Internationally Adopted Adolescents: How Do They Integrate Ethnic and National Identity?

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Abstract: In recent years the phenomenon of international adoption has steadily increased, and many adopted children are now adolescents. At this developmental stage the construction of ethnic identity becomes crucial, involving additional challenges for interracial adoptees. Some recent studies, mostly American, have focused on ethnic identity of adoptees: their results, however, are inconsistent with patterns of ethnic identification. This could be related to the complexity of this issue and the different strategies used by adoptees to confront dual membership of ethnic group and new social context. The present article explores how international adoptees negotiate dual identity and how this process affects their well-being. A self-report questionnaire was administered individually to 97 international adoptees aged between 15 and 22. Four types of adoptees, representing different patterns of ethnic and national identification, were determined in relation to different well-being outcomes. The results suggest some practical applications in pre- and post-adoption parent-training programs.

Keywords: Adoption, Ethnic identity, National identity, Well-being.

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International Adoption and Ethnic Identity

Adolescence is a particularly critical transition for adopted children: the construction of their identity, their relationship with adoptive family and social context, their planning for the future are all affected by the way they view their adoption history.

Research in this direction has focused on the extent to which adopted adolescents have adjusted, in order to identify possible risk levels vis-à-vis their non-adopted peers (Rosnati *et al*., 2008; 2010). Most of these studies compare adopted children with their contemporaries born and bred within their biological families, to detect any similarities or differences, and to discover whether adoptees present more behavioural problems during their adolescence (Rosnati, 2010).

Results are sometimes inconsistent: some studies about Israeli adolescents have shown no particularly problematic behaviours vis-à-vis their non-adopted peers (Gleitman and Savaya, 2010); others, conversely, highlight more behavioural problems, particularly forms of externalising behaviors, in adopted adolescents than in non-adopted ones (Bimmel *et al*., 2003; Juffer and van IJzendoorn, 2005).

In this scenario, the issue of the identity of international adoptees remains little explored, particularly in Italy, where the dearth of research extends to the wider area of adoption.

According to Tajfel's Theory (1981), social identity is "that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 314). In these terms, ethnic identity can be regarded as an aspect of social identity deriving from identification with one's ethnic group, the sense of belonging to it and any thoughts, perceptions and emotions linked to being a member of that particular group. It thus depends on the importance and value attributed to one's ethnicity understood as an ascribed component acquired by birth and often apparent in one's somatic traits (Mancini, 2006). As pointed out by Phinney (1992), ethnic identity is no static dimension but a gradual process deriving from negotiating individual needs (for belonging and distinction) and society's feedback.

In this direction, literature has highlighted the relevance of the cultural context in which the identity processes take place and that identity may

assumes many relational and flexible forms   (Bauman, 2001). Most research in this field has been focused on ethnic minorities as a crucial field for examination of these issues given that the migrants in their everyday lives are required to negotiate their understandings about the world and about themselves (Luke and Luke, 1999).

Only in recent times, given the increasing number of international adoptions, these issues was been related to adopted children experience. Grotevant (1992) pointed out that adoptees have to negotiate multiple identities into a coherent sense of self. These multiple identities include assigned components of identity (e.g., gender, adoptive status and ethnic origin), in which individuals have less choice, and chosen components of identity, as well as the aspects built by the subject through some degree of choice (such as political, religious, job domains). Recent contributions (Grotevant and Von Korff, 2011; Mohanty, 2013) highlighted the crucial role of the modalities of one's coming to term with his/her assigned inheritance, and, in particular for the adoptee, with his/her adoptive status and ethnic background.

