2011

Exploring the college experiences of students adopted from South Korea

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Exploring the college experiences of students adopted from South Korea

by

Jennifer Garrett Nissen

A dissertation submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

Major: Education (Educational Leadership)

Program of Study Committee:
Nancy Evans, Major Professor
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Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa
2011

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DEDICATION

To Christian, my partner and the inspiration for my study,

thank you for your patience and support throughout this long process.
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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To Nancy Evans, my mentor and friend, thank you for your assistance throughout this process. You are a great editor and a tireless supporter of students. Thank you for taking the time to help me achieve my goal.

To the other members of my committee, Kevin Saunders, Barb Licklider, Ann Gansemer-Topf, and Ann Thompson, thank you for helping me throughout this journey.

To the participants in the study, thank you for sharing your life stories with me. You have bright futures ahead of you. My life is richer for having met you.

To my friends (near and far), colleagues, and student advisees, thank you for listening to me complain about doing homework, read my drafts, and asking about my project. I appreciate your listening ears and assistance during the last five years. At times, you believed in me more than I believed in myself.

To my classmates, a special thank you to Molly Parrott, Lisa Hetzel, Craig Chatriand, Carrie Kortegast, and Clint Stephens for helping me stay motivated to achieve this accomplishment. I appreciate the positive and critical feedback in order to make my final product better.

To my family, for believing in me and understanding when I had to stay home to work on my dissertation. I plan to visit soon!
This phenomenological study focused on the college experiences of students adopted from South Korea. The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the college experiences of Korean adoptees related to their personal development and Korean cultural awareness while at a mid-sized Midwestern university. Eleven students at a land-grant institution in the Midwestern United States participated in this study. Data were collected using the three interview structure that Seidman (2006) outlined. The first interview focused on life history, the second meeting on details of their college experience, and the final interview on the meaning made of these experiences. The three interviews in the series were conducted within 1 week of each other to provide continuity from one interview to the next interview. There was no literature available on the college experiences of transracially adopted college students, so this study expands the literature in that area. The findings are organized into three sections that paralleled the interview content: youth and background experiences, college experiences, and thoughts about the future. The themes that emerged in the youth and background experiences include strong connection to family, religion as an important part of childhood, and connection to Korean culture as a child. The majority of the text focused on the themes that emerged from the college experiences portion of the interviews. The major themes included interacting with others while in college, experiencing life as an Asian person, and exploring racial and ethnic identity while in college.

In the final section, the theme focused on future plans and meaning making. The theme in this section was interest in learning about Korean culture.
The findings reflected that, although the students did develop and change while in college, they did not necessarily explore their Korean culture or interact with Koreans and Korean Americans. Typically, they did not use campus support services or the campus environment to explore the Korean culture.

The findings of this study have implications for parents of transracially adopted children, student affairs professionals, adopted individuals, and people who interact with these students. Recommendations for future research include studying students who were adopted from countries other than South Korea, interviewing students in different regions of the United States, and identifying a pool of students from urban areas to interview. It would be interesting to learn more about the college experiences of Korean adoptees as well.
CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides the background for the rest of the dissertation. It includes the rationale, problem, and purpose of the study. The research questions are presented in this chapter. Also, the delimitations and limitations are included as well as the theoretical framework and a few definitions of common terms.

Rationale

According to the 2000 U.S. Census data, there were 2,058,915 adopted children living in the United States with 257,792 (12.5%) of these children being foreign born. Almost “half (49 percent) of all foreign-born adopted children were born in Asian countries,” the largest numbers coming from South Korea, China, the Philippines, India, and Vietnam (Kreider, 2003, p. 9). Of the 122,899 children under 18 years of age adopted from Asia, the largest population, over 45% (56,825), is from Korea (Kreider, 2003).

The Korean adoption phenomenon in the U.S. began after the Korean War. In 1955, Harry Holt visited South Korea and adopted orphaned children who were fathered by U.S. soldiers during the war (Bergquist, Vonk, Kim, & Feit, 2007). Shortly after their adoptions, he and his wife started Holt International Children’s Services, the world’s largest international adoption program, which places children with families across the United States (Bergquist et al., 2007). At the same time, the South Korean government made it easier for Korean children to be adopted abroad than in previous years. According to Selman (2002), “by the 1990s there were very few mixed race children placed for adoption” (p. 222) from Korea. The majority of the children were born to two Korean parents instead of a Korean woman and an American in the military.
Today, South Korean officials are embarrassed by the practice of sending their babies out of the country, and the government is working to limit adoptions (Bergquist et al., 2007) and to phase them out by 2020 (Selman, 2002). In recent years, South Korea has tried to limit the international adoption of Korean children to about 2,000 children per year. Even though there are fewer children adopted from Korea, “there is a continuing problem over stigma of unmarried parenthood and in the absence of a comprehensive welfare system it is impossible for a poor single mother to keep her child” (Selman, 2002, p. 222). Although the number of children adopted from South Korea is decreasing, “there are still proportionally large numbers of Korean children being adopted in the United States” (Ahn-Redding & Simon, 2007, p. 6). According to Holt International Children’s Services, there are over 200,000 adult (18 years of age and older) Korean adoptees in this country (C. Rader, personal communication, September 22, 2009). Although some of these adults are in college, the total number of Korean adoptees who are currently enrolled in college is not recorded.

Research on the topic of intercountry adoptees has been limited to quantitative studies comparing scores of adopted children and their siblings or friends on psychological instruments (Borders, Penny, & Portnoy, 2000; Sharma, McGue, & Benson, 1998). There also has been research related to parenting intercountry adopted children (Altstein et al., 1994; Howell, 2006; Register, 1991). However, there have been no studies specifically about the impact of college experiences on transracially adopted individuals. The present study focused on transracially adopted individuals, specifically children adopted from South Korea. Transracial adoption refers to “any adoption across racial or ethnic lines” (Adamec & Miller, 2007, p. 288). Most of the students in this study have White parents.
The college experiences adopted students have may dramatically impact their development as individuals and their Korean cultural awareness. Korean adoptees may be separated from their families for the first time and “college often means a geographical relocation from a familiar, homogeneous place to a community often larger and more diverse” (Meier, 1999, p. 23). Their college years may be the first time that Korean adoptees are able to step outside of their adoptive families and explore who they are as well as experience how others treat them. According to Sidel (1994),

The traditional college years, the late teens through the mid-twenties, are years of extraordinary maturation and growth. These are the years when many young people leave home, often for the first time, meet very different kinds of people (also often for the first time) . . . and have the opportunity, and indeed the task, of defining for themselves and others who they are—what they think, the values they hold, their place in the world beyond the one in which they grew up. (p. 12)

The students in this study had been viewed as their White parents’ children in their hometowns. In college, that link to their families may be lost as they are on their own for the first time.

As Kibria (2002) noted, in today’s U.S. society “race is generally prominent and highly visible as a subject of social and political division” (p. 103). In addition, race on college campuses has been considered a hot button issue because of issues surrounding “curriculum and course content as well as faculty hiring and student admissions policies” (Kibria, 2002, p. 104). In order to assist transracial adoptees, it is helpful for student affairs professionals, parents, and students to anticipate the struggles that these students may face in
their identity development. These individuals may be able to assist Korean adoptees in their development, their understanding of their Korean background, and their maturation into adulthood. At college, those students may have greater exposure to people of other ethnicities than they had previously and they may be confronted with racial discrimination for the first time in their lives, especially in the Midwestern region of the United States whose residents are predominantly White. Moreover, these experiences may be more intense in college than in their insulated home communities as attending college may be the first time they are away from the protection of their White families.

Because there is limited literature in the area of the college experiences of Korean adoptees, this study addressed the practical purpose of meeting a need for better understanding of Korean adoptees and being able to better recognize and serve these students’ needs (Maxwell, 1998). To meet this need, it was important to know what the students experience in college and what those experiences mean in their lives.

**Problem**

During their college years, students are confronted with new situations, diverse perspectives, and unexpected challenges. Korean adoptees encounter similar challenges when they arrive on college and university campuses. However, the students may also be confronted with issues related to race, identity, and cultural awareness. College may be the first time the students learn about the Korean culture or are singled out as different. Other people may project stereotypes onto them and assume that they were raised in a Korean or Korean American family and that they know what it means to be Korean American. The students may not have any knowledge of the cultural norms and they may be treated
differently by the Korean and Korean Americans they encounter. Because Korean adoptees are the largest group of adopted children in the U.S., this study focused on their experiences. It is possible that information about Korean adoptees may inform studies about other Asian and intercountry adoptees.

In most cases, transracially adopted students from South Korea look different from their families who are White. Their families represent the predominant racial group in the United States and the Midwest. Students’ experiences of being adopted, having grown up in towns where they were always associated with their White parents, and being seen as independent from their parents for the first time, compounded with their experiences as members of a minority group, can provide interesting insights into who they are, how they relate to others, and what issues they face.

To explore this topic, it was important to know more about how being separated from one’s adoptive family and community changes interactions between students and others, how the students adapt to the college environment, if and how the students explore their Korean background, and how individuals can assist the students with their interest in and development of their identities. The lack of research on this topic made this project even more compelling.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to better understand the college experiences of Korean adoptees related to their personal development and Korean cultural awareness while at a mid-sized Midwestern university. For the purpose of this study, a Korean adoptee is defined as an individual born in Korea to at least one Korean parent and who was adopted by a White
family in the United States. I considered how the students develop as people as compared with selected student development theories, as well as if and how they learn about Korean culture during their college years. This information may provide adopted Korean students with perspective on other adopted Korean college students’ experiences, and it may also provide their parents, faculty, and student affairs staff more insight in order to provide resources to students adopted from Korea.

Following this study, the findings will be distributed to parents, faculty, student affairs staff, and students in order to enhance their understanding of Korean adoptees. This information may be in the form of a website, journal article, brochure, or another method easily accessible to the target audience. Individuals who interact with the students may be able to better recognize the situations Korean adoptees may confront in terms of learning more about their birth culture, seeing themselves as Asian Americans, and considering their connections to Korea. This information provides a missing piece in the literature about transracially adopted young people.

**Research Questions**

The research question that guided this study was: What are the college experiences that influence the personal development and Korean cultural awareness of students adopted from Korea? The subquestions explored were:

1. In what ways, if any, do Korean adoptees develop as individuals while in college?
2. How do Korean adoptees make meaning of their Korean American identity while in college?
3. Do Korean adoptees interact with Koreans and Korean Americans to explore their identity while in college? If so, how is their identity affected?

4. Do Korean adoptees use campus support services, including multicultural offices and cultural clubs, to explore their identity? If so, how is their identity affected?

5. What other factors in the campus environment influence the identity development or cultural awareness of Korean adoptees?

**Delimitations**

Because the majority of Korean adoptees are placed with White families, this study focused on the experiences of college students adopted from South Korea whose families are White. This information may or may not be generalizable to families of other racial backgrounds. Also, the information gathered may or may not relate to college students adopted from countries other than South Korea. The stories gathered through this research may not be able to be generalized to domestic adoptions within the United States, because domestic adoptions are usually of children of the same race as the parents (Kreider, 2003). Because of the focus on the impact of college experiences on young adult Korean adoptees, this research may not be generalized to young people in the same age range who do not attend college, given that young adults not attending college may not have similar opportunities and experiences.

**Significance of the Study**

This study is significant because it allowed college students adopted from Korea to share their childhood stories and their experiences in college. The findings of this study may
be helpful to other adopted students, parents of adoptees, student affairs professionals, and
the students themselves.

In 2011, parents of adoptees have access to information that was not readily available
when they adopted their children. There are a number of resources about rearing transracial
adoptees from infancy through high school, but there is far less literature about the post-high
school years in the child’s life. The information this study provides will give parents and
others more insight into ways to support their children.

**Audience for the Study**

Student affairs professionals, especially individuals in multicultural student affairs,
will find this study’s findings helpful when assisting transracially adopted students. The
students themselves may benefit from this knowledge, and they may be able to better adapt to
college and consider the possibilities to learn about their birth culture, if they so desire. Also,
parents of adoptees may be able to better understand what their children may experience
while in college.

**Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical perspective is like a travel book that serves as a tool to guide what a
researcher sees, what questions are asked, and how the results are interpreted (R. Shahjahan,
personal communication, June 12, 2008). This section addresses several identity
development theories as they relate to Korean adoptees. These theories include King and
development model, Marcia’s (1980) ego identity statuses, Phinney’s (1993) model of ethnic
identity development, and Baden and Steward’s (2007) cultural–racial identity model.
Because this study focused on the experiences of transracially adopted individuals, the cultural–racial identity model provided the main framework for understanding the experiences of Korean adoptees.

**Reflective Judgment Model**

Because the students in this study were different ages and in different stages of college, developmental level was important to consider. One relevant theory is King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model. King and Kitchener stated, “People’s assumptions about what and how something can be known provide a lens that shapes how individuals frame a problem and how they justify their beliefs about it in the face of uncertainty” (p. xvi). The students in this study were asked to think about their college experiences and reflected on these experiences.

In this model, seven stages are grouped into three sections: prereflective thinking, quasi-reflective thinking, and reflective thinking. In the first three stages that make up prereflective thinking, the individual does not know or concede that knowledge is not certain. People in the quasi-reflective thinking stages understand the issues but cannot provide rationale for their conclusions. Individuals in the reflective thinking stages are able to understand “that knowledge is actively constructed” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 131). In this study, the student’s stage within the reflective judgment model may impact that individual’s ability to reflect thoughtfully on his or her experiences while in college. The student may have more well-developed thoughts depending on his or her reflections about the topic. This model provided a framework to understand the students’ level of reflection about their college experiences.
Asian American Identity Development Model

As a result of her dissertation research related to the experiences of Japanese American women, J. Kim (2001) developed the Asian American identity model. There are several assumptions that must be made in order to use this model. First, one must understand that racism is pervasive and it influences what Asian Americans think of themselves. Also, Asian Americans have to actively work to unlearn stereotypes. The third assumption requires the ability to move from a negative to positive racial identity. The Asian American identity model comprises five stages: ethnic awareness, White identification, awakening to social political consciousness, redirection to Asian American consciousness, and, finally, incorporation (J. Kim, 2001).

The five stages of the model are sequential. In the first stage, ethnic awareness, children learn about their ethnicity from their parents and relatives. This stage is typically completed before children enter school. J. Kim (2001) found that “greater exposure to Asian ethnic experiences at this stage leads to a positive self-concept and clearer ego identity while less exposure related to a neutral self-concept and confused ego identity” (pp. 72-73). Because the students in this study were reared by White parents, one could assume that they might not have the same level of access to information about being Korean as they would if their parents were Korean.

The second stage, White identification, typically happens during a child’s early schooling. The child interacts with White children and learns that he or she is different. The child may try to fit in instead of standing out from the crowd. Children may “gradually internalize White societal values and standards and see themselves through the eyes of White
society” (J. Kim, 2001, p. 74). Young people may possibly experience an active or passive version of this stage. In an active White identification stage, the child may not see the differences between him- or herself and White children, whereas in a more passive White identification stage the child may daydream about being White.

The next stage is awakening to social political consciousness. In this stage, the individual abandons his or her personal responsibility for his or her situation but understands that racism is a societal problem. As a result, the individual is more likely to advocate for other Asian Americans and people of other ethnic backgrounds (Evans et al., 2010).

The fourth stage brings the person back to his or her Asian American background. This stage is called redirection to Asian American consciousness. While in this stage, individuals typically immerse themselves in the Asian American experience. They learn more about the Asian culture and then develop pride in their race as well as a positive self-concept (J. Kim, 2001).

During the final stage, incorporation, the individual develops pride in being Asian American. These individuals recognize that their Asian American identity is important, but they interact with people of all racial and ethnic backgrounds (J. Kim, 2001).

This model helps to explain the experiences of Korean adoptees. J. Kim (2001) did not specifically mention adoptees in her model, so it is unclear how adoptees experience the first stage of learning about Asian American culture from their families. The White identification stage may happen sooner for adoptees because they are surrounded by White people from the time that they arrive in the United States. The rest of the stages may be true to the experiences of individual Korean adoptees. This model was used to better understand
the participants’ experiences by comparing and contrasting their development through the various stages.

**Marcia’s Ego Identity Statuses**

Marcia (1980) used the work of Erikson (1968) to frame his ego identity statuses. Marcia defined identity as “an internal, self-constructed, dynamic organization of drives, abilities, beliefs, and individual history” (p. 159). Because their cognitive skills are more developed during adolescence and young adulthood, individuals of this age are first confronted with thoughts about their identity during this time in their life (Marcia, 1980). Identity crises may be resolved during this time period, but they also may continue for many years.

Ego identity statuses help researchers understand how young people handle crises. Erikson’s (1968) four modes of understanding identity include identity achievement, foreclosure, identity diffusion, and moratorium. Marcia (1980) further developed these statuses to include the concept of crisis and commitment, with crisis being “the presence or absence of a decision-making period” and a commitment being “the extent of personal investment” (p. 161).

Identity achievement is a time of both crisis and commitment. First the individual encounters the crisis, and then it is resolved with a new focus and path. The student may be presented with new information or exposure to other individuals and experience a crisis that concludes with a new path to learning more about Korean culture. Foreclosure is a time of commitment but no crisis. The individual accepts his or her parent’s worldview without question. In this study, this acceptance may mean accepting White culture as one’s own.
Diffusion is a time of neither crisis nor commitment. Young people in this status do not experience a crisis and they have a lack of concern about their development (Evans et al., 2010). A student in this status may be indifferent to learning about the culture. During moratorium, the young person questions his or her parent’s values, which causes a crisis. The student may be interested in learning more about Korea or Korean culture.

These identity statuses help in understanding the experiences of Korean adoptees. These young people, in different stages of identity development, fell into these statuses, which helped to better understand their experiences. These statuses helped to provide a framework for the experiences of students and the potential effects of their experiences at the university. Because this theory does not include race as a factor, the statuses may not be as salient in understanding the students’ experiences as they would be for White students.

**Phinney’s Ethnic Identity Development Model**

Phinney’s (1993) ethnic identity development model focuses on the identity development of adolescents in terms of their ethnicity. The three stages in her model are unexamined ethnic identity, ethnic identity search/moratorium, and ethnic identity achievement. Her model uses the same language for each of the stages but simplifies Erikson’s (1968) and Marcia’s (1980) work.

In the unexamined ethnic identity stage, adolescents do not explore their ethnicity. There are two subtypes in this stage: diffuse and foreclosed. Young people in the diffuse subtype stage have a lack of interest in their ethnicity, and individuals in the foreclosed subtype stage take on views about their ethnicity based on the perspectives of others around them. This stage is parallel to J. Kim’s (2001) White identification stage. Overall, the young
person is disinterested in his or her ethnic background. In the present study, a student in this phase would be doing nothing to explore Korean culture.

During the ethnic identity search/moratorium stage, the individual is confronted with a situation that forces him or her into this stage. This confrontation is similar to Erikson’s (1968) identity crisis. During this stage, young people may read about their ethnic background, talk with their family and friends about it, visit museums, or explore their ethnicity in other ways (Phinney, 1993). For adoptees, this stage may involve reading articles or books about Korea, talking with teachers and professors, or joining student organizations focused on Korean culture. Young people may react to this exploration with guilt for not exploring their ethnic background sooner or with anger at the dominant group because of their discrimination or racism.

Ethnic identity achievement is the final stage in this model. Young people in this stage resolve their conflicts and develop a bicultural identity. They appreciate their ethnic background and its effects on their lives. Students in the study may experience this stage by seeing the connections between their life in the United States and their Korean background.

This model was used to better understand the ethnic identity development of the students in the study and relates to the present study about Korean adoptees because of the potential development of ethnic identity awareness among the participants. One could assume that some of the students would be in the first stage of this model, whereas others might fully appreciate their ethnicity. This framework could not be used as the solitary framework to guide the study, however, because it does not take into account the difference in race between the child and the parent(s).
Cultural–Racial Identity Model

The cultural–racial identity model was created to better understand the identity development of transracial adoptees. This model “addresses the compelling roles of both race and culture within families where racial homogeneity does not exist” (Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 90). According to the developers of this model, the model “was developed in response to a need for greater distinctions between culture and race and to acknowledge possible interactions between the two” (Steward & Baden, 1995, p. 9). They completed an extensive review of the literature and previous studies about transracial adoption to create this model. This model goes beyond the Asian American identity development model developed by J. Kim (2001), which assumes that all Asian Americans are reared by Asian American parents.

The cultural–racial identity model recognizes the interplay between race and culture. For the purpose of this model, Hays (as cited in Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 91) stated, race “refers to heritage with a group based on geography and a common set of physical characteristics as manifested in traits transmitted via genetics such as skin color, hair texture and color, and facial features.” Hays also provided the definition of culture as “traditions, history, beliefs, practices, and values that are passed from generation to generation via perception, beliefs, evaluation, communication, and action” (p. 91). These definitions help to delineate the differences between race and culture in the context of the model.

The model consists of two axes: the cultural identity axis and the racial identity axis. The cultural identity axis (see Figure 1.1) consists of two parts: “adoptive culture dimension, or the degree to which transracial adoptees identify with their birth culture” and “parental
cultural dimension, or the degree to which transracial adoptees identify with their adoptive parents’ racial group’s culture” (Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 100). There are four options on this axis: bicultural identity, pro-self cultural identity, pro-parent cultural identity, and culturally undifferentiated identity. What quadrant a student falls into describes his or her cultural identity development. For example, a student may be in the pro-parent cultural identity quadrant, which means that the student identifies with the adoptive parent’s culture and does not identify with the transracial adoptee’s birth culture. This individual may consider him or herself White and feel connected to the values and traditions of White culture.

The racial identity axis (see Figure 1.2) also consists of two parts: “adoptive race dimension, or the degree to which transracial adoptees identify with their own racial group”
and “parental race dimension, or the degree to which transracial adoptees identify with their adoptive parents’ racial group” (Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 102). There are four possible identities: biracial identity, pro-self racial identity, pro-parent racial identity, and racially undifferentiated identity. Here again, the quadrant a student falls into describes his or her racial identity development. For example, he or she may be in the pro-self racial identity, which means that the student identifies with the transracial adoptee’s racial group and does not identify with the adoptive parents’ racial group. This individual may connect to his or her racial heritage and celebrate it.

