected the Asian American student’s racial, ethnic, and
Tenet Three: The Commitment to Social Justice. CRT works to eliminate institutions that maintain racist ideologies and end all forms of oppression towards subordinate groups (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002; Matsuda, et al., 1993). A key feature of the third tenet is interest convergence. Interest convergence notes that because racism supports White advancement and their self-interest, there is little incentive to eliminate it (Bell, 1980). An example of interest convergence in education can be seen from the work of DeCuir and Dixon (2004). Using CRT to analyze one African American student’s experience, interest-convergence occurred when a school wanted to increase the competitiveness in their athletic program by recruiting talented African American students to their football team. While these athletes would have access to high quality education by attending this school, these athletes did not participate in any honors programs. The African American student felt that his only asset, in the eyes of the administration, was his athletic ability. The school’s interest was making their athletic program stronger, while the families of these African American athletes were able to have their children participate in a strong education program. While there is no evidence to suggest that these students were provided the high-quality education, the athletic program did benefit from having these African American athletes (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Simply put, this story highlights that Whites will do things to benefit people of color so long as they benefit more from the situation (Bell, 1987).

Tenet three is committed to social justice by focusing on ending forms or oppression and empowering individuals to work towards this goal (Fernandez, 2002). There is a lack of
knowledge surrounding the racial and overall experiences of transracial adoptees in higher education. This study will offer implications of how faculty, staff, and administration can better support transracial adoptees.

**Tenet Four: The Importance of Experiential Knowledge and Storytelling.** CRT values experiential knowledge and stories told by people of color through interviews, spoken history, and storytelling (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). History shows that the voices of subordinate groups have been omitted from narratives written by dominant groups. The experiential knowledge that people of color possess is a legitimate resource and helps in the analysis of racial issues (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

One type of story that people of color exchange is on racial treatment and how they cope and deal with racism in general (Delgado, 1987). Delgado (1989) believed that stories could change mindsets that individuals had. The stories told by people of color could counter the stories told by oppressors through counter-stories (Lawrence, 1987). Additionally, storytelling helps build community and allow for healing to those in marginalized groups through venting and finding comfort through others (Delgado, 1990).

Buenvista, et al. (2009) used experiential knowledge to gain understanding of Asian American students’ experiences in higher education. In their research, they focused on a unique population of Filipino-American students and their experiences with family dynamics of college, cultural events, and the Filipino graduation ceremony. Filipino-American students possessed knowledge and were able to make sense of their experiences being liminal students of color. As liminal students, they were both foreigners and colonial members since the Philippines were colonized by America. They are often seen as second-generation college students, but may not
know how to navigate the education system in the U.S. This status causes Filipino-Americans to often be marginalized by people of color and by Whites.

**Tenet Five: The Interdisciplinary Perspective.** CRT scholars believe that in order to have a holistic knowledge on issues of racism, interdisciplinary perspective through various disciplines is important. Race and racism should be viewed in historical as well as the contemporary context and its relationship (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The interdisciplinary perspectives that CRT framework looks at is through the disciplines of gender and ethnic studies, as well as analyzing the education system from the experiences of a person of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) believe that it is important to bring in pedagogy and curriculum designs that focus specifically on race and racism in the educational realm. For this study, research will be drawn from both education and psychology when understanding racial and identity development of Korean American transracial adoptees.

**Conclusion**

CRT is an appropriate theoretical framework for the study on the identity development of Korean American transracial adoptees. First, CRT has helped individuals understand the role and impact of race and racism in the U.S., particularly the educational system. Identity development for transracial adoptees is a complex process because they are a part of families with different racial and ethnic identities and who look different from them (Samuels, 2009). Transracial adoptees have to integrate their racial, ethnic, and adopted identity together and ask the question “who am I as an adoptee and how does being adopted fit in with being Korean?” (Lieberman, 2001, pp. 107). Therefore, having a framework that takes race, racism and intersectionality into consideration, as shown in tenet one, will allow the researcher to analyze
the experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees in their racial and ethnic identity development.

Secondly, one notion that CRT advocates for is color-awareness (Matsuda, et al., 1993). Justice Blackmun said it best when addressing the University of California vs. Bakke case (1978): that in order to get past racism, we must acknowledge race. One may argue that they are “color-blind”, simply stating that they are not judging one by their skin color and therefore do not see their skin color (Tate, 1997). However, Aleinkoff (1991) would argue that in order to truly be color-blind, individuals must be conscious of color. After race is taken into account, individuals need to go through a mental process of not being triggered by thoughts associated with particular races (Aleinikoff, 1991).

This is important to the study on transracial adoptees because, these adoptees’ already have a “hidden” identity. This refers to the notion that without their adoptive parents next to them to contrast differences in racial and ethnic identity, their transracial adoptees status is not visible (Samuels, 2009). The “hidden” nature of the adoptee’s identity status may ultimately affect and hinder their identity development. To say that one is color-blind is disregarding an identity that is clearly visible to a Korean adoptee – looking Asian. In addition to having a “hidden” identity, Korean American transracial adoptees also struggle to have their identities recognized and accepted.

The third tenet focuses on the commitment to social justice. There is a lack of knowledge and understanding of the racial experiences of transracial adoptees. Without a holistic understanding of their experiences, faculty, staff, and administrations are not equipped with the tools to assist these students and address their needs. Conducting the study on transracial adoption will offer implications for how to support these students.
Lastly, the experiential knowledge and storytelling component of CRT is important in this study. Encouraging Korean American transracial adoptees to tell their stories and speak the truth will be empowering. Transracial adoptees vary in their experiences and much could be learned from their personal stories. An example of varying experiences among transracial adoptees is the difference in parental involvement in their racial and identity development process. Parents differed on how much they support their child learning about their birth culture due to fear (Dorow, 2006). Therefore transracial adoptees vary in their racial identity development depending on their experiences, comfort level, and exposure to their race and ethnic identity. Adoptees who are adopted as infants often feel less connected to Korea, their birth country, and may not identify at all with this race, ethnicity, or culture (Textor, 1991, as cited in Pinderhughes, 1995).

The use of CRT as a theoretical framework with the use of the five tenets guided the researcher to make decisions on how research should be conducted to further understand the identity development of transracial adoptees. Additionally, it assisted in clarifying and showing the importance of the problem of practice.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Transracial adoptees are a hidden population and without their adoptive parents next to them to contrast differences in racial and ethnic identity, their transracial adoptees status is not visible (Samuels, 2009). The hidden nature of the adoptee’s identity status may ultimately affect and hinder their identity development. A 2003 study by Friedlander suggests that identity development is impacted. She found that those who develop a positive racial and ethnic identity have higher self-esteem that those who do not (Friedlander, 2003).
One of the crucial roles that student affairs administrators play in higher education is in helping students through the transition from high school to college (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2006). Students entering college face transitional challenges, which are especially pronounced for minority students who may face unique barriers to success (Mowbray, 2008). These transitions may include anything from adjusting to a new environment, navigating their new roles as independent individuals away from home, and building new relationships (Kantanis, 2000; Erickson, Peters, & Strommer, 2006; Lowe & Cook, 2003). This can be an emotional experience for students (Kantanis, 2000). Some students are excited at the prospect for independence and freedom (Erickson, et al., 2006), while others will struggle to adapt to a set rhythm and schedule in a controlled environment (Lowe & Cook, 2003). Still, others will form unmet expectations of what college is and what they will be experiencing while attending college.

Invariably, these changes in lifestyles will cause a range of emotional responses including anxiety, excitement, and nervousness (Vasquez & Rohrer, 2006). Hossler, Ziskin, Moore, and Wakhungu (2008) believed that social interactions and academic experiences assist in the social integration of students, which in turn impacts their commitment to their institutions, as well as their overall satisfaction. Several literature streams were examined that all contributed to the broader topic of understanding Korean American transracial adoptees’ college experiences. The bodies of literature examined, including Korean American transracial adoptees, Asian Americans in college, identity development particular to racial and ethnic identity of Korean Americans, add to understanding college experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees. Because of the lack of information surrounding the experiences of Korean American adoptees in higher education, research on the experiences of Asian Americans in college was analyzed.
Additionally, the process of identity development, specifically the racial and ethnic identity development of Korean American transracial adoptees was explored.

**Korean American Transnational/Transracial Adoptees**

Transracial adoption is a way in which one can legally take and raise a child that is of a different race or ethnicity as their own (McRoy & Zurcher, 1983). An increase in adoption began in Korea during 1950-1953 because of war, poverty, famine, and diseases (Wilkinson, 1985). There are also aspects of Korean culture that result in a disproportionate number of orphans. Korean culture is based on Confucian teachings that viewed children born out of wedlock as a disgrace to the family (Simon & Altstein, 1987). Therefore, many Korean women gave up their children for adoption to avoid consequences such as getting disowned or bringing about shame to their family. Korean culture emphasizes and values family blood kinship, and view orphans as a nonperson because they do not have a family, which was believed to be a basic yet crucial aspect of the society (Wilkinson, 1985).

Back in the U.S., religious organizations assisted in bringing international adoptees into the U.S. after WWII (Simon & Altstein, 1987). The shortage in American-born children who were available for adoption increased the demands of transracial adoption in the U.S. White parents adopted transracial children for various reasons: humanitarianism efforts, infertility, wanting a specific gender and age of a child, and wanting a child but not wanting to have one of their own (Kim, Hong & Kim, 1976; Grow& Shapiro, 1974). In 1953 the U.S passed the Refugee Relief Act that allowed visas for the large number of Korean children from the War to be adopted (Hochfeld, 1954).

In the 1970’s The National Association of Black Social Workers stated that transracial adoption was not beneficial for children, which caused a decrease in domestic transracial
adoptions (Baden & Steward, 2000). This, in turn, resulted in an increase in Korean children being adopted internationally. Between 1953 and 2007, approximately 160,000 South Korean children were adopted in Western countries, representing the largest number of children adopted from one country (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2009). In 2011 alone, 734 children were adopted from South Korea to the U.S. (Intercountry Adoptions, 2011).

Some see transracial adoption as a way to raise and provide a future for a child who might not have had such opportunities otherwise; however, others criticize it. Organizations such as the National Association of Black Social Workers believe that transracial adoption would have a negative impact on a child’s identity formation and development. Additionally, they believed that it would hinder the child’s ability to the cope with discrimination and racism and their overall psychological adjustment (Simon & Altstein, 1987). Despite the varied views on transracial adoption (Simon & Altstein, 1987), as educators, researchers, and student affairs practitioners, necessary steps must be taken to learn and better understand the identity development process of transracially adopted students. Understanding the experiences of transracial adoptees will allow practitioners to be sensitive to their challenges and assist them in overcoming obstacles during their college transition and overall college experience.

**Korean Transracial Adoptees’ College Experiences**

Transracial adoptees vary in their racial identity development depending on their experiences, exposure, and comfort level with their race and ethnic identity. In the college transition process some transracial adoptees may experience culture shock when they see an increased number of people who look like they do, yet do not act in the same way, as they were not raised in a predominately White environment (Patton, 2000). This cognitive dissonance could be heightened if transracial adoptees have struggled with developing their racial and ethnic
identity. Without a positive racial and ethnic identity, this experience could impact adoptees negatively (Griffith & Bergeron, 2006). Furthermore, Trenka, Oparah, and Shin (2006) believe that children who have had no contact with their birth racial and ethnic group growing up could suffer from lower self-esteem. This low self-esteem could eventually lead to an identity crisis or difficulty in the adoptee relating to those from their birth racial and ethnic group (Trenka, et al., 2006). Additionally, Kirton (2000) believed that transracial adoptees may struggle with issues of racism, which could ultimately result in a difficult relationship both with their adoptive culture, as well as struggle with their birth culture. Eventually, this will lead to overall discomfort with the process of their racial and ethnic identity (Kirton, 2000).

Without developing a healthy racial and ethnic identity and a sense of self, adoptees may experience even more psychological challenges. Lieberman’s (2001) study asked questions that focused on integrating the adoptees experiences of being adopted with their identity and a sense of who they are based on their life experiences. All interviewees expressed wanting to belong, searching for self-knowledge, and wanting to feel complete. Most people expressed self-hatred and wanting to be White and stated they experienced racism. Some people felt they were trapped between two cultures and felt they did not belong nor accepted into either of them. For most individuals, they felt college is a crucial time for them to understand and develop their racial and ethnic identity (Lieberman, 2001). Lee (2003) found that discrimination is negatively related to the psychological well-being among Asian American college students and is related to distress. Having a sense of self and a comfort with one’s racial and ethnic identity will allow adoptees to navigate issues of discrimination and cope with racism that may occur during their time in college. A look at the experiences of Asian American students in college may help in understanding the unique transitional period for Korean American transracial adoptees.
There is a lack of information and knowledge on the experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees in college (Lee, 2003). Specifically, there is no knowledge regarding the challenges of how being a Korean American transracial adoptee affects their college experience. Without the knowledge surrounding a transracial adoptees racial and ethnic identity development in higher education, educators lack the tools to support this segment of the student population.

**Asian American Students’ College Experiences**

While many students are in need of assistance at some point in their college transition, Asian American students are a growing and often neglected segment of the student population that is in need of special attention. Studies show that Asian American college students have the challenges associated with achievement stereotypes and the model minority myth (Suzuki, 1989). Kawaguchi (2003)’s discussion with 15 Asian/Pacific American students from Southeast University revealed that they had negative feelings towards race relations and felt separation among students in addition to feelings of ignorance and racist attitudes among White students at the institution. These students expressed having faced discrimination since childhood in various ways. One example of discrimination that Asian American students faced in college was the model minority myth stereotype which stemmed from family members, the Asian American community as a whole, and various contributors in college (Kawaguchi, 2003). Students felt pressure from this stereotype due to assumptions and expectations. For example, at Southeast University, a math professor assumed that an Asian American student was good at math due to her race (Kawaguchi, 2003). Another student expressed the struggle that this segment of the student population experience due to the false assumptions that Asians are able to work through any challenges and still maintain their success (Kawaguchi, 2003).
Asian American students also expressed the importance of their ethnicity in their academic goals in college. Students articulated the importance of their ethnicity and their experiences that related to their ethnicity. For example, a student explained how she could use her Mandarin language skills as an engineer in her future career (Kawaguchi, 2003). Family pressures and expectations to be successful were shown in the types of career the students pursued (Kawaguchi, 2003).

Another theme that arose in the college experiences of Asian American students was cultivating leadership skills. An important aspect of college is finding one’s leadership style. However, there are not many visible Asian American leaders in society which impact the leadership development experiences of Asian American students in college. This may be due to the stereotypes of Asian Americans being passive, quiet and unassertive (Liang, Lee & Ting, 2002). Museus and Chang (2009) argued the importance of including Asian Americans in the work to improve leadership development among college students since they are a growing population in higher education but a group that is not fully understood. There is a need to improve this experience and encouragement needed to push Asian American students in leadership roles (Teranishi, Behringer, Grey & Parker, 2009). Kodama, McEwen, Liang, and Lee (2001) believed that identity development may be one of the biggest challenges that an Asian American student will face in college but shaping and fostering their leadership experience was crucial in providing confidence and self-awareness. There are gaps in the literature around the experiences of Asian American students in higher education. The voices and experiences of the numerous groups within the larger Asian American umbrella need to be explored (i.e. Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese).

Identity Development in College
Josselson (1987) defines identity as “a dynamic fitting together of parts of the personality with the realities of the social world so that a person has a sense both of internal coherence and meaningful relatedness to the real world” (pp.12-13). Stated differently, identity is a combination of who someone is, how they relate, and how they fit into various social contexts (Kroger, 2007). Simply put, it is a fusion of aspects of an individual which include their childhood, experiences growing up, and psychological events (Hoopes, 1990; Brodzinsky & Schecter, 1990).

During adolescence, individuals go through various identity development processes where they question and explore their social class, religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and race and ethnicity (Jones & McEwen, 2000). Berzonsky (2005) stated that it is important that individuals have a sense of ego identity in order to navigate situations throughout their lives. Ego identity is a true understanding of oneself and the ability to take ownership of one’s development. The seven aspects that make up the sense of self are: comfort with sexual orientation, comfort with self-image as far as appearance, sense of self from feedback from others, sense of self in cultural and social contexts, self-concept in terms of life-style, self-esteem and accepting oneself for who they are, and personal stability (Josselson, 1987). Identity is formed and developed through answering questions that pertain to these seven points (Josselson, 1987). Being adopted can impact how one sees themselves at different stages in their life (Pertman, 2000).

An important aspect of one’s identity development is their racial and ethnic identity. One’s racial and ethnic identity has a profound impact on their understanding of self (Baden & Steward, 2000; Friedlander, 2003; Josselson, 1987). For first-year students, transition to college is a time where they question who they are and reflect upon how they see themselves as a person (Cassidy & Trew, 2004). Race and ethnicity is an identity that needs more in-depth exploration
among adolescents transitioning into college. With the changing demographics in higher education and the impact that one’s race and ethnicity has on how they are viewed by society and others, this component of one’s identity cannot be ignored. For many adolescents, understanding their racial and ethnic identity and comes from their parents and families who pass on their knowledge and experiences, and understand the challenges and issues one may face because of their race and ethnicity. However, for transracial adoptees, understanding their racial and ethnic identity is difficult because they are a part of a family with a different race and ethnicity and they look different from their family (Samuels, 2009).

**Research on Korean American Transracial Adoptee Identity Development**

Huh and Reid (2000) looked to find out if transracial adoptees went through specific stages of ethnic identity development and what factors impacted one’s identity development. The method of collecting data was through interviews with the children and their parents. 80% of the adoptees who scored high on the ethnic identity development scale saw themselves as Korean American. 20% of the adoptees that scored low on the ethnic identity and ethnic exposure scale saw themselves as Korean American. In their research they found that it is important for parents to provide opportunities for the adopted children to explore and engage in various Korean cultural activities and talk about their adoption. Additionally, it is just as important for their adoptee to meet other children who are Korean. It was found that adoptees who participated in Korean cultural events and activities are able to talk to their parents about their adoption status more easily and more strongly identified with being Korean (Huh & Reid, 2000). This study highlighted the important roles of adoptive parents in providing opportunities for this adopted child to participate in cultural events and activities and meet other children from the same ethnic background.
Lieberman (2001) asked questions that focused on integrating the adoptees experiences of being adopted with their identity and a sense of who they are. Additional questions were asked that asked if this overall sense of who they are changed based on experiences and life events such as pregnancy, marriage or death of a loved one (Lieberman, 2001, pp.57). The interview yielded results where all participants expressed wanting to belong, searching for self-knowledge, and wanting to feel complete. Most people expressed self-hatred, wanted to be White, and stated they experienced racism. Some people felt they were trapped between two cultures and felt they did not belong nor accepted into either of them. For most individuals, they felt college was a crucial time for them to understand and develop their racial and ethnic identity (Lieberman, 2001). Similar to Huh and Reid’s (2000) studies, Lieberman (2001) emphasized the importance of providing their children with opportunities to learn about their birth culture through various interactions and experiences. Interestingly, in Lieberman’s research, the adoptees focused on being Korean more than issues of being adopted. They believed that their challenges were from being a part of a transracial family rather than their adopted status (Lieberman, 2001).

With the lack of knowledge on the ethnic identity development of Korean American transracial adoptee, racial and ethnic identity studies are explored to gain a better understanding. Studies that focus on one’s racial and ethnic identity assess ways in which transracial adoptees use racial/ethnic self-descriptors. This type of study also looks at the how adoptees feel about their race and ethnicity in terms of comfort-level and sense of pride (Hollingsworth, 1997; Brooks & Barth, 1999). Research shows that there are a variety of responses among transracial adoptee’s in looking at their racial and ethnic identities.

**Research on Racial and Ethnic Identity**
Hollingsworth (1997) used a meta-analysis method to conduct six cross-sectional, longitudinal studies which looked at the racial and ethnic identity of transracial adoptees compared with same-race adoptees who were non-White. The racial and ethnic identity was measured by looking at how children used racial and ethnic descriptors of self. A series of studies such as the Clark Doll study and the Twenty-Statements Test were conducted (Hollingsworth, 1997). It was found that transracial adoptees had lower racial and ethnic identities than those children who were adopted by same-race parents (Hollingsworth, 1997).

Other studies showed mixed results in responses among the adoptees. Brooks and Barth (1999) found that 244 Asian American and African-American transracial adoptees had positive and secure racial and ethnic identities. However, about half of the adoptees had lack of comfort when it came to their racial appearance (Brooks & Barth, 1999). Similarly, Benson, Sharma, and Roehlkepartain (1994) found that half of the research participants who were transracially adopted felt racial and ethnic pride where some adoptees wished they were of a different race or ethnic background, and a few felt embarrassed about their race and ethnicity (Benson et al., 1994). The limitations of these studies are that there is an automatic assumption that transracial adoptees with a positive racial and ethnic identity will have adjust well psychologically. However, these studies do not specifically show the relationship between racial and ethnic experiences and psychological adjustment. The research also lacks reliability and validity in that the researchers used tools that relied on racial preferences, self-reporting questionnaires, and open-ended questions.