Transracial adoptees, in fact, find themselves within a cultural and ethnic context other than their birth one, in which they had sometimes lived for years; unlike immigrants, though, they cannot build their own ethnic identity through recognising their parents' somatic traits and culture as similar to their own (Lee *et al.,* 2010). As highlighted by Scherman (2010), transracial adoptees become part of a new culture through a peculiar "migratory" process taking place in solitude rather than within a group. Adoptees thus find themselves confronting the difficult task of how to integrate, on one hand, the cultural baggage of their country of origin and, on the other, their belonging to a new family and identifying with that family's national culture. In fact, the process of building ethnic identity in the case of transracial adoption (cf. Baden, Treweeke and Ahluwalia, 2012) is so peculiarly linked to the encounter with the adoptee's original culture and background as to demand a new definition. The authors thus propose "re-culturation" to indicate how adoptees, at different levels, attempt to re-appropriate their birth culture in their late adolescence, youth, and even adulthood, looking for information and knowledge about it. Such a process seems to be started and defined by a need to resolve the discrepancy

perceived between their own physical features, so obviously different from those of their parents, and the cultural and relational baggage they carry. International adoption, on the other hand, implies constructing one's belonging to the adoptive family, which sometimes means pushing aside all that relates to one's origin. Alongside ethnic identity, therefore, it is interesting to consider the concept of national identity. Emerson's definition of national identity, endorsed by Tajfel (1981), refers to one's feeling of belonging to a nation (Emerson, 1960). In this theoretical frame, national identity refers to the ways in which people subjectively understand their place in the world, whom they see as being 'one of them', whom they see as being different, and whom they see as being against them (Reicher and Hopkins, 2001). If nationality can be closely linked to ethnic identity, it often represents a distinct way of identifying oneself, as in the particular case of transracial adoption, where children potentially face negative discriminatory experiences (Lee and the MIAPT, 2010). Thus, national identification may not always be a simple natural process in the case of transracial adoption (Lind, 2012). According to this approach, 'national identity' is not an objective description, but rather a psychological sense of what is valued as part of one's national background. The last few years have seen a number of studies on the adoptees' process of self-identification/ ethnic categorisation referred to their definition of themselves as belonging to a particular group. Results have been heterogeneous highlights the complexities of identity construction in today's multilingual and multicultural social settings leading to the emergence of a multiple match of ethnic and cultural identity. Some authors found that adoptees are able to acknowledge their ethnic origin by defining themselves in ethnic terms and building a medium-high level of ethnic identity (Brooks amd Barth, 1999). Others report a risk of marginalisation as to both cultures (Dalen and Saetersdal, 1987). In this case, adoptive children tend to build neither an ethnic nor a national sense of identity. This result is potentially negative, for an adoptee unable to develop a sense of belonging to either culture remains isolated (Tessler *et al.*, 1999).

Generally speaking, however, identification with the 'dominant' cultural background of the host family seems to prevail: adoptees tend to define themselves as belonging to the culture of their adoptive parents rather than their original ethnic group, and this is independent of their somatic traits

(Freundlich and Lieberthal, 2000; Scherman and Harrè, 2008; Simon and Altstein, 1992; Wickes and Slate, 1996). This prevalence of national identity over ethnic background could be referred to the adoptees' sense of belonging or attachment to their adoptive families (Westhues and Cohen, 1997), or else it could be a 'survival' strategy (Cederblad *et al.*, 1999; Rushton and Minnis, 1997): the fact that the adopted child arrives alone and in a position of weakness would stimulate its need, as well as the wishes of others, to assimilate to the new culture and society as fast as possible.