*Figure 1.2. Racial identity axis (Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 102).*

When the two axes are overlaid, it creates 16 possible cultural–racial identities, which creates the racial–cultural identity model (Figure 1.3). In the example above, the student would fit into the bottom right hand quadrant: pro-self racial identity and pro-parent cultural
identity. He or she may be interested in learning more about his or her race but be more connected to his or her parents’ cultural identity. In another case, a student may be pro-self cultural identity and pro-self racial identity, which would place the individual in the top left hand quadrant in the left hand corner. This student would identify most with both his or her birth cultural and racial background.

*Figure 1.3.* Cultural–racial identity axis (Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 103).

In this study, I determined each participant’s placement on these axes in order to determine where he or she fit into this model. By understanding each individual’s location on these axes, it was easier to understand the student’s interest or disinterest in learning about Korean culture. This model allowed the differences between the participants to be better
visualized and helped in understanding how their precollege and college experiences influenced their development in terms of racial and cultural understanding, which provided insight into their development. This theoretical model guided the study and provided a framework for the exploration of the racial and cultural development of the participants. Although this model had been cited by other authors, it had not been tested, which is a limitation of using this model.

Although the cultural–racial identity model (Steward & Baden, 1995) was used as the primary framework for this study, the other models were also incorporated to better understand pieces of the picture. King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model helped in understanding the students’ reflective stages and their overall development as a student. Although J. Kim (2001) did not consider adoptees in her research, her work on Asian American identity development helped in seeing the developmental stage that the students were in and their potential to move through this sequential model. Using Marcia’s (1980) ego identity statuses, helped in determining the crisis, if any, in the students’ college experiences. Phinney’s (1993) ethnic identity development model allowed for the understanding of the adolescent development of the students as it related to their understanding and experience of their ethnicity. Overall, these models helped to provide a framework for understanding the student’s experience more completely.

**Summary of Research Approach and Design**

This study used phenomenology as the methodology, which allowed for the gaining of “direct knowledge of the feelings and images of the research participant . . . so that the first conceptualization is as close to the experience as is technically possible” (Bentz & Shapiro,
In this case, the phenomenon under study was the college experiences of Korean adoptees.

The students were one of the data sources for this study. I interviewed each student three times. Following Seidman’s (2006) guidelines, the first interview focused on their background, the second interview focused on their college experiences, and the third interview focused on the meaning they have made of their experiences. In addition, I kept a reflexive journal, which I used as a data source. I wrote throughout the process and made notes about what I saw, felt, and heard during and after the interviews.

**Limitations**

A potential limitation of this study was the availability of willing participants who fit the criteria of the study. This study focused on one Midwestern land-grant university, and ultimately I was able to find enough participants at this institution who agreed to be interviewed. Another potential limitation was the number of men and women interested in participating in the study. Before I started the study, I found men to be more willing to talk about their experiences than were women. The study had 11 participants: 6 men and 5 women.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

This dissertation comprises six chapters. Chapter 2 focuses on the review of the literature related to the topic of intercountry adoption including the history, process, and experiences of adopted individuals. Also, this chapter includes information about Asian Americans in the U.S. and the experiences of college students in this group. Chapter 3 presents the methodology and methods for the study. This chapter includes details about
phenomenology as well as the design and methods used in the study. Chapter 4 provides the profiles that were developed for each participant. This chapter allows the students’ words to be accessible to the reader. Chapter 5 includes the analysis of the data. After the data were collected, I coded the responses and developed themes that were presented in Chapter 1. Finally, Chapter 6 includes a discussion of the findings, including comparisons with existing theory and research, as well as the conclusions and implications of the study. This final chapter focuses on the findings of the study and how they will be shared with the students, their parents, and student affairs professionals.

Definitions

This section includes some of the most commonly used terms in this dissertation:

_**Korean adoptee:**_ an individual born in Korea to at least one Korean parent who was adopted by a White family in the United States.

_Intercountry or international adoption:_ “The adoption of a child who is a citizen of one country by adoptive parents who are citizens of a different country” (Adamec & Miller, 2007, p. 163).

_Transracial adoption:_ “Any adoption across racial or ethnic lines” (Adamec & Miller, 2007, p. 288).

_Ethnic identity development:_ “The way in which individuals come to understand the implications of their ethnicity and make decisions about its role in their lives” (Phinney, 1993, p. 64). Ethnic identity “incorporates individuals’ self-label, sense of belonging, attitudes toward their own ethnic group, and involvement in ethnic group social and cultural practice” (Phinney, as cited in Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 92).
Cultural identity development: “The culture which one identifies as shown through knowledge, behaviors, and beliefs” (Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 92).

Race: “refers to heritage with a group based on geography and a common set of physical characteristics as manifested in traits transmitted via genetics such as skin color, hair texture and color, and facial features” (Hays, as cited in Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 91).

Culture: “refers to traditions, history, beliefs, practices, and values that are passed from generation to generation via perception, beliefs, evaluation, communication, and action (Hays, as cited in Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 91).
CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a context for this study of the college experiences of Korean adoptees. The topics covered in this chapter include the history and role of Asian Americans in the United States and in college, the history of Korean adoption in the United States, the process of intercountry adoption, and the issues and experiences these young people encounter. This information provides background in order to better understand the history and research on this topic. There is no literature specifically about the college experiences of individuals adopted from Korea, so gaining more understanding of the college experiences of Korean adoptees fills a void in the literature about this topic.

Being Asian American

It is important to understand the experiences of Asian Americans in order to provide a context for the information about South Korean adoptees. This section provides background information about Asian Americans in the United States and the issues these individuals face.

History of Asian Americans in United States

The term, Asian American, refers to a broad group of people, including people from East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent, and includes over 16 major ethnic subgroups that have settled in the United States. Martinez-Ebers and Dorraj (2009) commented on the history of the increasing numbers of Asian Americans:

Passage of the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act allowed Asians to immigrate to the United States on a more or less equal basis with those from other countries. The racist immigration policies of the United States were overturned. Currently,
about one-third of the 800,000 legal immigrants to arrive to the United States each year are from Asian countries. (p. 170)

The number of Asians in the United States is growing each year. Some of the immigrants in the last 30 years have been refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia (Hune, 2002, p. 13). On the 2010 U.S Census form there were 11 Asian subgroups listed, and it is estimated that there are 15 million Asian Americans who now make up 5% of the U.S. population (Kelly, 2010).

Korean immigration followed a different path than immigration from other Asian countries. In the early 1900s, Korean immigrants were recruited to work in the sugarcane fields in Hawaii. In 1903, the first Korean immigrants arrived on the mainland United States (McGinnis, 2007). Many of the first immigrants were Christians because of the proselytizing of American Protestants in Korea (Zhao, 2009), and most lived in Southern California (Choi, 2007). Early immigrants faced racial discrimination similar to that faced by Chinese immigrants. The local people believed that the Asian immigrants would negatively influence their economic well-being. Chinese immigrants were singled out in the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, and other similar acts affected the rights of Japanese and other Asian immigrants to become American citizens. By the start of World War II, there were about 9,000 Korean immigrants living in Hawaii and only 1,200 in mainland states. Since the Korean War, which ended in 1953, more than 1 million Koreans have immigrated to the United States (McGinnis, 2007). During the 1960s and 1970s, many Koreans immigrated to the United States because of the poor economic and political conditions in their war-torn country. Many of these immigrants were from middle class, professional backgrounds. In
addition, there were over 100,000 women who came as wives of U.S. servicemen who had been stationed in Korea during and after the Korean War (E. T. Chang & Kim, 2010). Today, there are many metropolitan areas with large Korean communities, including San Francisco, Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Memphis, and Atlanta (Choi, 2007).

Korean adoption has also seen a trend. As McGinnis (2007) reported, “between 1953 and 2004 a total of 156,242 South Korean children were sent to predominately [sic] Western nations for adoption, although it has been estimated that this total may be closer to 200,000 children” (p. 160) when private adoptions are included. “Of this total, 104,319 [children] were adopted by American citizens, constituting one out of ten Korean Americans” (McGinnis, 2007, p. 160). Many Korean Americans are adoptees who may or may not have any connection to Korea or their Korean heritage.

**Model Minority Myth**

The history of Asians in the United States includes being seen by others as the “model minority.” Asian Americans are considered to be the “model minority,” which is seen by some people as a “positive” stereotype. Asians are stereotyped as being “quiet, industrious, with intact families and high educational aspiration and achievement” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 81). R. S. Chang (1993) addressed the concept of the model minority. Being labeled as the model minority is “a tool of oppression which works a dual harm by (1) denying the existence of present-day discrimination against Asian Americans, and (2) legitimizing the oppression of other racial minorities and poor whites” (R. S. Chang, 1993, p. 1260). Asian Americans do not fit into the Black and White discourse on race. Asian Americans are seen as the “model” for people of other racial backgrounds to achieve the
American Dream (Martinez-Ebers & Dorraj, 2009) because these individuals are believed to fit into mainstream America. In comparing Asian Americans to Whites, however, Asian Americans are worse off economically. Asian Americans are more likely to be on public assistance than are Whites, less likely to own their own homes, and more likely to live in poverty (Martinez-Ebers & Dorraj, 2009). Although the model minority is stereotyped positively, there are many negative stereotypes of Asian Americans, including assumptions that they are “clannish, unassimilable, isolated, and disloyal” (Martinez-Ebers & Dorraj, 2009, p. 155). Korean adoptees may experience being stereotyped in this manner and be unable to deal with it because their parents, not having encountered this stereotyping, did not model coping behavior. Their White parents may not know how to coach their children to handle situations when they experience racial stereotyping.

**Perpetual Foreigners**

Asian Americans are misidentified as foreigners on a regular basis (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007). They are seen as perpetual foreigners. Asian Americans are asked where they are from even if their families have been in the United States for generations. Frequently, people are surprised that Asian Americans speak fluent English or that they were born in the United States (Ng et al., 2007). The perpetual foreigner stereotype can negatively influence the acceptance of Asian Americans as Americans because others think they “cannot assimilate to U.S. culture, that is, [they are] not real Americans” (Liu & Chang, 2007, p. 198). This kind of stereotyping may be particularly difficult for Korean adoptees to deal with given that they have been brought up in American culture in White families. Young persons may not
understand why someone is questioning their background when have experienced life only in the United States.

**Gender Stereotypes**

There are many gender-specific stereotypes of Asian Americans. Women are seen as “subservient, passive, and docile [individuals] . . . who [need] to be dominated, taken care of, and guided by others” (Kawahara & Fu, 2007, p. 182). Also, women are seen as hardworking and selfless. Women are also considered exotic and sensual. More recent stereotypes have characterized Asian American women as aggressive and mean. Women may face issues related to body image and depression, and they may be targets of domestic violence because of the stereotypical characteristics attributed to them (Root, 1995). Women may be victims of domestic violence because they are seen as subservient and docile.

Asian American men also face stereotyping. These men are expected to earn college degrees and be financially successful in the areas of math, science, engineering, and medicine. Also, Asian American men are considered to be “less attractive, sexless, and lacking in social skills” (Zane & Song, 2006, p. 289). They have been effeminized and emasculated. Asian American men are seen as less important and influential than are White men. Korean Americans are subject to being stereotyped in these ways, and they also deal with being mistaken as Chinese as Americans tend to stereotype all Asians as Chinese (C. Nissen, personal communication, July 7, 2010). This characterization of being Chinese can be confusing because young people may not have experience responding to this kind of stereotyping.
This information about Asian Americans in the United States provides background regarding the challenges that Asian Americans face in the nation, which is important for this study because the students interviewed might have experienced similar challenges. To summarize, the literature suggested that the students in the study might face challenges related to being Asian. They might experience discrimination or insensitivity because of their race. This information is important in providing context for the students’ experiences growing up, in college, and beyond their college experience.

**College Experiences**

The history of Asian Americans in higher education is complex. When immigrant families came to the United States, they saw obtaining an education as leading to better employment opportunities. These employment opportunities enabled them to support their families and regain social status lost because of a lack of English proficiency and underemployment. In the 1920s and 1930s, Chinese and Japanese immigrants saw gaining access to college and higher education as a way to avoid manual labor. When the Immigration Act of 1965 went into effect, it “ended all racial and ethnic quotas” and “Asians again began to emigrate in numbers” to the United States (Hsia, 1988, p. 8). As a result of this legislation, more skilled and technical professionals immigrated to the U.S. and entered colleges and universities in order to obtain advanced degrees (Hsia, 1988).

Currently, the number of Asian American students in college is rising.

According to the 1990 census, 37.7 percent of all Asian Americans 25 years of age and over have completed at least four years or more of college education. This figure
far exceeds the national average of 20.3 percent for all people who have completed four years of college or more. (Fong, 1998, p. 57)

In 1998, although only 3% of the general U.S. population was of Asian descent, Asian Americans were well represented in college, with 5% of college students being Asian American (Fong, 1998). The large percentages of Asian American college students may be a result of familial expectation to attend and complete college.

In the early 1990s, 55% of college-aged Asian Americans attended college, with the largest percentages of these students being of Chinese and Japanese descent; only 34% of other Asian racial groups attended college (Hune, 2002). Almost 53% of Chinese men and 30% of Chinese women attended college for 4 years. Korean men, similar to Chinese men, attended 4 or more years of college at the rate of 52%, but only 22% of Korean women attended 4 or more years of college (Hsia, 1988). Although there are many Asian Americans in college, Vietnamese and Cambodians are not well-represented. The college participation rate among Vietnamese “has probably become lower since 1980, due to the arrival of later waves of refugees. Other Southeast Asian refugees also would be likely to have lower educational levels” (Hsia, 1988, p. 15).

Thirty-eight percent of Asian Americans are college graduates, whereas only 20% of Whites have college degrees (Suzuki, 2002). There are some gender differences in college enrollment; Asian American women fall behind women of other ethnic backgrounds. “Women made up 51 percent of all Asian American students in 1997, somewhat less than for all students (56 percent) and for whites (56 percent)” (Wilds, as cited in Hune, 2002, p. 17). While in college, Asian American men tend to study engineering, whereas women study
health professions. The other disciplines that are popular for both Asian American men and women include biological sciences and social sciences (Wilds, as cited in Hune, 2002, p. 18).

Often Asian American college students are perceived to be bright and are presumed to skew the test curves and make academic success more difficult for their classmates (Suzuki, 2002). Asian American college students are seen as “studious, serious, shy, mathematically inclined, and lacking in social skills and outside interests” (Kibria, 2002, p. 106). This stereotyping may hinder the college experiences of the students because of the pressure put upon them to succeed academically and the negative connotation of the many perceived personal attributes (Suzuki, 2002).

The information presented about Asian Americans in the United States provides a foundation for the rest of this chapter. It is important to know about the experiences and perceptions of Asian Americans in order to understand Korean adoption in this country and the experiences of Korean adoptees.

**History of Korean Adoption in the United States**

The history and experiences of Asian and Korean Americans give some context to understand the experiences of the large number of Korean adoptees in this country. According to the 2000 census data, “Korea was the largest single-country source of foreign-born adopted children, providing about 57,000 children or a little over one-fifth (22 percent) of all foreign-born adopted children” (Kreider, 2003, p. 12). In the United States, the Korean adoption phenomenon began after the Korean War. In 1955, Harry Holt traveled to South Korea to adopt children who were fathered by American soldiers during the war (Bergquist et al., 2007). Shortly after they adopted their children, Harry and Bertha Holt started the Holt
International Children’s Services, which places international children with families across the United States and around the world (Bergquist et al., 2007). In addition to adoption agencies, “Western relief organizations set up orphanages and hospitals, evacuated children to safety, and established practices, including sponsorship, foster care, and adoption” (McGinnis, 2007, p. 161). Traditionally, extended families cared for abandoned children, but during this time Westerners brought the idea of orphanages to South Korea.

During the same time period, the United States and Korean governments made it easier for Korean children to be adopted abroad. In 1953, The Refugee Relief Act granted 4,000 special visas for orphans from all over the world to enter the United State to be adopted (Loveland, as cited in McGinnis, 2007, p. 164). According to Bergquist et al. (2007), over 150,000 Korean children were adopted overseas and placed in the United States from 1953 until 2004. During “the 1980s and 1990s, South Korea experienced dramatic economic growth and development, along with intermittent political turmoil and social unrest” (Bergquist et al., 2007, p. 7). This social unrest may have contributed to the increased number of children adopted abroad because of the lack of state care for the children.

**Politics of Adoption**

Cultural and political factors have played into the international adoption phenomenon in Korea. As a result of the Korean War, “cultural beliefs in ethnic homogeneity, discrimination toward children born out of wedlock, postwar chaos, poverty, social upheaval, and the decline of the traditional Korean society contributed to the continuation of intercountry adoption practices” (McGinnis, 2007, p. 162). The Korean War created close ties between the United States and South Korea (Sarri, Baik & Bombyk, 1998, as cited in
McGinnis, 2007). The strong political relationship, economic and political connections, and friendly relationship between South Korea and the United States has made it easier for adoption channels to be maintained and contributed to the number of children adopted from South Korea.

In recent years, South Korea has tried to limit their “export” of children to about 2,000 children per year, because the country’s officials were embarrassed by the practice of sending their babies out of the country (Bergquist et al., 2007). International adoption has caused some additional conflict between North Korea and South Korea. Melosh (2002) noted,

In the 1970s North Korea repeatedly criticized the South Korean government for allowing so many children to emigrate, and in 1988, during the Olympics in Seoul, NBC broadcaster Bryant Gumbel reported that such adoptions were “embarrassing, perhaps even a national shame,” for some Koreans. (p. 193)

As a result of the public embarrassment, the South Korean government put policies in place to phase out intercountry adoption by 1996. “State policies in the early 1990s encouraged domestic adoptions through tax incentives and family benefits,” but due in part to the economy, “in 1996, approximately five thousand children were placed in state care” (E. Kim, 2005, p. 57). Because of the growing number of orphans, there was a peak in the number of intercountry adoptions in 2004, and since then the number of U.S. adoptions of Korean children has dropped 44% (Selman, 2009). In the 3-year period of 2004 to 2007, the number of intercountry adoptions dropped by 17% (Selman, 2009). During this time, the South Korean government still allowed international adoption of mixed-race children and children
with disabilities while working to increase the number of domestic adoptions (McGinnis, 2007). Nevertheless, South Korea has been sending children outside the country for a long period of time, and they have sent more children overseas for adoption than any other country in the world (McGinnis, 2007).

**Contributing Factors**

Families in the United States influenced the increase in the number of Korean adoptions to the United States. The reason behind Americans wanting to adopt children has changed over the years. During the 1960s and 1970s, adoption levels remained high because of the need to find families for children; South Korean children had been abandoned and needed to be cared for. Later, the focus shifted from the children’s needs to that of the parents; couples wanting to become parents considered adoption as a way to fulfill that desire. Couples in the U.S. were facing a decline in fertility rates and a lack of infants for domestic adoption (McGinnis, 2007). Today, there is more acceptance of adoption as a means to having a family. There are other reasons for international adoptions in the United States including “postponement of childbirth and marriage, destigmatization of single motherhood, and equality of rights for women” in the United States (McGinnis, 2007, p. 167).

The culture of Korea contributes to the adoption of Korean children in other countries. Some of the factors that influence adoption of Korean children include

- Poverty, social and economic collapse, cultural stigma toward illegitimate births, racial and gender prejudices, disruption of traditional extended families, overpopulation, limited rights for women, and lack of a developed social welfare
system to support families, resulting in few alternatives besides the abandonment of a child. (McGinnis, 2007, p. 167)

Single mothers are stigmatized, and many of them choose adoption of their child as an option that avoids them being forced to endure the ridicule of having an illegitimate child. Also, South Korea lacks a strong welfare system that could help to support these mothers. Instead of dealing with ridicule and lack of aid, these mothers decide to relinquish their children.

**The Hague Convention**

In the early 1990s, there were problems with international adoption including child trafficking and coercion of poor women to give up their children. The Hague Convention of Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption “was established to create a legal framework for the arrangement and formalization of international adoptions through a system of national central authorities” (McGinnis, 2007, p. 164) to ensure that the best interests of the children took precedence. Since then, 68 countries have joined the convention, which works to prevent abuse of children. In 2000, the U.S. Congress “passed the Intercountry Adoption Act, ratifying the 1993 Hague Convention proposal to establish uniform standards to regulate international adoption” (Melosh, 2002, p. 290). There is also an adoption tax credit that adoptive families can receive from the federal government.

The total number of children adopted from South Korea has decreased, but the proportion of children adopted from that country is still large. According to Ahn-Redding and Simon (2007), “in 2002, 60 percent of all foreign-born adoptees came from three countries: Russia, China (only girls), and South Korea” (p.6).
Adopting a Child

There are a variety of reasons that individuals and couples in the United States adopt children. The most common reasons include infertility, desire to increase their family size and meet a social need, or their desire to have a female child (B. Lee & Parsons, 2008). Couples who are infertile and, thus, unable to have biological children, opt for adoption so they can create a family. Some families want to increase their family size, but they do not want to contribute to an increase in the population. Other families adopt for religious reasons. Some families desire a female child so they adopt a daughter from China or another country, where female children are not held in high esteem (Moe, 2007).

The decision to adopt may be a difficult one. In some cases, the couple faces obstacles including struggling “within themselves, with each other, and with family and society at large as they attempt to achieve the experience of parenthood that has been denied them biologically” (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 50). The process of adopting a child may put stress on the couple as well as the couple’s families. There are also financial implications for the family; adoption is expensive and the related expenses can further add to the family’s stress.

Reasons for Transnational Adoption

There are many reasons that couples may choose to adopt children from other countries. The main reasons include concern about adoption regulations for domestic adoptions; birth parents seeking to reunite with the child; and being disqualified from the process because of age, marital status, medical reasons, or the length of time that the domestic adoption process takes (Melosh, 2002). Open adoptions are growing in popularity in the United States, and adoptive parents are concerned about the child’s biological parents
being a part of his or her life. Adoptive parents may wish to have a closed adoption in which the biological parents do not meet the birth parents, which is more common in international adoptions. The policies for adoption in the United States are stricter than in other countries. It may be easier for older people or people with medical issues to adopt abroad than it would be within the U.S. (Falker, 2006). Potential parents who are concerned about being unable to adopt an infant or young child in the United States may choose to adopt from another country. Knowing about the options available to create a family is important because it can provide some insight into why potential parents would choose to adopt from outside of the United States.