Some studies focused on understanding the racial and ethnic experiences among transracial adoptees and its impact on their psychological adjustment. DeBerry, Scarr, and Weinberg (1996) conducted a longitudinal study of 88 African American transracial adoptees. It
was found that almost half of the adoptive parents assisted and supported biculturalism while raising their children during childhood. However, when the children reached adolescence and adulthood, the adoptive parents did not emphasize race and cultural socialization as they previously had (DeBerry et al., 1996). This study also showed that parents of the African American transracial adoptee had more of a positive racial and ethnic identity development when their race and ethnicity was prompted throughout their childhood (DeBerry et al., 1996).

Cederblad, Hook, Irhammar and Mercke (1999) took an epidemiological sample of 211 international adopted young adults in Sweden and found that racial and ethnic experiences that were negative in nature were measured by acts thought to be discriminatory. This showed that negative racial and ethnic experience impacted transracial adoptees psychologically (Cederblad et al., 1999). On the other hand, DeBerry et al. (1996) found that a positive racial and ethnic identity experience helped with psychological adjustment for transracial adoptees. Similarly, Yoon (2001) found that Korean adoptees that have adoptive parents who helped foster the adopted children’s ethnic culture had a more positive racial and ethnic identity development. With the studies above there were assumptions made that a transracial adoptee’s positive psychological adjustment was because of a positive racial and ethnic experience. Unlike the research that focused on the racial and ethnic experiences based on self-descriptors, these studies looked at how adoptees and their families addressed the cultural and psychological implications of being transracially adopted.

Out of the research questions and methods reviewed, the most compelling is that of Benson et al. (1994). Benson et al. (1994) used a theory as a basis to understand the relationship between a transracial adoptee and their adoptive parent and their acceptance of difference. Additionally, he began the work necessary to understand the importance of race and ethnicity in
identity development by looking at whether parents and adopted child saw differences or not (Benson et al., 1994). Benson et al. (1994) used the shared fate theory of adoption to explain their findings. This theory was created by Kirk (1964) and looked at acceptance of differences in adoptive families that created a “shared fate” between parent and child that played a crucial role in the psychological adjustment of an adopted individual. Benson et al. (1994) found that transracial adoptees agreed that parents accepted the difference seen between the adopted child and the adoptive parent. A smaller number of transracial adoptees stated that their parents denied the difference among transracially adopted child and adoptive parent. Additionally, transracial adoptees accepted differences by their parents than individuals who were adopted by parents who were of the same race.

**Limitations of Literature**

Current research has looked at qualitative, comparative, and descriptive study in exploring the racial and ethnic identity development of transracial adoptees. This is due to the fact that it is difficult to capture the experiences of all transracial adoptees because of various external factors that play a role in their experiences (Parham, 1989). Some studies focused on understanding the racial and ethnic experiences and how it affected the adoptee’s adjustment (DeBerry et al., 1996; Cederblad et al., 1999) while other researchers analyzed the adoptees’ racial and ethnic identity in terms of pride, comfort, and accepting the difference them and their adoptive parents (Benson et al., 1994; Brooks & Barth, 1999; Huh & Reid, 2000; Lieberman, 2001).

Research surrounding transracial adoptees often utilized convenience sampling where subjects were chosen due to easy accessibility to the researcher which is a limitation. For example, Hollingsworth (1997) drew their sample from adoption agencies and organizations.
Some research lacked clarity in that there were no differentiations between race and ethnicity or between domestic and international adoptees. Benson et al. (1994) did not show a distinction between race and ethnicity in their research. Brooks et al. (1999) did not show a distinction between the racial and ethnic experiences of domestic and international adoptees in their research. Cederblad et al. (1999) only focused on international research and did not compare it to domestic research. Huh and Reid (2000) did show racial and ethnic identity development of both domestic and international adoptees, however, they had mixed results in their data therefore needing more data to validate the information.

While there is some research on the college experiences of Asian American students (i.e. Suzuki, 1989, Kawaguchi, 2003), more research could be conducted to include data from parents, faculty, staff, and students who are not Asian American. This data could add to the knowledge surrounding the overall experiences of Asian Americans and the stereotypes and discrimination they may encounter. Empirical, theoretical, and practical research is needed to fully understanding the educational experiences of Asian American students and topics surrounding this population (Nakanishi & Nishida, 1995). In addition, the ethnic identity development of an Asian American student and its impact on their overall education experience needs to be studied (Kawaguchi, 2003). Further research must be conducted to understand the experiences of transracial adoptees so that student affairs professional can maximize their college engagement, foster a sense of belonging, and increase overall satisfaction.

In reviewing literature streams there was minimal research on the experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees in higher education (Hoffman, 2011). Further research must be conducted to understand how they approach their racial and ethnic identity and how their identity adds to the challenges, successes, and overall experiences in college. With an increased
knowledge on this segment of the student population, student affairs professionals can help maximize their engagement, foster a sense of belonging, and increase overall satisfaction. In this study, the research will focus on the college transition and experiences of a Korean American transracial adoptee. One of the main focuses will be their racial and ethnic identity development while in college, as this is a crucial time when students assess “who am I?” and “who am I as an adoptee and a Korean American?” The topic of adoption is both sensitive and complex. It is important to recognize that not all cases and experiences of adoptees or transracial adoptees are generalizable. The researcher would like to place value on the narrative of every adoptee who shares his or her story. Through these testimonials, the researcher hopes to capture the different experiences which will eventually be a factor in how they form and develop their identity.

Chapter 3

Research Design

This chapter will outline the research design used to explore the experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees in college. This includes an overview of the research question and methodology, which used the portraiture model to analyze the collected data which included site, participation, data collection and analysis. The section will conclude with a discussion on ensuring the trustworthiness of the study and the protection of the interview participants.

Research Question

A review of literature shows that there is limited research on the college experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees (Hoffman, 2011). Using a qualitative approach, the researcher sought to understand the challenges, successes, and overall experiences of this segment of the population with a “hidden identity.” Information was gathered from the
participants through the use of portraiture to gain an in-depth picture of how they approach their racial and ethnic identity and how their identity affects their college experience.

The research focused on providing an understanding of the experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees who were attending college at the time of the study. The research questions guiding this study were “How do transracial adoptees experience identity development in higher education?” and “How does their identity development shape their overall experience in college?” This research study was designed with the intent of providing new insight into the identity development of Korean American transracial adoptees in college and its overall impact on their college experience.

Methodology

**Qualitative Methodology.** Qualitative research was used in this study because it allowed the researcher to study, interpret, and understand how the participants make meaning of a phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research focuses on the process of looking at questions from a theoretical lens, collecting data through observation, and engaging with participants in their natural setting (Creswell, 2007). It also allows for the researcher to analyze the data to highlight the experiences of the participants through their own words. In this study, the phenomenon of how Korean American transracial adoptees navigate their racial and ethnic identity and how this impacts their overall college experience was explored.

In wanting to understand the racial and ethnic identity development of Korean American transracial adoptees and their college experiences, a qualitative research method was most appropriate for this study. The experiences of this segment of the student population have “silenced voices” that need to be heard (Creswell, 2007, pp.41). This qualitative research study,
with a small sample size, allowed the researcher to understand the complexity of the issue and explore the research questions in-depth with the participants (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002).

**Portraiture Approach.** Portraiture technique was first created by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot and advanced with the help of Jessica Hoffman Davis (1997). The portraiture technique goes beyond ethnographies to gain a deeper understanding of the research participants. It looks to explore the participants’ experiences and delve deeper into the complexities of meaning-making. Portraiture focuses on a unique story-telling where the reader can place themselves in the shoes of the participants in the study and evoke empathy (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Additionally, portraiture focuses on exploring “goodness” which is defined by the participant. This “goodness” is not the positive aspects of the research topic but focuses on interpreting the various experiences and complex meaning behind those experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Portraiture allows the researcher to go beyond academic language and make connections to the general public, giving people an opportunity to take action in creating social change (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The researcher must write a narrative that blends their analysis of the data gathered by also allowing individuals reading to come up with their own interpretations (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997; Barone & Eisner, 2006). What is most unique about the portraiture technique is that the role of the researcher is emphasized and “is more evidence and more visible than in any other research form” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, pp.13). Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) focuses on the voice of not only the participants but also the researcher. She states that there are many ways in which the researcher has a voice in the study and that this is important to the overall study.
First, the researcher acts as a witness and must carefully and accurately record what she sees and hears in the interviews. The researcher must not only listen in the interview but should observe body language and silence during these interactions because this may be what Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) calls “mixed feelings” and may add to creating a fuller picture of the study. With these observations, the researcher must interpret this information and ask the question “why.” In interpreting the information, Lawrence-Lightfoot emphasizes that there must be “descriptive evidence” so that they may be other views or conclusions of the information gathered (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). “Voice of autobiography” is also an aspect of the role of the researcher in portraiture where the researcher shares their story that is connected to the study. In summary, the researcher is given the opportunity to get a first-hand experience through the participants then write a narrative that paints a picture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

The portraiture approach is most appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to focus on understanding the depth of experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees in college. Additionally, this technique allows the researcher to provide an opportunity for the participants to find their voice in telling their unique stories. The researcher then is given the task of “selecting, interpreting, and composing the story” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997, pp.13).

**Site and Participants.** This research study took place in Massachusetts. The participants were interviewed where they felt most comfortable, whether it was in the researcher’s office, a location on the participants or researcher’s college campus, or any other place and time that was convenient for the participant. Allowing flexibility in time and location for the interview provided an environment that was most comfortable and accessible for the
participant. Additionally, the researcher worked to find a location that provided privacy so that participant’s felt like they can disclose and share their stories and feel as comfortable as possible.

For this study, criterion sampling was used so that the participants were not randomly selected (Patton, 1990; Creswell, 2007). Specific participants were chosen because of the knowledge they hold about the research questions being investigated and based on the criteria set by the researcher (Patton, 1990; Creswell, 2007). The participants for this study were Korean American transracial adoptees, adopted from South Korea by White parents, who were attending college in Massachusetts or were recently graduates. There were a total of four participants in this study. While this number may be a small sample size, it is appropriate for a portraiture methodology because this technique focuses on the depth of understanding and not the breadth of experiences (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Having four participants allowed for the researcher to paint an overall holistic picture of the experiences of the participants in college.

To gather participants, the researcher used list serves, posted on social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, gained referrals by colleagues in higher education in Massachusetts, and wrote letters inviting candidates to be a part of the study. The letter explained the details of the research and qualifications for the research. The researcher did not provide any financial or other benefits to the participants who participated in this research.

**Data Collection.** This study used a general interview guide approach when asking participants questions regarding their identity development and college experience. The general interview guide approach has flexibility but is structured more than an informational conversational interview (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003). When the participants for this study were determined, the researcher met with the individuals to discuss the purpose of the study and details surrounding it. The researcher also explained the roles and responsibilities of the
researcher and participants in the study. Once this was established, information was gathered to profile the participants and consent forms were signed. Each participant was interviewed several times for approximately 90 minutes each time. Each interview session was tape-recorded for later analysis. The information gathered from the interviews was transcribed into print by the researcher. To ensure the privacy and anonymity of the participants, each participant was given pseudonyms for identification and all the gathered information and interviews were secured in a locked drawer. Portraiture requires that the researcher builds a relationship with the participants and conduct interviews over a period of time (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The researcher informed the participant that the interview will be conducted several times over a three-month timeframe.

**Data Analysis.** The researcher used systematic and interpretative analysis methods outlined by Lawrence-Lightfoot and David (1997). To begin the data analysis, the researcher wrote reflective notes promptly after each interview while the information was fresh in her mind. The notes highlighted thoughts, body language, and impressions of the interview. Then the researcher transcribed the audiotape into print. The researcher read the transcripts and wrote memos reflecting on the data gathered and how it relates to the phenomena. These memos were the “impressionist record” that describes the researcher’s thoughts on the data collected, interpretations of the data, identify any changes in the researcher’s thinking, and identifying any future challenges (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997). “Impressionist record” highlighted the researcher’s analysis of the interviews and impressions gathered from it. It also allowed the researcher to make any changes and develop a plan for the next interview session. Additionally, the memos helped showcase how the researcher’s thoughts evolve over time which is important to portraiture work and its emphasis on change over time (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
As part of the systematic and interpretative analysis, open coding was used. Coding is a way for the researcher to interpret the data (Saldana, 2009) by looking at segments of the data and analyzing it for meaning. The main data analysis was an ongoing, non-linear process where the interview transcripts, notes taken after the interviews, and observations were all taken into account as the data was collected and analyzed. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) describes a systematic coding process that uses descriptive coding, interpretative coding, and thematic analysis. Descriptive coding takes segments of the document and briefly explains what it is. Interpretative coding states the researcher’s thoughts and interpretations of the data. Thematic analysis looks for themes across the data. The researcher codes for themes that emerge within the data (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, 1997).

Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) explains interpretative analysis as a voice-centered data analysis. No specific directions were given on the procedures of interpretative analysis. Therefore, based on portraiture work, the researcher focused on the situational, personal, and cultural aspects of the participants and their individual lives (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). The researcher looked to the experiences of the participants and embraced the instability of lived experience by being fully engaged and just listening during the interviews (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). As noted earlier, the researcher reviewed the interview transcript and the reflection memos written after each interview which displayed process and change over time (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Additional notes of the researcher’s thoughts and reactions were taken while reviewing the transcripts and reflections after the interview. These notes highlighted the evolving relationship between the researcher and participants as this is an important aspect of portraiture work (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).
Validity and Credibility. To ensure the “trustworthiness” of this study, the validity and credibility must be addressed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The credibility of the study was established through knowing that the findings will reliable and dependable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the researcher focused on the audiotaping of the interviews and the accuracy of the transcription. The researcher also used persistent observation and kept a journal entry noting the observations, reactions, and thoughts after each interview session. Additionally, peer review and debriefing was used to gain feedback, ask questions, and for support throughout the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Colleagues in higher education, the researcher’s advisor, and the Scholar Practitioner Community (SPC) group were utilized for the debriefing process. The researcher also used the member checking technique (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure that information presented was correct and accurate with the participants. Lastly, triangulation was used to test for consistent, accurate information with the use of multiple sources and data collection (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999).

Limitations of the Study. Undoubtedly there are limitations to this study. The first limitation is the generalizability of the results of the study. The study focused on four Korean American transracial adoptees attending college in Massachusetts. Because of the specific participant count and location, the results of the study may not seem generalizable. Also, this study focuses specifically on Korean Americans who are transracially adopted. Therefore, the data may not be transferable to other racial and ethnic student groups such as Latino(a) transracial adoptees, Chinese-American transracial adoptees, or Koreans who are not adopted overseas. Another limitation may be participation selection bias. The participants in this study were on a volunteer basis and those who meet the criteria. Because of this, the participants in this study may not be representative of
the larger Korean American transracial adoptee population (Hartman, Forsen, Wallace & Neely, 2002).

**Role of Researcher.** The researcher is not a Korean American transracial adoptee herself. However, she immigrated to the United States from South Korea at the age of seven and struggled to find her identity. Growing up in a small town in Connecticut the researcher tried to blend in with the crowd and assimilate to the U.S. culture. Attending college at the University of Vermont where differences were appreciated and embraced, it was the first time the researcher looked to celebrate her racial and ethnic identity. Having a better understanding of herself, she excelled in classes, took on leadership roles as a Resident Assistant and campus tour guide, and became the President of the Asian American Student Union. As a first generation Korean American female whose life has straddled two cultures, the researcher has faced many challenges. These challenges have led to awareness, sensitivity, and genuine desire to help others through their college journey.

What interested the researcher on the topic of Korean American transracial adoptees and their identity development and its impact on their college experience were the struggles she faced in college and how she overcame them. When the researcher began her college journey she did not know where she belonged. She was not Korean enough for the Koreans who came to the U.S to study abroad and she was not American enough because of her physical looks.

All necessary steps were taken to reduce any bias; however, the racial and ethnic identity of the researcher and how it has impacted her overall college experience may have influenced how the researcher interpreted the participant’s responses and the overall study.

**Protection of Human Subjects**
It is crucial to understand and respect the ethical dimensions of the project the researcher plans on partaking in. The researcher understands that conducting an ethically sound study is an important commitment in working with students. Participating in this study was completely voluntary and participants were selected based on strict criteria. The participants were given informed consent notification that communicated information regarding the study which included the purpose, the criteria for the study, and highlighted that this study is voluntary. The researcher gathered information and data on personal attitudes, experiences, and knowledge of students who may be taking a risk in telling their stories. Although there are formal safeguards that are in place through the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as far as confidentiality and protection of individuals, it is just as important to take into consideration the sensitivity of the topic at hand. Additionally, to ensure the privacy and anonymity of the participants, each participant was given pseudonyms for identification.

Given the importance of the topic the researcher will be exploring, as well as the sensitive nature, the researcher emphasized the vulnerability of the transracially adopted individuals meeting with the researcher and worked to preserve the dynamic between the professional/researcher and the student/participant. Aside from any regulatory issues, the researcher took into consideration the ethical perspective and the ethical commitment to the work that the researcher was doing. The researcher understood that as a researcher they have an obligation and responsibility to serve in the best interest of the student and participant. The researcher was also aware of any triggers that questions may cause, as their experiences as a transracially adopted individual may bring strong emotions to the surface.

**Conclusion**
The topic of adoption is both a sensitive and complicated issue. When the second layer of transracial adoptees is added, the topic becomes much more complex. Each student should be encouraged to tell their individual stories and allow them to find their voice. The researcher placed value on the narrative of each student who shares his or her story. The interviews allowed the researcher to learn more about the experience of Korean American transracial adoptees and further the understanding of the obstacles and challenges they may face. It is only when a transracial adoptee’s individual needs are acknowledged and identified that Student Affairs professional can ensure that these needs are met to help them grow as individuals.

In looking at the individual needs of students, addressing the greatest questions in life is a never-ending, cyclical, personal process of experiencing, integrating, translating, and testing our beliefs or non-beliefs against or with our cultural and environmental stimuli, while creating new meanings by cognitively reconciling intellectual development with evolving narratives. The college or university campus provides fertile soil for a student’s individual quest for purpose and meaning. To this end, this study explored “How do Korean American transracial adoptees experience identity development in higher education?” and “How does their identity development impact their overall experience in college?”

The researcher worked to ensure the trustworthiness of the study by gathering the data and transcribing the interviews, analyzing the data, reflecting on the observations made after the interviews, checking with the participants for accuracy in the information presented, and representing the participants’ experiences in forming their racial and ethnic identity and how it impacted their experiences in college. Throughout the process the researcher was aware of the limitations of the study and the biases they may hold throughout the research process. The researcher worked to ensure that there were no risks for the participants in the study and worked
to follow all guidelines set by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Through this study the researcher hopes to help the participants find their voice, provide more knowledge around the college experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees, and contribute to developing resources for these students.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this research study was to explore the racial and ethnic identity development of Korean American transracial adoptees and its impact on their college experience. The participants taking part in this study provided detailed accounts of their individual experiences of their racial and ethnic identity development growing up and in college. Additionally, they were able to provide detailed explanation of the meaning behind those experiences for them. Chapter 4 begins with a profile of the participants which provides an introduction to who the participants in this study were. Next each of the four participant’s experiences are depicted and presented in portraiture.

Profile of the Participants

“The ache for home lives in all of us, the safe place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.” --Maya Angelou

Sam is a 21 year old male and a full-time undergraduate student attending a private college in Boston and majoring in film industry. He grew up in Connecticut in a suburban town where he experienced racism and ignorance. These experienced pushed him to be intentional about his college search and led him to an urban institution. He began his college journey at a different private university in Boston but transferred his sophomore year.
Julia is a 21 year old female and a full-time undergraduate student attending a small, White, Catholic institution an hour away from Boston and major in human services. She grew up in a suburban town in Massachusetts where she was not exposed to a lot of racism or met a lot of people of color. This participant has focused her energy on her various identities being Catholic, living with a disability, and still figuring out how she identifies racially and ethnically.

Jane is a 27 year old female and was non-traditional student. She attended six different colleges that were all White, Catholic institutions until she found a college in an urban setting. She was a commuter student who majored in linguistics. She graduated in May 2011. This participant experienced a lot of racism growing up and always believed she was White until the age of 23. At this sudden point in her life she came to the realization that she had been dishonest to everyone, most importantly not truthful to herself. From this point forward she began to explore her Korean identity more in-depth.