Ethnic Identity and Well-being

Several studies demonstrate a positive correlation between the ethnic identity, self-esteem and healthy psychological functioning of non-white immigrant adolescents and young adults (Phinney, 1992). In transracial adoption too, the role of ethnic identity has proved crucial to the psychological well-being and development of a mature and integrated personality (Basow *et al.*, 2008; Lee, Yun, Yoo & Nelson, 2010). In fact, a recent review by Castle and others (2011) of 11 seminal studies on this topic highlights that, according to most of them, the development of a positive ethnic identity is essential both to the development of a mature and integrated personality and to the ability to confront any prejudice and discrimination as may be encountered in life. An even more recent study by Tan e Jordan-Arthur (2012) on adoptees of Asian origin confirms these results: the self-esteem of young international adoptees appears significantly linked to, and fostered by, an acknowledged and valued ethnic dimension. Other studies report a positive correlation between ethnic identity and self-esteem (Mohanty, 2013; Mohanty, Keoske and Sales, 2006). Besides, participation in cultural activities, socialisation experiences, a multi-cultural environment, awareness of one's different ethnic origin, and a quest for one's cultural roots (Song and Lee, 2009) have been found to contribute to developing a positive ethnic identity, particularly during adolescence and in the transition to adulthood.

The above-mentioned review (Castle *et al.*, 2011), however, also pointed out a certain ambiguity in the data as to whether adoptees' identification

with their background of origin could be a key factor for their well-being and psychosocial adjustment. For example, Cederblad and others (1999) found that among adoptees of different ethnic origins those who considered themselves Swedish had higher self-esteem than those who did not. How could these conflicting results be explained? How is it possible to ensure the psychological and social well-being of an adoptee who must confront ethnic diversity? How can they define themselves by integrating their identity building process with the culture of their adoptive parents whilst acknowledging their original ethnic belonging?

Research on adoptive families has recently highlighted that ethnic identity is not sufficient for an adoptee's well-being: belonging to the adoptive parents' cultural context must also be firmly acknowledged by the adoptee. In particular, both clinical practice and recent empirical research seem to point to the possibility of integrating the two identity reference systems into one bicultural perspective (Friedlander *et al.*, 2000; Rosnati *et al.,* 2012; Samuels, 2010; Scherman, 2010; Thomas and Tessler, 2007). In fact, in the last few years research has taken a significant turn from a mutually exclusive logic (forgetting one's origin in order to move into the "skin" of the adoptive family and its culture) towards an inclusive logic (integration is possible without excluding either factor). In other words, the effort adoptees are called to make would be two-fold: to open towards two different cultures, the original one and the adoptive one; to articulate this double belonging within a unified identity by valuing both without denying the specificity of each – thus making biculturalism an achievement rather than an acquired fact. This involves renouncing the simplicity of one linear belonging; on the other hand, the experience of belonging to more than one culture must allow fluctuation between different aspects of one's identity. The possibility of cultural integration would then pass not through the normalisation of an adopted child but rather through the encounter, however symbolic, between original and adopted reality. Two different sets of cultural models and skills (linguistic, relational, etc.) confront adoptees from different ethnic backgrounds: in what way can they keep a variety of references? It can be affirmed that adoptees construct their ethnic identity partly by keeping a connection with their ethnic background and simultaneously assimilating aspects of the dominant culture (Tan and Nakkula, 2005) in order to achieve a positive psychosocial adjustment,

although this aspect remains largely uninvestigated (Scherman, 2010; Manzi *et al., submitted*).

Aims[3]

According to the theoretical issues and empirical evidence, the aims of the present study were: a) to analyse the level of ethnic and national identity and the way adoptees integrate the two different cultural backgrounds; b) to explore the relationship between different types of adoptees' identities and their well-being in terms of behavioural problems, self-esteem and life satisfaction.

Method
Participants and Procedure

Participants were 97 adoptees born in Latin American countries and adopted by Italian white families. They were on average 18.13 years old (SD = 2.34; range 15-22) and their age at placement was 4.19 (range 0-14; SD=3.97). Boys formed 43.3% of the group and girls 56.7% ; they were born in Brazil (37.1%), Chile (28.8%), Colombia (19.7%), Bolivia (9.3%), Peru (3.1%), Paraguay (1.0%), Guatemala (1.0%). Adoptive families were recruited through agencies located in the North of Italy and working in the field of international adoption. Adolescents were informed by letter about the main objectives of the research and requested to fill in a questionnaire. Parents who consented were sent a prepaid return envelope and the questionnaires, and the adolescents were instructed to return the completed questionnaires to the investigators by mail. Among those who were contacted, 61% agreed to participate in the present study filling in the questionnaire.

