Korean adoptees in US seek identity via peers or cultural exploration

March 19 2008

Finding out "Who am I?" for Korean adoptees, many of them orphaned, following the Korean War in the 1950s was a struggle when adulthood hit for many in the 1970s, but the road has since gotten smoother with exploration of their ethnic identities following two basic paths, say University of Oregon sociologists.

The two roads -- usually one or the other, but rarely both -- have been through extended social exposure with their Asian peers or by reaching out to learn about their cultural heritage, most often while pursuing higher education, said Jiannbin "J" Lee Shiao, a professor of sociology and associate director of ethnic studies.

Shiao and co-author Mia H. Tuan, director of the UO Center on Diversity and Community, reported their findings in the American Journal of Sociology (January). The study focused on early adulthood memories of adoptees that had been among the earliest wave of Koreans into the United States. It was a study, Shiao and Tuan wrote, that shows "ethnic exploration exemplifies how the persistence of ethnicity can depend on the individual negotiation of racial inequality."

The researchers interviewed 58 adoptees, ages 25 to 51, recruited from international adoption-placement records. The participants had been placed into West Coast homes in California, Oregon and Washington between 1950 and 1975. The study, which includes numerous excerpts of participants' responses, is part of a book the two authors are writing on the adoptees' experiences.

"By studying older adults, we're getting a baseline for what younger, more recent adoptees might face in their later adult lives," Shiao said. "We found that social context, the situation in which adoptees spend early adulthood, shapes what kind of exploration they do and the identities they come out with. Those who don't explore, by choice or by lack of opportunity, often emerge with an identity that is not too different than growing up thinking of themselves as honorary whites. The difference being they may have had nagging concerns or they spend their lives minimizing things that come up in their life -- that has nothing to do with me, or that's not really me."

In the 1970s, adoptees entering adulthood (from age 18 to the early 20s) were faced with a time period when being Asian was highly stigmatized and there were few opportunities to explore their ethnic identity, Shiao said. The 1980s and beyond gradually improved the racial climate and long-range opportunities to explore, he added.

Twenty-six of the 58 participants did not explore their ethnicity during early adulthood. Most of the reasons involving lack of opportunity were tied to living in racially homogeneous workplaces and communities and family or life responsibilities. Some cited a lack of interest, specifically an aversion to Asians and Asian-Americans or a disinterest in racial differences. The remaining subjects chose to explore and were split between the social exposure and cultural heritage tracks.

The route chosen by adoptees led to one of two kinds of language, Shiao said. "If they explore and share experiences with their ethnic peers, they develop a racial language of discrimination or being part of a minority group," he said, adding that these relationships promoted bonding that carried into later adult years. "For those who pursue cultural exploration, their identity tends to become a symbolic attachment to their international heritage, which is not that salient in their daily lives."

Travel abroad might seem like the most extensive form of exploration, "but in actuality it's also the one that makes them feel more like Americans than anything else," Shiao said. "It can make them feel more like adoptees than Asians. They go out of the world they know. They may initially feel like they are going home and can wonder what their life could have been, but instead they experience a strong form of culture shock."

Adoptees either sought social exposure through others like themselves or sought information on their cultural heritage to learn something about their foreign origins. "And you'd think that those two things could go hand in hand, that people might want to do both, but what we found was that most people chose to do one or the other," he said.

Some adoptees indicated that they had not explored their cultural identities or only did so superficially, but, Shiao said, "looking deeper into the data, we found that they had actually done their exploring while in high school."

A lot of previous research on ethnic identity focused on the adolescent years, and was done by psychologists and sociologists studying teenagers in racially and ethnically diverse high schools rather than in the predominantly white schools that most adoptees attend, Shiao said.

"Early adulthood is an important time, because these individuals are nominally independent from their parents, and as a result are on their and must create some of their own social networks," he said. "This time period is very big period, dividing those who go to college and those who don't. Those who don't go to college tend to enter social and work worlds that remain similar to those they had in high school. Those who go on to college have less employment, and they have time to do more exploration, often through classes, personal associations, clubs and study abroad."

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Source: University of Oregon

Citation: Korean adoptees in US seek identity via peers or cultural exploration (2008, March 19) retrieved 27 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2008-03-korean-adoptees-identity-peers-cultural.html

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