Maya is a 33 year old female and was a non-traditional student. She attended a community college and earned her Associates then went on to a state college that was not very diverse. She was a commuter student who majored in advertising. She graduated in May 2012. While it took her nearly ten years to graduate, she has had a lot of life experiences, working a full-time job, living on her own, and taking classes. This participant experienced some racism growing up but college was not an impactful time for her in exploring her racial and ethnic identity as a non-traditional, commuter student. She had the unique story of meeting her birth family which became an important in her identity development as a Korean American woman. Below is a poem written by this participant to describe her experiences with understanding her racial and ethnic identity.
“This is something I've been trying to write...” by J. Lyric

This is something I've been trying to write for years.
   It somehow stains within the lines of my palms,
   embedded in the cord of my memory,
   beneath the heaviness of my dark eyes.
This is something I've been trying to write for years.

   Where do the misplaced souls go?
   Born to another world,
   to a family I've never known, to a language
   I can not speak
   a face which is mine- and embodies all the characteristics of....
   TIME
   but when I look in the mirror
   the woman I see
   is different from the woman I would have BEEN.

This is something I've been trying to write for years.
   Maybe it’s something in the curl of my smile
   or the sound of laughter
   or the wonderings of WHY
   the questions that always seemed to occupy
   my mind
   Maybe it's just not knowing why
   you were given up,
   and taken from your country
   to live in another,
   as another race,
   another face,
   another you.

This is something I've been trying to write for years.

   Dark hair, dark almond eyes,
   I have all the "Asian" characteristics
   without the "Asian" upbringing
   I've been misplaced
   like an autobiography booked placed in
   the romance section
   I've been misplaced.
   Neither 'fitting' in either
   cultures
   Always somehow
   being on
   the Outside,
looking in.

This is something I've been trying to write for years.

For the others out there that are like me,
adopted out of their own country
to a different race
a different face,
how do we truly define
our
IDENTITY
without
an identity to
identify with?

How do we know who we are
if we are not able to
know
who
we
WERE?

How do we know
who we could have been
if
we would not have been
who
we are
NOW?

This is for the other misplaced souls
who will trace their tears to those lost years,
This is for you.

This is something I've been trying to write for years.
Sam’s Portrait

Wednesday could not come fast enough. I counted down the days. I did not know what made me so anxious and impatient about our first meeting. Could it have been because he was the first person who showed interest in my research? Was it because he was willing to share his story with me? Was I just excited to meet another Korean person? I remember pacing back and forth near the entrance of my office. Sam had graciously agreed to come to my office instead of having my travel out towards Allston to him. I gave him my office address of 106 St. Stephens Street, which is located in an awkward side entrance that was hard to find and I was afraid he would get lost.

Sam arrived four minutes early. I could not miss him. He was a young Korean male, about 5’4, slim with a button down shirt and long pants. He was neatly dressed. The first thing I noticed was his perfectly styled hair. It had an airy swoop – every strand of hair was in place, smooth looking, and overall very stylish. He was bit shorter than I originally assumed he would be. As soon as I laid my eyes on him I knew he was the person I was meeting, I think he knew instantly too. It could have been the mere fact that we were the only two Asian people on the street at the time, but I think we recognized each other for different reasons. I quickly greeted him saying “hello” and introduced myself. I could tell he was really nervous meeting a random stranger who was going to probe into his life for the first time; he rarely made eye contact and turned different shades of red.

I walked Sam down the stairs and to the right to enter the building where my office was located. I gave him the left seat and I asked him if he would like something to drink and he agreed to water. I took the seat to the right facing him. We both sat at the round table in my fairly small and simple office. It consists only of a desk with the usual office supplies – printer,
monitor, phone, paperwork. I could see that he was looking around the office space, probably noticing how tight it was but how it had everything I needed, an unlimited office supply, a refrigerator, two in fact, a computer, a printer, and most importantly it was an enclosed space and had just enough privacy.

I was trying hard to break the ice and make him feel comfortable thanking him over and over again. I could tell Sam was feeling extremely nervous, perhaps even questioning why he signed on to do this in the first place. I first went through the consent form, going over each and every section thoroughly to make sure he understood every aspect and making sure I did not forget anything. Secretly inside I was scared that he would hesitate and back out from participating. But Sam quickly agreed and signed the form without any question or hesitation. This made me feel at ease. Next, I fumbled with the tape recorder and rambled making jokes about how this was my first time using a tape recorder. I could tell he was nervous, not really knowing what to expect even though I had just gone through step by step the goal and role of the researcher and participant. He was not really making eye contact except for once in a while and licking his lips multiple times like they were constantly dry.

My first question was an attempt to get him to feel more comfortable speaking to me, I ask him to tell me about himself. Even with his short answers I could tell that we had a lot in common already. We both had a love for dogs and we both grew up in Connecticut. He was not elaborating too much on who he was and, I could tell he was ready to delve right into the meat of the questions. He struggled more at what I thought was a simple tell me about yourself question and with that cue I began asking him the more probing and to-the-point questions. My first personal question was regarding his adoption and what he knew about it. Sam’s answer was much simpler than I anticipated, and he tells me that does not know much about it. I can tell
instantly that the focus most of his life has been on his racial identity and not as much on his adoption status.

It is not that he has not asked his parents about his adoption but they had limited information regarding it which added to the mystery of it all. Sam explained that his mother was unable to conceive then corrects himself and says that she did have a child but that it died at childbirth so they decided to adopt him and his sister. He does not explain why his parents did not try to have children again but chose to adopt instead. He does clarify that his sister is also adopted from Korea but that they are not biologically related. He describes his parents as Hippies growing up, flower children, baby boomers, and grew up listening to The Beach Boys, The Eagles and The Who. He says that that they now may be considered Yuppies. Later I discovered that his father is Jewish and mother grew up Roman Catholic. I am stunned at this discovery; they are a true multi-cultural family. I am fascinated, particularly about how they celebrate holidays.

Sam explains that his mother has a fractured relationship with her side of the family and both of her parents passed away before he was born so he never had the chance to meet them. His mother does not talk to her brother so Sam has not had many opportunities to meet his mother’s side of the family. He specifies that he only meets them when people pass away. On his father’s side of the family, his three brothers and sisters are all Jewish but two of them are married to Christians so they tend to celebrate both Christmas and Hanukah. I pointed out that his family is a true multiracial, multicultural family. “It’s the American dream right?” he jokes. This is the only time he describes himself as “Korean American Jew” but is clear about not really identifying with any religion, Judaism or Christianity. He states that he thinks of it as a reason
for family gatherings. It is a time where the family gets together and he gets to see his aunts and uncles and enjoy dinner together.

This topic is quickly over and we begin discussing his race and ethnicity, Sam has a lot to say about this. He tells me that childhood was a magical time in his life, where at that young age children do not really identify and differentiate people based on any differences they see. Even if they pointed out a difference, it was innocent in nature as if to just state a fact and without any judgment. He recalls a time in first grade where a classmate told him that he had black hair; while growing up he always thought he had brown hair like his parents. He tells me that he hated this classmate of his. I wonder if this had to do with the fact that this kid pointed out a difference that he did not notice or had neglected all along even at a young age. Sam described the experience:

I used to think I had brown hair like my mom for a long time and I think in first grade a kid…hated this kid…he told me I had black hair and this was the first time I realized not being Asian but being, not looking like my parents because they both have brown hair. And it’s the first time I understand that…kinda an animal seeing it’s reflection for the first time. It was kinda…surprised.

The words “an animal seeing it’s reflection for the first time” swirled around in my head. He was trying to process what this meant, trying to understand what this difference signified – creating confusion and utter disbelief. His parents were open about his adoption and them being different from him but the words did not sink in until he was able to notice these differences and the meaning behind it himself. *I am adopted. These are not my parents by blood. Everyone is noticing that we do not look alike.* Other kids did not mock or make fun of the difference. They just asked about it, wondering why he looked different than his parents. He tried to embrace his
adopted identity as a child by making it a statement, a mere fact. Classmates would ask and he would tell them, I am adopted. He stated how interesting this interaction was, not only was he telling second and third graders that he was adopted, but he was also explaining what adoption was to them. A concept he could not even fully comprehend the full meaning of himself.

This situation was the start of many unpleasant experiences for him where differences were constantly pointed out and mocked. Sam provided another example where some kids were playing soccer then started making faces at him. They were using both of their index fingers and pulling at the end of their eyes towards their ears, making their eyes slanty and small. This became an A-ha moment for him where he realized the meaning behind these gestures, the negative meaning. Not just negative meanings but the stereotyping and intentional pointing out of differences among the majority of Whites – especially the differences in one’s facial features. This began the endless journey for Sam. The journey where there were no turning back. He was seeing how he was different from everyone else around him. People would call him names like “chink” and make the eye slants with their fingers.

These negative experiences may have been what led him to explore his racial and ethnic identity in the first place. Trying to understand why some people were closed minded, ignorant, and believed in stereotypes about Asians. When asked about how he identifies racially and ethnically he could not give a solid answer and in asking the same question multiple times his answers varied. It was hard for him to pinpoint exactly what he believed his race and ethnicity to be. He knew the book answers. He knows racially he is Asian, ethnically he is Korean American. In the beginning he says that he is racially Korean but he always thought himself as American. His struggle in saying this though is that even though he says he is American, there are specific connotations and assumptions that come with it. Part of the challenge was to finding
a word that infused his experiences being an adoptee growing up with parents who are American but born in Korean and embracing some of his Asian culture in so many words.

I could tell as he starts out that he did not have much exposure and experience with his Korean heritage let alone the Asian culture growing up. That was because he grew up in a homogenous environment surrounded by a mainly White community - in a suburb in Connecticut. Kids made fun of him for being Asian once in a while. However, for the most part he blended in with the rest of the kids in elementary school whose focus at the time was not on one’s differences. Overall he seemed to fit in and he says that kindergarten through third grade was not a problem. Around fourth grade was when he began to notice that he was one of the few minorities, perhaps even the only minority in his entire school. That is when he began to get into fights and yelling at people when they would make fun of him with comments and facial expressions. The rest was a blur to him until junior high school.

Junior high school was a great time of transition and exposure for Sam. Through the internet, aspects of Asian culture like Japanese music and cartoons were readily available. This was when his interest in Asian culture started and the rest was history. Eighth grade was an impactful time where he experienced culture shock for the first time. A student from South Korea had immigrated to Connecticut and began attending his school. This situation presented mixed feelings for Sam, excited to see another person who looked like him and came from the same place he was from; yet, feelings of anger and doubt as well. He could not understand this student, not in terms of linguistics but in terms of who he was as a person and where he came from. Sam recalls:

In 8th grade the…huge mile stone was a, we had an exchange student, not an exchange student, he moved here from uh…Incheon, Korea. Um…and I didn’t really talk, I didn’t
understand him at all. And I don’t mean linguistically, I mean uh… I couldn’t wrap my head around him as a person. His attitude, his work ethic, his um…mannerisms and things like, I couldn’t, I couldn’t stand him because I couldn’t comprehend it. It was all so different from what he knew and grew up with yet this person was somehow supposed to be from the same place he was from… South Korea. How could this be?

It took almost a whole year to accept this new Korean student who had entered his school. Sam was the only Asian in the school and now he had to make room for another. Would he experience double the stereotypes and racism now that there were two of them? He would soon find out. In 9th grade Sam began playing the guitar. His love for music gave him something to connect with others on. He mustered enough courage after school one day and asked the Korean student if he played the guitar. Luckily this other student did. From that day on they began playing the guitar and spending more time together. Their relationship had gone from one of annoyance and hatred to acceptance and connection. He described his interactions with his friend’s family who spoke very little English and could not pronounce his name. This was the first time when he felt culture shock. Stepping into his friend’s house, their family would be scattered around the house. His sister was watching Korean pop on TV and his mom in the kitchen cooking some Korean dish. Sam could not focus on one aspect at his friend’s house, there was too much going on, too much to take in and process, too much to understand.

He reflects back saying the only exposure to Korean culture was when his parents would meet up with a few other families who had adopted Korean children and they would learn about Korean culture and have Korean food. He did not really elaborate on these experiences because there was no milestone there and he did not feel though he was connecting with anything and nothing was sticking. But this experience at his friend’s house was different. He was totally
swallowed by Korean culture and experiencing it firsthand. Spending time with his Korean friend was a window into his heritage and background.

Other opportunities presented themselves to Sam which were not necessarily there to help him delve deeper into Korean culture but into other Asian cultures. His love for punk rock music grew while in his high school years. This type of music allowed him to be cynical, perhaps overly cynical about the town he hated so much and gave him the green light to be eccentric. He bleached his hair and dressed in unique ways where he would sometimes wear a suit for no reason and other times would wear flip flops. He also began getting into Japanese music and began learning Japanese on his own.

This was the significant time in Sam’s life where he began to explore the larger Asian umbrella that he fit into, at least in terms of his looks. He paused for a second and continued by saying that this was a very polarizing time for him. As he was diving into Asian culture, his Korean friend was becoming more Americanized. This made them drift farther apart which resulted in a falling out. This was a turning point in Sam’s life. He recognized for the first time that he had truly acknowledged an aspect of his identity that was such a significant part of him – being Asian and being Korean. This was not to be mistaken with the fact that he had not fully accepted nor embraced it however. At this point when asked where he fit in he said he stated that it was with the American kids, although he was not truly fitting in with them either. He only had contact with American kids at the time and that is where he felt most at home.

Towards the end of his senior year he said his experiences with his race and ethnicity in a “White washed community” left him “embittered as a person.” These experiences pushed Sam to be intentional with his college search. Although he did not have set plans or even the motivation to go to college, he knew he did not want to stay in Connecticut, so he applied to schools in
Boston, Rhode Island, and New York City. Before senior year was over Sam was given an opportunity of a lifetime that opened his eyes to his racial and ethnic identity once more. He was one of five contestants that won a Youtube contest celebrating a Japanese band’s 20th Anniversary. The prize was a plane ticket to Japan, tickets to the Japanese concert show, and a cash stipend. He tells me that he was excited and scared at the same time, “being on the other side of the planet where plenty of people speak English in Tokyo but not like they speak English in Boston.” Not only was this the experience of a lifetime, he was traveling overseas for the first time since his adoption, by himself at the age of 18, with basic knowledge of Japan and the Japanese language.

The most striking and memorable experience for Sam in Japan was not necessarily the attention from Japanese fans or the adrenaline you get from visiting a new place for the first time, but feeling like an “Asian person in Asia” for the first time. The feelings could only be described as “different”, “belong[ing]”, “confirm”, “fitting in”, and “normal.” For the first time he felt like no one was watching him or judging him. This overwhelming feeling of being a part of something was quickly washed away when it was time to stop his adventures in Japan and come back home. His first stop back in the U.S was Texas. He stated that he experienced culture shock being in Japan for a week but then again when he entered the U.S., feeling that people in the U.S. compared to Japanese people were different people. Not only were there noticeable differences in looks and stature between Japanese and American people, the attitudes and treatment towards Sam were different. In Japan he felt accepted for the first time. Back home he experienced comments about Geishas and questions asking if bought a lot of cheap, knock-off things in Japan.
Sam did not let these ignorant comments get in the way and when he finally chose a private university in the heart of Boston, it was mostly due to financial aid. He began to build upon his experiences in Japan and took Japanese language classes. He explained that while he wanted to take Korean language classes, it was not offered so the best next thing was Japanese. I figured now was a good time to bridge the topic of his racial and ethnic identity again to see if it had expanded, evolved, or changed. I am surprised by the answer I get. He states that would say he is Korean American for everyone’s understanding. I dug deeper and asked outside of what anyone else thought, who he was on the inside. His answer was pure truth and raw in nature as he tells me that it truly depends on the day but usually it runs in the middle. I saw him ponder for a second then say, “when I’m with White people I feel very foreign and when I’m with Korean people I feel very domestic.”

Around Korean people he feels an “immense space” because he has not made any connections with people at Korean churches, which was an important aspect of community building among Koreans. He felt uncomfortable in Korean churches mostly because he does not speak the language. All in all he says that he cannot play the game of fitting in. He means this in the social context of looking like you fit in when you may not truly. In terms of feeling foreign among White people he paints me a picture of going to a club with a White friend. He had VIP access and was excited to bring a friend. Little did he know that his night in particular the club was about 90% Asian. His friend could not stop pointing out the fact that everyone in the club was Asian and kept asking where the White people were. What his friend failed to recognize was that as he was pointing out all the Asian people, Sam knew he was one of them.

Our second time meeting was not as nerve racking as the first. I was still a bit nervous hoping that he has not forgotten about our meeting. I went outside close to our meeting time and
I could see Sam walking down the street wearing a light grey long sleeve shirt with both sleeves rolled up neatly halfway. He was wearing jeans. Again, I think to myself that he was great at being on time. We quickly greet each other and we walked into my office. He remembered where it was from the last time and sat down in the same seat. I offered him a Sprite or water and he chose Sprite. He asked to use the restroom and I showed him our awkward entrance. We have to exit my office door into our main living room space where the blush couches and sofas are located along with a TV for students to watch. I unlocked another door to the right into our conference room where there is a long rectangular table with many seats and grab the bathroom key on the corkboard. I then turned to my left where the emergency exit was. I showed him how to turn the key to turn on the yellow light and disable the alarm to the emergency exit. I pushed the handle bar to open the door, gave him the alarm disabling key and told him to take his first left then right to find the bathroom. I felt bad having him go through this much effort just to use the restroom. I was thrilled that he did not set off the alarm coming back into our space. I quickly put the key back into the conference room and escorted him back to my office. We jumped right into the interview and I could tell had been thinking a lot about our last meeting. His answers were a bit more short and succinct.

This time around I wanted to explore his racial and ethnic identity and his experiences understanding his identity more. I focused on his Korean identity first. Sam said that the level that he identifies being Korean depended on the people around him and how they reacted to each other. He elaborated in saying that he does not feel Korean at all around Korean people and he felt completely White American. Among Koreans he felt without a culture and completely different than them. In addition he told me around White American people he felt like a complete foreigner. He told me that he is Korean American because he can “ride the line” if he
wants to because only he knows this. However, it was other people that made him rethink his position on it. I tried to wrap my brain around what he has just said to me. How Sam perceived himself and how others perceived him was different. No matter how much he wanted to believe that he is Korean or that he is White, others will view him a certain way and it would not matter what he thought or believed he was. That is where he could “ride the line.” He was fluid in his identity, travelling from being Korean or White. When he was doing Korean things like watching Korean movies or eating Korean food he says he could be Korean and fit in like a Korean. However, he was soon brought back to questioning it when someone pointed out that he was not Korean enough because he did not speak the language. Vice versa, he could be American and do American things with his American friends until someone in the group pointed out, “that’s so Asian of you.”

It seemed as though the group where Sam has felt most sense of belonging has become with international students. Perhaps they could identify in similar ways where international students are from another country with a different culture but expected to assimilate while in the U.S. by learning to speak English and having to eat American foods since their native food may not have be readily available. Essentially both Sam and the international students were trying to juggle two cultures, seemingly very different cultures and figuring out when to be a part of which culture. However, not all experiences with international students have been positive either. Sam described an experience hanging out with an international Korean girl from class. He enjoyed spending time with her and they connected because of their enjoyment of 90s cartoons. She explained that she does not really hang out with American people because she has nothing to talk to them about. Sam was taken aback. He saw ignorance in his own people that he had experienced with the majority White people in his small town in Connecticut. When he
asked her about him she stated that he was “Korean enough.” Again he was left to question exactly which racial and ethnic group he could be a part of and truly belong to. No matter what one said, he felt he was not Korean enough for the Koreans and not White enough for the White people.

The stories are endless, all with the same conclusion, no true acceptance, no true understanding, and no true sense of belonging. Sam lived with roommates but it did not work and now he lives alone. He had two American roommates who were good friends from college. He learned how to cook more Korean food and experimented at home. He always offered his roommates food to try, but they refused calling it “chink” food and often made comments like “aren’t you gonna cook anything normal?” Normal to Sam’s roommate meant American foods like burgers and pizza. This eventually took a toll on Sam and the absolute ignorance just ate at him. He says that he is also “having trouble with American (White) people because of ignorance…much like having trouble with Korean people.”

Sam highlighted that in exploring his racial and ethnic identity, not all experiences were negative. His racial and ethnic identity has had a profound meaning during his proudest moments. Looking back on winning his trip to Japan, he remembered an unforgettable moment where he read a news clip where the spoke about the individuals who won the YouTube contest. He remembered that the news article described the winners as four American teams and had a description of him as an Asian person. This was important to him because for once he was considered someone who looks Asian, someone who is Asian. He describes how he felt while in Japan:

People casually come up to me and ask for directions in Japanese and things like this.

Scary. But really…not unsettling but really shocking? I guess really…startling. Being
an Asian person in Asia was a, for the first time, was a...really different feeling. Maybe feeling belonged but maybe not even belonging but a feeling of...kinda like...not even conformity but kind of not fitting in but I don’t know how to put words to it. It’s a feeling of normality. Just a feeling of nothing. Like I don’t feel like anyone is watching me anymore...judging me...for once.