Measures

Information was gleaned from the self-report questionnaire, in which children answered questions about socio-demographic characteristics and scales for measuring identity and subjective well-being.

Ethnic Identity. Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure, or MEIM (Roberts, Phinney, Masse, Chen, Roberts, & Romero, 1999) was applied to measuring ethnic identity. The MEIM places the emphasis on cognitive clarity, affective pride, and behavioural engagement with one's ethnic group. For this study we used a modified 10-item version adapted by Lee and Yoo (2004) to the adopted population, with higher scores referring to higher levels of ethnic affirmation, belonging and commitment to one's ethnic group. In fact, one of the items was: "I have a strong sense of belonging with my ethnic group". The scale was translated into Italian. Participants indicated their responses on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha for this scale was .93.

National Identity. National identity was assessed by adapting the same 10-item scale from Phinney's MEIM (Roberts *et al.,* 1999): the phrase "ethnic group" was changed to "Italian people" (as in the item: "I have a strong sense of belonging with Italian people"). Participants responded using a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating a higher sense of identification and commitment to the Italian group. Cronbach's alpha coefficient for the current study was .90.

In this way one instrument was adapted for measuring two identity dimensions: ethnic (i.e., related to the country of origin) and national (i.e., related to the host culture). This approach led to two independent but comparable scores.

Self-esteem. Self-esteem was measured by the Self-Liking/Self-Competence Scale Revised (SLCS-R, Tafarodi and Swann, 2001). The global self-esteem is measured through two dimensions: Self-Liking, referring to the evaluative experience of oneself as a good or a bad person and a self-ascribed social value and Self-Competence, positive or negative evaluation of the self as a causal agent and source of power and efficacy. The scale measures Self-Liking (SL) and Self-Competence (SC) by two 8-item subscales, each balanced as to positive and negative items. Respondents state their degree of agreement with global statements

indicating low or high SC (e.g., "I tend to be unsuccessful'"; "I am a capable person") and low or high SL (e.g., "I tend to devalue myself"; "I like myself"). Responses are made on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). A global index of self-esteem was based on the scores of the two subscales. Cronbach's alpha was .86 for the SL subscale, .74 for the SC subscale and .88 for the total scale scores.

Behavioural Problems. The presence of behavioural problems was measured by Goodman's *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (1997) (Italian version by Marzocchi, Di Pietro, Vio, Bassi, Filoramo, Salmaso, 2002). This scale consists of 20 items ranging from 0 (not true) to 2 (absolutely true) assessing the frequency of certain behavioural patterns within a 3-month period. It measures four dimensions (5 items each): Conduct Problems (e.g., "I am often accused of lying or cheating"), Emotional Symptoms (e.g., "I get headache, stomach-ache, or illness"), Hyperactivity (e.g., "I am restless; I cannot stay still for long"), Peer Problems (e.g., "I am usually on my own. I generally play alone or keep to myself"). Higher scores indicate higher levels of behavioural and emotional problems. The sum of the four subscales gave a 0-40 *Total Difficulties Score*. The internal consistency of the *Total Difficulties Index* as by Cronbach's alpha was .75.

Subjective Well-being. Subjective well-being was assessed through the *Satisfaction with Life Scale* (Diener *et al.,* 1985; Italian version by Di Fabio and Ghizzani, 2005). This scale consists of 5 items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree) and measuring agreement by a statement (e.g., "In most ways my life is close to my ideal"). Higher scores indicate higher levels of satisfaction with life. Cronbach's alpha for the current study was .77.