**Intercountry Adoption Process**

Individuals who wish to adopt internationally must use a licensed adoption agency. This requirement is a provision of the Hague Convention, and it was instated to protect the adoptive children from child trafficking and to ensure the best interests of the children (Adamec & Miller, 2007). The individual or family wishing to adopt is put through a rigorous application process, including a home visit. When this process is completed, the agency searches for a child for the family. The potential adoptive families are given photographs and some details about the child, and they must decide if they want to adopt the child or not. At this point, a doctor in the United States reviews the child’s medical records and provides a report to the family. Children adopted from other countries frequently have intestinal problems or tooth decay. In some cases, these children may have more serious issues like fetal alcohol syndrome and developmental delays. After the child arrives in the United States, he or she is examined by a doctor and vaccinated. Also, the child has the right
to become a United States citizen. The parents can complete paperwork for this process to begin (Adamec & Miller, 2007). The whole process can be very expensive and can take many years to complete. According to the Holt International website, there are different costs and criteria for adopting children from each of the countries that they serve.

In the United States, some adoptions are considered open adoptions. In this case, the birth parents and adoptive parents know one another’s names and contact information. They may have even met one another. After the adoption is complete, there may be contact between the birth parents, adoptive parents, and child. Proponents of this type of adoption argue that children are able to live a more positive life without the secrecy and lack of knowledge of their birth parents. However, some people believe that closed adoptions are more beneficial for all parties because the adoptive parents are given the opportunity to fully parent the child without interference from the birth parents who gave the child up for adoption (Adamec & Miller, 2007). In most cases, intercountry adoptions are closed adoptions with no communication between the birth and adoptive parents.

**Having a Multiracial Family**

Before adopting internationally, families may not consider the implications of having a multiracial family. Unlike adoptions of children of the same race, “members of [transracially] adoptive families were often visually identifiable as biological strangers,” (Melosh, 2002, p. 159) so it is more likely that people will ask about the child’s origin or relationship to the parent. The majority of Korean adoptees are adopted by White parents who live in White communities. The adoptee may stand out, and his or her parents may not know how to address the racial comments or stereotyping that their children endure on a
regular basis. Some ways to bring the child’s culture into the family include trips to the
country of origin, incorporating the child’s culture into holiday celebrations, and having
interactions with children of the same ethnic background on a regular basis (Brodzinsky,

**Criticisms of International Adoption**

Along with proponents of transracial adoption, there are critics as well. The
criticisms relate to race and politics. One of the criticisms of transracial adoption is that
White parents cannot give their children of another race a sense of their racial identity
because the parents do not share this identity (Adamec & Miller, 2007). Simon and Alstein
(1994, as cited in Benson, Sharma, & Roehlkepartain, 1994, p. 108) claimed that “the
adoption of children of color by Caucasian families blunts the development of positive racial
identity and is therefore a kind of cultural genocide.” Although not all adoptive parents see
the importance of exposing their child to his or her birth culture, some parents give their
children the chance to interact with Asian Americans and explore the culture through culture
camps, martial arts, and other activities.

Politics are also an important factor in the criticism of international adoption.
Because South Korea has a good relationship with the United States, it is logical that children
from South Korea would be adopted in the United States. Some critics believe that removing
children from their country of origin results in detrimental effects on the livelihood of their
birth community. Instead of funding the relocation of the children, the money could be spent
to improve the infrastructure of the community to develop children who become productive
citizens. Also, there is a concern about the unlawful practices of trafficking children
Mothers may be coerced to relinquish their children for financial gain.

Some critics are concerned about the definition of an orphan; some countries define orphans as children who were removed from their families but who actually may have the opportunity to be reunited with their families of origin (Gailey, 2000). Although there are many critics of international and transracial adoption, there are also several proponents and legislation in place to protect adopted children.

**Issues that Intercountry Adoptees Face**

Throughout their lives, intercountry adoptees face issues and challenges similar to and different from their peers. One study showed that 5 to 15% of American children taken in for psychological treatment were adoptees (McGinn, 2007). While “adoption doesn’t typically define adoptees’ day-to-day existence . . . it can play an important role in how they perceive themselves at various stages in their lives” (Pertman, 2000, p. 53). This section addresses some of the issues that adoptees face while growing up, which provides insights into the years prior to their college experiences.

**Development**

There are several reasons why adopted children may face developmental delays (Verhulst, 2000). These children may have been denied adequate stimulation and affection or they may have been subjected to abuse while living in an orphanage or foster home. Children may experience malnutrition or have undiagnosed medical conditions. Because of these and other factors, children may have psychological issues as well. Throughout their lives, adopted children may feel disconnected from their families because of their different ethnic background or concerns about the influence of biology on their behaviors.
Attachment

Attachment can be a problem for adoptees. “Attachment is a term used to refer to close, enduring, emotionally based interpersonal relationships” (McGinn, 2007, p. 63). Attachment means that the members of a dyad or triad feel connected to each other and have developed a sense of trust with one another. Attachment disorder occurs when a child has a difficult time relating to or accepting his or her primary parental figure. This disorder is more common in those who were adopted as older children but not as common for those adopted as infants and toddlers (Adamec & Miller, 2007). The adopted child may not bond well with the new parents because he or she does not feel attached to the parents. Some of the symptoms of this disorder include stealing, lying about obvious situations, learning problems, and affection issues (Moe, 2007).

Learning Differences

After living in an orphanage, children may find it overwhelming to integrate into classrooms in the United States. Because there may not have been a lot of mental and linguistic stimulation in an institution, the child may develop more slowly in these areas than do other children (Verhulst, 2000). Children who are adopted when they are older may struggle with language acquisition because they learned another language before learning English (Selman, 2009). Sometimes younger children have difficulty learning language, but they typically overcome these difficulties easily.

Grief

Children who are adopted may feel a tremendous amount of grief related to losing their birth parents and leaving their home country. Although many adopted children are
unaware of the beginning of their lives, there are feelings of loss associated with being separated from what they know. Anger, fear, anxiety, and sadness are related feelings that the individual may experience (B. Lee & Parsons, 2008).

**Siblings**

Dealing with sibling relationships may be difficult for adoptees. In some cases, the adopted child may be the only child, but in other families there may be other biological or adopted children. The addition of an adopted child may change birth order and the role that each child fills within the family (Nelson & Erichsen, 2000). The adoption may change the interactions between siblings and the adopted child. If the siblings are biological children, the adopted child may feel out of place because he or she looks different from the rest of the family. The sibling(s) may not treat the new brother or sister as part of the family (Adamec & Miller, 2007). If there is more than one adopted children from the same country, “it is valuable for the children to share the experience of difference and bias because they can offer one another support from a knowing place” (Steinberg & Hall, 2001, p. 149).

Although these problems may be difficult to handle, parents can be proactive and work with their children to resolve them. It is important to make the siblings feel part of the process. One way to accomplish this would be to take the child or children on the trip to get the adopted child. Also, before the adopted child arrives, the family could have a meeting and discuss each person’s role in the family and their responsibilities with the new child (Nelson & Erichsen, 2000).
Experiences of Korean Adoptees

Korean adoptees may have different experiences than that of their peers because of the visible difference between themselves and their families. Borders et al. (2000) noted that adoptees face unique challenges throughout their lifespan. All adoptees, not just internationally adopted individuals, are more likely than are their similar aged friends to report lower self-esteem, to have less social support from family and friends, to experience more depression, and to have sought counseling at some point in their lives. This section addresses the experiences and challenges that Korean adoptees face as they are growing up, which may relate to their experiences in college as they continue to develop.

Fitting In and Self-Esteem

Adolescence is a time of change in one’s hormones, body shape, and connection to one’s peer group. In one study, the researchers found that “transracially adopted youth are less likely than same-race adoptees to report high self-esteem. However, [these] adopted youth tend to have higher self-esteem than is found in the national sample of public school adolescents” (Benson et al., 1994, p. 98). Although these young people may have lower self-esteem than do other adoptees, research has shown that transracial adoptees have the same levels of self-esteem as do their nonadopted peers. During this time, young people may become more interested in their cultural and ethnic identity. There may be some conflicts between the child and his or her parent (Keck, 2009).

Identity Development

Most young people encounter some identity issues as they are growing up (Evans et al., 2010). Transracial adoptees face these normal growing pains, but their identity
development issues may be more complex because of their racial background and unknown origin. Transracial adoptees may also wonder about why their birth parents gave them up and what effect that has on their own identities. There are two distinct areas for consideration: adoptive identity development and ethnic identity development.

According to the research about general adoption, there is a continuum of the salience of adoption in an adolescent adoptee’s life. At one end of the continuum, the person does not want to know anything about his or her adoptive culture, and at the other end of the spectrum, the individual is preoccupied with his or her adoptive status. In the middle of the continuum, the individual’s adoptive identity is equally important as other parts of his or her identity such as social, religious, or sexual orientation (Grotevant, Dunbar, & Kohler, as cited in Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2007).

There are three aspects of adoptive identity development including self-definition, coherence of personality, and sense of continuity over time. Self-definition refers to the way one defines him- or herself and what that means in the social context. In the present study, self-definition refers to how the student may identify his or her ethnicity. One student may consider himself Asian while another student may consider herself Korean American. These terms imply different things to different people. Coherence of personality refers to how parts of an individual’s identity mesh together. Students in the present study may consider parts of their identities more important than other aspects. For example, a student may see her positive attitude and cheerful disposition as more important than her racial background. The sense of continuity over time is what links previous experiences to current and future experiences (Grotevant et al., 2007). The student may have a connection from his or her
childhood and college experiences that will lead him or her to act a certain way in the future. These three aspects of identity provide the foundation for one’s lifelong development of identity.

International adoptees may also face racial and ethnic identity issues. According to the research, “transracially adopted children must contend with the challenges of both adoption and being a person of color. Apparently, race presents more of an identity challenge than does adoption for transracially adopted adolescents” (Benson et al., 1994, p. 100). The conflicts of understanding their race without role models and experiencing racism in their communities may provide a time of conflict for the adoptee.

In their study, Altstein et al. (1994) acknowledged that “adoptees reported a heightened interest in their native culture during adolescence as they were struggling with one of the most critical developmental tasks of that age, identity formation” (p. 267). This finding may be related to the coherence of personality as part of the adoptive identity process. Young persons may be thinking of themselves in terms of their adoptive culture as well as trying to learn more about their native culture.

**Transracial Adoption Paradox**

Based on his research, R. M. Lee (2003) proposed the idea of a transracial adoption paradox, which individuals who are adopted into families of a different race sometimes experience. Although the children may look Korean, they are reared by a White family and are expected to act as if they are White (R. M. Lee, 2003). If children are adopted at a younger age, they are more likely to relate to their adoptive parent’s culture than their birth culture. One group of researchers found that “racial/ethnic identity also appeared to be
weaker among transracial adoptees living in more racially homogeneous (i.e., White) communities” (Cereblad et al., as cited in R. M. Lee, 2003, p. 719). R. M. Lee found that there is “emerging evidence that positive racial and ethnic experiences contribute to the psychological adjustment of transracial adoptees” (p. 720). In the situation of transracial adoption, parents are less likely to know about the cultural and ethnic traditions of their child’s homeland.

There are four ways that families may address the transracial adoption paradox: cultural assimilation, enculturation, racial inculcation, and child choice. Cultural assimilation involves taking a colorblind stance to the world. Parents who practice this method do not encourage their child to learn about any culture other than the dominant one. The child is reared in this culture and spends the entirety of his or her time interacting with individuals from this racial background. Enculturation refers to teaching children about their birth culture. R. M. Lee (2003) wrote: “Adoptive parents with a belief in enculturation typically provide their children with educational, social, and cultural opportunities to instill ethnic awareness, knowledge, pride, values and behaviors, as well as to promote a positive ethnic identity” (p. 722). In racial inculcation, parents teach their child coping skills for dealing with racism and discrimination. Child choice refers to allowing the child to choose how involved he or she is in learning about his or her birth culture. These strategies are not mutually exclusive or exhaustive (R. M. Lee, 2003).

**Dealing with Racism and Learning about Race**

As mentioned earlier, transracially adopted children may encounter racism with which their parents may not know how to cope. Transracial “families face together the pain of
ethnic and racial discrimination directed against some of their members” (Melosh, 2002, p. 160). Although children who are adopted and are of the same race as their parents can disguise their adopted status, families with children of a different race are more likely to stand out and be questioned (Melosh, 2002).

One good thing about being of a different racial background is that “most transracially adopted adolescents report that they ‘get along equally well’ with both same-race and other-race people” (Benson et al., 1994, p. 108). Eighty percent of the Asian adoptees in Benson et al.’s (1994) sample agreed with this statement.

One way to assist children in learning about their racial background and how to handle racism is by providing role models of the same race. In an extensive study by Benson et al. (1994), they found little evidence that transracial adoption thwarts positive racial identity among [primarily Asian] adolescents adopted as infants, [but] most families adopting transracially could do more to connect their children to same-race role models. [According to this study], many transracial families do not intentionally build such connections. (p. 113)

These young people are reared in White communities and they have White friends. There may be few opportunities for them to develop Korean cultural awareness.

Ethnic Exploration

One of the main predictors of interest in the country of origin is “parental encouragement and co-participation in cultural activities” (Huh & Reid, 2000, p. 85). Huh & Reid (2000) found that parents who encouraged interest in the birth country helped their
children develop a Korean identity, whereas children of parents who did nothing to encourage an interest had the opposite effect of children not exploring their heritage. Children and young adults in various phases of the identity development process may travel to South Korea to experience their birth country. Some of the adoption agencies welcome adoptees to participate in heritage tours where they return to their birth country for the first time (Melosh, 2002). Holt International Children’s Services and other adoption agencies organize trips to South Korea for the parents and adopted children. Bergquist et al. (2007) reported on a study to determine the effect of such a trip on young people who had never returned to their country of birth. The participants who participated in this low-cost trip seemed to have positive overall results. A researcher traveled with them and recorded their experiences. The participants experienced “many positive cognitive and behavioral changes, in terms of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and integration of ethnic pride” (Bergquist et al., 2007, p. 336) but some had intense emotional reactions to the trip.

Over the years, transnational adoptees have become an identity group. There are national organizations for families and focused research about adoptees. The Internet helps to build community among adoptees and their parents.

**Experiences as Young Adults**

As young adults, some international adoptees come to terms with their strengths and interests, seeking out intimate relationships, “recontracting and reaffirming ties with [their] adoptive family on [the] basis of acceptance of [the] triadic family” (Rosenberg, 1992, p. 197) and deciding whether or not to search for their birth parents. If these young people attend college, this time period may be one of exploration and discovery.
Experiences as College Students

There have been no studies specifically related to the experiences of college students adopted from South Korea. This study provides the first glimpse into this particular time in adoptees’ lives and the impact their experiences in college have on their development and Korean cultural awareness.

Conclusion

Studies related to intercountry adoption from South Korea and the identity development of young adults have been difficult to locate. There are few articles and books on this topic. Many of the research studies used quantitative methods to compare and contrast adopted children and their siblings or adopted children and their friends; others focused on a variety of scales used to measure identity development, involvement in cultural events, and other related topics. Some of the books relate to specific countries and some of the articles are related to adoptions within the United States, so it is difficult to generalize the experiences to all adopted people. After reviewing the literature, it is clear that the majority of the research refers to children and young adults but not specifically to the experiences of college students. The present study would be complementary to the work done thus far.
CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to better understand Korean adoptees’ college experiences related to their identity development and Korean cultural awareness while at a land-grant university in the Midwest. This chapter provides information about the methodological approach, philosophical assumptions, research approach, participants, data sources and collection methods, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, delimitations, and limitations of the study.

Methodological Approach

In order to capture the words of the students, a qualitative research approach was used for this study. Qualitative methods, such as interviewing and journaling, are well suited to understanding the lived experiences of participants because these methods allow the participants to share their own stories in their own words. According to Creswell (2009), “Qualitative research is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). The students were asked to share their stories to illuminate their precollege and college experiences and the meaning they have made of these experiences in terms of identity development and Korean cultural awareness. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) stated, “Qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning people bring to them” (p. 3). My role as the researcher in the present study was to listen to the students’ stories and interpret their experiences as a group.

“Qualitative research methods provide the tools for beginning to understand the complexity of campus life and student affairs” because these methods seek “to understand
meaning and gain knowledge . . . as well as add richness and complexity of campus life” (Manning, 1992, p. 133). On college campuses, qualitative research is particularly useful in advancing knowledge relevant to the profession of student affairs and the study of students because it allows students to provide more information than on a rating scale like a Likert-type scale. Students are able to express themselves in words and provide more insight into their own lived experiences. Student affairs professionals tend to use informal qualitative research methods in their daily work by seeking out and attending to student input, suggestions, and stories in order to improve programs and understand students’ needs.

In this study, I used basic interpretivism as the theoretical paradigm. Interpretivism “assumes that reality is socially constructed, that is, there is no single observable reality” (Merriam, 2009, p. 8). The participants in this study had similar background characteristics, but they each interpreted their own realities differently. The participants provided a rich array of stories based upon their own diverse upbringings and perspectives.

The purpose of interpretive research is to understand people and their experiences (McCotter, 2001, p. 4). According to Williamson (2006), “interpretivism is a broad term that encompasses a number of different paradigms, all concerned with the meaning and experiences of human beings” (p. 84). College students are “constantly involved in interpreting their ever-changing world” (Williamson, 2006, p. 84), and this perspective focuses on interpretation to derive meaning through qualitative research methods. This study of South Korean-born adoptees and their experiences in college followed an interpretivist perspective by way of students sharing their stories, which were then interpreted using analysis informed by the selected lenses.
The questions asked of the participants focused on the human elements of their experiences—how they felt, what they experienced, and how their thoughts related to the experiences. “The questions [the researcher] asks and the interpretations the researcher brings to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 19) are affected by this interpretive perspective. Every individual, including the researcher, creates meaning and responds to experiences.

**Philosophical Assumptions**

The epistemology for this project was constructionism. Crotty (1998) defined constructionism as “the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p. 42). The students in this study were experiencing things in college, and at the same time, they were constructing meaning about what was happening in their lives. It was important to learn how students were constructing and interpreting their experiences in college in order to better understand the experience of Korean adoptees.

**Research Approach**

In this study, I used phenomenology as the methodology. This qualitative methodology is aligned with interpretivism, because with interpretivism “the task of the inquirer is to unearth . . . meaning” (Schwandt, 2001, p. 134). According to Patton (2002), “a phenomenological study . . . is one that focuses on descriptions on what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience” (p. 107).

Phenomenology “requires methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon—how they perceive it, describe it, feel
about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104). Phenomenology allows for the communication of “direct knowledge of the feelings and images of the research participant . . . so that the first conceptualization is as close to the experience as is technically possible” (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). In this case, the phenomenon under study was the college experiences of Korean adoptees. Because I am neither Korean nor an adoptee, I have not experienced events in a way similar to the participants. Patton (2002) commented, “The only way for us to really know what another person experiences is to experience the phenomenon as directly as possible for ourselves” (p. 106). I asked the participants open-ended questions and then followed up with probing questions to encourage them to share their experiences with me. Their insights were the best way for me to understand the phenomenon of being a Korean adoptee in college.

The goal of phenomenology is to understand the “essence” of the experience. The use of in-depth interviews to elicit responses from the participants allowed me to interpret the experiences of the group and to understand the essence of their experiences. This methodology also emphasizes “the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image, and meaning” (Creswell, 1998, p. 52). Students provided stories based, not only on facts, but also on the meaning and value they attributed to the interaction or experience.

An essential part of phenomenology is for researchers to bracket their experiences. Van Manen (1990) explained, “We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself” (p. 47). Auditing my biases was a necessary step for me to
consider my assumptions and presuppositions about what it means to be a Korean adoptee in college. Reflexivity, or “the fact that the researcher is part of the world he or she studies” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 109), is an important concept to consider in qualitative research. In order to manage these perspectives, I used a reflexive journal to explore my thoughts and ideas through writing.

It is important for researchers to know themselves and to audit their biases in order to be better able to listen and understand what their participants are saying. Epoche, a Greek term meaning to abstain, is a critical component of phenomenology. In research terms, it means to “set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). For this study, I focused on the words of the students, asked clarifying questions, and tried not to jump to conclusions. It was impossible to remain unbiased toward the material because I had strong opinions about the topic of Korean adoptees, their personal development, and their awareness of Korean culture. As a phenomenologist, I strived for disciplined subjectivity where I was constantly monitoring my thoughts and re-evaluating my research. Moustakas (1994) noted that the role of the phenomenologist is “to look and see [nature and meaning] again, as if for the first time” (p. 85). Participants told me things that I had not considered before. I listened to their explanations with an open mind and allowed myself to hear their voices without the interference of my own voice. Also, I solicited the assistance of my peer reviewers to help me see things from different points of view.
Participants

The participants were undergraduate college students who were born in South Korea and adopted before the age of 1 by White families in the United States. Korean adoptees are the largest group of intercountry adoptees in the U.S. with over 45% of intercountry adoptees coming from South Korea (Kreider, 2003, p. 12). Because of this large percentage, Korean adoptees are an important population to study. Korean adoptees may have had experiences similar to other adoptees from Asia. Because the participants for this study were all adopted before they reached school age, they experienced all of their schooling in the United States.

Participant selection for this project was challenging, but before the project began, I identified a few ways to reach out to Korean adoptees. Creswell (1998) suggested, “Because of the in-depth nature of extensive and multiple interviews with participants, it is convenient for the researcher to obtain people who are easily accessible” (p. 117). Potential participants were identified through the Korean adoptees club and the Korean language group on campus, for which I had access to membership lists. Also, I went through the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) process to send a mass e-mail to all students designated as Asian who had home addresses in the U.S. and planned to recruit more participants with the help of one of the adoption agencies that focuses on intercountry adoption. Neither of these two last options were used because I found enough people for the study using a snowball sampling technique, asking the “early key participants . . . to refer [me] to other participants” (Merriam, 2009, p. 79) who were Korean adoptees. The older students I interviewed knew at least one other adoptee each, and in addition, I talked to everyone I knew to help me identify students. One of my contacts connected me with a student who connected me with his classmate and
his sister. Another individual shared the name of a fellow member of a student organization. A graduate student in my program assisted me by asking his scholarship class if anyone was adopted from South Korea. In his 2002 book, Patton suggested that “the chain of recommended informants (in snowball sampling) would typically diverge initially as many possible sources are recommended, then converge as a few key names get mentioned over and over” (p. 237). With this technique, I identified a number of the Korean adoptees on campus. The student organizations, snowball sampling, and talking to everyone I knew on the campus allowed me to find an adequate number of potential participants.

Another important item to consider was my relationship with the participants. Because I knew some of the participants personally, it was important to assure these students of their confidentiality. Some of the ways I insured confidentiality included adequately disguising their identities by using a pseudonym, securing the tapes and transcripts, and changing any identifying details such as hometown, siblings’ names, etc.