For once, he was accepted as being an Asian and felt it, he believed in who he was. Being labeled as the right identity, even if it was an overarching description as Asian, was enough to make Sam feel like he fit in. To me this was a nice ending to a rainy Friday, coming to the conclusion that at some point Sam felt included, a part of a larger whole, and accepted without judgment. We set up our final meeting time and I lent him a Northeastern University umbrella as he walked out of my office to shield him from the rain. He promised to return it on our last visit.

On the day of our last visit I could see him from down the street, I waved to him and he waved back. I could tell in both of our excitement that we had bonded in just the short time we had gotten to know each other. The first thing he admits to when he saw me is forgetting my umbrella. Without hesitation I told him that it is not a problem that was the least I can do for all that he has shared with me. We walk to my office and I could tell that he was much more comfortable from his posture. He sat all the way back into his chair leaned to one side. I gave him water and we began talking like we are old friends catching up. This time we focused on his college experiences and ways in which college life could have been a smoother transition. In reviewing our previous conversations I knew that his racial and ethnic identity had impacted his college experience. He started out by saying that after his experience traveling to Japan he thought about wanting to learn Japanese to be an interpreter his freshman year. He thought this would be a good job, I could tell the experiences in Japan led him to explore this career option.
His career aspirations soon changed however, and he transferred from the university where he started his college journey his freshman year to another college with a focus on the arts. He is now pursuing a degree in film production. Throughout college he continued to explore his identity through social means, watching Asian cinema, and learning to cook.

I began by asking him what the hardest transition was coming to college. He explained that it was not necessarily making friends but figuring out where he wanted to fit in. After high school you are rooted from your clique or group that you belonged to and are left to pick and choose a new group that you want to belong to in college. Students had to negotiate their different identities to figure out how they wanted to represent themselves and where they were going to fit in. Sam explained that he was from a small town in Connecticut and now “in a community that is filled with minorities and they are not minorities anymore.” He felt a tremendous pressure to figure out how to be friends with Asian people, contemplating if they were going to understand him as a person, and if he was going to fit in socially “but especially racially.” His biggest challenge was in deciding if he should be the one token Asian friend among the White guys or make friends with Asians who may look like him but may not understand him. Either way he did not feel that he was going to truly fit in but it was figuring out where he would mostly fit in.

One way in which Sam tried to expand his understanding of his racial and ethnic identity was exploring ways he could get involved with the Asian American Association, although it was not a positive experience as he had hoped. He explained that at the university he transferred from, the Asians tend to stick with people from their same country. He acknowledged that it could be due to comfort and being able to converse in their language but he encouraged schools to have “racial mixing.” I agree that while it is important to have specific cultural groups where
student identify similarly in ethnicity, they should be encouraged to look beyond that and expand their network. A prime example he gave was with the Vietnamese Student Association which has essentially taken over the Asian American Association. He thinks that encouraging students from various ethnicities within the Asian umbrella coming together and collaborating on a large-scale event will allow for students who are interested to participate. Having a homogenous group be the main or only voice would discourage others who are not part of that group to engage because they may sense that they do not fit in.

Sam gives me a suggestion on ways in which colleges could provide opportunity for students to interact from various backgrounds. At the college he ended up transferring to all the students would be invited to a program during Orientation where they would meet each other and network. International students from different countries including all of Europe as well as various students from different cultural groups would all come together to participate in a meet and greet. This gave students a space and the opportunity to meet people when they first arrived on campus. He was encouraging collaboration, working together, to find common ground while respecting the various cultures represented. I thought this is a brilliant idea. For example, instead of the Chinese Association group working in a silo’s on their individual events they could reach out to other student groups such as the Indian Association group to put on a film and food festival program showcasing both of their cultures.

The third interview seemed to be shorter than the other two. I had learned so much from Sam and I felt us getting closer to each other. I summarized what I have gathered from Sam from our conversations and time together and see that his racial and ethnic identity has truly evolved over time. His racial and ethnic identity was also fluid and moving along a spectrum where some days he felt one culture more than another depending on the environment and
situation. I have noticed that when he first talked about his racial and ethnic identity, he identified as being part of the larger Asian American umbrella and stating that he was Asian when asked how he identified. It seems as though Sam received message from others who told him that he did not belong in either the Asian or Korean community. However, through his negative and positive experiences with classmates, exposure to various Asian cultures, and having a Korean best friend for the first time he was able to begin exploring his identity and felt as though he was a part of the larger Asian community. The message that Sam received from others were that he did not belong in. Eventually he learned that within the Asian community, he had a specific ethnicity and moved on to embrace his Korean American identity. Perhaps as he was growing closer to his Korean friend and his family he began to truly understand his heritage and customs and liked what he experienced. What Sam really needed was an opportunity for him to experience, explore, and embrace his Korean culture. These experiences helped shape who he is and helped him hone in on his Korean American identity.

Now, he was able to truly distinguish the fact that he is Korean by heritage but is part of a larger Asian American umbrella. His identity has evolved throughout the years due to the various experiences he has had. He had explored identities of being Asian, Korean American, and American. It seemed as though he was aware of his various identities and his primary identity changed based on the situation, timing, and environment. Simply put, his identity was fluid. When you break it down, his identity will fluctuate and he may identify more with being Asian, Korean, or American depending on the day. Overall, he has taken the time to explore all aspects of his Asian, Korea, and American identity. In agreement he tells me that what I have said is pretty accurate. He states that in his town he identified much more being Asian American because it did not matter that he was Korean, it mattered that Sam was not White.
Sam reiterated the fact that one’s identity is always evolving. He believed that college is a crucial time where one thinks about who they are as a person. He says, “coming to college, it was a social experiment. Suddenly you have so many more subjects to get data from…college is the time when you get the most self-conscious kind of experience.”

Sam experienced racism and microaggression growing up and in college. He was able to identify times when this occurred. These experiences made him explore his racial and ethnic identity more deeply. He was provided opportunities in college to meet people from various backgrounds, countries, and ethnicities. He expressed that having attended an urban institution he was able to build relationships with various people. Sam believes that targeted support would have allowed him to share his experiences and accept help when needed. He emphasizes that trust is important in relationship building. If agrees that if he had met a faculty or staff member that he knew cared and who he trusted, he would have reached out to them for support.

Julia’s Portrait

A friend from Graduate school Facebook-messaged me telling me that he knew a student who he thought would be great for my study. He told me that he had encouraged the student to fill out my questionnaire. As soon as I checked his message on Saturday morning I kept refreshing my questionnaire document to see if anyone had completed the survey. After an hour of refreshing the page, I gave up and went about my day disappointed. Before heading to bed that Saturday night I checked one last time and noticed that someone had filled out my survey. As soon as I realized Julia had filled out the questionnaire for my research I called the number she provided. I got her voicemail and left a message. I knew nothing about Julia and when I got her voicemail I was surprised because I noticed that it was hard to understand some of the words she was saying because the pronunciation of her words were not clear at times. She called back
within a few minutes and we chatted on the phone briefly. We discussed the purpose and goals of the interview and during our conversation there were times I repeated what I thought I had heard and she was great about repeating or correcting what I had misunderstood. Although I assumed there was some type of disability, I did not ask right away because I wanted to build a relationship of trust and comfort before I asked her about it. Julia also did not mention anything about her disability. Later, I found out that Julia has mild cerebral palsy. Looking back it might have been a better idea to ask Julia from the beginning if she had a disability and what accommodations she needed but I was trying to be careful not to offend her by prying.

After discussing the purpose and goals of the interview we went through what our schedules looked like, and I asked Julia if I should call her back to set up a date and time or if email would be better. She told me that email would be easier and I took that as my cue to think of other ways in which we could communicate that may be more accommodating to her disability. Again, at the time not knowing exactly what type of disability she had I thought of ways in which I could see her face to pick up on body language and to be able to put a face to a name. Additionally, I wanted a way in which we could utilize a typing function if I needed clarification or if I did not catch everything she said. I emailed Julia a couple hours after our phone conversation because I wanted to get on her schedule as soon as possible. I suggested using Skype so that we could utilize all of its features such as seeing each other through our cameras, hearing each other through the microphone, and using the chatting function if I needed clarification on anything she was saying. She easily agreed and we were having our first conversation two days later.

I carefully practiced using Skype before our first conversation to avoid any technical difficulties and to make sure I looked into the camera to show that I was making eye contact.
When the times came, I called Julia, and although we still ran into some technical difficulties connecting to Skype and being able to see each other, we quickly overcame the hurdles and we began talking about Julia’s childhood. The few minutes into our conversation I was instantly drawn in by the video chatting method of conversing. It had a different feeling than meeting someone in person face to face – it had a certain appeal about it. There was a sense of comfort about video chatting - like old friends catching up. I was pretty sure Julia was sensing this too because the first image I remember was her big smile. She was in her residence hall room, a single room without any roommates. It looked like a typical residence hall single room, small with a twin size bed. I could make out the door to the room with one single hook and two posters on the wall by the bed. I could not make out the first picture on her wall but the second poster is a city view. From first glance I did not think it is a city view of Boston and I assumed that it was New York City. I could only see her from the shoulder up. Her hair was parted down the middle, shoulder length and she had glasses on. Julia was dressed very causally and I noticed right away that her face has a lot of soft features. From first glance she looked very friendly, especially when she smiled. She had no makeup on and no jewelry that I could see from the webcam. After a few seconds of getting used to seeing her on my computer screen I started out the conversation by asking her what she knew about her adoption. Although she did not have any specific information on why or how she was adopted she told me that her parents had been very open about the fact that she was adopted since she was very little. Her parents really wanted a family and tried many times to have a baby. They even opted to try methods like hormone treatment. However when all options failed they looked into adoption. Julia’s mother saw a little Korean baby in the supermarket fell in love with the baby instantly. That sparked an interest in her mother to look into adopting a child from Korea.
I am interested in learning more about Julia’s adoption so I asked her how she first learned that she was adopted. She told me that her parents used picture books to explain to her about adoption. I am intrigued at the method of explaining the adoption concept to a child through the use of a picture book - what a great idea! Picture books could be a tool to use with children because they do not have the vocabulary to understand certain concepts but could use images to associate with certain words. By the second or third grade she was able to comprehend what it meant to be adopted. I wondered if Julia’s parents were intentional in informing Julia about her adoption because there was an apparent racial and ethnic difference among her and her parents. Julia knew that she looked different from her parents. It was obvious when a child was adopted by parents of a different race because next to the parents the child is of a different race. Julia points out that if a child was adopted by parents who are of the same race they did not necessarily have to disclose the fact that they are adopted because it was not apparent or obvious.

The first Skype meeting seemed to go by really quick and the next time we meet through Skype she was at home in Chelmsford, Massachusetts for the long Labor Day weekend. This gave me a great opportunity to start out the conversation by asking her about where she grew up. Julia grew up in a White, middle sized, suburban neighborhood right outside of Lowell, Massachusetts. She tells me that while her town was very White, Lowell has a large Cambodian population. She was raised in a Catholic, Italian family. Her mother was raised Protestant but converted to Catholicism when she married her father who was raised Catholic. She has a brother and a sister. Julia tells me that her brother is two years younger than she is and her sister is five years younger. Her brother was also adopted from Korea but they are not blood relatives.
Her sister was born as biological daughter to her adoptive parents after Julia and her brother was adopted.

I was curious to know about the dynamics between the siblings – having two adoptive siblings and one sibling who was biological to the parents. From what I can gather all the siblings got along fairly well except for the usual sibling fights that typically happen in every family. She explained that she shared a room with her sister, which provided more opportunities to bicker - a pretty normal sibling interaction. Julia got along with her brother but he was usually out with friends or working and did not seem him often. She was very open in talking about her family and even invited her siblings to introduce themselves to me. I was able to get a glance of her sister walking past the camera and she even convinced her brother to say “hello” on the camera at the end of our second session. I did not get the sense that she was extremely close with her siblings from the interactions that Julia described but I could tell that they all respected and cared about each other because they were even willing to come and greet me, a complete stranger who Julia was video chatting with.

Julia explained the relationship with her siblings in more detail. Even though her brother was also adopted from Korea, they have not really engaged in conversation about their racial and ethnic identity. I assumed that they would have some type of unspoken understanding, both having the identity of being Korean and having been transracially adopted. She does recall memories of her and her adopted brother celebrating their “airplane day” together growing up. This was the day that she flew over from Korea to the United States. Every year they picked a place to go out to dinner and had a cake to remember the day they flew over from Korea to the U.S. As a child this “airplane day” was an exciting day that allowed the children to eat cake, have fun, and celebrate. However, in reality this day really represented when they shed their
Korean culture, leaving their homeland and flew to a foreign place where they had to make it their new home, learning and assimilating to a different culture.

I wondered if Julia’s experiences with her racial and ethnic identity had been as positive as she remembered her “airplane day” celebrations that marked an important day in her life. Julia did not see much of a difference growing up between herself and other children. She could not recall a time where someone made fun of her for the way she looked or for looking different than her parents growing up. However, she always knew that she was different from her family, at least racially. Julia's parents used opportunities like "airplane day" as a way to socialize her and her brother and teaching them that they were also Korean.

One story she highlighted was of having to talk about the family tree in school when she was little. Her parents explained their side of the family but told her “remember you are also Korean and also Asian still tell them where we came from but don’t forget to tell the class where you’re from.” This was a great segue into learning more about her experiences with her race or ethnicity growing up. Growing up Julia did not experience many challenges but things quickly changed in high school. The experiences she had were not necessarily negative but recalled beginning to notice cultural differences with her Asian friends which took her by surprise. She saw that her Asian friends would have different priorities and responsibilities that she did not necessary understand. For the first time she saw that she was not only different in appearance from her family and White friends, she was also different than her Asian friends with whom she looked alike. She explains:

I think elementary school it was normal, I was in girl scouts, I played soccer, um played on the playground, um but I remember in high school a lot of my friends who were Asian came from 1st generation Asian parents in the U.S. so they would go to Chinese school
they would be like ‘oh I can’t go out my Dad is making me study’ or ‘I have to go babysit my brothers, I can’t go out ever’ whereas I would just, I guess [be a] typical American and I just you know I guess [do what a] Caucasian American kid I would do. I would watch cartoons, play with friends outside, all that.

Normal to Julia meant that she did not experience anything out of the ordinary. She did not experience racism or kids making fun of her. It seemed as though she fit with the White kids around her. However, she noticed for the first time that she had a “typical American” daily routine, while her Asian friends had the daily routines that were stereotypical for Asian students that focused on their studies and school, helping out at home, and listening to what their parents said without negotiation. The difference that Julia saw among her Asian friends had a different impact on her than that of her White friends. She always knew that she was different from her White friends in terms of appearance. While she had similarities with her Asian friends in terms of appearance, for the first time she realized that she had a deeper, more impactful difference – a cultural difference.

Julia did not seem emotional in telling me that she saw this cultural difference. It almost seemed as though she had accepted this revelation and was not affected much by it anymore. It seemed as though the experiences that Julia had growing up pertaining to her race and ethnicity were neither positive nor negative. It was just different than what she knew and grew up with. In order to better understand her experiences, I delved deeper and asked her about how she identified with the Korean culture. She told me that she does not identify much with it. Although she was able to tell people that she is Korean, it was just a word to her, a way of categorizing herself among various racial and ethnic groups. She did not feel Korean or believe that she is Korean but labeled herself as Korean due to her heritage.
Julia hesitated a bit and stated that she had not purposely sought out Asians to explore her racial and ethnic identity. She told me that through connections with friends she was able to meet other Asians which helped her build upon her racial and ethnic experiences. Other ways in which she had explored her racial and ethnic identity had been due to opportunities presented to her. She recalls an example of a time when her teacher approached her because there was a Korean girl who was moving from Korea to the U.S. The teachers knew that Julia was from Korea and asked if she would be willing to befriend this student who was immigrating to the U.S. Her teacher also asked if she was able to translate Korean into English. Julia did not speak a word of Korean and told the teacher she could not translate but would do her best to be friends with the new student. While it was clear that the teachers tokenized her but Julia was not offended and described the situation in a very positive light, telling me that the teachers were making connections for the students.

Although Julia has not had much exposure to Korean culture, I noticed that she has tried to explore her Korean identity through helping this student who emigrated from Korea and through participating in activities such as Taekwondo martial arts in high school. Aside from these experiences her exposure to the culture was limited. I wondered if she has ever had an A-ha moment when it came to understanding her racial and ethnic identity and asked about a time where this identity was important to or took a particular meaning to her. She takes a moment to think about the answer she was going to give. She slowly responds:

I think doing like silver reward in girl scouts because we were looking for projects and oh my god it was like seven years ago now so I can't remember how I decided it but I told my mom [about this project] and she was like you know you were adopted. You're very lucky and not a lot of people, well not all Korean babies get adopted but some people
with disabilities in Korea if they’re not adopted they have a harder time. What about doing yours of someone around Korea? And I was like that's cool. So I ended up doing a whole leadership project collecting items and raising funds to buy baby products and regular product for Korean babies still at the agency where I'm from. So that project made projects like this more exciting and more meaningful.

Julia’s story goes to show you the type of person she is – always looking to give back and engaging herself in service work. Even though she had not been able to learn about the Korean culture and heritage in-depth, she still wanted to do something to give back to those in need in Korea – her motherland, a place that is still a part of who is she.

Before our second session ends I was able to learn about her racial and ethnic experiences in college. I first asked if there were any intentionality in choosing the schools that she applied to and ended up choosing. Julia was looking at all different schools and originally she wanted to attend school in Boston. However, the college she is currently attending gave her more scholarships, which ended up being the reason why she chose that particular institution. When asked if race or ethnicity was a factor in her college decision and she told me that it was not. The reason why it was not a factor in her college decision was because she did not truly understand how she identified racially and ethnically. Julia knows she is Korean and she thought that it is “cool” but her racial and ethnic identity was not a huge part of her life like it once was growing up. She believed this was due to the fact that she had gotten involved in various activities in college which took up a lot of her time and was unable to focus on her other identities and interests. Julia focused on making and spending time with friends watching TV and talking about college life. She did not feel as though she had time to spend on exploring her racial and
ethnic identity because she chose to focus her energies on getting herself involved in other aspects of campus life.

In learning more about her racial and ethnic identity in college I asked about her college decision making process. She explains me that she was accepted by all White Catholic schools. While financial assistance was important in her decision, another important factor was the connection she made with the person from the disabilities service office. She was able to connect with a staff member who made her feel welcomed and comfortable. This gave me the perfect opportunity to understand her disability in greater detail. Julia explains:

They don’t know what exactly happened and apparently the agency in Korea didn’t know any of it. They told my mom not that I wasn’t healthy because like I am. Um, they told my mom and dad and everything’s fine, like her medical records are good, she has, and my mom said I may have had pneumonia or something once but it wasn’t like a bad case. But except for that my medical records was clean. And even when my parents held me for the first time they were like we didn’t know. Um it wasn’t until they brought me for my medical here in the U.S. that the pediatrician I guess somehow the way he lifted me up my head flopped back, and he was like she really should be holding her head up at 6 months old. And at first my parents didn’t get it. They were kinda like oh, whatever. And then my first birthday passed and I wasn’t even like walking or really talking a lot.

When asked what her diagnosis was now she tells me she has mild cerebral palsy (CP). She explained that currently, some challenges she experiences are in motor skills such as movement issues. Recently her fine motor area have been challenges where she needs help to change in a store or help picking up tiny objects like a pen if she drops it. Without asking Julia goes into how she struggled with people assuming that she has “problems intellectually.” She explained
that because of the way she talks and how she walks they assume that she does not have the mental capability like others.

Julia is a strong woman who strives to be independent and has embraced her disability. She spoke about it comfortably and was able to articulate when she needs help and when she does not. She acknowledged that at times she needs assistance but she does not lean on her disability as a crutch and pushes herself to excel. She is truly an inspiration.

In our third conversation she was still at her parent’s house in Chelmsford. I wanted to explore her racial and ethnic identity deeper and asked about her experiences in college. She explained that at her college there is an African Latino Asian Native American (ALANA) center where people from various cultural backgrounds come together. When Julia began college she was invited to the ALANA center. However, she had not been taking care of her health and was not feeling well so she did not go. Eventually, the encouragement to go at the beginning of her first year wore off and she forgot about it. I asked Julia, knowing it was a vague question whether she felt more comfortable around White people or Asian people. Julia responded White people because she has not been around Asian people in a long time. I wondered if there were more Asians at the college she was currently attending, if she would have made more connections and been more involved with the Asian community, therefore, having a stronger racial and ethnic identity.