Data Analysis and Results

Preliminary Analyses and Group Classification
Descriptive statistics were calculated for all the variables considered, revealing adoptees to report a medium-high level of ethnic and national identity, an overall moderate level of self-esteem and subjective well-being,

and a low level of behavioural difficulties – most of them, in fact, showing no particular behavioural problems. Preliminary analyses show orthogonal ethnic and national identity scales (r = -.18), dividing the respondents' classification into 4 groups: through the median splits technique for ethnic (*median* = 3.1) and national (*median* = 3.0) identity scores, 4 subsamples were created depending on how strongly or weakly the subjects would identify with their ethnic origin and Italian culture and society.

The first group, referred to as the "Dual" (n° = 25), included adoptees reporting high levels of both ethnic and Italian identity. Their high level of integration was based on success in combining the two cultures in a unitary way. The second group, the so-called "Assimilated" (n° = 27), displayed low levels of ethnic identity and high levels of Italian identity. The "Separate" group (n° = 27) presented high levels of ethnic identity and low levels of Italian identity, not having developed a sense of belonging and identification with the host culture. The "Marginalised" (n° = 18), on the other hand, appeared to be distancing themselves from both cultures. The following chi-squared analyses refer to this classification by evaluating the correspondence between the four groups and gender, current age and age at the time of adoption. No significant differences were detected among the four groups identified as to adoptee's gender [χ^2 (3) = 1.243, p = .743], current age [χ^2 (3) = .503, p = .918] and adoption age [χ^2 (3) = 2.976, p = .395].

Group Classification and Relationship with Adoptees' Well-being
To test the differences in psychosocial outcomes across the above identity types, a series of one-way variance analyses (ANOVA) was conducted by using the four groups as independent variables and some well-being variables (Behavioural Problems, Self-Liking, Self-Competence, Life Satisfaction) as dependent ones. ANOVAs showed significant differences in the adoptees' behavioural problems (F (1.97) = 5.05, p = .00, η^2 = .14), self-esteem (F (1.96) = 5.61, p = .00, η^2 = .15) and life satisfaction (F (1.96) = 11.22, p = .00, η^2 = .27) across the identity group types. *Post Hoc* analyses highlighted fewer behavioural problems among the "Dual" than the "Separate" and the "Marginalized" groups, but no significant differences with the "Assimilated". The "Dual" perceived a higher level of self-esteem than all others groups and a higher level of life satisfaction

than the "Separated" and the "Marginalized", but there was no difference with the "Assimilated" (see Table 1).

Referring to the mean scores of the "Separate" and "Marginalized" groups, the results of the *Post Hoc* analyses indicated that the level of behavioural problems and self-esteem was lower for the "Separate" and the "Marginalized" compared to the "Dual", whilst no difference emerged between the latter and the "Assimilated"; regarding life satisfaction. The "Separate" and "Marginalized" showed no difference but their levels were both below the "Dual" and the "Assimilated" groups.

The *Post Hoc* analyses indicated no differences between the "Assimilated " and the "Dual" groups as to behavioural problems; the former showed lower self-esteem than the latter, and no differences with the "Separate" and "Marginalized"; finally, they revealed a higher level of life satisfaction than the "Separate" and the "Marginalized" but no difference with the "Dual" group.

Table 1. Behavioral Problems, Self-esteem and Life Satisfaction Scales: Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD)

	Dual (N = 25)		Assimilated (N = 27)		Separate (N = 27)		Marginalized (N = 18)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Behavioural Problems	10.92	4.98	11.81	4.84	15.52	5.69	15.72	6.19
Self-esteem	2.9	.48	2.61	.53	2.53	.51	.2.42	.45
Life Satisfaction	5.76	1.03	5.08	1.22	4.18	1.21	3.97	1.30

Discussion

From the results of this study significant differences have emerged among some variables relative to the well-being and psychosocial adjustment of internationally adopted adolescents.