With in-depth interviews, it is important to explain the research project fully as well as to develop rapport. After the research proposal for this study was approved by my committee and I received university IRB approval, I contacted potential participants via e-mail to solicit their interest in participating in the study (Appendix A). When I had a difficult time getting in touch with students via two attempts via e-mail, I followed up with a Facebook message. Upon receiving a positive response, I followed up with an invitation to meet for the first interview (Appendix B) and to complete the informed consent document (Appendix C). It was imperative to provide complete information to the students before the first interview. In addition, students were given time to develop questions about the study.
Each participant needed to feel open with me as the interviewer/researcher so that each could be “comfortable and forthcoming with what he or she [had] to offer” about his or her background and experiences (Merriam, 2009, p. 106). A total of 11 students were interviewed; 9 completed all three interviews, and 2 completed the first two interviews. I met with 2 of the students briefly before the first interview to explain the project, to build rapport, and to answer any questions prior to beginning the interviews; both of these students completed the three interview series.

According to Seidman (2006), there are two things to consider when deciding the appropriate size of a sample. He suggested that one criterion be “sufficient numbers to reflect the range of participants . . . that make up the population” (p. 55). In the present study, I wanted to include both men and women. Korean culture does not mirror traditional Chinese culture in which boys are valued more than girls and predominantly girls are adopted out of the country, so there have been similar numbers of Korean boys and girls adopted to families in the United States. Because of the stereotyping of Asian Americans prevalent in the United States, it was important to have both male and female participants in order to take into account the differences in the experiences between men and women. A stereotypical Asian American women is expected to be a “subservient, passive, and docile” and “childlike and innocent [person] . . . who needs to be dominated, taken care of, and guided by others” (Kawahara & Fu, 2007, p. 182). Asian American men are stereotyped as “educationally successful, achievement-oriented [individuals] . . . who excel in mathematics and science” as well as being “less attractive, sexless, and lacking in social skills” (Zane & Song, 2006, p. 289). Korean Americans are subject to this stereotyping, and they also deal with being
mistaken as Chinese as Americans tend to stereotype all Asians as Chinese (C. Nissen, personal
communication, July 7, 2010). Men and women deal with challenges in different ways, and there were expected to be some gender differences in this population (Kawahara & Fu, 2007).

King and Kitchener (as cited in Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998, p. 161) stated, regarding their reflective judgment model, “People’s assumptions about what and how something can be known provide a lens that shapes how individuals frame a problem and how they justify their beliefs about it in the face of uncertainty.” The students in this study were asked to think about their college experiences and to reflect on these experiences. Their stage within the reflective judgment model influenced their reflections on their experiences while in college. Thus, it was important to consider the student’s year in school. Juniors and seniors tend to be at different developmental levels than are freshmen and sophomore students because of their age and experience. Although I had planned to solicit students who had been at the university at least two semesters, I was unable to get enough participants without including first semester students. Of the 11 participants, 3 of them were first semester freshmen. Those students were able to reflect on the experiences they had in college, but they did not have the breadth of experiences that the other students had.

I selected traditional age college students from 18 to 25 years of age because of their life stage (Erikson, 1968) and potential for comparison to others in the same age range. Also, students in this age range experienced similar generational events that may have affected their experiences (Elder, Johnson, & Crosnoe, 2003). This population is of particular interest to
student affairs professionals because the majority of students (62.7%) on college campuses fall into this age range (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2008, p.14).

Another important factor to consider was the hometown of the students. I looked for a diverse group in terms of rural, suburban, and urban hometowns. The type of their hometown would have had an impact on the experiences of the students as they were growing up due to the diversity or lack of diversity in their populations. Although I found many students who were from rural and suburban hometowns, students from urban settings were not available, due most likely to the overall student population at the university.

Recruited students grew up in the Midwest and were attending a land-grant university in the Midwest. I focused on one land-grant institution in the Midwest for logistical reasons. From my experience working in the Midwest for the previous 5 years, my perception was that people in this region of the country have similar values, such as the desire to work hard and being even tempered. This perception agrees with Slade and Lee’s (2004) statement that “Americans associate the pastoralism of farm life with cultural wholesomeness and thereby identify the Midwest as ‘genuine America,’ ‘the keeper of the nation’s values’” (p. xvii). I identified students who were reared in this region because of the potential similarities in their families’ values.

Seidman (2006) suggested that one can stop interviewing when “he or she is no longer learning anything new” (p. 55). Jones, Torres, and Arminio (2006) stated, “Saturation occurs when the researcher begins to hear [or observe or read] the same or similar kinds of information related to the categories or analysis” (p. 71). As the study progressed, I knew when to stop because I started to hear similar reflections and ideas from multiple students. I
had planned to interview a total of 6 to 10 students, and I ended up interviewing 11 participants.

This section provided an overview of the selection of the participants for this study about Korean adoptees in college. One of the most critical features of this study was finding suitable participants: students who had been adopted from Korea and who were currently in college. For logistical reasons, it was most convenient to interview students at one institution in the Midwest. In addition, it was ideal to interview students at a single institution because of the common environmental factors that influenced their experiences. After countless conversations with students, faculty, and staff at the university and numerous e-mail and Facebook messages, I found a sufficient number of students for my study.

Data Sources

Students who had been adopted from Korea before the age of 1 and who were currently attending a land-grant university in the Midwest provided the data for this study. I interviewed each student three times following Seidman’s (2006) guidelines. The interviews were transcribed, and the transcriptions, as well as my own reflexive journal, were used as the data sources for this study.

Data Collection Methods

To collect data, I used the three interview structure that Seidman (2006) outlined. The interview protocol for this study can be found in Appendix D. The first interview focused on life history, the second interview on details of the college experience, and the final interview on the meaning made of these experiences. According to Seidman, “in the first interview, the interviewer’s task is to put the participant’s experience in context by
asking him or her to tell as much as possible about him or herself in light of the topic up to the present time” (p. 17). For the present study, I inquired about hometown, family make-up and interaction, and schooling of the participants. I asked about when they learned about their adoption and about their early experiences with Korean culture. I also posed questions about their experiences in school and with teachers. This first interview gave me a sense of the participant’s experiences prior to attending college.

Seidman (2006) stated that, in the second interview, one of the goals is “to concentrate on the concrete details of the participants’ present lived experience” (p. 18). In the second interview I asked the students to describe their college experiences, relationships with friends, roommates, and classmates, as well as their activities and exploration of their birth culture, if any.

In the third interview of Seidman’s (2006) three-interview structure, the interviewer should ask “participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 16). In the third interview of the present study, students discussed what their college experiences meant to them, how they had changed or stayed the same during their college years, and where they saw their lives heading.

The time between the interviews was short, as recommended by Seidman (2006), who suggested that “the researcher can space each interview from three days to a week apart . . . [which] allows time for the participant to mull over the preceding interview but not enough time to lose the connection between the two” (p. 21). For this study, the interviews were conducted in a quiet space with 1 week or less between interviews. I recorded the interviews and had them transcribed shortly after each interview. I took notes during the interviews
about what the students said and how they responded to certain questions. The students were encouraged to e-mail me between the interviews to provide additional information, but few chose to do so.

I used my own reflexive journals as a data source. Van Manen (1990) stated, “Keeping a journal, diary, or log can be very helpful for keeping a record of insights gained, for discerning patterns of the work in progress, for reflecting on previous reflections, [and] for making the activities of researchers themselves topics for study” (p. 73). I wrote throughout the process and made notes about what I saw, felt, and heard during the interviews. I used these journals to make connections and think through the process of analyzing and writing up the study.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Merriam (2009) described data analysis as “the process used to answer your research questions” (p. 176). For the present study, data analysis began with writing field notes after the first interview. These notes allowed me to adjust the questions, to consider other topics of interest, and to reflect on my skills as an interviewer. The data analysis continued throughout the process of reviewing the transcripts and coding the data. I kept a list of the interview dates and corresponding transcription dates, and I hired a transcriptionist to help with the transcription process. Seidman (2006) stated, “[I] avoid any in-depth analysis of the interview data until I have completed all of the interviews” (p. 113) to avoid attributing something from an earlier participant to the current participant. I conducted multiple interviews each week, including 3 weeks during which I had five or six interviews.
In order to decrease the volume of text, I “read it and mark[ed] with brackets the passages that [were] interesting” (Seidman, 2006, p. 117), using QSR NVivo qualitative data analysis software. I also referred to my research questions as a guide for focusing my coding efforts. According to Schwandt (2001), “coding is a procedure that disaggregates the data, breaks it down into manageable segments, and identifies or names those segments” (p. 26). Coding was an ongoing process. After completing the interviews, I developed a preliminary list of codes based on the questions I had asked the participants.

It was impossible to anticipate the variety of themes that arose from the interviews. As I reviewed the interview transcripts, I continuously updated the list of codes for my coding list. First, I created descriptive codes that “entail little interpretation” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 57). Then, I created inferential codes and then developed codes related to patterns in the material. Throughout the analysis, it was important to keep an open mind and counteract biases.

As a part of the data analysis procedure, I also created profiles of each of the participants to better understand their experiences (Seidman, 2006, p. 119) and to provide a snapshot so that others could get to know each student by getting a sense of his or her background and perspective. I listened to each of the interview tapes while reviewing the transcript to create the profiles using a mixture of my words and the students’ own words.

**Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is an important component of any research study. Merriam (2009, p. 229) provided a chart that details eight strategies to promote reliability in qualitative research. These strategies will be discussed in this section. Because of the heterogeneous nature of
qualitative research, it is difficult to present a rubric or checklist on which qualitative researchers agree; however, researchers do agree that “goodness is based on a cultivated relationship with respondents that emphasizes dignity and respect, not . . . a researcher’s ‘objective’ truth” (Magolda & Weems, 2002, p. 493).

Qualitative research experts have suggested that researchers “treat respondents as humans, rather than acting as detached spectators,” to “conduct member checks,” and to “triangulate data . . . to examine social phenomena from multiple vantage points” (Magolda & Weems, 2002, p. 493). The students in this study were treated with respect by allowing them to choose whether or not to answer the questions and by providing an open environment for them to share their stories. Member checks were completed in the profile and data analysis phases of the research. The students were sent their profiles and the analysis section for their review; all but one student sent a reply e-mail message about the profiles and a couple of students made minor corrections. For example, in one of the profiles, I made an error about which of student’s family members had attended the university. Another student asked me to change some of the text, and I sent her a reply with an edited version, which she approved. I also sent each of the students the results chapter; only 3 of the 11 students responded with changes or suggestions. Most of the students mentioned enjoying reading the profile and feeling comfortable with it.

In this study, I used multiple methods in order to triangulate the data to ensure trustworthiness. Triangulation helps “to establish validity through pooled judgment and using outside sources to validate . . . materials” (Merriam, 2002, p. 25). In some cases, I discussed information from previous interviews with the student I was interviewing. When
As with any qualitative research project, the relatively small sample size limited the generalizability of the study. The sample of 11 students was enough to get to the point of redundancy, “stopping at the point at which no new information is coming forth from participants” (Jones, 2002, p. 465). The students started to repeat topics that other students already had identified. Also, to keep the students involved in the entire process, I used member checks so that they could review their profile and parts of the data analysis to ensure consistency with their experiences.

I used peer review to further enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis. I was a member of a writing group who reviewed each other’s work to provide feedback and suggestions. In addition, I adopted Seidman’s (2006) suggestion of creating profiles, which opens “up one’s interview material to analysis and interpretation” (p. 119) and allows others more access to the data.

Merriam (2006) suggested using rich, thick descriptions. Providing in-depth and illustrative quotations allowed the students’ words to be read without undue interruption in the text. This rich, thick description provides detail to the reader.

Some of the threats to the trustworthiness of this study included sample selection and the narrow scope of the project. Participant selection was an issue. It was impossible to identify Korean adoptees from university records or other means, so reaching out to student groups and creating a purposeful, snowball sample were the best ways to identify students. These techniques of selecting students could have resulted in interviewing individuals who
were similar in their level of interest in Korean culture or their progression in terms of identity development, but based on their varied responses, that did not happen.

One of the benefits of qualitative research is that a researcher can examine a “small purposeful sample . . . because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of many” (Merriam, 2009, p. 224). Generalizability in this study is limited because of the narrow focus of the project in terms of ethnic background and institutional type and location. It may be possible to translate the results to other young adults who are adopted from Korea, which would make it applicable to that population of individuals. At the same time, the experiences in college may be so unique that the results cannot be generalized to a larger group of adults in this age range. Although this study was narrowly defined, which helped with managing the selection of participants and extensive data, it provided an in-depth examination of the experiences of its participants and other students who may be similar to them.

Positionality Statement

Positionality is an important concept to consider in any research project as it “describes the relationship between the researcher and his or her participants and the researcher and his or her topic” (Jones et al., 2006, p. 31). My personal characteristics as a researcher influenced my interest and understanding of my research topic.

I am a White woman who grew up in Florida. I was not adopted, and I grew up in a household with my biological sister and our mother. I have always lived in areas with other people who are similar to me, and I attended three predominantly White universities. I have
faced little discrimination in my life. This privileged position made it more difficult for me to understand the experiences of people in minority groups or people who are marginalized.

My interest in the topic of Korean adoptees was sparked by my partner. He was born in South Korea and adopted when he was 18 months old by a White family. He was raised in a predominantly White community. He has told me stories about the discrimination that he has faced. After high school, he spent one year out of state and returned to Iowa for college, where he attended two different universities. At both institutions, he struggled to fit in, and he was unable to accomplish his goal of working in the science field.

As a researcher, it was important for me to consider my preconceived ideas about being adopted. I had strong opinions about how I think I would experience life as a transcultural adoptee. I envisioned being interested in my birth culture and language. Also, I would want to visit my home country but not necessarily meet my birth parents. As an adult, I would consider meeting with other adoptees to learn about their experiences and I would reach out to others adopted from my home country to learn more about their lives and families.

From what I have experienced, there are two ends on a continuum and not a lot of movement between those two poles: Either one is interested in the Korean culture and wants to visit and learn as much about Korea as possible, or one has no interest in that part of his or her background and resists learning about it. I am passionate about this topic, which I believe helped sustain my interest to the completion of this study and dissertation.

In the analysis and interpretation phases of the research, I needed to remain open minded and not look for certain results that related either to experiences about which I have
read or heard stories or to my preconceived opinions or assumptions. Overall, my personal interest and bias could be mitigated to provide substantive and unique research in the field of student development.

**Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues are important to consider in any research project (Magolda & Weems, 2002). I took steps to mitigate any harm to the participants in my study. Before soliciting participants, I submitted an IRB approval form and related documents, including the introductory e-mail to the participants, the informed consent document, and the interview protocol, and received IRB approval to begin the project (see Appendix E).

Before the interviews began, the potential participant reviewed the informed consent document and, at the first interview, he or she had an opportunity to ask questions. We each signed two copies of the informed consent form, one for each of us to keep. In the course of the interviews, participants were asked about sensitive topics and these thoughts may have caused them discomfort. In some cases, the students hesitated or laughed nervously, but none of them seemed particularly uncomfortable during the interviews. The participants were free to refuse to answer any question and to provide as little or as much information as he or she was comfortable providing. Only one student, who mentioned that she had visited the counseling center on campus, refused to answer a question. I asked if she would disclose the reason for her visit, and she refused to answer. Also, to disguise the participants’ identity, each was asked to share a pseudonym with me; however, because none of the students provided a pseudonym, I selected them. In addition, I changed the names of their siblings, hometown, and other identifiers.
Delimitations

As discussed in chapter 1, the majority of Korean adoptees are placed with White families. This study focused on the experiences of college students adopted from South Korea whose families are White. One of the 11 student participants had a Korean mother and a White father, but otherwise, all of the students were reared by White parents. The information gathered from this study may or may not be generalized to families of other racial backgrounds. Moreover, the information gathered may or may not relate to college students adopted from countries other than South Korea. In addition, the stories gathered through this research may not be able to be generalized to domestic adoptions within the United States, because domestic adoptions are usually of children of the same race as the parents. Because this study explores the impact of college experiences on young adult Korean adoptees, this research may not be generalized to young people in the same age range who did not attend college because young adults who haven’t attended college may not have had similar opportunities and experiences.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the scarce availability of willing participants who fit the study’s criteria. Focusing on one land-grant university in the Midwest for the study made it difficult to find participants. Another limitation was the availability and interest of junior- and senior-level students who wanted to participate, eventually resulting in 8 juniors and seniors and 3 first-year students to interview.
Summary

The purpose of this study was to better understand the college experiences of Korean adoptees related to their identity development and Korean cultural awareness while at a land-grant university in the Midwest. This chapter provided information about the methodological approach, philosophical assumptions, research approach, participants, data sources and collection methods, data analysis procedures, trustworthiness, ethical considerations, delimitations, and limitations of the study.
CHAPTER 4. PROFILES

The purpose of this chapter is to provide information about the individual participants in the study as well as the university they were attending. In order to provide an overview of the university, a university profile was created. This section is followed by the composite profile of the participants as a group and individual profiles of each of the 11 participants. The profiles provide a snapshot of each participant in order to introduce the individual students represented in this study.

University Profile

The university where the study took place is a land-grant institution located in the Midwestern United States. It is a 4-year, public institution with the mission of educating people of the state. According to the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (n.d.), “America’s land-grant universities fulfill their mandate for openness, accessibility, and service to people” (¶ 4). The university values practical subjects, such as engineering, agriculture, physical and social sciences, and also serves students interested in design and liberal arts. This university enrolls over 25,000 students, over half of whom are from within the state. The student’s ethnic background is predominantly White (84%). Six percent of the students are international students, and Asian, Latino and African American students make up the remainder (10%) of the population in equal parts.

Composite Profile

Eleven students, 6 men and 5 women, adopted from Korea participated in the study. I completed the face-to-face three-interview series with 9 of the participants. One participant completed only the first two interviews. Another student completed the first interview face to
face and the second interview in a written format; because of his busy school and work schedule, he did not complete the third interview.

All of the students had been adopted when they were 1 year of age or younger. Nine of the 11 students had parents who were currently married. One participant’s mother had passed away and another participant’s parents divorced when she was in elementary school. All of the parents, except for one mother, were White. The one mother who was not White was South Korean. At least one of each of the participants’ parents went to college. Eight of the 11 students had one parent who was a teacher or administrator at a school. The students had grown up in small to mid-sized towns in the Midwestern United States except for one student who had grown up in a larger city (population approximately 100,000 people). The states represented included Iowa, Minnesota, and Illinois.

Only 1 student was an only child, 3 participants had three siblings, 3 participants had two siblings, and 4 participants had one sibling. Five of the students were the youngest child, 3 were the oldest, and 2 were the third child out of four children. Most of the students had adopted siblings or cousins. Adam and Ben each had one sister adopted from South Korea and no other siblings. Ian had two brothers, one of whom was adopted from South Korea. One of Ellen’s brothers was adopted from South Korea, but he was White, born to a military couple stationed in South Korea. Faith had two adopted cousins; she stated, “My mother’s younger sister has four children and the middle two are both adopted from South Korea, but they’re not biological.” Gwen had an adopted, female cousin, and Harry had a younger, male cousin who was adopted from South Korea. Four of the 11 participants had at least one adopted sibling, however census data show that this is not necessarily the case regarding
families with adoptees. “Among the 17 million households containing adopted children of the householder, 82% had just one adopted child, and 15% percent had two adopted children. Just 3% of these households had three or more adopted children” (Kreider, 2003, p. 19). These statistics, however, do not separate out domestic versus international adoption.

A common profession among the students’ families in the study was teaching. Eight of the 11 students had one parent who was a teacher or administrator at a school; the professions of one participant’s mother and father is unknown. During one interview with a participant, I reflected,

Almost every single student that I’ve talked to has at least one parent, usually the mom, sometimes the dad, that’s a teacher. Maybe people that are teachers are more likely to be nurturing. They want to have more children and they see adoption as a possibility, whereas other people might not even consider it.

Another reason may be that the participants are from small hometowns where it is more likely that their parent would serve as a teacher because there are more jobs as teachers than other jobs within small communities. These individuals may feel more comfortable with children and able to handle any special challenges adopted children may face.

In addition, all of the students had at least one parent who had attended and completed college. Children of teachers may be more likely to attend college because of the focus on the importance of education in their families. The literature as well as census data show that “adoptive mothers have been found to be more educated and to have higher incomes than biological mothers” (Kreider, 2003, p. 17). Adopted children also live in more affluent households. According to the census data, “one-third of adopted children under 18 lived in
households with incomes of $75,000 or more, compared with 25 percent of stepchildren and 27 percent of biological children” (Kreider, 2003, p. 17).

At the time of the interviews, the participants were 18 to 24 years old. They had started attending classes at the university between Fall 2004 and Fall 2010. Three of the participants (2 men and 1 woman) were first-year students at the time of the interview, 4 were starting their third year, 1 was starting her fourth year, 1 was a man in his fifth year, and 1 woman had transferred from a community college and was in her second year at the university. All of the participants were current students at the Midwestern land-grant institution except for one who had stopped out of college (discontinued college courses with plans to return to complete the degree at some later point in his life). A variety of majors were represented including art, social sciences, biological sciences, business, education, and engineering. While at the land-grant institution, 7 of the 11 students participated in one of the multicultural programs or learning groups either during the summer before or during their first year in college.

When asked about their ethnicity, the students gave a variety of different answers, including Korean (4), Korean American (1), South Korean (1), Asian American (1), American Korean (1), Korean adoptee (1), and regular kid who happens to be Asian (1); one student did not answer.

**Participant Profiles**

A profile of each participant was created to provide a snapshot of each individual and his or her experiences. According to research about general adoption, there is a continuum of the salience of adoption in an adolescent adoptee’s life. At one end of the continuum, the
person does not want to know anything about his or her adoptive culture, and at the other end of the spectrum, the individual is preoccupied with his or her adoptive status. In the middle of the continuum, the individual’s adoptive identity is equally as important other parts of his or her identity like social, religious, or sexual orientation (Grotevant, Dunbar, & Kohler, as cited in Grotevant et al., 2007). The student profiles are organized based on this continuum from those least interested to those most interested in Korean culture.