Julia did not have any issues with this growing up but did encounter a negative experience in college. She explained that a close White friend constantly joked around stating “you’re not worth five dollars”, “oh, why did your mom adopt you?”, and him talking to her in an "Asian accent." She continued to explain that although she did not experience a lot of racism in college that has impacted her view on her identity, college had certainly made her ponder her
identity. In her human services major they talk about race and issues of racism a lot. These
conversations have been insightful but have also confused her in terms of understanding and
figuring out her own identity. The college she currently attends has had dealt with issues of
racism but it has mainly been experiences of African Americans, emphasizing the Black-White
paradigm. She said that one day she questioned “where do I fall into?” She had only heard
about issues of race and racism experienced by African Americans and did not identify the same
way being Asian. Many conversations she had with professors and classmates focused on the
Black-White binary and failed to see beyond that scope. Also, having parents who were White
made her identify with White people. She recalls a professor saying to her “you’re a person of
color but you, but you aren’t.” This professor focused on the Black-White dichotomy which only
looked at the opposite spectrums of race and forgot about the voices of the various other minority
experiences that exists. Julia began to doubt her own experiences and feelings because she was
being told she was not experiencing issues of racism like the African American students but was
experiencing racism and stereotypical remarks by a close friend for being Asian and adopted.

I looked to gain a better understanding of how Julia identified racially and ethnically.
Her response was a simple one in that she did not really know. She always knew that she was
Asian and her parents were Caucasian. She simplified the concept for herself by stating that she
is Asian and her parents were White. However, when she actually had conversations regarding
her racial and ethnic identity she struggled to describe herself because she knew that being
adopted contributed to how she viewed her racial and ethnic identity. She told me that it was
hard to describe herself because no words or descriptions sounded right. Julia thought that
because she has White parents she has some White privilege. When encouraged to try to
describe who she is as a person she says, “I guess I’m a person, I’m a Asian person of color with
White privilege. But then, I just, but that sounds weird.” I had to ask for clarification, I had never heard a person of color speaking of White privilege that she felt she had through her parents. I was perplexed because from an outsider’s perspective she did not have White privilege as an Asian. I wondered if Julia felt some sort of White privilege because her parents were White even if she was not. She in fact did:

Yeah I feel like I kind of have to because my parents are White. Like, I don't know. I've... I've looked ... I...I don't know it's such a tough topic and like I was talking about yesterday I've, I’ve always been in the gray area in my ethnicity, my disability, all of that.

So I look at this more ... as gray area that I’m in.

Julia felt as though she benefited in some way because her parents were White. I wondered if there were some truths to this. I had heard a White person speaking of unearned privileges being White but had never heard of a person of color feeling as though they had unearned privileges because their parents were White. I thought long and hard in the moment to think of an example of how this could be. The first thought that came to mind was having White parents could allow someone like Julia to have an easier time navigating things in the U.S. than some of her Asian friends from childhood who emigrated. Many immigrant families struggle with understanding policies, language, filling out paperwork, among other things. However, it was important to recognize that Julia did not have White privilege because she was not White, she was Asian.

I focused on bringing our conversation back around and asked Julia the same question in all of our conversations regarding how she identified racially and ethnically to see if the answer would change or evolve during our time together. During our second meeting she told me that she did not really know how she identified. During the middle school years she was more
excited about her racial and ethnic identity and now she felt that “it’s cool” but nothing more than that. Julia's comment in saying that something was "cool" meant that it did not really bother her or affect her and she was content with it. Therefore her race and ethnicity was something she acknowledged and accepted but did not mean much more to her than that. In our last meeting I asked the question one last time. She simply says, “probably that I'm Korean but I was adopted and I'm very much like an American kid. I don't really fit into any of the like Asians stereotype (meaning studies all the time, respected elders, watched their younger siblings - all the observations she had made about her Asian friends) but I look Asian.”

Her racial and ethnic identity answer varied from time to time. It was apparent that she was not able to confidently tell me who she believes she is. One thing was clear – she knows that she is Korean by heritage, adopted but grew up as an all-around American kid, and has White parents. I was curious to know what identity was most important to her currently, I was certain at this point that it would not be her racial and ethnic identity. She stated that it was religion and her age. Her religion was understandable in terms of being raised Catholic and her parents’ Catholic values that have been instilled in her. Her parents emphasized religion to the point where it became the most important aspect in her life growing up with family being second important. In terms of age being important I asked her to elaborate on what she meant by this. Her age and being in college was important to her and she is proud of the fact that she is in college and navigating it herself even with a disability where people assumed that she could not do it on her own. She reiterated that she was living on her own and like everyone else she liked having fun. She was very proud of her independence and her achievements of getting A’s and B’s in college. Listening to Julia and seeing a glimpse of self-confidence and a moment of pride brought a smile to my face. Age was an important identity for her currently because she is
almost twenty-one and a senior in college and she is desperately trying to figure out what her next steps are. She was looking for the answers and her age and work in college is what was weighing heavily on her mind, making it an important topic for her right now.

When asked what identity has impacted her college experience the most she expands on her disability. She tells me that it is her disability status. She recalls the time when she went to Camp Paul to work with children with special needs with a peer mentor. She enjoyed teaching and working with the children which is what led her to her human services major in college. However, having picked human services major, she has experienced some challenges within this community:

I have mild cerebral palsy (CP). This is another continuous issue. Not people asking but I’ve been asked to be like a peer mentor to other kids with CP. I can talk independently, I can run a mile, slow[er] than most people, but I can run a mile. I don’t wear braces I don’t really [have] any therapies anymore. I’ve been peer mentoring some of the kids with CP they will come back and yell at me that I don’t really have CP, ‘the doctors are lying’. They are mad at me. They’re like “you don’t have CP, you’re lying.” So like I take in a mixed bag. Like my whole life so it’s kinda of weird because like we’ve been talking about I’m Asian but my parents are White. I have a disability that’s not considered totally able for the typical community but I’m not disabled enough to be considered having a disability by some people in the disability community so…I’m just as at this point whatever.

The words “I’m not disabled enough to be considered having a disability” lingered in my mind. Julia is speaking about the intersectionalities in her identities where she is Asian, with White parents, and has a disability. These various identities are intertwined to make up who she
is. I am overwhelmed with feelings of hurt and disappointment in hearing this story and am trying to not show it in my facial expressions. Her disability identity was yet another identity that Julia was trying to navigate. She did not completely fit in with the cerebral palsy community yet was not seen as being part of the “typical community.” So where does she truly belong?

In understanding Julia’s experience with her identity whether it is her disability, Korean, Asian, or White identities, there were no clear answer. She was not one identity, and it was a continuous journey as she experiences new challenges, successes, and life in general. She was still trying to figure out what identity she believed represented her fully. Julia's needed opportunities for someone to help her understand and explore her racial and ethnic identities. Julia had not even been to a traditional Korean restaurant, something she had always wanted to do. The desire to learn has always been there but she has not had the opportunities to delve deeper into Korean culture. She agrees that college was an important time where students think about their identity. Not just think about it, but truly, really, seriously question it, probe it, and explore it. She agreed but at the end of the day she was still left where she started, wondering, “who am I really?” She put it best:

I guess it's more what I was talking about yesterday. I almost feel more confused about my race and ethnicity in college than I ever really was, because I was growing up. But when I was little it was so easy it was like ‘I'm Korean but I'm American and my mom and dad loves me’ and I guess I didn't really think about it. Um and then in college I was thinking about all of this ethnicity stuff and then I still am confused a little bit about what exactly I am.
I learned a lot from this experience and from Julia. Most importantly I am inspired by Julia’s story. She is a true example of a woman with strength, determination, and persistence. Even though she is still traveling that journey of self-discovery and answering the question “Who am I? Who I am truly deep down inside?” She has come far in what it means to live with a disability that has empowered her to embrace her independence and to give back to others.

In my time with Julia it was important to understand in what ways college administrators could have helped her explore her racial and ethnic identity. She believed that it was important to find a way where students can state that they were adopted or transracially adopted. This way administrators can identify these students and reach out to them, building a trusting relationship where students feel comfortable having important identity conversations. My last question focused on wanting to capture Julia's voice. I asked if she could let people know one thing about her disability what would it be? She took a minute or two to think about it then said that she wants people to know that she is independent and takes pride in doing everything herself with the appropriate help. She was very intentional in using the words appropriate help. Although she chose to do things on her own but knew when to ask for help if needed. My discussion with Julia focused on the intersectionalities of her identities. She emphasized that religion and her disability were both very important to her. These identities as well as her racial and ethnic identity were all playing a crucial role in helping Julia understand who she was. Julia agreed that it would have been helpful to have someone to talk to about her experiences with trying to understand her identity in college. She did not feel as though she connected with a specific faculty or staff member who she trusted to have these discussions.
Jane’s Portrait

Jane and I had been exchanging emails for a few days until we finally were able to schedule a date and time that worked for the both of us. Jane and I emailed back and forth several times but our conversations were short and to the point. We texted a few times, keeping each other up to date about our schedules and confirming when we would meet. Our relationship does not blossom until I met her in person. Jane was a non-traditional, commuter student, who had graduated a year ago and was living in the Worcester area. I was thankful that she was willing to drive almost an hour to come meet me. She arrived 15 minutes before our scheduled meeting and was able to find street parking nearby. I was in a meeting and texted her telling her that I would be there in ten minutes. I remembered running across the train tracks on Huntington Avenue towards Opera Place, trying not to waste any precious time since she had driven all the way up to Boston to meet with me. Running down St. Stephens Street, I saw a woman with dark hair pulled up in a messy bun and big brown eyes in a light blue windbreaker sitting on the sidewalk looking down at her phone. I knew instantly that this was the person I was meeting and picked up the pace running down the street. She must have heard my loud footsteps because she looked up and I waved to signal to her that I was the person she was meeting. We introduced ourselves to each other and walked back onto Opera Place, which was only two minutes away to feed the meter where she was parked. We found our way to my office where we sat down to catch our breath and I offered her a bottle of water.

I thanked Jane for driving up to meet me and for her interest in my study. She was very warm and friendly, telling me that she was really excited that someone was doing this type of research. She explained that her friend told her about my research and instantly she was interested in participating. I went over the consent form with her explaining the details of
participating and asked if she has any questions. She did not hesitate one bit and signed the form to begin our conversation. Jane's purpose for meeting with me was clear. She wanted to educate others on her experiences as a Korean American transracial adoptee.

Jane started by telling me that she learned that her birth parents were college students in Taejon, Korea and she was relinquished at six months into a Catholic family, which was the one criteria they asked for. Her adoptive father is Irish-Catholic and her adoptive mother is Italian-Catholic. Her adoptive parents taught her about her adoption through picture books, personal stories, and lessons. She recalled being able to understand the concept of adoption by the age of five. Her parents had socialized her about being adopted and being Korean at a young age. As a child she was aware that she did not look like her parents and those around her as she grew up in a predominately White neighborhood. To confirm the differences she saw she asked questions regarding her looking different from everyone else around her. Her parents were honest with her – making sure not to hide or sugarcoat anything by answering any questions she had about why she looked different from them. She sighed before telling me that around age five or six she remembered kids making fun of her saying things like “ching, chong, chee” and pulling their eyes out. Jane realized that being different was something to be made fun of, something negative.

It seemed as though Jane had been socialized from a young age that she was Korean, different than her parents. I wondered when she became aware of her race and ethnicity. I could tell that Jane had experienced many negative situations like this before. Not only did she sigh before answering, it seemed as though she was going through a personal database full of stories and had to think about which one fit best in answering my question. She was thinking through
all the times she had been made fun of growing up or times where she did not feel like she fit in at family gatherings because she looked different than everyone else.

I delved deeper into her family and asked about her siblings. Jane has a brother who was also adopted from Korea, although he is not blood-related. Her brother was four months when he was adopted. Her brother’s birth parents came from different social classes. The father was from a high income background where his mother’s family was low-income. Her brother’s birth parents fell in love and when the mother became pregnant, the father’s family did not approve and moved their entire family to the U.S. I was curious to know if Jane and her brother were close, both being adopted from Korea. They do in fact have a bond, but sometimes their similarities cause them to clash. They both had problems and issues associated with being adopted. They also struggled to identify racial and ethnic identity. The feelings of being different were intensified when they were not able to identify with their parents. Jane reiterated that her and her brother identify so strongly with each other that sometimes it is very painful to see each other going through a difficult time. It is the unspoken understanding of why things are difficult that makes their relationship so strong.

I found an opportune time to ask why Jane’s parents adopted. They could not have children, although they tried for two years. Her mother had always wanted children and a family friend had adopted a girl from Korea which prompted them to look into that option. Jane has expressed the importance of her adoption status and her racial and ethnic identity in her challenges growing up so I asked what identity was more challenging to navigate. She looked off into the distance as she tries to paint a visual for me:

I think of it as like a layered cake. So…adopted domestic, like similar in culture, similar in race and ethnicity. They have that one layer of being adopted that they have to get
over. We’re also racially different, culturally different, ethnically different, so we have a lot more tiers to overcome. That’s how I see it.

Jane puts it best – she was not only experiencing challenges with her adoption status or her racial identity or her ethnic identity, they were all layered on top of one another and impacting each other. Her identities were not and never would be mutually exclusive. Over time one issue may cause more internal struggle than another depending on life situations and circumstances. Her adoption status was the base foundation and having other identities such as her race and ethnicity added complexity to her experiences and identity formation.

In understanding the layered challenges in one’s identity, I asked her what the biggest challenge was for her growing up. She looked off into the distance again, making sure she was not making eye contact and answered:

Missing my birth mom. It’s weird, like Mother’s Day, I think of her. Around my…like birthday…in November, I think of her. Just kind of the unknown of not knowing where I start. It’s like every…almost every person knows their roots and their beginnings. I can’t say everyone, but a lot of people. And when you chop that off and cut it out and then you start it’s like you start a tree at the middle and expect it to live, when it doesn’t have its roots.

It takes me a moment to gather my thoughts as she finished her sentence. I am left speechless at how she has described her thoughts and feelings about not having any answers of who she truly is and where she came from.

Growing up her parents took her to Korean Culture camps and bought her a Hanbok (Korean traditional outfit) that were supposed to teach her more about her Korean culture. However, she was confident in telling me that those experiences are not what teach children
about cultural awareness. She believed that if parents were truly culturally aware, they would understand the differences in cultures and work to integrate those aspects into a child’s life.

Jane’s parents superficially exposed her to basic aspects of Korean culture, but did not integrate Korean culture into her life. Jane explained that nothing was ever mention about holidays in Korea, and even the things she learned about Korea in culture camps were “touristy”, made for outsiders looking.

Even after Jane and her family learned about some basic Korean foods there was never any attempt to make it or eat it growing up. Looking back, Jane said that her parents never attempted to integrate Korean culture in their everyday lives which has made Jane and an aspect of her identity insignificant. The comments her parents made about how important Korean culture were not reflected through everyday action. Their lack of understanding or knowledge of some fundamental Korean cultural aspects hindered their ability to teach Jane about her homeland. Jane’s parents provided opportunities for her to participate in programs and events but left the onus on her to learn about the programs and did not participate with her. Jane's parents focused on her attendance at these programs instead of focusing their energies on learning about Korean culture themselves and infusing it into Jane’s life. I thought to myself that one way this could have happened was if Jane’s parents learned about specific Korean holidays and celebrated those holidays together with Jane.

Although Jane said that she had happy childhood I could tell from her facial expressions that her experiences were clouded with pain. Even at a young age she was made fun of constantly for being different, looking different, which ultimately made her push away her Asian identity. If she did not acknowledge it or think about being Asian, she did not have to believe that she was. Jane explains:
I was kinda shrouded in a false image of myself. I didn’t really…like I said I didn’t remember that I was Asian at all, umm, until someone would joke about it and make fun of me or I would look in the mirror. It was rough…uhhhh…I got made fun of a lot. I got teased a lot. Ummmm, and I was kinda like the token Asian. Like a friend in high school…funny I say friend; he would say, you know, ‘I’m gonna put you in a little box and send you back off to China in a boat!’ You know, and that…that is a small example of what happened to me.

The pain that comes from each and every word said to Jane would be acknowledged then pushed away, turning into a deep-seated anger. Eventually the pain would turn into scars, a permanent memory of the pain.

Jane reflected on her experiences growing up and remembered being considered “popular” all throughout school. This was a part of the façade that Jane had created for herself. She did not realize how thick this façade was until many years later after coming to understand who she was and after being true to herself. She admits that this façade was a great survival skill and it was able to get her through her teen and young adult years by being a “White Abercrombie wearing girl” who never mentioned anything about Asia or Korea. Living this lifestyle was a safe thing to be, because to be different, and to stand out meant that you were a target and something negative.

Jane clearly knew she was Asian, but I was curious to know how she identified ethnically and culturally as well. She does not hesitate in answering this question but is very intentional about how she answers it.

I have a lot of Asian friends and they call me a hybrid. A banana. Some terms aren’t as positive. They still identify me as White. I didn’t realize that I was Asian until I was age
23 cause I would look in the mirror and, and that’s when I would remember “ohhhh you’re Asian.” Cause I do not identify culturally with Asian people. Racially I know I am Asian, I know I am Korean. Ethnically, I still say I am Korean. Culturally, I am American.

Although Jane was able to answer quickly, her understanding of how she identifies racially, ethnically, and culturally as an Asian and as a Korean American has been distinctly thought through. Even though her friends identified her as White, she was able to tell me how she, herself, has come to understand her unique identity. Growing up, Jane knew factually that she was Asian but she never identified with being Korean culturally. She pretended to be White, shedding all aspects that identified her as Asian. It was only until she was reminded through judgmental comments or literally looking at a reflection at herself that she “remembered” that she was Asian.

By our second meeting, Jane and I had been regularly emailing and texting each other and I sensed our level of comfort growing. She had come up to meet me again and I was mindful of her time due to the parking meter. This meeting I tell her I wanted to focus more on her journey into understanding her racial and ethnic identity. I added that if we flow into a conversation about her college experience we could discuss that also. I wanted to know how she identified with the Korean culture. This was a hard question for her to answer because people identify her as Korean because of her phenotype. However, she does not identify strongly with Korean, since the cultural aspect is missing. The environment she grew up in did not foster nor cultivate her Korean culture.
I wanted to understand if she has made any efforts to get to know her Korean culture and to explore her racial and ethnic identity. In her response to my question I could tell that she has wanted to learn more. She quietly responds:

It’s really emotional for me and in order to dip into that, I have to really…be aware that it’s gonna be difficult so I have dipped into some of the language, some of the food. Just kinda on the surface. And then I do some research on my own; at night I read books. But not too far in because it’s painful. More like scholarly articles I get from school databases because personal narratives and journeys are so emotional. Research often times offers information without the personal emotion. This is what is too painful.

She sighs as she continues to explain:

I guess…trying to grapple with the fact that I’m both angry at Korea as a nation for doing this to many of their children and also…wanting to be accepted…by Korea as well. It’s difficult for me. It’s kinda like a dialect, a dialect of the problem. It’s like, ugh. It confuses me cause I’m like how can I be angry at Korea as a whole when their history and culture dictated many of the reasons why women were pressured into giving up their children. I mean, you’ll be shunned right, if someone kept a child. So how can I really be angry at something that has been going on for thousands of years. The mentality. But I am!

Her open wounds have not healed into scars yet and caused too much pain for her to explore her identity deeply. I now see why Jane had not delved deeply into learning more about her racial and ethnic identity, particularly her Korean culture. She feels deep pain and a sense of betrayal from Korea. She feels as though Koreans should have made a different decision than sending their children to a foreign country to learn and adapt to another culture. On top of that
Koreans then expect the adoptee to learn Korean customs, language, and culture. It seemed as though she wanted someone to take ownership for what has become her situation as a Korean American transracial adoptee that does not seem to belong anywhere in society. So where does she turn to?

Even though her pain is ever present and raw, I questioned if her views of her racial and ethnic identity has ever changed or evolved over time. Jane says three-fourths of her life she considered herself White. Not partially White, but all of her being White. One day she had an epiphany. The epiphany was not a specific incident that had occurred. Being single and alone for almost five years and trying to get down to the root cause of her angst made her realize what was wrong. Upon deep reflection and on a path to self-discovery, she knew that deep down inside she knew that she was not being true to herself and was being fake around people. She explained that she was “peeling off different layers” until she got to the core and realized that she did not fit in when she decided she was White.

Her identity up until the age of 23 was formed based on culture not appearance, therefore she thought of herself as White, not Asian. Age 23 specifically became an important time for Jane to learn about her racial and ethnic identity. I wondered if Jane’s experiences got better growing up and I asked where she fits in now. She "floats." Her answer is simple but has a lot of meaning behind it. She does not seem to fit into any specific group because she is not accepted by Asians. Among the Korean community, specifically, she tells me that they have pitied her while others felt the need to “make up” for the country’s choices of giving up so many of their children up for adoption. She also specifically states that she did not have any roots because she does not seem to fit in. She adds that she did not want to see pity in others eyes for having been adopted. Not all experiences had been negative. She remembered working at a Korean
restaurant and the owner who was a middle-aged Korean woman would call her by her Korean name, Ji Won. She taught Jane how to prepare Kimchi (Korean fermented cabbage dish) and even taught her basic Korean phrases. Jane explicitly stated that she is forever grateful to this woman for this experience.