The "Assimilated" and "Dual" groups appear to have reached higher levels of psychosocial adjustment and psychological well-being, whilst higher risk indicators are detectable among the "Separate" and "Marginalised", whose emotional-behavioural problems are greater, and their psychological well-being is lower. A more detailed analysis, however, highlights significant differences in self-esteem, an aspect which the "Dual" perceive more substantially: they probably see that their "ethnic" side is acknowledged, whilst in the identity profile of the "Assimilated" it is not so.

Given the reoccurring pattern of types, it is possible to configure the adoptees' experience of their double ethnic belonging as a *continuum*, with the "Dual" and the "Marginalised" at opposite poles and the "Assimilated" and "Separate" in between. In addition, the "Separate" and the "Marginalised" present a certain number of risk indicators, whilst the "dual" group shows a higher level of psychosocial well-being and openness to the future.

The "Separate", stressing ethnic belonging, on one side, and the "Marginalised", generally indifferent to both ethnic and cultural allegiances, on the other, can be considered opposite outcomes of the adoptees' strategies for confronting the ethnic diversity they carry even if operating in a similar way: the adoptee's difference is perceived as antithetical to similarity and belonging and cannot be assimilated within family boundaries.

The intermediately positioned groups, "Assimilated" and "Dual", are well adjusted, with a higher level of life satisfaction and fewer emotional-behavioural problems. "Dual" individuals, besides, have higher self-esteem as they build a solid identity by integrating belonging to their ethnic group of origin and the culture of their adoptive parents in a unitary, conflict-free way and by incorporating the two cultures within a coherent sense of identity. In other words, both national and ethnic identifications can be key to an individual's psychosocial well-being, on condition that a further identity transition takes place as to the integration process of these two

dimensions at the level of the self. The better adoptees can synthesise their two cultures, the more can they be rooted in their family history and look to the future with confidence. On the contrary, if they perceive themselves as caught between the two cultures and pulled towards one or the other they will feel compelled to take sides.

One significant limitation to this study is that the small size of the sample prevents a broader generalisation of its results. Moreover, the four types outlined are based on a vast quantity of data and represent an inevitable simplification that cannot exhaustively account for the heterogeneity and complexity of the cases encountered in actual life. Besides, research demands a focus on relational networks, which are dynamic by their own nature: it is thus possible to hypothesize a number of changes from one type to another, as adoptees go through their different life transitions – to adulthood, to the world of work, to forming a family, etc. Therefore, longitudinal studies should be conducted to follow the development of ethnic identity in time.

Finally, in light of the emerging results, it is possible to draw some practical indications for the formation of prospective adoptive parents. The difficult task awaiting adoptive parents and children is, in fact, that of valuing diversity whilst constructing a solid sense of belonging within the family and social context. A formative approach based on prevention (Iafrate and Rosnati, 2007), should ideally include some meetings for the parents to be made aware of the importance of valuing the child's country of origin, an aspect which must be neither minimised nor laid undue stress upon. In this way, parents could be supported in devising functional strategies of cultural socialisation, so as to enable their children to be recognised and appreciated in every aspect of their person and history. It is then crucial to accompany and support adoptive parents along their path according to an enrichment perspective (Iafrate and Rosnati, 2007), that is, through small-group preventative training (to include young adoptees too), in order to promote and enhance resources, as well as allowing the development of a support network (Greco *et al.*, 2003; Rosnati *et al.*, 2013).

The difficult task awaiting adoptive parents and children is, in fact, that of valuing diversity whilst constructing a solid sense of belonging within the family and social context. Pre-adoption and post adoption parent training

should be also aimed at strengthening the parents' awareness regarding the importance of valuing the child's birth culture and country, thus stimulating the child to get acquainted with his/her culture of origin, actively encouraging their children to learn about their original culture or ethnicity, for example, through participating in culture meetings, learning the birth language and, as the adoptee has become an adolescent or young adult, visiting the places where the child had lived for a time, maybe for years. These processes are relevant from early infancy, when children start to develop notions of cultural and racial membership, but becoming increasingly relevant during adolescence and early adulthood, as this study has shown.

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