**Jasmine**

Jasmine was adopted when she was 3 months old, and at the time of the study, she was 21 years old. She had transferred from a community college to the university to study veterinary medicine but found her passion studying art. She wanted to become an illustrator. She had come to the university from a small town, where her mother held a leadership role in a school, in a state adjacent to the university’s location. When asked to identify her ethnicity, Jasmine struggled and eventually landed on Korean American. In a later interview, she said, “Korean is just genetics” and “I would say [I am] American, since that’s all I’ve really ever known. ‘Cause . . . my family celebrates [being American], that’s why I do.” She had had limited contact with Koreans or Korean Americans.

When asked why her parents decided to adopt, she responded, they “wanted another child and [they] thought adoption would be a good choice.” Her parents were divorced and she had not had any contact with her father since she was 8 years old. She had two older brothers and a younger brother; all three her parents’ biological children. As she was growing up, Jasmine was closest to the brothers closest to her age—one older and one younger. Because she was the only girl, she felt like she sometimes had been spoiled.
Jasmine was dedicated to her family. When asked if she wanted to learn more about her birth parents, she responded, “I’ve just grown up around my parents . . . so they are my parents.” Jasmine’s mother is an important figure in her life:

My mom (is) a great lady. She’s the best mom you could ask for. My mom and I are REALLY close. I call her, pretty much every day [laughter]. I love my mom. I really admire her. She raised three children on her own pretty much.

After Jasmine graduated, she was hoping to stay in the Midwest, probably in a small town, so that she would be close to her family.

In order for her mother to advance her career, she had moved the family frequently. Jasmine had lived in four states, all in the Midwest. She always thought of the most recent place as her hometown. Jasmine took the moves in stride. She said,

It was a little bit difficult. You have to make new friends, but I didn’t mind it.

Probably the hardest one was the high school one. I think it’s easier when you are younger to move around and make friends and then once you get older, it’s a little bit more difficult.

When she was younger, she made a lot of friends while playing soccer. All of her brothers played; it was the family sport of choice.

As a youngster, Jasmine was interested in learning about Korean culture but she did not have any opportunities to do so. The small Midwestern towns in which she lived were homogeneous White environments. Her mother talked about how it would be neat to travel to Korea together, just the two of them. Jasmine knew the president of one of the Korean clubs on campus. He had invited her to participate in activities, but she was busy with work
and school. She mentioned that she might consider attending an event with him or seeking out Koreans in the future.

Because her mother worked at a school, college had been stressed in their family. All of her siblings were currently in college. Her mom “always said, ‘just be proud of yourself’ and then she will be proud of you. Education’s been something that’s been stressed growing up in our family.”

One of the things that stood out to Jasmine in the university town was the diverse backgrounds of the people: “Here you see a lot more [people from diverse backgrounds], just around town, you see a lot more Asian people and [people from] different backgrounds” in comparison to the towns where she previously had lived. The transition to the university had provided some challenges. She mentioned, “It took some getting used to just ’cause it was bigger. . . . I wasn’t used to the lecture halls [where] you sit next to someone new every day. Now I’m getting used to it and I like it a lot.”

The transition from veterinary medicine to art seemed like a natural one for Jasmine. She stated, “I’ve always liked art growing up,” and she seemed to enjoy the mixture of art and science classes required for her major. Jasmine recalled, “I used to be more science orientated and I always thought I’d go into a . . . purely science field, but now I miss the illustration part so I went back to that.” She also was staying connected to animals through her job at a kennel and owning her own dog.

She had been dating her boyfriend since 2008. He was White and a master’s student at the university. They had met while working at Target in her hometown. They were living together at the university. When asked about her long-term plans with her boyfriend, she
responded, “I don’t really think about that [laughter]. Probably marriage and everything is a long ways away for me.” Also, she had not thought much about adopting her own children. After some thought, she said, “I’d be willing to adopt. I’d probably want to give birth first to my children, as well. I think if I had the resources and was able to take care of children then adoption is a good way to go.” Early in the third interview, she talked about her own adoption. She stated, “I think adoption was a really good thing for me at least. I like my life and where I’m at. I wouldn’t trade my family for anyone else.”

Being Korean American did not seem like an important part of Jasmine’s identity. She explained, “I don’t think people really perceive you that much differently. I’m just used to growing up being Korean American so I don’t know” if there is any difference. When I asked if she would change anything about her physical appearance, she responded, “I’m satisfied. I wouldn’t trade looks with anyone. I’m content the way I am. I feel like God made me this way. I’m happy with it.”

While at the university, she had not made use of resources like the multicultural office or any student clubs. When asked about the multicultural office, she said, “I get e-mails from them, but I don’t really read them. I really don’t even know what that’s really about truthfully. I probably should read the e-mails.” Although she knew the president of one of the Korean clubs on campus, she had not gone any events he had invited her to attend.

Gwen

Gwen was adopted when she was 6 weeks old. At the time of the interview, she had just celebrated her 21st birthday. She had grown up outside a small town of 200 residents on a farm less than an hour from the university campus. She started at the university in Fall
2008 and was majoring in music education. She felt appreciative that she was adopted. She reflected, “I’m lucky. I don’t think that I would have the same opportunities over there that I have over here and the same kind of family I do.”

Gwen’s parents have a biological son who is 8 years older than Gwen. Because her mother suffered from diabetes, her doctor had recommended that she not bear more biological children. Gwen stated, “They just decided to adopt ’cause they really wanted a girl and they really wanted a second child.” As she was growing up, Gwen’s parents did not encourage or dissuaded her from learning about Korean culture: “They never said don’t; they said, ‘Well, that’s cool if you want to, it’s whatever you want to do with it.’” Other than reading a few books in their home library and taking taekwondo for one year, Gwen did not explore the culture as a child or teenager. She had an interest in traveling to Korea for a short period of time but no specific plans for the trip.

Gwen was planning to teach music in the Midwest, most likely in a small town in Iowa because she wanted to stay close to her family. Her father was a farmer, and her mother had been a teacher until she had lost her job recently. Her brother was living in a larger city in the state, and he had a professional job. When asked about meeting her birth parents, she stated, “It doesn’t matter who my parents were, [my mother and father] are the only people I’ve ever known. So no one else is ever going to be a parent to me.” Her mother celebrates her arrival day in the U.S. Gwen said, “My mom calls it ‘my gotcha day.’ For the past few years, she sent me flowers.”

Gwen had a mild case of cerebral palsy. She stated that it really didn’t interfere too much with anything:
Most people don’t even know I have it. My left hand isn’t as coordinated, which for me being a musician is kind of tough. It affects my eyes a little bit, too. I was born cross-eyed; I had to have surgery to correct that. It’s taken away my depth perception. It’s harder for me to drive.

When asked about her brother growing up, she told about trying to live up to a high standard set by him and her cousin, also adopted from South Korea. She recalled,

He [my brother] was always [a] . . . very ambitious, charismatic person. He graduated with a 4.0 from high school. He almost graduated with a 4.0 from college. He has three majors. My cousin, who was adopted, also . . . (is) very intelligent. . . . She’s a mechanical engineer and sometimes I feel like I personally don’t match my stereotype of being intelligent; there’s always that kind of stereotype.

Gwen did not feel smart in comparison to others.

The community where Gwen went to school was small and not diverse. There were two other Asian people in the school, and they both were adopted. She explained that everyone knew her because “it’s a small town so everybody knows everybody and everything about everyone.” She had participated in several music-related activities like band and choir and spent time with a core group of friends. She reflected, “I’m definitely the kind of person that has their small circle of friends. I get along with everybody I know.”

When asked about becoming conscious of her identity, she stated,

Well, [my mom] told me about [my adoption] before I even started kindergarten, but I probably didn’t start caring about it until junior high, high school. I thought it was interesting. It’s always cool to be different in some way.
Gwen recognized that being Asian differentiated her from her peers in a homogeneous town. When pressed to answer the question about ethnicity, she said, “Asian . . . but in every other way I’m basically White.”

Gwen had chosen this university easily. She had applied to a few other schools, but she was most comfortable with the faculty and the campus at this university because of her close proximity and exposure to it through her music activities. She explained,

I wanted to be a music major ’cause it’s something that I’m good at. Maybe mechanically wise ’cause I’m older I learn stuff faster than if I would have been learning this [instrument] from the beginning in fifth grade. They always say, “The instrument is the tool, but the musician never changes.” So mechanically sometimes it’s tough, but it’s a lot easier than if I would have been starting out learning music for the first time. We learn at a much more accelerated rate.

For her first two years at the university, she had lived in a residence hall close to the music building where she takes most of her classes. She spent most of her time in classes, practicing, or doing homework in the music building. She stated,

As a music major, you’re isolated from everything else. ’Cause all your classes are music. It’s like a big high school. All your classes . . . are in this one building. You see the same people every day, all day and those [people] tend to be . . . your friends. Even the people I know that aren’t music majors, it’s because I know someone who’s a music major who knows them. We are a family but there’s a lot of drama, a lot of gossip. When it’s always the same people, it’s all personal. Everything’s a big deal.
Because Gwen was spending most of her time in the music school, most of her friends had some connection to music. She said,

I’m [laughter] not the stereotypical Asian in any sense of the word. It’s become almost cool; we make fun of it a lot. “Oh, you are so good because you’re Asian.” It’s hard to explain. It’s almost like a compliment... It’s almost a cool thing to be Asian ’cause for some reason in my little group of friends in the music hall, I’m one of the only Asians and they’re like, “Oh, it’s because you’re Asian” or I can make fun of myself and be like, “I can do this because I’m Asian.” People once in a while, they’ll make jokes that you might consider derogatory, but I know they’re just joking, they don’t mean any harm by it. Just something about Asians being bad drivers and they’ll call me “yellow,” they’ll call the blacks and the whites and the yellows, the Asians. I told you about those stereotypes that people have of Asians being good musicians and being intelligent. We crack jokes about it all the time because I’m by no means the most talented person in the department. I’m not your typical withdrawn, shy person like a lot of Asians are.

Gwen frequently encountered misunderstandings with others. People would assume that she did not speak English and they would speak more slowly when talking to her. Also, she had met Asian students who would speak to her in their native language, which she does not know.

Gwen was participating in music ensembles and a service fraternity. In the fraternity, she was helping to host events in the music building and doing volunteer projects. For a semester, she had been active in a conservative Christian organization:
I went to the services and I was in the small group called the life group. We taught English to international students. . . . I started drinking and my life group and a lot of the people at the [church] weren’t okay with it. So I was like, “I don’t think this [church] is for me anymore.” I just walked away.

When asked to explain her decision to start drinking, she talked about making a conscious decision for herself:

My friends wanted me to start drinking, but I wanted to start drinking. It wasn’t about peer pressure at all for me. It started out as something I wanted to try and I discovered that I like it more for the social aspect, more than anything.”

Gwen had utilized a couple of the support services on campus including the multicultural office and the counseling center. She went to the multicultural office’s luncheon at summer orientation but after arriving on campus, she did not get involved with any of their programs. She also went to the counseling center when she was dealing with some personal issues. She found the experience helpful.

After graduation, Gwen was committed to staying in the Midwest. She said, “I think after being other places, that the morals and values of the people around here and how they interact with each other is a lot better than [other parts of the country].” She had seen her perspective change in terms of her career.

[Attending college], it’s definitely different, shifting your mentality. In high school and middle school and elementary, you’re just going to school ’cause it's what you do. But it’s a very different dynamic shift to preparing for a profession and preparing
to your switching your mentality from a student to a teacher. . . . You’ve always been a student and now you are learning to be the teacher. It’s definitely a different world.

She also discussed how she felt about being a person of color and a teacher. She reflected on the principal or school district’s point of view, saying, “If I’m the best option and I just happen to be . . . a teacher of color that doesn’t really hurt them in any way. I don’t know that it positively affects them in any way either, like tangibly, positively affect them.”

Since Gwen had been in college, she had seen a change in her perception of being Asian. She told me, “I see myself as Asian but I’m more personality-wise like a White person. I’m not really like an international student.” When asked how she realized that, she responded, “I knew I was Asian, but I had never really been around that many Asian people before to know what their culture was. I may be Asian skin-wise but I’m really nothing like them culturally.” She reflected, “I’m an American adopted Asian person [laughter].” When asked if American or Asian is more important, she stated, “I wouldn’t say that one’s any more important or less important than the other” but from previous conversations, it seemed like American was more important than Asian in terms of her identity. When asked about the importance of Asian as part of her identity, she replied,

I would say the word “Asian” is more of an outward descriptive, but it doesn’t really change how I act or how I see myself or how I would hope that others see me. To me, it’s just another thing like saying I have black hair, brown eyes.”

When asked about her satisfaction with her appearance, she said,

[I am] not very [satisfied] because I used to be a lot thinner. I know I can be that way again. I’m not stereotypical in appearance for an Asian either, so [guys] are kind of
like, “No.” I’m not what they would expect. [Also], my eyes. Because I’m not a
White person, I compare myself with other Asians. I feel like my eyes are more
squinty compared to other Asians that I’ve seen, even Korean versus Chinese people.
I don’t have an eyelid that goes up. . . . like where you would normally put eye
shadow, on that part of your lid, I don’t really have that.

She seemed to think a lot about her appearance and how it impacted how people related to
her.

When asked about adopting her own children, she stated,

I’ve thought about it. It just depends on what my husband wants to do, too. I think
the idea of adoption itself is enough, the purpose behind it. Just to give somebody a
home and maybe a better life than otherwise wouldn’t have that opportunity in their
country. Leave yourself an opportunity if there’s some reason you can’t have children
and you want a different experience.

During the interview, I asked for advice to give to the younger students with whom I
was meeting. Gwen’s advice was,

Stay organized. Stay true to yourself, don’t try to change. Don’t change who you are
for the wrong reasons. It’s cool if you want to change ’cause you come to college to
learn and grow as a person, but just don’t let people influence you in a negative way if
you don’t want them to.”
Harry

Harry was adopted when he was three and a half months old. At the time of the first interview, he was 18 years old. He was a first-year student at the university where he studied kinesiology. Harry was a no-nonsense guy. He was straightforward and direct.

Harry had two older siblings. At the time of the first interview, his brother was 25 years old and his sister was 22 years old. Harry did not know much about why his parents decided to adopt:

It hasn’t really been a topic that has come up, but they felt as though it was a good thing to do. There are a lot kids that are in my situation that need the help, but they never get it. I just happen to be lucky. They wanted another child. They thought it would be good to adopt somebody and give them a nice home.

When Harry was 11 or 12 years old, he had considered learning more about his birth parents but he had not pursued them. He explained,

I’ve lived here my whole life with the family that I have so it hasn’t really been something that was strange and it’s not like I ever felt out of place with the family that I’m with now. I don’t think it’s really a big concern of mine to find [my birthparents].

Also, Harry never had an interest in learning about South Korea or Korean culture. He recounted a story about an exchange student from South Korea who had visited his town during his sophomore year in high school. He recalled, “I got to be good friends with him. [His host parents went on a trip and] he did not have a place to stay, so we took him in. He lived at my house for a month and my parents completely flooded him with questions.” From his friend, he learned what it was like to be a young person in South Korea. When Harry was
in elementary school, he went to a couple of culture camps with his parents but he did not remember much about them. He said, “It was fun. That was really the first time that we tried [Korean] food. I do remember trying seaweed and it was really bad. I almost threw up. It was the first time that we did taekwondo.” He reflected, “I think [my parents are] almost more interested than I am. Not that I’m disinterested; it’s never been a huge topic to me.”

When asked about celebrating the day he came to the United States, he remembered,

We used to celebrate it once in a while, just go out to eat. We stopped doing it. My family always used to watch the [video]. It was always a big deal for them. I never really cared but now that I look back I can see why it was important. . . . It’s not as big of a deal anymore.

He seemed disinterested in the entire celebration. The day was not important to him.

Harry’s family was close knit. He reflected,

My mother is an elementary teacher. My father does custom furniture and he does some carpentry. My brother is married and has two kids. My sister is also an elementary teacher. We’re not one of those families who likes to attract attention to themselves. We’re not really out there. I AM and my sister is, that’s the main thing that we have in common. My parents and my brother, they definitely avoid the spotlight. They’re very modest, very humble.

Because his extended family lived nearby, he saw them often. He had three uncles and three aunts, and one of his cousins was adopted from South Korea. He said,

He is 14. He’s 4 years younger. I spent quite a bit of time with him. He struggles a little bit. He doesn’t really like to talk to people if he doesn’t have to. He doesn’t like
to be told what to do. They used me as a role model for him. I don’t think it was necessarily because we were both Korean. He and his two younger brothers always look up to me because I was close to their age... They always tried to get him to listen to me or act like me or do what I was doing.

Harry had not always seen eye to eye with his mother. He stated that when he was in middle school and early high school,

I really did not get along with my mom all that well. We fought quite a bit and now that I look back on it, I think it was because we were so alike. We both have very, very strong personalities. We don’t like to be told that we’re wrong. She’s a teacher, so she definitely has power in her job. She knows how to tell people what to do and she’s probably the most intelligent person I know. We clashed sometimes. We get along just fine now. My dad was always the man in the middle. If she would get upset about me, the way I was acting, or if I would get upset about her and the way she was acting, he would always have to be the one in the middle of everything to get us on the same page. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn’t. I am definitely close with my dad, I’m close with my mom too, but I’m not closer with one or the other. He is a positive figure in my life. He really works hard at what he does even though he doesn’t necessarily get a lot of the credit or make a lot of money. He’s very honest and he is humble. He doesn’t want anything for himself before he wants it for me or my sister or my brother, and really, him and my mom have done whatever they needed to do for all three of us. After I look back from graduating high school, I think I didn’t do enough to recognize that and to appreciate it but I definitely do now.
Harry grew up in a small town on a farm. His father used to be a farmer but in recent years, they had not farmed the land. He reflected,

The town is about 1,100 people; over half of them are over the age of 55. It’s an old population. I can drive from one side of the town to the other in less than 10 minutes and I may or may not see anybody [laughter]. Everyone waves at everybody.

Everybody’s very friendly and everyone knows everybody. Our town is definitely getting smaller all the time. There’s not enough big cities around for people to have a reason to stay. There are no stop lights. There’s always little kids running around by themselves or with another little kid, going to the pool or riding their bike. At least half of the people in the town have something to do with agriculture. When I was really young, I didn’t know what to think [about my hometown]. When I got to middle school and when I was in early high school, I thought, “This is so boring. There is nothing to do.” We have to drive at least a half an hour to go to a movie theater. The closest fast food restaurant is half an hour away. When I got to be a little bit older, I thought, “This is really nice.” I know everybody and everybody knows me. It’s a really friendly town. It’s got its advantages and disadvantages obviously. It was a nice place to grow up. It was very safe, secure. Everybody’s so closely knit together. That was a good thing, but that’s also a bad thing. If somebody would get a speeding ticket, in one hour everybody in the town would know where they were, how fast they were going, how much the ticket was for, who the cop was that pulled them over.
Everyone in town knew Harry because, when he first arrived, there was a full page article in the newspaper about him. He reflected,

Everybody knew that this little kid got adopted from Korea and came to [my town]. I don’t look the same as everybody else. It definitely wasn’t a negative perception, but it was a unique perception. They knew I was different, not in a bad way, but I wasn’t the same as everybody else.

The schools Harry had attended were small. His high school graduating class was less than 50 people. He went to school with the same students from preschool through high school, and he didn’t experience any discrimination. Harry was active in school activities. He said, “I was in [an honor society]. I was in student council. I was class officer. I was pretty good in band, back in the day [laughter]. I played percussion. I played basketball for 4 years.” These activities had given him the chance to develop close relationships with his friends:

For the most part, [my friends] were either in band or they were in basketball or both. My two best friends were in both with me. We pretty much did everything together. They were into sports. I’m huge into professional sports. We’d watch the same movies. We’d watch the same TV shows. We’re very similar and we were really close. It was hard to go our separate ways, but that’s just how it goes.

In dating relationships, Harry was looking for an equal. He had dated a couple of girls in high school. He said, “They were the type of people who made great decisions, very modest, just fun to be around. Similar to me, but obviously not similar enough that I’m still
with them [laughter].” While at the university, he was dating a girl who he knew who was a senior in high school from his hometown.

As a youngster, Harry traveled to various domestic and international destinations. He traveled with his siblings’ youth group, his own youth group, the Spanish Club from his high school, and his family. Although he had never traveled to South Korea, he may travel there in the future. He stated,

I’m sure I’ll end up going to Korea. Just going there would constitute learning something. I would have to pick up a few things before I went. . . . [My family and I] haven’t talked about it in a while. I don’t know when that will happen.

Harry had been expected to go to college. Both of his siblings had gone to college. Of his siblings, Harry had received the highest grades, test scores, and earned a scholarship. He picked this university because

my sister went here . . . and a lot of her friends, that I was very familiar with. . . . I’d been on campus a lot. It was a really familiar atmosphere, wasn’t going to be too different. I didn’t have much interest in other schools.

Even though Harry was from a small town, he had not had a difficult time adjusting to the mid-sized college town. He explained,

I have never considered myself a country person. I was never into agriculture. I’ve been a lot of places. Even though I grew up in a town of 1,100 [people], I see myself as more of a city person than a country person.

He had had a smooth transition to the university and enjoyed getting to meet new people.
Harry had received a minority student scholarship and had weighed the pros and cons before deciding to accept the scholarship. He realized it would provide a large sum of money to pay for his tuition and other college expenses. He remembered,

I thought, “I should do this.” I happen to be extremely lucky that I applied early enough to get it. I didn’t even think about that whole race part of it. . . . Although, I did think that it would be more diverse than it is. There are a lot of White people in [the scholarship classes]. I thought there would be all Asians, all Blacks, all Hispanic. It was a little different than what I expected.

His father was supportive of his decision, but his mother was a bit hesitant about the scholarship program. He remembered, “We saw that you had to take a class. You had to do community service hours. Being a mom, she was worried that her kid was going to be overloaded a little bit.”

Harry’s major was kinesiology. There were several jobs he would consider after graduation:

Athletic performance and that ties into strength and conditioning. It’s based on athletes and how you can improve their performance on the field or on the court or whatever they do—enhancing their speed, their strength, their agility. Also, [another job option is] personal training with a client who really wants to improve their own health and their own fitness level.

He was considering getting some experience at the university by getting a job at the recreation center or volunteering with the athletic department. Ideally, his job would keep him in the Midwest close to his family.
One challenge he was facing at the university was his living situation. Harry and his roommate were polar opposites. He stated, “I don’t drink pop because of my lifestyle. . . . He goes through about three cans a day. He sleeps really late. I don’t usually sleep past 8:30–9:00, if that. Pretty much all he does is play computer games.” He also had had some issues with his suite mates. These issues had been resolved in conjunction with the resident assistant and the hall director. He remembered,

[Our resident assistant] helped us out but the problem kept getting bigger and bigger so he had to go to the hall director and then the four of us separately, my roommate and I, and then the other two, had a meeting with the hall director and hashed it out. Now it’s not a problem anymore but [the hall director] had to step in to settle it.