I asked if she fits in with White people even though she was made fun of a lot growing up. She had to think about that question and pondered but eventually stated that does not fit in with White people. She identified experiences at gatherings with either family or friends and not identifying with her adoptive family’s culture of having Italian food. Additionally, she explained that she does not feel a sense of community or connection with her extended family. This makes get-together’s difficult because she does not feel like she truly belongs to her larger extended family. She often catches her mom’s side of the family making comments like “I didn’t know you were adopted. I never…no one told me.” This was an attempt by her family members to emphasize the fact that they did not notice a racial difference among Jane and her family members. This was hard for Jane to understand since she is phenotypically Asian and her parents are phenotypically White. They would also ask ignorant questions like “well are you like Asian?” or “Where’s Asia?” to state that they did not want to point out where Jane was from. However, what the family members failed to realize was that this was denying an important aspect of Jane’s identity. Jane tells me that other family members will continuously tell her that she is accepted and that they do not care where she is from. However, what the family members failed to understand is that over-acknowledging something, in this case, that Jane was adopted from Korea, is stating that they see a difference and is making it a point to bring up that difference. Jane tells me that if they truly did not care about the difference, they would say anything because it would be an unspoken acceptance.
I knew from previous conversations that Jane was a non-traditional student who had recently graduated in May of 2011. I wondered if her college experience had anything to do with her racial and ethnic identity journey and asked. She confidently answered that it had impacted her experiences greatly:

I would say, at first I started off at a small liberal arts Catholic school. It just went along with the flow of my life; White, stereotypical Abercrombie-thinking, and I wasn’t happy. I failed out, I failed out of school with a 0.6 GPA because I just didn’t go. I was so unhappy. I would say [public, urban university] really changed my life because now I’m a part of, um, the Asian Student Center. They have a huge network of Asian people from Southeast, East, Central, all in one place and it was kind of a place for me to discover. Before this, I felt as though I never truly belonged to a community. I know this sounds funny, but, picture New York…you can go down there and you can be whoever you want, you can bump into someone and they won’t say ‘I’m sorry’. You can walk down the street with blue hair…someone could be like, I don’t know, wearing a tutu and people don’t look. So it’s somewhat like that at [public, urban university]. I have the choice to be anonymous. There are so many different types of people that you walk and people don’t stare. People speak a different language or I speak English, and I look Korean, and people don’t give a fuck.

For Jane, being accepted and feeling a sense of belonging was fitting in without someone pointing out differences. She blended in at the urban, public institution that she attended and did not stick out like a sore thumb. The institution she chose had a large Asian American population and is an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution (AANAPISI). To Jane, this was a community where she felt free. It took her four tries to finally find the
environment she needed to succeed. She failed out of four other colleges that were all similar in demographics, White, small, and Catholic. She found a home away from home at institution in an urban setting with a diverse student population. At age twenty-four and a commuter student, Jane focused on her studies in Sociology and Psychology. She graduated summa cum laude which was very different than a failing 0.6 GPA she received from the other institutions she attended. It was amazing to see that both GPAs came from the same person. Finding the right community really did help Jane find confidence and shaped her identity so that she could focus on her academics instead of spending all her time and energy on the internal turmoil she was experiencing. Jane explains, “They don't think that being adopted affects you if you look well adjusted. They don't think that there is any impact or identity crisis going on within the shell that looks fine.”

Jane did not connect with any faculty or staff while attending college who she felt she could trust and talk to about her experiences with her racial and ethnic identity. Attending a commuter school made it difficult to build certain connections; Jane did her work at school and usually left campus afterwards. She did say that she wished she had the residential experience of living on campus in an urban setting like Boston. However, was clear in stating that she would never take back her decision to attend the urban, public institution she chose and her experiences there. Jane was able to provide a lot of suggestions on how faculty and staff could better assist transracial adoptees in college:

Be aware first. Be, I know it’s unusual, you know, people don’t want to pry and single out a Korean adoptee but…I think the adoption, the adoption population is grossly, grossly, um…just under-acknowledged in general. I don’t even think people even think that they are issues stemming from being adopted. Usually, it’s all sunshine and
happiness. It’s not all a happy story. That just like anything in life, there are two sides, and don’t be so quick to put the happy label on it because that person, that student, might be struggling in their class for reasons that you might not even know pertain to their identity. So, if you think they have a problem, ask, because a lot of them, at least for me, I open up if someone just asked.

Jane’s suggestions were honest and straightforward, she was asking educators to educate themselves on what transracial adoption is, what challenges this segment of the population experienced in college, and how to better assist them through these challenges. When adoptees are grappling with who they are as a person and how they are able to relate to each other and the world around them, these thoughts consume them day in and day out, how can they focus on other aspects of their lives such as academics? Without a proper venue to channel their feelings or someone to talk to they are left to handle these issues on their own, not having any outlets or assistance in navigating these challenging situations.

Jane seemed like an individual who had been working through her feelings and the pain that has been bottled up for years – issues that have plagued her since she was five. Jane admitted that she had not come to terms with nor accepted the fact that even though adoption may not always be a happy time, it is what happened to her and there was no changing it. She is still struggling to try and change something in the past when she is not able to go backwards.

In our last conversation we talked about her racial and ethnic identity taking a particular meaning for her. Throughout the years, instead of working through her thoughts, feelings, and pain – she had learned to cope with situations. One coping mechanism she had learned was how to put on an Asian or White face. These faces are interchangeable and can be put on at various times and with various people. In front of her boyfriend’s family she puts on her more Asian
face because she had learned through the years how to do this. Jane had to learn to respond to and navigate through racialized spaces. This is neither negative nor positive, but just a way of living through the racism. When she is around Asian people she puts on the “face” that is associated with Asian people – perhaps being a little more soft spoken, being shy, and respecting elders through gestures like offering them food first. When she is around White people she will adapt and put on her “American face” that fits the mold of how White people are – maybe toning down her Asian “face.” She finishes by telling me “it’s not good for like long term because I don’t know how long I can hold it up.” Her faces are temporary and it works in situations where she needs to make a first impression. She admitted that it is hard to maintain these images because she would have to truly learn aspects of each culture to keep up a particular image.

After our meeting we sit around and casually talk for another twenty minutes. I share with her about my life story of immigrating at a young age. I also told her about my older brother who lives in Virginia. We could have talked for hours but I was mindful of the time. We wrapped up our conversation and I grabbed a bag of Korean frozen food before walking Jane to her car. As soon as she got into her car I hand her the bag full of instant Korean noodles, spicy ribs, and rice cakes. My mother had packed her food to celebrate a Korean holiday called Chuseok. Chuseok is a harvest festival, giving thanks to good harvest for the year. She is grateful for the food and is touched by the thought. I could see her eyes welling up.

Overall Jane believed that she was a richer person because of her racial and ethnic identity. She has a unique perspective on the world because of this. Additionally, having been a non-traditional student has impacted her identity. This situation has forced her to think and reflect on her life, which has ultimately added to her racial and ethnic identity development. She is still grappling with the questions of “where do I fit?” and “how do people see me?” More
importantly she wonders what is more important, the way she looks physically or how she acts culturally. She specifically states that having been a non-traditional student has not been easy and life has not been easy. However, she has learned to extract the good things from her racial and ethnic identity and utilize them to her advantage. Jane’s request is simple – she would like people whether it is faculty, students, or staff to ask and get to know people’s stories. She tells me that if someone asked, she would be more than willing to share and tell them her experiences, which may ultimately help someone else who may be experiencing the same thing. Often times we fail to ask the simplest question of all, why.

Jane’s experience at an AANIPISI school is important in that there were a large number of Asian Americans with whom she could identify. Seeing people who looked like her and did not point out differences made her feel “free.” This institution also provided her with different opportunities to get involved in co-curricular activities even as a commuter student. She recalled a student inviting her to the Asian Student Association while waiting in line at the cafeteria. She believed that if it was not for the personal invitation she would not have gone there herself. She admitted that she came to school and left immediately after most days. Therefore a more targeted support and more opportunities to reach out to students like Jane are needed. With more targeted support, Jane could have explored her racial and ethnic identity more in-depth and could have found a support network among other Asian Americans and faculty members.

Maya’s Portrait

I remembered sitting in front of the computer watching the news when a Facebook notification alert popped up on my phone saying that someone had friend requested me. A few minutes before this notification appeared I had put up a post recruiting participants on a Korean Transracial Adoptee Facebook group. Maya had seen my post on the page and she Facebook-
friend me. I looked through Maya’s page to see if I knew this person. In looking through her page I had a funny suspicion that she had seen my recruitment post. Her name on Facebook was a made up name that she used as her signature in her written work. I looked through her pictures and knew that she was an Asian woman. I also was able to get a quick glimpse of some of her poetry which captured my attention immediately. I clicked on the message option and sent Maya a message asking if we knew each other or if she had found me through my posts recruiting participants for my study. Within seconds, a chatting icon popped up on my Facebook page and we were writing back and forth to each other for a good 30 minutes. After I got off Facebook we exchanged emails a few times then talked on the phone to set up a date and time to meet for our initial interview.

Maya was a non-traditional, commuter student, who had recently graduated in May. She was now working full time. We met on a Thursday night after work; Maya drove down to Boston after work from Chelmsford. I was grateful for Maya’s flexibility and willingness to drive up to see me. Our meeting was pushed back nearly an hour due to traffic, but the wait was well worth it. Maya told me that her car was a Black Honda and when I spotted her car on St. Stephens Street I waved to get her attention. We parked her car in the lot closest to my office and we walked towards my office. She was dressed up in professional clothing – slacks, a button down top, and heels. She was also wearing make-up. Maya was about 5’1, petite and has straight black hair. I noticed right away that Maya was always smiling, after every comment or question she has a big welcoming smile on her face. I quickly showed her where the bathroom was. Once she was done we sat and I apologized and thanked her for being so helpful driving out of the way to meet me. I could tell she was dedicated to meeting me and to contributing to
my research. She has taken the time to sit in traffic, after a long day of work to speaking to a total stranger about her life.

I could tell instantly that Maya had a very easygoing and down to earth personality. She looked very comfortable and at ease. Maya was very open in telling me that her adoption story, which was very unique. She knew little about her adoption, only her Korean name and her birthday. She eventually found out that she was given up for adoption because she was a fraternal twin. At the time in Korea there was a superstition that fraternal twins should not be kept together for fear they would end up becoming incestuous. However, her birth family found her in 2003 and she was able to go to Korea and meet them in 2007. It took so long to visit her birth family because she was never naturalized when she was adopted. Maya’s adoptive mother feared that if she went to Korea that she would not come back. Finally, she was able to process the paperwork to become naturalized.

I learned that Maya lived in Florida until she was about ten years old. She was clear in telling me that racism existed where she grew up in Florida. She did not go into detail about her experiences right away but told me that she moved up to New Hampshire when she was ten because her adoptive parents divorced. Her adoptive father is Italian. Her adoptive mother is White but she did not specify her heritage. She came to live with her mom and her brother lived with her dad. Her brother is older and was also adopted from Korea. Although they are not blood related she told me that they have gotten closer as they got older. She did mention that it was comforting to have someone that looked like her and was of the same ethnicity. It was easier to have at least one family member that looked like her. Her parents decided to adopt because they did not think they could have children. Maya did not know why they decided to adopt Korean children and never bothered to ask. Her adoptive parents did not talk much about
her being adopted or being Korean growing up. However, her mom was supportive, even when her birth family contacted her. Maya and her mother never really talked about the difference they had in terms of race. Growing up if Maya ever talked about experiencing racism her mother would try to talk to her about it. However, she emphasized that it was not a big issue growing up.

Maya recalled being in public with her parents and people asking if they were together. She also noticed people making assumptions thinking that she was multi-racial when she was with her father. She recalled times when she would go out with her dad who is Italian and people assuming that she was half White and half Asian, even though her mom is not Asian. Her mom is White and has blond hair; the differences in appearance between Maya and her mom are quite noticeable. Maya was asked more questions and heard comments when she was out with her mom. Maya told me that she has a brother who was also adopted from Korea. Although they are not biologically related she tells me that it has somewhat helped having someone who looks like her. They are closer to each other than they were growing up. I sensed that they have talked to each other about their adoption identity. She was able to tell me that her brother does not have any interest in finding his birth family, but he took a trip to Korea with her. This experience had allowed her brother to channel his interest in his Korean culture.

There was not a large Asian population where Maya grew up. In high school, only eight out of 600 students were Asian. Maya always knew she was Korean - even when she was younger. Even though she called herself Korean American, she never identified herself as being Korean and she felt more American. She felt that because she was not raised being Korean with Korean traditions, heritage, and culture, she is not truly Korean. She knew that it is her culture and accepts that but feels as though she will always be an outsider. The only thing that identified
her as Korean was her phenotype and her Korean name, Young Min. Maya does not have much information on her name except for mentioning that she had Google searched how to write her name in Korean. She took the image of her name written in Korean and got it tattooed on her. When she went to visit her family in Korea she learned that her name was not spelled correctly on her tattoo.

Maya was able to distinctly remember times when she faced racism although she tells me that she has not experienced a lot of it. She recalled the first time she experienced racism when she was five years old. She lived in Florida and a kid was making fun of her eyes. She remembered going home crying and her mom trying to comfort her. Similarly, she was standing at the bus stop and kids made fun of her. When she moved to New Hampshire, she experienced microaggressions. When she was ten years old people would confuse her and a multi-racial girl named May Ling. Everyone would call them by the wrong name even though they looked nothing alike. As Maya grew older, she kept her experiences of racism she faced to herself. Although there were not a lot of situations that occurred, it did come up at various times. We wrapped up our conversations, agreed to email each other to set up another meeting, and hugged each other tightly.

The second time that I met Maya was over the weekend. It was difficult to meet on weeknights because of traffic so we decided to meet on a weekend. The second time we met, Maya was dressed more casually in jeans, sweater, and boots. It was a rainy day outside and I could tell that she had a lingering cough. She had a cough for months now so I provided Maya with some hot water for tea. We began by talking about her experiences meeting her birth family for the first time. She started to tell me that her twin brother found out that he had a twin sister when they were both 13 years old. Once Maya’s twin brother learned of her existence, he
pushed himself to learn English. He was determined to find her and wanted to be able to communicate with her.

Maya’s birth family contacted the adoption agency in Korea and was able to contact Wide Horizons, the organization that her adoptive family utilized to adopt her. Around the age of 22, Maya received a letter that stated that there was information about her adoption. Maya went to Wide Horizons and discovered that her birth father had initiated the search and explained that she also had a twin brother. Maya could not comprehend meeting her birth family, including her twin brother for the first time in 22. Growing up, she always had a feeling she was a twin. She wondered if she had a twin sister but never thought she had a twin brother. For years, Maya and her birth family communicated through writing letters and sending pictures. She realized that she not only had a twin brother but also had an older brother. They finally got the chance to speak on the phone in 2003. Communicating on the phone was difficult due to the language barrier. Although her twin had been practicing English, Maya’s older brother was most fluent in English and translated bits and pieces of what they were saying. Maya recalled seeing a picture of her birth family for the first time in 2003 and was filled with emotions. She was overwhelmed by the mixed feelings she had in meeting those who she resembled for the first time. She had always wondered about her birth family and for the first time in her life she felt a sense of closure.

A big step in Maya’s identity development journey was meeting her birth family. In 2007 they paid for her to visit them for a week. The only word that she could use to describe the experience was awkward. Maya experienced anxiety before the trip and even on the plane to Korea. Thoughts of meeting her birth family who she has not known for 22 years raced through her head. What will she say? What will they say? Will they understand her? Will they accept
her? She played out various scenarios in her head but none of them actually happened. She thought she was going to be consumed with emotions but she was not. Her birth family showed up at the airport to pick her up and they were crying. The only thought that went through Maya’s head was that this was really weird. She did not feel any connection to her new “family” and she felt numb. The night she arrived in Korea she remembered going out to dinner with birth family and just sitting at the restaurant knowing that she was wanted and not abandoned, something she has thought for quite a while. She felt at peace for the first time, a feeling she never knew before.

Meeting her birth family has given Maya a sense of closure. She took a deep breath and said:

I think before I was never a person who was, angry about being adopted or anything like that. I was always aware that I was adopted. I was always pretty open if anybody ever asked me a question or curious. I think growing up I did have some issues looking back. I think I still have some abandonment issues going on. I think, yea, definitely, I mean, it was something I always, I always wondered about. I always wondered why I was given up. I never knew a lot of adoptees. I only knew my name, my birthday, and where I was born. That was it. And I always wondered, I always wanted to know, why? Why was I given up? I remember when I was younger; I used to fantasize about my birth mother.

She was going to come save me and take me away.

She laughed as she said the last sentence. Maya added that meeting her birth family has pushed her to want to know more about her Korean culture. Being in Korea with her birth family had made her realize how much she did not know about her own culture.
Meeting her birth family had been a mixed experience. It has brought her a sense of closure she is not sure she would have had if she had not had the opportunity to reunite with them. She expressed that being adopted had brought up abandonment issues which were prevalent in her previous romantic relationships. Being adopted and not knowing why and feeling that you were not wanted, she says, made her fear that people she loved would leave her too. Having the chance to reunite and find the answers to her past, has enabled her to move forward in her present. While it had provided some type of closure for Maya, there have also been challenges associated with it. Most recently going to Korea in 2011 she remembered her family having certain expectations of her. They thought she would have learned more Korean in order to better communicate with her family. She was bothered that her birth family did not attempt to learn more English. One aunt in particular had an attitude with her and was displeased that she had not learned more Korean words. She sensed that her birth mom was embarrassed by this interaction. Maya reflected on her time in Korea and said that she does not think that she could ever live there permanently. She knew that she did not fit in and said she felt very alone while there. Simply put, she felt that she would always be an outsider looking in. She explained that with the cultural difference of her being raised by an American family and being surrounded by her own family, how much of a difference she feels while being in Korea. This experience impacted her greatly and she described it as feeling as if an ‘alternate’ version of her resides in Korea, the person she imagined she would have been, if she had not been given up. She often thinks of this, who would she have been if she had not been given up? How different or the same would she be?

Even though I’m here, I almost felt like someone was living the life I was supposed to live there. [I feel like] there’s someone with my name, my identity, with my family,
living and probably, married with kids and you know, typical Korean. So being there was weird. I feel like I left a part of my life there. But here I don’t feel that. Here I feel this is where I have grown up, there is where I feel more like I fit in.

Maya spoke freely about having a fraternal twin brother. She said she often forgets she is a twin. When her twin and she began to write letters, he confessed that while he was growing up, he always felt a loneliness inside. Maya says she felt this too. She felt like something was always ‘missing.’ When she met her twin, they had weird similarities such as they both wrote poetry, both enjoyed the same type of music and considered themselves romantics. She also found it funny that they shared the same favorite colors and dressed in the same colors while she was in Korea, not on purpose, a mere coincidence. Her relationship with her twin was complex as the language barrier making it difficult to communicate but having an underlying love and understanding that not even language, could separate.

Around the time when Maya met her birth family, she was also navigating her college life. She graduated high school in 1997 and from there attended community college in Massachusetts. Maya decided to attend community college for three years because she did not know what she wanted to do. She thought attending community college would allow her to figure out what type of career she wanted and thought it would save her more money than attending a four-year institution. Attending community college she noticed that there were a lot of minorities. She recalled her high school being primarily White and community college was the first time she saw a diverse student population consisting of African Americans and a few Asians. Seeing a diverse student population at her community college was an adjustment for Maya but she enjoyed this experience. She was able to finish her Associates degree in 2000.
Instead of continuing on to a four-year institution, she took some time off due to personal issues going on in her life. She paused for a second and decided to disclose more of her personal life.

Maya explained that she had moved out to live on her own with her ex-boyfriend and was having issues with her father. She wanted to go back to school at a four-year institution to go on to get her Bachelors. However, her adoptive father who she does not have a relationship with anymore stated that he would only help her financially to attend UMass Lowell if she agreed to live in the residence halls. Maya did not want to live in the residence halls because she was around 23 and did not want that experience as a non-traditional student. Maya was upset that her father had helped her brother pay for his schooling but was only willing to help her on the condition of living in a residence hall. The situation ended up in an argument between Maya and her father. She explained that her relationship with her adoptive father has been a complex one; she feels he has been a conditional parent and she had made the decision to cut ties with him. She stated that when she went to Korea, she felt more unconditional love from her birth father than she ever did from her adoptive father.

In the end, Maya decided on attending a state college in Massachusetts and wanted to major in advertising. She settled on a state college because she did not want to commute into Boston at the time because she was living with her ex-boyfriend. She explained that college has been a long journey for her, almost ten years, and she just completed her degree this past May. While attending college, Maya worked full-time at Jenny Craig and took some semesters off. There was a year when she did not take classes she needed because she did not go see her advisor and ended up taking classes that she did not need to graduate. She laughed as she tells me that she thought she was done with classes, but realized she needed a minor and almost had a meltdown.
In summary, Maya’s college experience consisted of driving to school, attending class and leaving. She commuted to school and was not able to make a lot of friends because of it. In terms of her experiences in learning about her racial and ethnic identity in college, there were not a lot of Asians at her school. She said her college experience was very similar to her high school in terms of racial diversity. Race and ethnicity were not a factor in choosing the college she attended. Location was the most important factor as a commuter, non-traditional student, living with a partner. Making friends in college or becoming involved in co-curricular activities were also not a priority for Maya. She was focused on working and finishing school. At the time she did not even think about racial diversity. She was not concerned about the number of Asians she would be surrounded by because her focus was to attend classes, go to work, survive on her own, and finish her goals of graduating.