Harry had expected the classes to be more challenging. He said, “It’s actually been a little bit more boring than I expected [laughter]. It’s been a little slow.” While at the university, he had joined a professional club for his major and participated in intramural sports with the other men on his floor. He was planning to get involved in leadership opportunities as they became available. The following summer, he was going to serve as an orientation leader.

Harry had experienced more discrimination on campus than he had in his hometown. He reflected,

Maybe it’s because there are so many international students. Sometimes people see me and they think, “He’s Asian, maybe he’s an international student.” Or they’ll crack a joke about your eyes squint, just this really dumb stereotype. For the most part, I don’t look like an international student. I don’t dress like an international student. I
don’t sound like an international student. Really the only thing Asian about me is the fact that I’m Asian, along with my skin color and my hair. I do stand out but I don’t. It’s nothing that I worry about. It’s a really minor thing. My friends might say something stupid . . . but I don’t let it get to me. If somebody is walking toward me, I might notice that they look at me funny, maybe because they think I’m an international student. I would think that people on this campus are so used to being around international students, that it wouldn’t really make a difference. They don’t come up to my face and say stuff. . . . I personally think that they look at me differently or they perceive me differently until they actually talk to me and realize that I don’t have an accent. I don’t know a different language. I don’t know anything about other cultures. Whenever people see Asian people, they assume they’re Chinese. Then, they realize that this guy doesn’t know anything about China. He’s not from China or he’s just as American as anybody else. It’s just the way that people look at me.

Harry had strong personal feelings about discrimination and the use of derogatory language. He explained,

I don’t think that anybody in my family is discriminatory against anybody. I wasn’t raised that way, so my parents and my grandparents don’t think that way. We don’t feel that’s the way that people should live. That’s the way that people should think. This background had helped him to reaffirm and strengthen his beliefs while in college. He said,
I already knew that I wasn’t a biased person in any way. I hate all types of discrimination. It’s become even more of a strong feeling. Not necessarily seeing firsthand that someone’s being discriminated against but just the fact that I know that there are people that say they’re racist toward this group or they hate gay people or they hate women. I don’t want to be associated with those types of people because that would lead somebody to think that I was like that. Even guys on my floor, they make derogatory comments. The guys next to me that are really loud just happen to be Black. So guys on my floor, they’ll ask how the neighbors are doing, but I think you know what term they use. Or people saying that the foreign students should go back to where they came from because they can’t understand what they are saying or any types of comments like that. Why do people have to say things like that? It’s frustrating. If I don’t want others to refer to me in a derogatory manner, then there’s no way that I would refer to myself in that way. When Black people talk to each other in the way that they do, it just blows my mind but that’s their choice. I’m not going to say anything.

When asked to speculate about why others use derogatory language, he stated,

I think that it’s an issue of self-confidence, self-insecurity. Maybe they are not mature enough to realize that it’s not right, or maybe they don’t think it’s a problem. Maybe they think that if they allow themselves to do it then others will find it okay of different races. Then they would be possibly more accepted or they would be part of the group more because they’re able to make fun of themselves.
Harry considered himself a “regular American kid who happens to be Asian.” When asked the question about identifying his ethnicity, he said,

Almost until I got here, I never really thought of myself as being so different from everybody else that . . . the first thing that they would say is, “He’s Asian.” When I was growing up . . . we were together at such a young age that nobody ever looked at me. My senior year of high school I had friends tell me, “All these years that we’ve known each other, I didn’t even think of you as an Asian person because we’ve known each other so long. You don’t even come across as Asian. The only thing that you have is your skin and your hair.” They never thought of me as being different. I was there and I have different skin and different hair color and that was really it. Personally, I thought the same thing. I was obviously different, but I’ve been an American citizen for how long so it wasn’t like I was an outcast. It wasn’t like I was so incredibly unique that people were picking me out of a crowd and staring at me. I see myself more of being unique now even though there’s thousands of Asians around me. Now it’s more common for people to refer to me as, or see me as an Asian person, but I see myself as a regular American kid who happens to be Asian and also happens to be on the same campus where there are thousands of other Asian people. For the most part, I don’t think that people necessarily see me as being totally different like they would an international student. I really don’t think that it’s any different from the next person that lives next to me or the person that lives across the hall. I am part of the Asian population here so people definitely do see me as . . . part of that group. It’s a little bit more of an exception because there are definitely other
people like me who are Asian but they were adopted at a young age or they’ve lived here all their lives. So they think that, “Oh, you’re one of them,” but other than that, I really don’t think that it’s any different than it would be if I was Caucasian or if I was whatever, besides the fact that I’m Asian and I’m part of that different smaller ethnic group, actually very large [laughter].

When asked if race was an important part of his identity, he replied,

I don’t think it is. If I was going to say importance of 1 to 10, I would say 2 or 3. It’s never brought up that much. It’s not like I sit around and talk to people about it. It just hasn’t ever been something I’ve had to worry about and deal with a lot.

When Harry was asked about what it is like to be a student at the university, he responded,

It’s very anonymous. It’s very different from where I was growing up just because everybody in the town, in the school knows who you are and they know if you did something right. They know if you did something wrong. They know you on a personal level. If you came to school wearing something that you wouldn’t normally wear, they would judge you because they know that’s out of the ordinary for you. Here you pass by thousands of people that don’t know you. It’s definitely nice when people don’t care. It doesn’t make a difference. Sometimes it can definitely be a nice thing to know that the other people aren’t gonna come up to you and say, “Hey, you’re doing this differently than you normally do.” It’s a big change from the type of atmosphere that I was in in high school. It’s definitely different not knowing
everyone because in my town I did know everyone. I think being part of the crowd is good, it’s nice.

When asked about utilizing the services at the multicultural office, Harry said, “I’ve been over there twice. I haven’t really needed anything over there. I haven’t used it. I don’t even really know what they would have done for me.” He also stated,

I haven’t really sought out any services to explore my culture because it’s never been a huge topic of interest for me. Not because I’m trying to avoid it but because it hasn’t really ever crossed my mind. I can’t say that I’ve taken the initiative to seek out that type of service.

When asked if he would seek out experiences with other Korean adoptees while in college, he stated,

That’s a funny question. I’ve never really thought about it. I would probably say that that’s something that my mom would want me to do more than I would even think about it. Ever since we had that exchange student that was from Korea to live at our house for that month, she’s always been so interested in international students, people from diverse cultures, and diverse families. I can’t say I’ve ever really thought that I’m going to go find other people that were adopted from Korea [laughter]. It’s never really crossed my mind. I could, but right now I would ask myself, “Why? [laughter] What’s it gonna do for me?” I don’t think it would be necessarily good or bad. Good in the fact that I would just be meeting other people that happened to be in a similar situation to me.
Kelly

Kelly was 8 months old when she was adopted. At the time of the interview, she was 18 years old and a first year student at the university. Kelly’s parents had two biological children and one adopted child before Kelly. Her brother, Dylan, also was participating in this study. Her brothers were 20 and 29, and her sister was 25. She said,

They said that I was “a gift with purchase” [laughter]. They originally adopted my brother. They were going to look into adopting another child. [My brother’s] agent called to check on them . . . and he’s like, “Your papers are still current, how would you feel about adopting this little girl that we have? We’re having troubles placing her.” They sent photos and my x-rays, and then I was on the plane.

Kelly was not interested in learning about her birth parents because “If they didn’t leave any information, then it probably should be reciprocated.”

Kelly’s parents gave her the opportunity to explore the Korean culture. She related that her parents said,

“If that’s something that you want to pursue, then we will help you,” but I was very content with where I was at. [One time], we did go to a Korean festival. I got my name written in Korean [laughter]. We got to try some of the foods. We got to watch some taekwondo. We got to watch a woman dancing. Other than that, I really don’t remember much.

When asked if she was interested in traveling to Korea, she stated, “I would love to go with my [adopted] brother. It would be cool to be just the two of us, but you always want your parents with you. I would definitely take the opportunity to go with my brother.”
Kelly and her siblings were close in different ways. She said that she and her adopted brother were probably the closest, probably more because of age. He keeps to himself a lot. I was the only one of the siblings that could tap into him that he felt comfortable to share with. So we’re very close on that aspect. Everyone says that [my oldest brother] and I are most alike which kind of scares me [laughter]. I’m beginning to see some of that. I think just in the way that we think and the way that we’re passionate about things. We both are very opinionated [laughter]. [Our other two siblings] just go with the flow.

Another reason she felt closer to her adopted brother was because they both were different. Her fingers had not formed properly, and she used a prosthetic on one hand. She reflected, My hands make me different on the outside. [My brother’s] cleft lip makes him different on the outside. That’s one reason why [my adopted brother] and I are very close is because we are different. That also draws more attention to us, so technically we can’t say that it’s only our ethnicity that draws more attention to us.

Kelly’s mother was a pastor and her father was a teacher. He was unemployed because the family recently had relocated to another city for her mother’s job, but her father had found a new job around the time of our first interview. She talked about her relationship with her parents, saying, I’m very, very close to my dad. He’s helped deal with my hands in the way that they are. He’s been my number one supporter from day one. He encouraged me to be as involved as I was and even if I thought that I couldn’t do it, he found a way or he helped me find a way. [My relationship with my mom is] complicated because she
was never really there. She’s quite the workaholic. She doesn’t really know a balance between work and family. I think that if you bear in mind that balance is really important and . . . if you believe that, it shouldn’t be a problem in your own life. The last 6 years, we haven’t lived together. I understand that they did it so I could graduate from the same school that I began in. All the girls are fighting with their moms and who do I get to fight with a dad and a brother [laughter]? I’ve always been torn about [my mom’s career] because she’s serving the Lord and I admire that but there’s no balance.

Kelly respected her mother’s chosen profession of serving as a pastor but she wished that her mother had a better relationship with her. She stated,

There was a weird saying in my family, something that I really don’t like but my parents always say it. They say, “My mom had the first two kids and then, my dad had the second two kids.” The reason why I don’t like that . . . you should parent all of your children equally. You shouldn’t pick two to raise and leave the other two for your husband. I know . . . they don’t mean it literally. It’s just something I’m sensitive to. The older two are closer to my mom and then, the Asian two are closer to my dad. I don’t know how my older siblings feel about that. I think that at some points they felt invisible because in a White family; if you have Asian children, more of the focus is on the Asian children because they’re so cute, they’re adorable. They might have felt some discomfort there but they didn’t treat me like it was a problem. Kelly’s faith is very important to her. She explained that without her faith, she would be a completely different person:
I would resent my hands. I would resent everything about me. I do believe that there is a purpose that I was made this way. I know that God does not make mistakes. That was a really hard concept for me to believe especially because I was the one that always had to find an accommodation or a different way of doing things or I couldn’t play this character because she’s not Asian. I’ve always wanted to be a good role model. My faith has helped me be that person because it’s kept me out of the self-indulgences like alcohol and drugs and sex. That stuff isn’t appealing to me. If I weren’t a Christian, I probably wouldn’t feel that way. I have more respect for myself than if I weren’t to have my faith. I was raised as a Christian, but I’ve also been in points of my life where I’ve had to decide for myself if this is something that I believe or not. It was a struggle, but here I am today and I’m a Christian. I’m nervous at using that term “religion” ’cause so many bad things that are associated with religion and Christianity. . . . It’s one of the hardest lifestyles you can live. It’s definitely a good life. It’s definitely my passion.

Kelly’s hometown was a small town in the same state as the university. She explained that it has like 1,200 people. We have a consolidated school district . . . [with the town that] is six miles away. . . . My town’s pretty boring [laughter]. The highlight would be the bar [laughter]. There’s the bar and two banks. There’s an old salon that’s only open one day a week. There’s two churches. My street still ends with a farm, but behind us, it’s expanded a ton. [My town] was safe. It was secure. I miss it, because we just moved to the city and I’ve realized that I’m definitely not a city girl [laughter].
I enjoy my gravel roads and just sitting in a field. I’m not a country girl, by any means, but I like the quiet. I like the smells. It’s just home.

Because Kelly’s hometown was small and rural, her schools were not diverse. She remembered that there were five Asian students at her school: herself, her brother, her best friend, and her best friend’s two siblings. Her best friend was of Filipino descent with a White father and a Filipino mother. Kelly had a lot of different friends:

I had a lot of different friends from different groups. I’m hard to label as a certain type of person. My main group of girlfriends, they are very good students. They started making bad decisions the last part of high school . . . but I still didn’t. There were a couple of us that didn’t. Some of them did the same sports as I did. Some of them did music, like me. Some of them did drama. I was in children’s theater [laughter] and musical. Just with different seasons, you would hang out with more of them who were in your activity. One of our favorite activities would technically be trespassing but it was all in good fun. We would go hay bale jumping. The hay bales are all made, the circular ones, and then they’re all lined up and you just start at one end and run down them.

Kelly was active in her high school, particularly in music and sports. She recalled,

I played volleyball, softball, and soccer, and in middle school, I wrestled. My dad is a huge wrestler and he’s been wrestling or coaching for 30 years. Neither of his sons liked wrestling and so he was heartbroken. Then he was looking into female wrestling and he got me into it, of course, because well number one, I wanted to please him, but then I actually liked it. I only wrestled girls. I would never put a boy
in that position because he can’t win because either he forfeits and is a coward or he
beats her and he just beat a girl or if he loses, that’s just the end of it all [laughter].
So, I wrestled girls. I got second in state. I didn’t go to nationals because my mom
didn’t like the fact that I was wrestling. So that ended in eighth grade.

When asked about dating in high school, Kelly told me that she did not date anyone.

She said,

I have pretty high standards. I have a different perception of dating than other people.
My friends are more into the casual dating. I’m into intentional dating because where
my standards are there isn’t going to be someone like that until I’m ready to marry
and he’s ready to marry. By intentional dating, I mean dating for marriage. I don’t
feel like I’m ready to date. You have to know who you are first. I want him to know
who he is. You need to be your own person first.

Kelly also reflected on her perception of the guys with whom she interacted. She stated,

I did have a lot of guy friends, but they didn’t really pursue me as the dating type. I
always thought that my ethnicity was part of that because they like the blonde and the
tall and the skinny. I’m short and not as skinny as them and Asian. I wasn’t that
picture that they normally picture and so I felt like that’s a lot of the reasons they
overlooked me. I have this guy friend who’s very blunt. He just flat out told me he
does not like Asians, but “You’re okay,” is what he always says to me. He’s like,
“’Cause I don’t see you as Asian. I’ve grown up with you, but you’re Asian and I
make fun of that, but I don’t see you as the type of Asian that I don’t like.” And I’m
just like, “You are ridiculous.” That reinforced it for me. It’s a mind thing, but there’s no way of proving it or disproving it to me.

While in elementary school, Kelly realized she was Asian. She remembered that growing up she knew that she was adopted, but I still thought of herself as White.

It wasn’t until [a standardized test] when my teacher corrected my bubble for ethnicity. I put White and she put Asian/Pacific Islander. She had to explain to me that even though I grew up in the United States, that’s not my ethnicity and I was shocked.

Later, in eighth or ninth grade, she became more aware of her race. She said, I resented the fact that I was Asian. ’Cause Asian eyes they don’t sink in . . . like other people’s eyes. When my friends were doing makeup, it looked different on them then on me, which is why I didn’t wear makeup throughout high school. Things that my friends did never matched, never went well with me because I’m Asian. Like skin tones and hair and makeup. It just didn’t reflect me like it did them. I always felt like I stuck out a lot. I hated having my pictures taken because I was the only Asian and all my friends are blonde and brunette and stunning [laughter]. I felt like a sore thumb. I’ve grown a lot since then and accepting that I was made for a reason.

Right now, I’m trying to figure out my purpose in this world and who I am in Christ. I don’t know what he wants for my life and that defines me as my faith defines me.

Kelly felt there was an expectation in her family to go to college. She saw attending college as the next step in her life. In fact, she started looking at colleges when she was in eighth grade. She remembered, “I was ready [laughter]. I was sick of my town. I was sick of
the people. I was ready for college.” When she was looking at colleges, she focused on small, Christian colleges. This university was her last choice. She said,

My parents were actually very much against [me attending a Christian college], which surprised me. They knew all along I was supposed to be at [the university]. I was just being stubborn about it [laughter]. They wanted me to get more of worldly perspective and I have. I was worried about my faith going into college. I wanted to be held accountable and I thought a Christian college would help me do that, but then coming to [the university], I’ve realized that it’s my battle, not someone else’s. It’s up to me and I don’t regret coming here. It’s been a perfect fit for me and I like the size. I like being known, but not known. I know a lot of people here, but then I also don’t know a lot of people here [laughter]. So it’s really nice.

She received a lucrative scholarship for minority students. She recalled,

I think that some people think that [people of color] have it made, that we’re given all the opportunities because we’re of color. When it was announced that I did get the scholarship, a lot of my friends said, “Well, it’s cause you’re Asian,” but they didn’t take into account that I had a 3.99. [GPA], that I was sixth in my class, that I did write a kick butt essay. They didn’t take into account the time I put into things and all the activities that I was in. It’s not like I was under qualified, but they attributed everything to my ethnicity and that was hurtful.

While in college, she had interacted with the multicultural office through the scholarship program and the disabilities resource office. Also, she had been to the health center and supplemental instruction for her economics class.
Kelly’s transition to the university was tough, but she seemed to be taking it in stride. She said,

It was rough in the beginning trying to figure out what I wanted to major in. I’m not one to go out and talk to people. Most of the friends that I’ve made, they’ve approached me or they’ve sought me out.

She also had a difficult relationship with her roommate. She stated, “She’s a very stubborn person and I’m a very stubborn person. We don’t even have the same views or the same values. . . . I try to act in Christian love and she won’t have any of it so it’s just difficult.”

She had connected with members of her church. She talked about what she liked about her church:

I don’t always agree with everything. I’m not like a sponge, I just feel well-founded and I like hearing what they have to say. I love the worship. I was very starved growing up with worship because my mom always had older churches. The congregation’s average age was like 66. Just seeing people my own age worshipping, that is something I’ve never really seen. I was really intimidated. . . . It’s dominant over the other Christian groups. That kind of worried me. I didn’t want a mega-church with radical ideas. I don’t think it’s proven to be that. I have so much time invested into church. The rest is me time. I don’t feel like I should have so many commitments like I did in high school. I like enjoying people.

Although most of her friends were from her church, she was spending time with a lot of different people and having an active social life. She said, “I actually have quite a list of
Atheist friends, which is good. They won’t even step foot in the door [at my church]. I have a lot of different friends.”

Kelly had learned some of the qualities that attract her to people. She stated, Something that really attracts me is boldness in people and just seeing people passionate for something. That’s something that I’ve felt I was making it up in my head, but to see it in person, it’s just reassuring. . . . My Atheist friends are very bold and that’s probably something that attracts me to them because we have nothing in common. I like people with opinions and people who if they don’t know who they are, they’re searching. I don’t really care much for apathy for strong friendships.

Kelly chose linguistics as a major at the university. She recalled that language was always been something she had excelled at:

I’ve always been very decent at everything else, but language has been in the first seat. I want to work overseas teaching English as a second language. I think once I’ve done what I needed to do there, then I want to come back to the United States and teach Spanish. The first one would probably be the Dominican Republic because they need a lot of help down there. It’s just a country in need. I want to learn Arabic or Chinese.

Kelly remembered that, when she came to the university, she experienced such a culture shock:

I’d never seen so many Asians in my life. What was embarrassing was this Chinese boy came up to me within the first few weeks of classes and he was completely lost. He looked so relieved to find me because he thought I spoke Chinese. Then I didn’t
and he was horrified and so embarrassed. I was like, “I’m sorry.” I took him to the class that he needed to be [laughter]. He knew English, but he was so overwhelmed that nothing was comprehending. . . . I’m still thrown off when I see Asians or hear Asians speaking without an accent, like me. I just forget . . . that people can be adopted and grow up in the United States. Even I fall victim to those stereotypes.

Although Kelly had been at the university only a short period of time, she had learned a lot about herself. She explained,

I know it’s cliché, but college is really, actually very helpful in finding who you are and that’s something I’ve always struggled with. I don’t really know who I am, what I’m called to do. I’ve definitely learned that in the boy area. I’ve learned what I want out of a boy. I want a man after God’s own heart. Then, if he captures that, then he’s captured mine. I think that’s my biggest thing is no compromise for anything, for my academics, socially. . . . I’ve been given free will but I’m going to use it to glorify God. I’ve definitely learned independence. I had a pretty good sense of independence before coming here, but really cutting the cord. You think you’ve cut the cord, but then you realize that you really have to in college. I’ve definitely learned watching other people, the responsibilities of the freedoms that we have in college. I am completely delighting in my freedom because I come from a family where you need to report, always call, always check in, can’t be out past a certain time no matter what night it is, always having to ask to do things, always having to tell people where you are. It’s constricting. I was definitely ready to break from that, but I’ve also been responsible with that. It’s been really awesome. I haven’t quite discovered
Kelly appreciated the anonymity the university could offer to her. She explained,

Lectures, for example, I thought I wouldn’t like being a number, but I do, in a sense. I like not always being called on. I want to be more invisible than what I was because in high school everyone had their eyes on me and all my friends. Some people were waiting for us to slip, so there’s a lot of pressure in being a role model for everyone. Then, in college, I love lectures because you’re just a number. I know a lot of people don’t like that but I love it. Not all eyes are on me. I don’t have to come across in a certain way because that’s what people expect of me. People don’t know me, so I can just be me. It’s a lot less pressure to be lost. I still have my closer friends and I still have my activities that are small and people do know me. It’s a good balance.