I hoped that she had some experience in college that made her reflect on her racial and ethnic identity and ask if there had ever been a time. She could recall one in her English Composition class where students had to write a paper. Maya chose to write about her adoption and meeting her birth family. Her professor asked her to write an article on it for the school paper. She reflects:

So that was pretty cool. It was probably like the only time I could kind of relate to being Korean at that school because it really wasn’t anything that came up. I was really honored to be asked to put my story in writing. So, I wrote about my experience, about meeting my family. It was published in the school’s newspaper and I felt good.

Other than this experience Maya could not recall a time when her race and ethnicity took a particular meaning to her or someone else.
Maya did not think that her race and ethnicity has impacted her very much in college. She was more impacted by her commuter college experience because she was surrounded by a diverse group of students, which made her think about her own racial and ethnic identity. However, at the state college she did not have opportunities to think much about her racial and ethnic identity due to her schedule of only going to school when she had class and then leaving right after and also because the environment consisted of only White students. The challenges that Maya experienced in college was not so much focused on her racial and ethnic identity but more on being a non-traditional, commuter student. She struggled to motivate herself to finish her college journey. So many times she wanted to quit but somehow pushed through. She knew that she needed to complete her Bachelor’s degree in order to find a job and pursue her career – this became the motivation she needed to finish a journey that she thought would never end.

In our last meeting Maya provided suggestions for faculty, staff, and administrators who are working with non-traditional, commuter students. Her main advice was to assess individual student’s situations and provide financial aid. Although Maya chuckles as she is saying this I know she is serious. Although her parents were not helping her financially while she attended the state college, she still had to provide the university with her parent’s financial information, which did not allow her to qualify for much financial aid. Although she severed ties with her father, she was never eligible for financial aid. She sighs in telling me that she was making about $27,000 a year working full-time while in college and was a student, she had to take out school loans. She whispered that she still has not paid back her loans yet. I took a second to take in all that Maya has shared with me, I asked if she had to do college all over again what would she change. Maya’s positivity shines through in her answer. She started out by telling me that everything happens for a reason. Although she believed this, she tells me that she would
have gone to a four-year institution right after high school instead of going to a community college. She only attended community college to save money but that did not end up working out as she thought it would. She also would have liked to attend college in Boston or a city and lived in a residence hall – going for that holistic college experience.

To add to the holistic college experience, Maya would have liked the opportunity to meet more people. I had no doubt that Maya has a lot of friends with her warm and bubbly personality. However, the opportunity she was talking about was the chance to participate in different student groups and organizations. She mentions that it would have been nice to be part of an Asian Cultural group. Maya had never had these opportunities presented to her because there were never enough Asians in her high school or college to create such student groups. She believed that if she had the chance to participate in these organizations than she would have been more exposed to Asians, specifically Koreans.

Maya highlighted one of the most important aspects in the life of a non-traditional college student. She told me that everything is situational and everyone has a different situation. Some students are working full-time, going to school on top of that, or have children they are raising. In her situation she said:

Sometimes I say I strictly feel like I went and said Okay what can I take? What’s going to fit in my work schedule? All right, okay, I got to drive there. It would take me 50 minutes to get there. Almost an hour each way and then I would go to work so I would just be tired. I would concentrate on my commute there, the classes I had to take and then go to work. I didn’t have time to make friends or join clubs

Although she takes full responsibility for her decisions, I wondered if more faculty and staff were able to learn about the different situations that their students were navigating, they
could offer assistance. Overall, even the simple tasks of having someone understand what these students are going through would go a long way.

I was eager to learn more about a gift that Maya has. After our first meeting Maya sent me samples of her writing including poetry, a video clip of her performing slam poetry, and some of her free writes. She has been writing since she was 15, it began as poems about her teenage angst. She really focused on writing in her 20’s when she was in a toxic relationship and needed an outlet. She told me that she thinks a lot about her experiences in life. She is always asking questions. “If I had not been adopted, who would I be? Would I be different? Would I still be the same? What would be different? What would be the same about me?” Maya’s questions focus a lot on the question of nature vs. nurture. Having met her birth family and having been to Korea, these questions are more daunting. Writing poems allows her to reflect on her experiences and has become an outlet for her.

After our meeting I invited Maya to lunch in the dining hall. We walked to the nearest dining hall where she chose to eat breakfast and I chose to eat lunch. We sat for close to an hour talking about family life, relationships, and work. I realized that we had become very close within this short period of time. After finishing up in the dining hall I stopped by my office to grab Korean food my mother had packed for Maya for the Korean Chuseok holiday. She was excited to try the homemade Kimchi, spicy ribs, and Korean rice cakes. I hugged Maya and told her that this was not good-bye but see you later as I watched her get into her car.

In hearing Maya speak about her experiences and reading the poetry she has written I was left feeling as though they are two different people. When speaking to Maya she is happy, upbeat, and positive. She is always making eye contact and is often laughing and smiling in telling her stories. In her written work, she is full of emotions, raw emotions. I see it as an
individual having two selves and writing has become a vehicle to express her. She is able to own her experiences and become confident in her story through reflecting on her life to herself and writing about it.

Maya has learned the importance of finding her voice and telling her story through writing poetry. Poetry has allowed her to release her most inner thoughts and feelings. Maya has experienced both racism and microaggression. Through these experiences she became aware that she was different than those around her. Maya could have benefited from targeted supported and more opportunities to get involved while in college. She was focused on working full-time and finishing coursework that she did not have the opportunity to explore areas of campus life. College could have been a more enhanced experience had she been involved in co-curricular activities or had connected with a faculty or staff member.

**Conclusion**

The racial and ethnic identity development of the participants in this study varied. All participants struggled to understand their racial and ethnic identity because of a lack of understanding and integration of their birth culture. All participants struggled in identifying as Korean because they felt as though they were not raised learning and understanding Korean culture. Similarly, they struggled in identifying as American because they knew that based on heritage they were Korean. When asked to state how they identify racially and ethnically, Jane stated that she “floated.” Sam stated that it depended on the day. Julia simply said she did not know. Maya explained that she is Korean American but does not truly identify with being Korean.

In understanding their identity, Sam and Julia expressed the importance of intersectionalities in their identities. Sam explained that he celebrates both Christmas and
Hanukkah because his father is Jewish and his mother is Catholic. Julia stated that religion was the most important aspect in her life. She also said that she embraced her disability identity, which is very much a part of who she is even though it does not define her.

Some participants were socialized at a young age. Jane recalls her parents making sure that she knew she was Korean. All participants told stories of attending Korean culture camp, taking Korean martial arts, or meeting other adoptees on play dates. These programs provided exposure to the Korean culture but it was only on a basic level. All participants stated that their parents did not integrate Korean culture into their lives. It was up to the individual participant to seek out opportunities to explore their racial and ethnic identity as they grew older.

All participants experienced racism growing up or in college. Some experienced microaggressions, were tokenized, or experienced more overt forms of racism. Julia and Jane remembered close friends making racist remarks. This shows that racism occurs frequently and has an impact on the individuals experiencing it. All of these previous encounters play a role in how they navigated race-related situations as well as made sense of their experiences in college. All four participants in this study had different experiences and level of comfort with their racial and ethnic identity. They often felt they did not fit in with the Asians or the White people. The participants felt they did not truly belong anywhere. Maya learned more about her Korean identity when she travelled to Korea to meet her birth family. Sam sought out to learn more about his racial identity through cooking, music, and friends. All participants agreed that in exploring their racial and ethnic identity, college was an important period in their life. College was an important time in their lives because they thought more about their racial and ethnic identity.
Participants in this study stated that the college journey was a difficult one for various reasons. One difficult was in forming social relationships. Jane and Maya who are recent graduates and non-traditional, commuter student, had different priorities and responsibilities in college. They did not have opportunities to form social relationships because they had to go to work before and after class. This did not leave them much time to commit to making friends in college. Some participants stated that they had to think about their various identities in forming social relationships. For example, Julia built social relationships based on identities that were important to her such as being Catholic or being disabled. Sam and Jane expressed having difficulty in trying to figure out what group he belonged to because he did not fit in with the White students or Asian students. He found that he fit in most with international students who also struggled to find a community.

This study emphasized that the needs of transracial adoptees are varied based on one’s circumstances, background and experiences. Maya expressed concern with finances. She lacked financial support from her parents and the institution she attended. Therefore she had to work a full-time job while attending school. This did not allow her to be active on campus or be a part of a community. She believed that educators should recognize individual situations and work with those students based on their needs. Sam and Jane expressed the importance of finding opportunities for students of different ethnicities to come together. Sam knew that there were a large number of different ethnicities under the Asian umbrella. He thought it was important for student organizations to expand their networks and work together as a larger Asian community instead of planning events in silos.

All participants in the study stated that they wanted to participate in this research study because there was an interest and focus on transracial adoptees, something they have never seen.
Every participant emphasized that the interview experience was meaningful to them because they were able to find a voice, speak up, and tell their story. Most importantly, someone was willing to listen. All participants expressed the importance of trust and relationship building. They all stated that college would have been a richer experience had they had someone to talk to. It would have been beneficial for these students to have a faculty or staff member reach out to them and express interest in their experience. The participants agreed that the experiences of a transracial adoptee in college are unique. This study shows the importance of narrative and story-telling. Overall, this study gives educators a better understanding of the experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees in college.

Chapter 5

Discussion of Research Findings

The purpose of this study was to understand the racial and ethnic identity development of Korean American transracial adoptees and its influence on their college experiences through their lived experiences. Two primary research questions guided the study:

1. How do Korean American transracial adoptees’ experience identity development in higher education?

2. How does Korean American identity development shape their overall experience in college?

Critical Race Theory (CRT) was the theoretical framework used to understand how Korean Americans adoptees developed their racial and ethnic identity. Specifically, CRT was important in this study because it explores the impact of racism experienced by Korean American transracial adoptees in college. CRT also explores the intersectionalities of identities. The participants in this study expressed the intersectionalities of their identities and its
significance. Therefore, CRT was important in understanding the experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees.

A portraiture approach was used to conduct the study. Portraiture was appropriate for this study because it allowed the researcher to engage in story-telling which gives the reader an opportunity to place themselves in the experiences of the participants. This experience evoked empathy and a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participant (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997).

Through in-depth interviews and data analysis prescribed by Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), I learned about the lived experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees. More specifically, the researcher learned about the racial and ethnic identity development of the transracial adoptees and its impact on their college experiences. This demographic of students is a hidden population (Samuels, 2009). Currently, there is a limited amount of research on Korean American transracial adoptees in higher education (Lee, 2003). Student Affairs educators lack understanding of their unique experiences. Five important conclusions were found based on the analysis:

1. The Challenges of College Transition
2. Identity Development in College
3. Racial and Ethnic Identity Development
4. Experiencing Racism
5. Importance of Narrative

The findings in this study present new information to the limited literature on the college experience of transracial adoptees.

**The Challenges of College Transition**
The first conclusion that can be made from the finding is that the transition from high school to college was challenging. A significant event in many students’ lives is the process of moving away from home and attending college. This can be an emotional experience for students (Kantanis, 2000). Some students are excited at the prospect of independence and freedom (Erickson, et al., 2006). Many students will struggle to adapt to a set rhythm and schedule in a controlled environment (Lowe & Cook, 2003). Still others will form unmet expectations of what college is and what they will be experiencing while attending college. Invariably, this change in their lifestyles causes a range of emotional responses including anxiety, excitement, and nervousness (Vasquez & Rohrer, 2006). While these were all factors in the college transition for the transracial adoptees, what was more important was building relationships.

In the midst of all these changes, social relationships are a major factor that can either positively enhance or negatively affect the college experience. Social networks and community ties are crucial to the transition process because everyone has a need to belong (Marsh, Bradley, Love, Alexander & Norham, 2007). Such relationships show both the level of an individual’s adjustment, as well as a larger connection to the university community; thereby creating a gauge for their sense of belonging (Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Therefore, it was crucial to explore the needs of transracial adoptees and how to help them in their college transition.

This portraiture study confirms that transracial adoptees often struggled with the college transition. An important part of the college transition was forming friendships and social relationships. All participants, including the recent graduates who were non-traditional college students stated that they struggled to form relationships. This study revealed that transracial
adoptees struggled to find a community where they felt a sense of belonging. Grappling with one's racial and ethnic identity became a factor in navigating which social circles to join.

Participants in this study reported that their racial and ethnic identity influenced their friendship and social relationships. Their racial identity became important to them in college, which sparked an interest in meeting more Asian people. Some participants expressed that their racial identity added a level of difficulty in forming relationships because they did not know to which social group they belonged.

Participants felt they did not fit in with the either Asian students or the American students. Non-traditional commuter students in this study struggled with the transition into college for different reasons. They did not have the time or the opportunity to get involved on campus and make friends because they were commuter students. They did not live on campus and they rushed after class to get to their full-time jobs. Therefore, their focus was not on figuring out which social circles they belonged. Instead, the priority was in quickly completing classes and getting to their next responsibility – work. This influenced their social relationships because they were not easily able to form friendships in college based on their hectic schedules.

What these findings suggest is that college is an important time in a Korean American transracial adoptee’s life, whether they are a traditional or non-traditional college student. The first few months in college can be challenging and could affect a student’s overall college experience. One participant ended up transferring to six different colleges, which were seemingly very similar in that they were predominately White and Catholic institutions. She finally ended up in a place where she found racial, ethnic, and cultural diversity in an urban setting. She felt as though she fit into this new environment. This finding has implications for the educational community because it shows that transracial adoptees are a specific group within
the college population that needs special attention and assistance in their college transitions. These students are often overlooked because of their hidden identity but are also in need of assistance in forming friendships and navigating issues surrounding their college transition.

**Identity Development in College**

Secondly, college is a time when one explores and develops their identity. Literature on identity development states that it is a crucial and important part of one’s development. Kroger (2007) defines identity as a mosaic of who someone is, how they relate to others, and how they fit into social contexts. Other scholars have defined identity as a combination of one’s childhood, experiences growing up, and psychological events that have occurred in their lives (Hoopers, 1990; Brodzinsky & Schecter, 1990). College is often said to be the time where individuals define their identity. They question who they are and reflect on themselves as a person (Cassidy & Trew, 2004).

The participants in this study agreed that college years were transformative and they began to question who they were during this time. Additionally, all participants described college as the time where they explored their racial and ethnic identity. This is a notion that is also supported by Lieberman (2001). The ways in which participants explored their racial and ethnic identity varied. Some participants explored it on their own by self-reflecting. Other participants sought out opportunities to get involved in Asian cultural groups or seeking out Asian students to socialize with. Lastly, some participants explored their racial and ethnic identity through simply trying Korean food or doing research on their own to learn about the culture.

This portraiture study confirms the importance of identity development in college. Although all four participants in this study had varying degrees and levels of identity
development in college, they all agreed that college was when they thought about their racial and ethnic identity the most. All participants expressed that they had thought about their racial and ethnic identity growing up. However, they identified that college was when they had conversations regarding these thoughts friends, in class, or in student organizations/group meetings. What these findings suggest is that college is an important time for one’s personal growth. An important aspect of their personal growth is figuring out who they are as a person. These participants were able to work through who they are as individuals through relationships, forming friendships, networking, and experiences in classes.

This finding has implications for the educational community because it supports that identity development is an integral part of the overall college experience. Therefore, Student Affairs educators need to understand the process of identity development and ways to support students in their growth and development as individuals. Student Affairs educators could provide opportunity for discussion, dialogue, and reflection. Additionally, having one on one conversations with students about their journeys will assist them in working through understanding who they are as individuals.

**Racial and Ethnic Identity Development**

Identity development was important during college for all participants. However, racial and ethnic identity development was a large aspect of their overarching identity. Similar to literature on identity development, research on racial and ethnic identity development highlights the importance of understanding one’s racial and ethnic identity. Lee (2003) found that an adoptees’ comfort level with their racial and ethnic identity allowed them to cope and work through issues of discrimination and racism in college. Participants in this study supported this notion. A participant who grew up thinking and believing she was White experienced racism
growing up. To cope with the racism, she avoided working through the situation and the pain it caused her, resulting in anger. She had not worked through the pain she felt from the racism she experienced and it took her nearly 23 years to address the issues she had regarding her racial and ethnic identity.

These findings suggest two things. First, students have experienced racism growing up and are still experiencing them in college. On the other hand, students’ who understand their racial and ethnic identity may have an easier time navigating feelings and thoughts that come when experiencing racism. However, adoptees who have not explored their racial and ethnic identity may be confused and will not know how to navigate the experiences they encounter (Griffith & Bergeron, 2006; Kirton, 2000; Trenka, et al., 2006). Research shows that for a transracial adoptee, understanding and navigating their racial and ethnic identity is a difficult process because they are a part of a family that has a different race and ethnicity from them (Samuels, 2009). Participants expressed their struggle in understanding and accepting their racial identity because they did not want to be different from their family and friends.

This finding emphasizes the need and importance for Student Affairs educators to assist transracial adoptees who experience racism in college. No matter what their previous experiences have been or what their racial and ethnic identity development journey has been, these students need assistance in working through the pain, hurt, and confusion that racism and racist remarks will leave on an individual. Student Affairs educators are needed to assist individual adoptees who may be experiencing conflicting feelings and thoughts associated with racism.

Similar to Samuels’ (2009) beliefs, this portraiture study showed that transracial adoptees struggle with understanding and working through their racial and ethnic identity because their
families are of a different race. Additionally, participants in this study all experienced racism in college and struggled to navigate through issues of racism. All participants expressed having experienced varying degrees of racism from name calling to eye squinting and stereotypical remarks.

For some participants, college was the first time they met a large number of Asian American students. They expressed that they did not identify with other Asian American students. The participants knew they looked like other Asian American students. However, beyond appearance, they did not feel as though they connected with other Asians. The main reason for this was that the cultural piece was missing for many participants. They did not have the cultural exposure and understanding.

Another reason why racial and ethnic identity is important in college is because students begin to be aware of its importance in their everyday lives. No participants directly stated that their ethnicity was the most important identity that affected their academic goals in college. However, all participants expressed that their various identities played a role in their academic goals. One participant expressed that when he began to explore his racial identity, he realized that he wanted to major in Japanese to be a translator. In a study conducted by Kawaguchi (2003), Asian American students expressed the importance of their ethnicity in their academic goals in college. In this study no participants directly stated that their ethnicity was the most important identity that affected their academic goals in college. However, all participants expressed their various identities playing a role in their academic goals in college. As an example of other identities playing roles in participants’ academic goals, one participant expressed that her disabled identity impacted her decision to major in human services. For this
participant, her involvement with summer camp and volunteer work allowed her to explore and understand her disability status. Thus, her disability status became the most meaningful identity.

Although the previous examples showed how an aspect of an individual’s identity can lead them to pursue a career to express that identity, it can very well have an opposite effect. A non-traditional student who recently graduated from her undergraduate studies stated that she changed majors from social work to linguistics because her challenges in working through her adoption identity made her not want to delve into other’s challenges, which she would constantly encounter in social work.

In understanding the participants’ racial and ethnic identity, an important conclusion drawn was that students had various identities that were important to them. Sometimes these identities went beyond race and ethnicity to include disability status and religion. Critical Race Theory (CRT) places value on the intersectionalities of identities and recognizes intersectionalities of identities such as class, gender, race, and age (Crenshaw, 1993). All participants expressed the importance of intersectionalities of their identities. One participant discussed being an adopted Korean American who celebrates both Christmas and Hanukkah, having a father who is Jewish. Another participant expressed the importance of her religious and disabled identity, seemingly more important than her racial and ethnic identity in college.

Higher education administrators need to look at students as a whole person, taking into consideration all of their intersecting identities. Administrators play an important role in helping students understand their various identities and how they interact and contribute to who they are as an individual.

**Experiencing Racism**
This research supports the belief that racism occurs in college and impacts students. Literature on CRT states that race and racism are deeply rooted in our society and therefore has become normalized (Ladson-Billings, 1998). A form of racism is microinsults and they are conscious behaviors (Sue, et al., 2007) such as calling someone a derogatory term. Additionally, Asian American students may experience other forms of microassaults that pertain to the model minority myth and achievement stereotypes (Suzuki, 1989). Participants in this study were able to share times when they experienced racism, microassaults, or heard stereotypical remarks. While most of their experiences happened when they were growing up, all participants expressed that they had also dealt with racism in college.