When asked about the use of derogatory words, Kelly indicated that she didn’t think that was “classy”:

I like to keep it classy [laughter]. I don’t find derogatory things funny. There’s definitely a limit. I might laugh, but it’s not too far until you actually cross the line, and then it’s just not funny. It depends on the context of it. But definitely not the names, the derogatory names for race. I won’t do that. I actually hit my guy friend who said the N word and I was like, “That was not necessary.” Maybe I laugh at some stereotype jokes. In high school, my brother ruined it for me. ’Cause he embraced his ethnicity and he liked to have fun with it and so everyone gave him crap or jokes and all of that. When I got to high school, they assumed that they would do
the same thing. I was never really insulted by it. I was just like laugh it off, whatever it doesn’t matter. But then it got to be a daily thing where my ethnicity was brought up and I was just like, “Do you really think that I forget that I’m Asian? Do you really need to remind me?” It’s like being short, too. Everyone reminds me that I’m short like I forgot somehow overnight. I don’t really do that because I got so much of it in high school. I’m pretty sure it’s obvious that I’m Asian. I don’t feel the need to tell people, “Hey, I’m Asian,” like my brother does [laughter]. Maybe [he makes jokes] to be funny and he is a funny guy. I think to show that he’s not sensitive or that he’s not a weird Asian. There’s weird Asians and there’s cool Asians. There are weird ones that . . . you would call super nerdy and then there are cool Asians that are like Caucasians only with slanty eyes.

Kelly’s hands had defined who she was. Her fingers on both of her hands were deformed. She stated,

[My hands] have definitely defined my life. They’ve built my character to where it is today because you have to have a certain attitude if you’re going to be living like this. I wouldn’t say I’m disabled; I hate that. Even here at [the university] they tried to tell me that I was disabled and they wanted me to get accommodations for my hands. I was very stubborn about it because what they saw a disability, I don’t. It was hard for me to explain to them that I didn’t need the accommodations that they wanted to give me, even though I knew that they were trying to help me, but I didn’t need them. I still don’t need them. I don’t use the accommodations that I can technically have because my hands don’t affect my learning and I think that would just be milking the
system if I were to do something like that. I don’t want to be seen as different. If I
were to have special accommodations, it would make me stand out more.

When asked about her satisfaction with her physical appearance, Kelly said,

If I excluded my hands, I would change my eyes because I don’t like how they don’t
go in. I know that’s because I’m Asian, but it just makes a difference in your
appearance. . . . I’d definitely change my eyes. It just that’s what makes me look
Asian is because they’re not deep, there’s no depth. If I could change my hands, I
would change my left hand. ’Cause I’m very reliant on my prosthetic and it’s
annoying and just having a normal left hand, I could play the guitar, which is
something that I’ve always really wanted to do. . . . It’s just one of those things I can’t
do. I could wear a ring. So if I get married, I don’t know what I’m going to do right
now if that ever happens, but I don’t want to wear a necklace on a chain. I don’t want
that. I don’t want to be different. I don’t; that part I want to be normal.

When asked to describe her racial identity, she described herself as “a mutt because I
don’t know exactly what I am. Everyone’s a descendent from something else and I think
we’re all mixed breeds. Like the dominant would be Korean, but I’m a mutt.” Kelly
discussed the lack of importance of her ethnicity as a part of her identity:

I think [being Korean] has little to do with who I am. My ethnicity is Korean. I think
of it as adjective that describes me. I haven’t divulged in the culture or anything. I try
not to make my ethnicity a part of my identity because I was only born in South Korea
and that’s just what I look like. I don’t feel Korean at all. Maybe when I look in the
mirror. I am not familiar with the customs or the language or the culture. Maybe if I
felt . . . more knowledgeable, maybe I would identity myself more as Korean, but
since I’m 100 percent American that’s just who I am. Korean is just how you
describe my eyes to me.

During one of the interviews, we talked about how sometimes people forget that
Asian adoptees are Asian. She stated,

I forget that I don’t look like an American. People say that to me, too. I like it
because they’re knowing me as a person rather than me as my ethnicity. Same things
with me hands. My closer friends they always say that they just forget. I notice when
people stare and usually I’m good with it. There are days where I’m like, “Everyone
looked at me today. Everyone had some snide remark to say today.” My friends were
like, “What? Are you kidding me? I don’t even notice.” That is reassuring to me
because they’ve looked past it. They’ve also looked past my ethnicity. I don’t think
physical things should define a person. I don’t like it.

Since being in college, she thought her relationship with her parents and her siblings
had improved. She recounted,

My dad and I butted heads my senior year because that’s our defense mechanism
when we don’t want to say goodbye or don’t want to think about being separated. We
just butt heads a lot. I’ve learned a few things here, especially just having everything
that I do be glorifying to God and that includes honoring my parents and serving
them. I have a new attitude at home. I actually do what they ask me to do the first
time and it’s a lot easier to do so. My older siblings are trying to get to know me
better because we’ve all realized that we know each other, but we don’t know each
other. The two oldest ones, they only know me as a child. They don’t know me as
the woman I’m becoming. So, they’ve actually taken some interest.

Over Thanksgiving break, Kelly went home to work and talked with one of her co-
workers about being adopted:

This guy I work with . . . he didn’t put two and two together that I was adopted. So
we were talking about my family and everything and he’s like, “How do you have
White siblings? I don’t get this.” And like, “I’m adopted.” He goes, “No way!” and
then he was going into the whole why I was adopted and I told him it was because of
my hands. He just couldn’t believe that and he kept trying to make excuses for my
mom and excuses for me. I was like, “I’m good with this.” It affected him, more than
it affected me [laughter] and that made me realize that I am okay with where I’m at
and I’m okay being adopted. I said, “No, it’s really okay. I’m very content with the
life that I have and I’m very blessed with the life that I have. If I weren’t adopted,
then I wouldn’t know you.” I told him, “Instead of looking at it like I’m being put up
for adoption and being given away, these are people don’t want me. My parents
chose me.” They looked at a picture and said, “We want her. They chose me. They
pursued me. So I think that is far more flattering than “being put up for adoption.”

When asked about where she would live after she graduated, she mentioned, “It
depends on if I actually go overseas. If I choose to stay in the states, I do like [the Midwest].
A smaller town outside of a city.” Kelly wanted to adopt her own children when she got to
that stage in life. She stated,
I want to adopt. I always say five kids from five countries and one in the U.S.. I don’t want to have kids of my own because I don’t know if my hands are genetic. I have been very blessed in having the mobility and the function and the use of my hands. I don’t know if it’s genetic and I don’t want the life that I’ve lived for my children. There’s a lot of hardships, there’s a lot of frustration. I just don’t want to see my kids go through that. I want them to . . . not be defined physically. The thought that my kids would have this scares me. I guess the husband might have a say in this [laughter]. I do have a heart for cleft lips, because that’s what my brother went through. I’m used to seeing someone go through that . . . so that probably wouldn’t hurt me as much . . . I think it would be beneficial to adopt special needs kids. I would just have to get over myself [laughter]. I still have growing to do before I adopt so that’s a very good possibility. While my kids are growing up, I want them to be able to relate to [people of] any color of skin. I just want them to be open to one another. Get to know other cultures. Get to know a world outside of their own.

**Dylan**

Dylan was 4 months old when he was adopted. At the time of the first interview, he was 20 years old. Dylan had an older brother, an older sister, and a younger sister, Kelly, who was adopted from South Korea. Kelly, who also was participating in this study, was not his biological sister. His older siblings were his parents’ biological children. When asked about his parents’ reason to adopt, Dylan stated,

The main reason was they wanted to have kids still to take care of them, but not really go through that whole process again with pregnancy. They saw my picture and they
adopted me because I had specific needs. I had a cleft palette and they knew my mom gave me up because she couldn’t afford to pay for my surgeries.

Dylan knew little about his biological parents. When asked if he wanted to know more about them, he said, “My adopted parents are the ones that I really know. It seems that’s all you’ve known as your parents and you forget you’re adopted.” His adoptive parents are his parents.

As he mentioned, Dylan was born with a cleft palette and he felt that this medical issue shaped his life:

It’s basically a little cut in the mouth and it affects your nasal cavity and nose, too. There’s a little flap in the back that connects the back of your throat with your nose. Air isn’t being pushed through your nose when you talk. I grew up with that and they fixed it when I was little. . . . I’ve had 13 surgeries. It takes a lot of energy for me at least. I’ve stopped growing so my body’s reached its maturity level where it’s finest and I go back every year for a checkup, instead of every 4 months or every 6 months before. I still have at least two surgeries left, which will fix everything. My top jaw is pushed back further than my bottom jaw. The main portion right now is trying to get that fixed right now. I’ve had two bone grafts, where you take bone out of your hip and put it in your mouth. I had nose and throat surgery for my flap and I didn’t like that, that kind of hurt; but after that, everything started evening out. Also my sister . . . has disability, but not as bad as mine. She’s pretty good at stuff. Better than I am actually [laughter]. She doesn’t let it bother her either.

When he was a child, his parents had not encouraged him to learn more about Korean culture. He remembered,
We had a couple books about Korea, but other than that they [my parents] really didn’t say much. If I asked, they would say as much as they knew about it, but other than that, it was really up to me to go out and see where I wanted to look for stuff. I remember once or twice we went to a Korean festival when I was little. Other than that we didn’t really learn much about it.

Dylan was interested in traveling to Korea:

I want to go visit Korea. I’d like to go back to the country, near my hometown. My home country to see what the actual cultures now, how it’s changed over the years. I like their style of living. How they dress and they’re very big in some music in hip hop over there. My parents, they want to go, too. If we do ever take a trip, they want to come with me, just to see what it’s like. My younger sister, she’s interested, too. She would like to go back and see it sometime.

Dylan was not very close to his siblings. His brother was married and was transitioning from being an engineer to working in the ministry. His older sister was a special education teacher, and she was married and had one child. His younger sister, Kelly, was enrolled at the same university as a first-year student. Dylan was closest to Kelly. He stated, “I’m a little closer to her ’cause we’re about the same age, so closer siblings.”

Dylan grew up in a small town in the same state as the university. His mother moved around quite a bit because she was a pastor. Although she moved often, she did not relocate the family unless she was moved to a different region of the state. Dylan’s father had been a special education teacher at his high school until they moved to another town, and he was currently looking for work. Dylan did not always like having his father as a teacher. He said,
“I wouldn’t recommend it. If you got in trouble, [my father] knew about it right away because he knew all the other teachers. [If] you did something in class, they would tell him.”

Dylan had a fair relationship with his parents. He reflected,

I wouldn’t say it was the best. Parents and kids, they have their arguments. It wasn’t perfect but it was pretty good. Growing up, my dad took care of us ’cause my mom was doing her ministry work. I was . . . not as close with her, because she was never there. Dad did the best he could. I think we were pretty good, pretty close. I’m closer to mom now. ’Cause I live in college so she doesn’t get to see me as much anymore.

Dylan’s parents wanted their children to go to college, but it was not a requirement. He described his parent’s point of view:

They want us to succeed in life. Do something with ourselves. But they never really pushed it. They left it up to us. Let us go. They’ll still help me if I needed it but other than that they expect me to grow up and do what I do.

Dylan’s hometown was small with about 1,200 residents. He remembered that his town was pretty quiet, with not a lot going on:

We started actually growing a bit in high school, when I was a sophomore in high school. We were getting a lot of people that really liked our school district. We were two small towns into one town, but we were still a town. You were closer to your friends. It wasn’t very diverse. I was actually the only Asian person in high school. I was the only Asian person ’cause up until junior year and my sister came to high
school, and there was my senior year we had two Asian girls came into our high school as freshmen. I was the only Asian person for two years.

Dylan struggled in elementary school. He recalled that some kids had ADD or ADHD:

I don’t think I have it, but I acted more towards it. I got put into this a reading program because my reading scores were low in elementary school. I like reading a lot. You kind of have to grow into it. I was more into computer games, video games. There is a stereotype of Asians should know math really well. I’m just not one of them. I’m not a math person. I’m the total opposite. I do not like math.

While in middle and high school, Dylan was involved in the choir and band. He ran cross country and track. He said, “I enjoyed cross country more than track though ’cause cross country you’re free. You have all these nature trails; track you’re restricted to a big circle. It gets boring after a while.” He also participated in the chess club and academic decathlon. He was also a Boy Scout and achieved the rank of Eagle Scout. While he was in high school, he worked at the local fast food restaurant.

Because his town was predominantly White, his friends were White. He remembered that they were never really prejudiced about anything:

They really accepted me for who I was. I would joke a couple times about, “I’m Asian and why are you hating on me ’cause I’m Asian?” Just joking. Other than that, they’re pretty cool with everything. I got along with everybody . . . in high school. We were a small school so everyone knew each other. . . . I knew people in computer
club, I was really good friends with them. I knew the athletic people ’cause I was in sports, but I knew everybody and so it was really nice.

While in high school, the topic of culture was rarely addressed. He remembered, “We never really talked about culture in high school. Mostly cause it was White school. I think the most we ever did was history class. The Greeks or slavery we talked about but nothing other than that.”

At the time of the interview, Dylan was a third-year student at the university studying design. He had considered attending the local community college near his home, but he decided against it because he would have had to complete the first 2 years of the design curriculum when he arrived at the university. He was awarded a lucrative scholarship for minority students that paid his tuition for 4 years at the institution. During the summer before his first year, he participated in a transitional program for minority students. The main purpose of the program was to help students transition from high school to college life. The program helped him to prepare for his first year in college. He remembered,

College your first year is trial and error, knowing what to do, what not to do. What you did wrong and what you shouldn’t do. It’s a learning experience your first year and as you progress up to your fourth and third year, you really realize how this is what I have to do. College really is a bunch of time management that you really have to get used to.

Looking back on his first couple of years, Dylan wished that he had spent more time socializing and getting to know other people. He was focused on his major and the demands of the program.
The first time Dylan experienced a racial slur was at the university. He recounted that he was walking down the hall with a group of people.

This kid came out and started talking, nobody really liked him a lot because we felt he was full of himself. . . . We talked to him and we were laughing and he calls me a “chink” out of nowhere. At the time, I didn’t know what that meant because. . . . I’d never experienced that, so I was just, “Okay cool.” I just walked off. It didn’t bother me, and to this day it doesn’t really bother me either. Then everyone else was laughing at me ’cause I guess the funny thing was he was Asian, too. They were like, “Why did he say that, ’cause he’s Asian as well?” He was a bit immature sometimes. I know what it means now, but I didn’t know what it meant back then. I never heard it ’til college, until that point. I didn’t hear it afterwards.

Dylan had a unique major, a combination of art and science. He said he chose graphic design because he really didn’t know what to do in high school.

Science I was good at it, I liked it but wasn’t sure if I really wanted to stick with it. I liked art a lot ’cause of free expression, do what you want to do, draw what you want to draw. You work your own hours. I heard [the university] had a really good program for graphic or architecture. I did all core classes and I got through all that and then got into graphic and I knew what it was, but each college has their own specific style of how they do things. I did a semester and it wasn’t what I thought it was. I was thinking, “What should I do? What else is out there for me?” That’s when I found [my major]. I liked science in high school. I liked biology. I figured they were both some things I liked. Last semester I took a course or switched majors
and now I really like it. It’s what I want. I’m not bored with it. It’s not exactly what I expected so it’s still there.

The major he chose would allow him to do medical illustrations and models. This major is the same that another participant, Jasmine, chose. Since being in the design program, Dylan noticed, “I feel like a lot of Asians . . . [are] very strong in their art side. Especially like Japanese has all their anime. China has very rich culture and traditions.” He was intrigued by this artistic focus of Asian cultures.

When Dylan first arrived at the university, he was surprised by the diversity. He said, “It was seeing all these other people around and seeing different cultures and ethnic groups and I met a couple other Korean or Asian people here.”

At the university, Dylan was involved in one of the popular dance groups. He was in his departmental club for his major. He participated in intramural sports. Dylan met his friends through his varied activities including people from his major, individuals in the summer transitional program, and the scholarship program in which he participated. He had two best friends, a man and a woman. They were both Latino. He stated,

I have a lot of ethnic friends [laughter]. [My best friend’s] from Puerto Rico. My other best friend, she’s Mexican. Coming from an all White school, I had a lot of White friends in high school, but here a lot of color, a lot of culture around you. You get to see different types of people. My groups of friends here is spread out, culturally speaking. I think a big part was meeting different cultures of people and being around my friend, she’s Mexican. She still has that culture in her, too. But she grew up White. She grew up Americanized. Same with my other friend, he’s from Puerto
Rico, but his mom [is] strongly [immersed] in Spanish [culture]. Strong ties with her culture. You have to really get to know them better. That’s what helped me with the culture thing because they shared their types of culture, what they do on their holidays, special events they have, [and] the food that they make.

In addition to meeting people through the minority student programs, Dylan had investigated joining a social fraternity. He said,

I was in for a semester. I joined because my best friend was in it. I pledged there and I didn’t become a full member. Fraternities, if you really want to be a part of it, you have to make time for it. It’s a bunch of activities and bonding, helping making community, that’s what fraternities are in really getting to know you. I’ve tried it and it was fun, but I did not have the time for it. I’d say for a while it was good experience. I met some people there; you get really close with people that live in the house.

Dylan was well-connected on campus. He found the staff in the multicultural office to be helpful:

I feel [the multicultural office] has made it very easy for me to get to college, and I tell other people that I know to go to [the multicultural office]. You can [go] to [the multicultural office] for free printing, free copying, [and] they pay for two free tutors a semester a year. They have scholarships forms for you to fill out.

During the summer between his first and second year, he had traveled with a group of university students and staff to California for a conference about race and ethnicity. He recounted the story about being selected, saying:
[My adviser told] me it is the national college of race and ethnicity and it’s a conference with a bunch of people that come and talk about culture and then their experience they had. At the time, I was like, maybe I can learn about Korean culture ’cause I was still like I should probably get out there. I applied for it and I got accepted so they accepted my application so I was excited on going. We got split into groups that were different racial type, so I got put with Latino people. My group members were of African American and a White person, and I was Asian. What [the conference] really wanted to stress was [that] you know all about your own culture but how much do you know other people’s culture? They really wanted to test that and that’s why we got put into groups of not of our own culture, to really understand other groups of culture. We had to go to presentations or conferences that spoke about Latinos. . . . We got time to go on our own to different ones that we wanted to go to as well.

The conference gave him the chance to think more about his ethnicity and to better understand Latino culture.

When asked what it is like to be a student at the university, Dylan explained that he was “lucky”:

How many people can afford to go to college now or just don’t want to go to college really don’t know what they’re missing out on. I feel lucky to have gotten a scholarship . . . and having parents to pay for some of my college expenses that are left over. [The university staff] really stress join a club, get out and socialize, do something, make new friends. I’m very lucky to be a student at [the university].
Since being in college, Dylan felt he had taken on more responsibility but also that he had changed in other ways:

I’m more introduced into cultures, more opportunities to go look for information or check out certain things, whereas in high school, we had nothing like that. College pretty much prepares you for the world. You have so many opportunities to go out. In high school, I was into . . . figuring out what my history and background was. Not the top priority. I didn’t know of any resources I could go to other than the Internet and now [the university], they’re all about multicultural [inaudible] and all races are equal. I go to the Korean Student Association and learn something there or go to the library and learn something or talk to other Asian people. So that’s changed a bit to where I’m more into finding out about my background.

When asked to name his ethnicity, he stated, “I say that I’m Korean, South Korean. I just don’t look like it or act it.” He added,

I can’t really change who I am. So if they ask, “Where are you from, where did you grown up?” I’ll say, “Oh I’m from [small town], but I’m Korean, I was adopted from South Korea when I was 4 months old.” I’m from [the state], so I’m technically White, but I’m still Korean. [When I was younger], I identified as Korean. But I didn’t really feel I was. Growing up White, with a White mom and dad, [I became] Americanized. People don’t believe I’m Korean, they just feel I’m Korean American ’cause I was adopted when I was 4 months, but I was born in Korea. Since it had to do with the whole fact that I grew up in America, which is why I don’t feel as much of a difference if I say I’m South Korean or I’m South Korean adoptee. I feel it’s the
same life path. Obviously if I grew up in South Korea, I would be different. I would have different culture, food, clothes. I feel it’s whether I’m South Korean or South Korean adoptee, it’s the same thing.

When asked if race was an important part of his identity, he stated,

I think very important. I mean to anybody you might stand out and maybe you don’t want to be like everybody else. It’s kind of boring. I feel like race makes it exciting for some people, ’cause we’re not all the same. Two people from South Korea could be totally different; individually speaking everyone’s different. I mean race-wise everyone’s different. It’s an important part of my life. Obviously I wouldn’t be talking with you if I wasn’t Asian.

When asked to provide advice to younger students, he stated, “I would say they picked a really good school to come to.” He added,

It’s very centered on its culture, outreaching people, informing them, teaching them about race and identity. We have tons for resources and it’s not just about race and culture, but it’s a really good college and they have lots of good programs you get to choose. They get you involved so you’re not sitting in your dorm.

After graduation, Dylan was planning to attend graduate school and then he would like to move to a big city. He said,

I like the big city. I would choose to live in New York or California or Chicago, somewhere that [is] not as small as my hometown. Smaller towns are very quiet but too quiet is not where I really want [to be].

He wanted to learn more about Korea and Korean culture. He stated he would
Definitely try to learn Korean. If I do ever travel to Korea, I could speak some. I see myself learning Korean hopefully and visiting their city, getting a first-hand look on how they live. One of my dreams is to actually live in Korea before I died, too.

When asked if he would adopt his own children, he said,

Probably from Korea. Somewhere or any kid really that needs help. I’d probably look into Korea or Asian something. It depends if we have our own kids. Lately a lot of my friends that are married or getting married or engaged; they talk about kids. A lot of them have told me they want to adopt. I hear there’s a lot of Korean kids that are put up for adoption, more than any others. A lot of my friends have told me that they want to adopt from the Korean agency. I say, “It’s pretty cool actually.” I’d say, “Go ahead.” I had a friend call me about it. “I’m thinking about adopting an Asian kid. What do you think?” “I think it’s pretty amazing ’cause obviously me being adopted, I have good life now and a second chance to actually grow up and have a life ’cause somebody adopted me.” I feel adoption is a good opportunity. . . . It’s a lifesaver.

He reflected on his own youth saying:

My parents never really spoke of the Korean culture or of my own race. I was always White. If I had kids, I would want to every now and then, if I whatever I learn, I would try passing it on. See what they get out of it. What they take from it growing up. I feel culture is dying. International kids [who] come here are losing their strong side of their customs and they’re doing Americanized, letting go of the past. It’s a bad thing.
Ian

Ian was adopted when he was about 1 year old. At the time of the interviews, he was 18 years old and a first-year student at the university. He grew up in a small town in the same state as the university.

He did not know why his parents decided to adopt. He could only speculate on the answer to that question. He had two brothers: one 17 years old and adopted from South Korea, the other 15 years old and his parents’ biological child. Ian did not know much about his birth parents. He said, “I was put up for adoption because they were really young. They were too young to have me and they couldn’t afford it. They weren’t in that stage of their life and that’s all I really know.” Because of being adopted, Ian had strong feelings about relationships. When asked about dating in high school, he stated,

I did not really care about dating. Part of it was since I knew my birth parents had to give me up when I was younger, I didn’t want the temptation ’cause I never want to put my kid through that. I want to be there for my own child. A lot of teachers and a few other kids . . . [thought] that’s really responsible. . . . I had teachers say, “You’re going to go far in life with that philosophy.”