This portraiture study shows that racism occurs in everyday life and has an effect on students in college. All participants were able to identify one time or another growing up as well as in college where they experienced racism. Some situations were subtle remarks made by professors due to assumptions based on their race. Other times, friends made racist remarks that were hurtful. The fact that each participant was able to specifically state what happened or was said leads one to believe that this experience had a lasting impact. Two participants recalled joking comments made by friends that were offensive. Three out of four participants stated that they were called derogatory names or were made fun of growing up.

Kirton (2000) believed that transracial adoptees might experience racism that could influence their relationship building with both their adoptive and birth cultures. Findings from this study are consistent with this belief. Participants expressed that their experiences with racism made them question which racial group they belonged. The participants felt they did not belong to the Asian group or American group. The Asian group did not accept them because they were not brought up culturally Korean. The American group did not accept them because
they looked different than White people. They did not feel as though they belonged to the adoptive or birth cultures fully. One participant stated that she was constantly “floating” from the adoptive culture to birth culture and vice versa. Adoptees expressed that often times they feel as though they do not truly belong to the adoptive or birth culture because they are not fully accepted for who they are. All participants seem to straddle both adoptive and birth culture, not truly feeling like they belong to either group.

In college, adoptees experienced racism from friends who often joked about their adoption status or their racial and ethnic identity. No matter what the joke was or how it was presented, adoptees still expressed being affected by the racist jokes, remarks, and comments. This finding has implications for the educational community because Student Affairs educators need to continue their work to fight racism and injustice in higher education. Faculty, staff, and administrators should educate themselves so that they are not caught making comments that are insensitive or offensive. When Student Affairs educators witness racism on their college campuses, they should immediately raise consciousness about the oppression when it occurs. Additionally, they must be an advocate, take a stance, and address the issue. The adoptees who have experienced racism in college must also receive support to be able to talk about their experiences and work through it.

**Importance of Narrative**

Lastly, there is an importance of understanding one's experiences through narrative and story-telling. CRT values the importance of stories told by people of color through story-telling, interviews, and spoken history (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The stories told by the participants in this study have been important because we are able to learn from their lived experiences. Delgado & Stefancic (2001) believed that experiential knowledge that people of color have is a
resource and helps others understand racial issues. The narratives of the participants in this study have provided insightful information about the challenges transracial adoptees experience in college and their needs. The types of stories that people of color often tell are of their experiences with racism and how to navigate those situations (Delgado, 1987). The participants supported this notion in that racism was an important aspect of their narrative and how it influenced their experiences growing up and in college. Additionally, storytelling helps heal the pain through venting and finding comfort from community members (Delgado, 1990). All participants confirmed that participating in this study allowed them to address issues that had built up over time. Additionally, they expressed that this opportunity gave them a chance to think more deeply about their experiences and allowed for reflection.

This portraiture study validates the importance of helping students find their voice and speaking up to tell their individual stories. All participants stated that they decided to participate in this research because they had previously never seen anyone showing interest in transracial adoptees. Additionally, all participants stated that this research interview experience was invaluable to them because they were able to tell their stories and work through the deeply rooted issues and feelings that had been building up over time.

These findings suggest that students are interested and willing to tell their stories if they are given the time, dedication, opportunity, and platform. As CRT suggests, participants have agreed that telling their story has helped them recount their lived experiences and be introspective. Through this experience they were able to express their inner deep thoughts that they have not had the opportunity nor had the space do before.

These findings have implications for the educational community because Student Affairs educators need to provide the venue, time, and space for students to be able to talk about their
challenges, history, and experiences. Additionally, these findings showcase the importance of trust and relationship building with students to feel comfortable in sharing their narrative. It is crucial that Student Affairs educators place value in hearing and listening to the important stories of their students. In turn, the students will feel valued and will take the time to share their story.

**Implications for Educational Practice**

This study supports the importance of understanding racial and ethnic identity development among undergraduate transracial adoptees. There is a lack of knowledge surrounding the racial and ethnic identity of adoptees and its impact on their college experience (Lee, 2003). An understanding of one’s racial and ethnic identity will allow an adoptee to navigate racism during their college experience. Having an understanding of the racial and ethnic identity development of transracial adoptees and its impact on their college experience would allow higher education administrators to better assist students in their college transition as well as their journey throughout college. Through this study, the participants were able to tell stories of their lived experiences and the meaning behind them. Based on the findings in this study, the following implications for practice offered to those in higher education administrators, faculty and staff.

The findings are significant to higher education administrators because the study supports the notion that racial and ethnic identity development is an important aspect of a transracial adoptee’s overall identity. Additionally, the study shows that the racial and ethnic identity development of transracial adoptees is more prevalent in college and impacts their college experience. With this information, Student Affairs educators and practitioners have an opportunity to assist transracial adoptees in their college journey. The first step in addressing the needs of transracial adoptees is figuring out who these adoptees are. It is recommended that
colleges and universities establish an option for students to self-identify as adoptees. When students apply to college they are given choices to identify themselves racially or ethnically. Similarly, colleges can provide a check box option that can allow transracial adoptees to self-identify. When adoptees self-identify, it will allow administrators to reach out to these individuals to better assist them in their college experience. Once an adoptee has been identified, administrators should focus on providing support for him or her.

To understand the needs of transracial adoptees, higher education administrators should get to know their students and develop personal relationships with them. A trusting relationship will encourage a transracial adoptee to open up and share their story. Additionally, having a relationship with an adoptee will make them more likely to reach out and seek help when it is needed. Additionally, administrators must educate themselves on the challenges adoptees face in college. One challenge may be in figuring out where they fit in racially. College administrators should actively seek out information to better support transracial adoptees in their college transition. There are a variety of ways in which Student Affairs educators could further their understanding of the obstacles and challenges transracial adoptees’ face. One way is to read articles that focus on the racial and ethnic identity development of transracial adoptees. Another method would be to attend trainings, workshops, and programs. Through these professional development opportunities Student Affairs educators will understand the specific needs of transracial adoptees and ways to address these needs. Additional trainings should be held regularly to stay current on the trends and research on supporting transracial adoptees in their college journey.

Orientation sessions may be an opportunity for staff to meet transracial adoptees and to begin building a relationship and support network for adoptees. Student Affairs educators can
provide a separate meet and greet session for those self-identified transracial adoptees, giving students the opportunity to network with other transracial adoptees who may have had similar experiences and who have struggled to connect with others. At this orientation, various programming and mentoring opportunities could be highlighted to address the needs of adoptees. This explanation will provide transparency for the parents in understanding what experiences are available for adoptees as well as make adoptees aware of opportunities to enhance their college experience and support them through their transition.

While it is important for administrators to build relationships with adoptees, it is more important for the adoptees themselves to be able to build friendship and relationships with their peers. Administrators should provide space for adoptees to network with other transracial adoptees. This safe space could be a place where adoptees share their experiences with others and find a support network among their peers. Many adoptees may not feel comfortable disclosing the information that they are adopted. However, if adoptees are given a space where they can meet others with a similar identity, they may feel a sense of comfort. In this safe space, adoptees can begin to explore their racial and ethnic identity more deeply.

When transracial adoptees arrive on a college campus, they have to seek out cross-racial interactions on their own. If the administrators were to only connect transracial adoptees to each other, they are not creating environments where adoptees can meet and interact with students cross-racially and cross-culturally. Faculty and staff need to take the responsibility of showing the importance of diversity as well as an appreciation of it (Chang, Chang, & Ledesma, 2005). Therefore, faculty and administrators should provide a diverse environment for students to enhance their educational experience (Harper & antonio, 2008). One way would be to help students interact with diverse groups of students.
Administrators should work toward providing opportunities for transracial adoptees to explore their racial and ethnic identity by connecting them with students of the same race. Without targeted support, transracial adoptees may struggle to find a sense of belonging and will struggle to connect with the greater university community. Korean American students may look to seek out experiences at an Asian American Center on campus where they can be exposed to their birth culture. While engaging in activities with other students who look like them and identify in similar ways, these students will feel a stronger sense of belonging and connection. However, the hope is that transracial adoptees will continue to develop their identity and feel increasingly comfortable with who they are as individuals. This strong sense of self will allow them to form meaningful relationships and friendships where they can connect on a racial or ethnicity identity basis, create meaning, and feel a sense of belonging. However, student affairs practitioners must assist students who have not reached this comfort level and help them through their identity development process.

Transracial adoptees can be supported in their racial exploration through peer to peer learning. One particular mentorship opportunity is the exchange between international students and transracial adoptees. The growing numbers of international students in colleges in the U.S have pushed universities to provide services to help international students adjust to the U.S culture (Zhai, 2004). International students often face difficulty adjusting to higher education due to academic pressures as well as the challenges of living in a different culture that may be vastly different from where they came from (Mori, 2000). Additionally, these students struggle with learning the English language, lack of financial resources, adjustment issues, and forming social networks (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2008). Many colleges have created support offices to assist students in their college transition. For example, to assist international students
the international education support office provides enhanced orientation, guidance, and counseling from professional staff members. Additionally, they provide advisors to help international students work through their culture shock and adjustment in college (Zhai, 2004). Similarly, transracial adoptees need dedicated support from administrators on their unique struggles with adjusting to college life and navigating their racial and ethnic identity.

In this mentoring program transracial adoptee will be paired up with an international student from the birth country of the adoptee. This would provide a mutually beneficial relationship for both individuals. Transracial adoptees who have been raised in the U.S to speak English can help the international students with their transition by helping them practice their English. Additionally, since transracial adoptees have been assimilated to the U.S culture, they can help international learn about the U.S customs and culture.

In return, international students will educate the transracial adoptee in their birth culture. International students can teach transracial adoptees their native language, they can seek out the native food, or they can tell students’ personal stories of what it is like growing up in that country and culture. This exchange of information and assistance can allow students to learn more about their prospective interests, help each other through the transition, and hopefully foster a relationship. Overall, the goal is to support transracial adoptees in being a part of an inclusive community that will help retain students of color and assist them in excelling during their college experience (Harvey & Anderson, 2005).

**Implications for Future Research**

While this study sheds light on the experiences of Korean transracial adoptees in college, there are several opportunities for future research. First, administrators need to assess the types of institutions transracial adoptees choose to attend. This information will allow administrators
to understand the factors that are important to transracial adoptees in choosing a college. These factors may still be important to adoptees when they begin college. With this information, administrators can better assist transracial adoptees in their college transition.

Secondly, a quantitative study should be conducted more broadly with a larger participant base that focuses on different geographical locations around the U.S. This information will provide data on the number of transracial adoptees in college in various locations around the U.S. Being able to identify the number of transracial adoptees at various colleges will help administrators gauge the needs of this population. Additionally, it will allow administrators to be intentional about providing targeted support to this group of students.

Thirdly, a qualitative study should be conducted that will compares the experiences of transracial adoptees in different colleges. This study will look at the different experiences of transracial adoptees at various institutions that are different in size, location, and demographics. It will be important to understand how transracial adoptees identify racially and ethnically in various geographical locations and how this impacts their college experience. Such quantitative studies may reveal how demographics and geographical location play a factor in a transracial adoptees’ exploration of their racial and ethnic identity. For example, being in an urban setting like New York City may allow a transracial adoptee to have access to try their ethnic food or to attend their cultural festival celebrations.

One last thing to consider is that the term “Asian American” includes many ethnicities. Similar studies should be conducted to explore the lived experiences of transracial adoptees of other Asian ethnicities such as Chinese or Vietnamese adoptees. It will be interesting to see if there are similarities in the experiences among Asian Americans or if the experiences differed based on specific ethnicities. Future studies should also focus on the lived experiences of
transracial adoptees and the intersectionalities of their identities. For example, there should be a better understanding of the racial and ethnic identity of transracial adoptees and their religious or disability identities and how it influences not only their college experiences but their unique identities overall.

**Conclusion**

This study is significant because the narratives of four Korean American transracial adoptees’ experiences with understanding their racial and ethnic identity and its impact on their college experiences adds to the limited literature and knowledge that is currently present. The topic of adoption is both a sensitive and complicated issue. When you add the second layer of transracial adoption, the topic becomes that much more complex. This study has identified the lived experiences of four individual participants and how they make meaning of it. Each participant formed his or her identity in various and unique ways. It was important to place value on the narrative of each individual who shared his or her story. This study gave these participants the opportunity to tell their stories and find a voice.

While this study has contributed to the limited literature and knowledge on the college experience of transracial adoptees, further research is still necessary. Future studies should focus on various other identities that transracial adoptees hold beyond their racial and ethnic identity such as their gender, religious, sexual orientation, and disability identities that make up who they are as individuals. An understanding of how these various identities affect an adoptee’s college experience will allow for administrators to better assist students in their college journey. Additionally, future research should be conducted on various ethnicities under the larger Asian umbrella such as Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese transracial adoptees to truly understand the
racial and ethnic identity development of transracial adoptees and its overall impact on their college experience.
Appendix A: Recruitment Document

The Racial and Ethnic Identity Development of Korean American Transracial Adoptees and its Impact on their College Experience

Dear Potential Participant:

My name is Chong Sun Kim and I am currently working on my dissertation for my doctoral program in Education under the guidance of Dr. Kimberly Truong at Northeastern University. My dissertation topic is on the racial and ethnic identity development of Korean American transracial adoptees and its impact on their college experience. There is not a lot of research on this topic and I hope to gather information that will allow faculty, staff, and administrators to better assist these students in their college transition.

I am using criterion sampling to recruit participants for my interviews. I am recruiting Korean Americans, who have been adopted by White parents from South Korea, are attending an undergraduate institution in Massachusetts, must be between the ages of 18-22, and are between sophomore through senior year in college.

Each participant will be asked to participate in three interviews approximately 90 minutes each. Participation in this study is completely voluntary and all interviews will be kept confidential. Please fill out the short eligibility survey to see if you meet the criteria to participate in the study. After review of the survey I will contact you to let you know if you have been selected for this study. Please feel free to contact me with any questions or concerns you may have about this study.

The survey can be taken by clicking on the following website link: https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/viewform?fromEmail=true&formkey=dGVGaF9GeTcyQTBvRWdBYlJNaDV1SVE6MQ

Thank you for our time and your willingness to participate in this study. Please contact me either by email at ch.kim@neu.edu, or by phone at 860-601-0709 if you would like to discuss your potential participant further.

Thank you,

Chong Sun Kim
ch.kim@neu.edu
Northeastern University
IRB#: 12-07
Appendix B: Online Questionnaire

**Online Questionnaire**

Please fill out all questions below.

* Required

Name * (please include first and last name)

Phone Number * (best number to reach you - this will only be used to contact you by the researcher and will be kept confidential)

What is your e-mail address? *

Gender
- Male
- Female
- Do Not Want To Disclose

Were you adopted from Korea? *
- Yes
- No

Please confirm that your parents are White? *
- Yes

How old are you? *

Are you currently attending college in Massachusetts? *
- Yes
- No

What year are you in college? * (How many years have you attended college so far)

Submit
Appendix C: Unsigned Consent Form – Northeastern University

Informed Consent Form

Northeastern University
College of Professional Studies
Doctor of Education Program

Title: Racial and Ethnic Identity of Korean American Transracial Adoptees and its Impact on their College Experience

Principle Investigator (PI): Kimberly Truong, Northeastern University

Co-Investigator: Chong Sun Kim, Northeastern University

Purpose: I am inviting you to take part in a research study. This study will examine the racial and ethnic identity development of Korean American transracial adoptees and its impact on their college experience. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are: Korean American transracial adoptees, adopted from South Korea by White parents, between the ages 18-22, and who are attending college in Massachusetts. Participating in this study will consist of you to complete a pre-interview questionnaire and participate in at least three individual interviews, lasting approximately 90 minutes each. Each interview will be tape recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only.

Procedure: If you decide to take part in this study, I will ask you participate in individual interviews. The interviews will take place at times and locations that are convenient for you. All interview sessions will be audio-taped and the tapes will be transcribed into writing. Your name will not appear on the transcription and pseudonyms will be used.

Risks and Benefits: The possible risk is the sensitive nature of the topic and by participating in this study; it may bring up some emotional feelings. The researcher will provide resources for the participants including local, national, or university counseling or agencies that assist with transracial adoption. There is no direct benefit to you but the researcher hopes to gain insight on the racial and ethnic experiences of Korean American transracial adoptees and its impact on their college experience. This information hopes to better assist faculty, staff, and administrators with the tools in helping these students in their college transition.

Confidentiality: Your part in this study will be confidential and only Dr. Kimberly Truong, PI and Chong Sun Kim, co-researcher will see the information and have access to it. Pseudonyms will be used to identify the participants and your name and identity will not be disclosed. All information from the research will be with the co-researcher in a locked drawer. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you or any individual. Any electronic information stored on a computer will be projected by a password that only the co-researcher has access into. The data gathered will be used to complete this research study, dissertation, conference presentations, and publications in the future. Background information of each
participan will be used which may include the following information: gender, family background, year in school, and additional information that will help the reader in understanding the experiences of each participant. The audio files will be stored for two years for quality assurance but will be destroyed after.

**Voluntary Participation:** Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You can choose not to participate in the study or decide to change your mind about participating later on. You may also withdraw from the study at any time. At any point in the interview you may choose to skip any questions.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**
No, you will not be paid for your participation.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**
This study is completely voluntary so you will incur any traveling costs to the interview site.

**Contact Person:** Please contact Chong Sun Kim at (860) 601-0709 or via email at ch.kim@neu.edu or Kimberly Truong who is overseeing my research at k.truong@neu.edu if you have any questions about this study. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University Boston, MA 02115. Telephone: 617-373-7570, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Signature of the person agreeing to take part</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Printed name of person above</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chong Sun Kim, Co-Principal Investigator
Northeastern University
IRB#: 12-07-07
Appendix D: Primary Interview Questions

**Interview #1: Background Information**
1.) Tell me a little bit about yourself
2.) What is your major?
3.) What do you know about your adoption?
4.) How did you find out this information?
5.) When and how did you become aware of your race? Your ethnicity?
6.) How do you identify both racially and ethnically?
7.) What are your thoughts on being ethnically Korean and being a part of a family that is of another race?
8.) What have we talked about today that you'd like to discuss further?

**Interview #2: Family Life**
1.) What have we talked about last time that you'd liked to discuss further?
2.) Where did you grow up?
3.) Do you have any siblings?
4.) What are some challenges you faced growing up being transracially adopted?
5.) When did you notice that you were of a different racial and ethnic identity than your parents?
6.) How did your parents emphasize this difference?
7.) What do you know about the Korean culture?
8.) To what extent do you identify with your Korean culture?
9.) How has your parents encouraged you to explore your racial and ethnic identity?
10.) What efforts have you made to learn about your racial and ethnic identity?
11.) How has your view of your racial or ethnic identity changed or evolved?
12.) How do you identify culturally? Racially? Ethnically?
13.) What have we talked about today that you'd like to discuss further?

**Interview #3: School Life**
1.) What have we talked about last time that you’d liked to discuss further?
2.) Why did you chose (    ) university/college?
3.) Was race/ethnicity a factor in your college decision?
4.) Can you describe a moment when your racial or ethnic identity was important to or took on particular meaning for you?
5.) Can you describe a time when your racial or ethnic identity was important to or took on particular meaning for others?
6.) How has your racial and ethnic identity impacted your college experience?
7.) How do you benefit from your racial identity?
8.) How did you “miss out” or were impacted negatively because of your racial identity?
9.) What are some challenges you faced in your education being transracially adopted?
10.) What could educators/administrators at school have done to help you in college?
11.) What have we talked about today that you'd like to discuss further?
Appendix E: Resource Form

Resource Form

NU’s Health & Counseling Services
Forsyth Building, Suite 135
Phone: (617) 373-2772
E-mail: nushp@neu.edu
http://www.northeastern.edu/uhs/aboutuhs/contactus.html

Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute
56 Hartford Street, Newton, MA. 02461
Phone: (617) 332-8944
Email: info@adoptioninstitute.org
http://www.adoptioninstitute.org/index.php

KAAN (Korean American Adoptive Family Network)
P.O. Box 704, Camp Hill, PA. 17001
Phone: (717) 574-3629
http://www.kaanet.com/

Holt International Children’s Services
P.O. Box 2880, 1195 City View, Eugene, OR. 97402
Phone: (541) 687-2202
Email: info@hotinternational.org
http://www.holtinternational.org

G.O.A.’L (Global Overseas Adoptees’ Link)
5th Floor., Seogyo-dong 363-20, Mapo-gu
Seoul 121-837
Phone: +82-2-352-6585
http://goal.or.kr

IKAA (International Korean Adoptee Associations)
P.O. Box 19647, Seattle, WA 98109-6647
Phone: (617) 373-4390
Email: info@ikaa.org
http://ikaa.org/en

InKAS (International Korean Adoptee Service)
Bok-Chang building #703, 80, Sogongdong,
JungKu, Seoul
204 Ell Hall Phone: +82-2-3148-0258
Email: inkas21@yahoo.co.kr
http://inkas.org
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