He recognized that the situation his birth parents were in was not ideal. Ian had an interest in meeting his birth parents. He explained, “I want to go over. In Korea, they have places where they can help you find your biological parents. I want to do that when I get older ’cause it probably costs lots of money [laughter].” When asked who he would want to travel to Korea with him, he said,
If my parents wanted to go . . . I would be totally fine with that; that would be fun. If my brothers wanted to [go]. If I get married, if my spouse wanted to go, that would be fine. They can meet their biological mother and father-in-law [laughter]. If I had a close friend who wanted to go and be there for me, that’s fine. I really wouldn’t mind either way.

When asked about his awareness of being adopted, he talked about when he and his family went for a while to a camp for Korean adopted children:

I did like learning about my country. It was cool to be surrounded by people who weren’t completely different to me. When I walked down the hall, I wasn’t like, “I am totally different looking.” . . . I get that here [at the university], too. In my hometown, it was basically all Caucasians and then, when I come to college, there’s lots of minorities so it feels different.

Ian’s parents took him to culture camp but they did not actively encourage him to explore the culture in other ways. He remembered,

They told me I was Korean, and so therefore, you are going to be different. You are going to be different and people might bring that up and say, “I was adopted from Korea, not China” like most people automatically assume. They said if I wanted to . . . read about it and ask questions, ask your teacher if they know anything about the country. [My parents] would try to answer questions if I asked, but they really didn’t know.
Ian had learned a lot about the culture at the camp but he did not remember much about it. When he was a child, he had done some reading about the culture and he had had a particular interest in dragons. He remembered,

“I’ve read books about Korea when I was younger ’cause I was mildly interested. The lack of talk of large poisonous things that depressed me [laughter]. In middle school, we would do reports on countries and I would try to pick Korea as often as I could because one, as soon as I did it once, I had the research I needed for the next time and two, I liked doing, being able to talk about my native country and possibly dispelling certain myths that the middle schoolers have about people from Asia. Contrary to belief, we do not all worship dragons and we do not always eat rice, although rice is very popular.

Also, he had had some exposure to the traditional food. His mother made it for his brother’s birthday. He recalled, “I don’t really like it. My brother likes it for his birthday. Our family has a tradition for your birthday, you get to pick what meal we have. Because my brother’s American, he has to have cake [laughter].” His parents celebrated Ian and his brother’s arrival days but it became more complicated as they got older and they had other commitments. Usually they went out to eat and they got a small monetary gift.

Ian always enjoyed differentiating himself from his peers. He related how, for school pictures “when I was in fourth grade, I had a traditional Korean [outfit] . . . that you’d wear in a traditional Korean ceremony for a kid. The kids were like, ‘What is this?’ My teachers knew and they’re like, ‘That’s really cool.’”
Ian’s mother had stayed at home when her children were young and since then had worked a couple of part-time jobs. His father was a pharmacist in their small town so he knew everyone. When asked about his parents, Ian recounted,

They got more laid back the older and more mature we got and they taught us how to act. We were always decently good in school. . . . They made sure get your homework done before you watch TV. Basic stuff parents are supposed to teach their kids. As they got older, they got more lenient. If we wanted to go out with friends . . . as long as you tell them where we’re going or get back at a decent time, they did not care ’cause they knew they could trust me about what I did. They didn’t care where the heck I went. I would go out with friends to restaurants. We would go over to their houses . . . all the time. That’s the same with all my brothers. They raised us well [laughter].

Ian felt like he had more in common with his youngest brother than with his middle brother. Ian and his youngest brother were not particular about their clothes or their hair like the middle brother was. Ian and his youngest brother also liked music and they both played the same instrument. The middle brother was more involved in sports. Ian reflected on his youngest brother by saying:

He’s technically the most sociable out of all of us. He’s White so you never really have the barrier or people thinking. People didn’t care that I was Asian, but still he’s different. When you’re a kid, you’re a little bit more wary of that. I would seclude myself. I didn’t mind being alone, I liked having time to myself. He never really did that so he’s a bit more sociable. He’s really good at math, better than me ironically as
Asians are supposed to be good at math. I hate math [laughter]. He likes it. He likes to play video games like I do. He’s basically more like me in most aspects. We’re different obviously. He’s the youngest child. . . . He got babied a lot and he was my parents’ biological son.

Ian did not always get along with or understand his middle brother:

He’s the jock and he’s different and he likes to make fun of [me and our other brother]. Honestly, he’s smart in some ways, otherwise he is not the most intelligent person I’ve ever met. If I make him mad, he’s like, “Why do you have to be the dumb Chinese kid?” and like, “I’m Korean. You’re also adopted! I’m not Chinese [laughter].” It makes no sense to me. He used to be cocky until he figured out me and [my youngest brother] got way better grades than he did so he needs us for help on homework [laughter].

Growing up, Ian got to see his extended family on a regular basis because they lived nearby in the state or in an adjacent state. Once, he had a negative encounter with one of his uncles. He remembered,

It was [my uncle] and my dad, and they thought I was asleep. It was mostly my uncle, my dad was listening, grunting every once in a while [laughter]. My uncle’s a doctor, he’s like, “All the new doctors coming in are Asian and all the best jobs are going to go to Asians. All the Mexican’s are just taking over all the factories.” Eventually I sat up and said, “Shut up. They’re not.” They looked at me funny. I said, “It’s not like that.” I mostly stood up for my racial/ethnic background.
His relationship with his uncle had been difficult since then. He had experienced another incident shortly after September 11, 2001, when his aunt made a comment about a mosque near her house being a training facility for terrorists. Ian’s mother had laughed at the comment, which upset Ian.

The town in which Ian had grown up had fewer than 5,000 residents. Because it was a small town, everyone knew each other. The town was not very diverse. Other than himself, his brother and one other adopted kid, there were no Asians in his town.

In high school, Ian’s friends all had been White, and most were girls. He said he had hung out with girls a lot more than he hung out with guys, which led a lot of guys to think that I had 50 girlfriends. . . . I did have guy friends, a lot of them were older than me, and so they’re in college now. We still get together on weekends and play card games that aren’t suitable for our age, but we do it anyway because it’s fun [laughter]. Video games and card games, that’s all we do. If I wanted to have serious talks, I would hang out with girls . . . which gave me a lot of insight into what happens in the female mind.

While in high school, he had worked at the library, which he really enjoyed. Also, he had spent his summers swimming for fun. He had not joined a team because he did not like the competitive aspect of it.

One of Ian’s favorite high school and college activities was band. He enjoyed being a part of multiple bands at his high school. He recalled,
For the most part, I had a blast in high school with band. I loved going to the football games for marching band. I loved going to contests for jazz band and the show choir competitions were by far the best. I looked forward to them every year.

At the university, he was in the marching band that performed at football games. He said, “I love marching band here. [I will do it] all four years [laughter]. Band camp was hard ’cause it was lots of hard work. The year is so fun.” He had been thinking about joining the jazz band but he had not auditioned. Other than participating in band, he was attending Bible studies and went to church. He had attended a few church services at one of the larger churches in town that had a live band.

Although both of his parents had gone to the rival university in the state, Ian chose this university because

I knew people who graduated before me in high school who went here and…they loved it. I knew it was really good for science, which I knew I wanted to go into, and I had friends who were also going here. I’m like, “Let’s go to [this university].”

Then, I got that scholarship. Now I’m really going to go [laughter].

Ian had received a lucrative minority scholarship. The program required him to take two orientation classes with the other scholarship recipients during his first year and complete community service projects.

Ian did not declare a major until the middle of his first year. His mother had suggested that he keep his options open. He picked biology. He stated,

I like animals and I knew that was where I needed to be if I wanted to study them.

When I was in first grade, I could name 50 different kinds of sharks off the top of my
head. When I got to third grade, I could name 50 different kinds of dinosaurs off the top of my head and pronounce them all. I moved from dinosaurs to reptiles and then animals in general. I want to study snakes. If I worked in a zoo in the reptile department, I would be so happy with my life [laughter].

Because he was a first-year student, he was taking general education classes. Ian had found his classes to be pretty easy except for his math class. He said,

I like my classes for the most part. I hate math so much. Not the class, just the topic. It bores me. I’ve noticed that if you go to class, pay attention, and take notes you generally don’t have to study for 2 hours a day on this subject. If you go to class, you pay attention, you take notes and then, when you get back to your room, you look over your notes for 15 minutes. You’re fine.

He felt like he had had a smooth transition to the university because he was focused on his school work. Also, he felt pretty strongly about his decision not to drink. He was not interested in being involved with people who drink while in college.

Other than interacting with his adviser for his scholarship program, he had used a couple of support services. His advisor worked in the multicultural office. He had asked him a few questions about registration for classes. He also had attended some supplemental instruction sessions to prepare for tests.

Ian had a group of friends at the university with whom he would hang out. He had spent time with one woman from his high school who was in the band, her boyfriend, and a couple of other men from band. They had gotten to know one another during band camp and
had continued to spend time together. Ian did not get along with his friend’s boyfriend. Her boyfriend had a tendency to say insensitive comments to Ian. He recounted,

[My friend] likes the band, Dragon Force, which is a rock band. They’re actually based in Japan but they play the song called “Through the Fire and Flames,” which is the hardest song ever on Guitar Hero, which is where it’s famous from and it sounds really cool. [My male friend] was playing that one day and I started singing the lyrics and [his female friend’s boyfriend] was like, “Don’t sing that. Just cause you’re Asian doesn’t mean you can sing it,” and I’m like, “You’re an idiot.” I just gave him the “you’re the most dumbest person I’ve ever seen right now” look [laughter]. He says stupid stuff. He says “who cares” to me a lot when I’m talking about something. I put up with him ’cause he’s [my friend’s] boyfriend and I like [her].

Ian had noticed that since being in college he had been making fun of people more often. Recently, he realized he had been making fun of his female friend too often, so he had apologized to her and had vowed to not tease her as much.

Since coming to the university, he had not met many other Asian students. He explained,

Except for my scholarship class, not really. Part of it might be just ’cause I grew up in a small town so I’m used to being the only Asian so it doesn’t bother me as much. If I happen to find a friend who’s Asian, that’d be okay. I’m not choosy about what race people are [laughter].

When asked about his ethnicity, Ian replied, “I say, ‘I’m Korean.’” Sometimes people say to me as a joke, they’re like, “You don’t like football? That’s un-American.” I’m not
American, I’m Korean [laughter]. My mom gets mad at me when I say that ’cause I’m an American citizen.” When asked about his ethnicity in the third interview, he stated,

I’m not sure if America really has an ethnic group. I’ve more or less been assimilated by this culture. I never learned enough about Korea. I didn’t live there long to really feel out of place; this is where I grew up. I’m more or less American. I don’t really like Korean food. I like American food. I like chicken. I’m more or less American.

When asked what it is like to be Korean at the university, he said,

I really haven’t noticed. No racist comments have been thrown at me, no stereotypes. Aside from noticing that there are a lot more Asian people around here. I think there’s less stereotypes here because there’s more people [of different races] around then there are in my hometown where, every once in a while in high school, I got some stereotypes. Part of it might be because we’re all much more mature. I haven’t actually been around drunk people. If enough drunk people were around me, I might get some comments thrown at me, but I try to avoid drunk people.

He mentioned that sometimes he has forgotten that other Asian students come from Asian families in the U.S. and international locations.

I have the mindset, I know it’s not true, but that everyone was adopted. There’s no way on earth that’s true. There are plenty of Asian people here and they’re speaking their own language. I know they’re foreign exchange students. It catches me off guard, but I’m just like, “Oh, they’re foreign exchange students.” I can’t understand a word they’re saying but . . . that’s just me not understanding their language.
Ian tried not to use derogatory or racist language. He stated, “I get very, very angry if people start using slang terms for races, just in general.” He added,

I don’t like it. I never use those words. I will swear before I use words like that. I absolutely hate them. If people like, “You don’t like pie, that’s un-American.” I’m like, “I know; I’m Korean” [laughter]. I try not to put other races down ’cause it makes me feel like a dirt bag and I try to make sure people around me don’t do that either ’cause then they look like dirt bags. In all honesty, if they start making those kinds of comments in their workplace, they’re probably going to get yelled at by their boss. People say Asians are good at math. I’m like, “No, I’m not. I’m terrible at math” [laughter]. I HATE math and I suck at it in all honesty. Basically what I want people to know is think before you say something because you never know. Just think before you say something and don’t ask stupid questions.

While in college, Ian was dating a girl that he knew from his job at the library in his hometown. He reflected,

We’ve been dating a month and a half. I saw her for the first time since we’ve been dating last weekend. Even though it’s a long distance relationship, we have a really strong relationship. She’s home schooled, and very, very sheltered [laughter]. Technically she’s the equivalent to a senior. She is thinking about coming here next year. She doesn’t know if she wants to go to college. Most of her family is pushing her towards it so she thinks she probably will.

Until recently, she had never been to a football game or played a video game. Ian mentioned how he learned in sociology that mixed race couples are very rare in the United States. He
said, “Sometimes they said the ethnic difference is too big. Since I was raised in the United States, I don’t think I’m that much ethnically different but technically since we are different races, it is unusual.”

Ian was devoted to his girlfriend. In his scholarship class, they talked about gender stereotypes. He raised his hand and stated,

She’s [my girlfriend] the most beautiful girl on the planet to me and I don’t need another girl. I see other girls. I hang out with other girls . . . but my girlfriend is special to me and I don’t care what she looks like. . . . She loves me, and that’s all that matters. All the guys are like, “Yeah you don’t mean that.” I’m like, “Actually, I do. You’d be surprised. You guys just haven’t met someone, you just don’t know about that yet.” I may have offended several guys in that room. I think the respect for me from all the girls went up. I had several girls say if you need us to tell your girlfriend you said that, we will.

Ian felt like his relationship with his family had stayed the same since he had been in college. He described,

I was always on pretty good terms with my parents. I was never a trouble maker. . . . The only difference is instead of seeing them every day . . . they call me more than I call them [laughter]. Now we have long phone conversations where my phone has died twice during the middle of those conversations. I do look forward to going home, not only ’cause I get to see my family, but ’cause I miss people back home, especially my girlfriend and my cats [laughter].
When asked if he would seek out other Korean adoptees while in college, he responded,

Maybe if the opportunity presented itself. It would be kind of cool to hang out either [with] an Asian group in general or other Korean adoptees so I could sit there and not stick out. . . . I enjoy sticking out. I enjoy being the unique one in the group. It’d be interesting to see if I’m not the random black-haired Asian kid sitting with a bunch of Caucasian people [laughter].

One thing that Ian had learned about during college is the issue of power in relation to race:

One other thing I figured out, minority does not mean that there’s not as many of you because that’s not true. It’s who has power. The White people will always be considered the majority because they are in power. The majority of people in the government are Caucasian. So to all those White people who’d like to think it’s not fair that the Asian people get all these scholarships. I’m like, “Well, put lots of Asian and other racial groups into our government and then you guys can also get scholarships. ’Cause you’ll be a minority.” That’d be interesting. As a general rule, I think White people today are not racist at all. My friends are White and they’re not racists. Their parents aren’t racist. I have met a couple who have racist grandparents. But as a general rule, their grandparents aren’t racist. But if you go back far enough, you will find that part of their family was extremely racist just ’cause that was the culture. . . . As unfair as it is, their offspring now are paying for it when they don’t get the scholarship. All the disadvantages that people are always complaining about
nowadays. They don’t have the scholarships, the jobs. All the Asian people are getting the computer jobs. The stereotypes are that we’re lazy and not as hard working. None of those are necessarily true, but they’re paying for what they’re great, great, great grandparents did way back when the country was going. I know it’s not fair but you have your ancestors to thank for that [laughter]. The reason you’re not getting all this stuff is cause you’re paying for what your ancestors did.

Ian was unsure where he would live after he graduated. He stated, “If I end up studying reptiles that are poisonous, I imagine going to somewhere with lots of poisonous snakes, like Australia. There or Africa, but I’d rather go to Australia.” He seemed interested in adopting his own children one day. He said,

If me and my spouse want to have kids, I would definitely bring up adoption. If we did want kids, I would like to adopt at least one. If I found out I have a sibling and they have kids and . . . didn’t learn from my parents, if I could adopt them that would be cool ’cause then I could finally say [that] I actually get to live with someone I’m related to by blood.

Ellen

Ellen was adopted when she was 8 months old. At the time of the interview, she was 20 years old. Ellen was from a small town, and she studied journalism at the university.

Ellen’s parents never told her about their decision to adopt. She reflected, “My mom was married once before and she had my half-sister. She got remarried [to my dad] and then she adopted my brother, and she adopted me, too. So I’m thinking that they couldn’t have kids.” Ellen’s half-sister was 35 years old, and her brother was 21 years old. Her brother was
adopted from South Korea, but his birth parents were in the U.S. military and they were White. He had met his birth parents a few years ago. Ellen talked about her birth parents and she said, “I know that they were both professors at a university in Pusan, but that’s all I know. I’ve thought about trying to find them, but that was a few years ago. I don’t really think I want to.”

As a youngster, Ellen had an interest in learning more about Korean culture. She had studied Korean language with a graduate student at the local university who was from Korea. Ellen reflected,

I was really interested for a while. I took Korean language lessons for a long time. I did a lot of research. It would have been middle school age—sixth, seventh grade. At that point, I realized that it was different that I didn’t know anything about Korea so it was finding out an identity. At one point, the interest just went away. I took language lessons from fifth grade until eighth grade. Then, after that, I really didn’t want to anymore. I pretty much cut that whole thing off. When I stopped, I could still write. If the language is in front of me, I could read it and I could tell you what parts of it meant, but I couldn’t tell you the whole sentence. I’m definitely not fluent anymore but I could make it maybe [laughter].

Her parents were supportive of her learning more about Korea:

They never tried to hide from the fact that I was adopted. When we’d go to the library, they would show me those kinds of books [about adoption]. My mom got a Korean cookbook and she would make some stuff. They wanted to be really open about everything.
Ellen and her mother had talked about traveling to Korea but their plans had not panned out yet.

In growing up, Ellen had a difficult relationship with her brother. Talking about her brother she related:

He was the bad kid. He was always in trouble. He didn’t get good grades. He didn’t have a great reputation. When we were growing up, we were close because we lived together; we were forced to. He was immature. He was a year older than me and I think he started [in] eighth grade. It started with the people he hung out with—they were always the bad kids that did bad stuff and then obviously to fit in you do bad stuff, too. Just seeing what that does to your family I think was not good. . . . It was . . . drawn out for so long. ’Cause even after he graduated high school, it didn’t stop. She felt distanced from him because of his lifestyle and the negative impact it had had on their family. Recently, she had worked to make amends with her brother and get to know him. She said,

Now I’m actually getting to know what he’s like. My brother is 21 and he got married a year ago. He is on his way to Afghanistan. This will be his last tour and then he’s getting out. He’s in the Marines.

Ellen had a different outlook on things than did other members of her family. When asked if attending college was an expectation in her family, she remembered,

They knew I always was going to [college]. I always knew I was going, too. My brother didn’t go to college. My sister did for a year and dropped out, and my mom didn’t go to college. My dad did, but I don’t think it was ever [an expectation].
When asked about her family having any preconceived ideas about Asians, she said, Going through high school, I’ve always been pretty smart. I think [my family] always thought that Asian people are always smart, which isn’t necessarily true. . . . That was my brother’s thing, too. He would make jokes, “Oh I’m from Korea but I didn’t get any of the smartness.” But it was always just joking around.

Ellen felt disconnected from her extended family, especially on her mother’s side. She reflected on a recent family event:

We went to a family reunion this year, but it was really sad ’cause I didn’t know my aunts, I didn’t even know half their names ’cause that’s how little I’ve ever been around them. My mom didn’t really get along with them. None of them really reciprocated staying in touch so they drifted apart.

Ellen did not feel she had a strong bond with her extended family. She stated,

[My parents] really want me to have close relationships with my brother and my sister and my aunts and my uncles and my grandparents, and I understand where they are coming from. . . . I feel really awful saying this ’cause I know you are supposed to have really close relationships with your aunts and your uncles and your grandparents, but it’s hard to have that connection because I don’t ever see them. But then those relationships were formed because of bloodlines and obviously I don’t have that with anybody. I don’t have it with my parents either but I have relationships with them from growing up there, being raised by them. I’ve tried to explain it to my parents, too, and they don’t really understand. It’s hard for me to have that [close relationship with my family]. I think part of it is just me, too. My brother is totally okay with it.
Sometimes they almost seem [like] . . . complete strangers to me, which I know is ’cause I don’t see them very much, but it’s just weird. I really do think that that it is [not looking like them]. I do have a different personality than the rest of my family, and I’ve always had different interests and different goals. My brother is already married, wants to have kids. My sister had kids starting when she was 22, got married early just like my brother. Then there’s me who’s been like, “I don’t really care if I get married. I don’t really want to have kids. I want to move away from here.” They live right around [our hometown]. I’ve just always been the different one and that’s how my whole family is. So I think that they all talk about that stuff, do that stuff, and then I’m just different [laughter]. They’ll ask me [about my goals], but then they’re just, “Whoa, that’s weird” [laughter].

Ellen felt guilty that she did not have close family relationships because she felt like those relationships are expected.

Ellen’s hometown was very small. There was a small college in the town, which, she said, was the only source of any type of diversity in the town. “I looked up the demographics of [my hometown] and it was 99.8 percent white. It’s a nice town. The people there are really nice. Everybody knows each other. It’s not my cup a tea. But I grew up there.”

At her school, there were two other students adopted from Korea. She was not close to them because they were not in the same grade. Because she attended a small school, Ellen was involved in a variety of activities. She was president of the student body and in an honor society. She was also the regional student of the year. She stated,
There are other people in my grade that were smarter than me that probably deserved some of that stuff more than I did. I was more of a people person than a lot of the really smart kids, so maybe that’s why [I received all of these honors].

She also had been involved in athletics, including cheerleading, track, and gymnastics. She reflected, “High school [was] really fun for me. I had a big group of friends. We hung out all the time. Pretty much all my friends were White. I had more guy friends than girl friends.”

She also had dated two guys in high school. One of the relationships had continued from her junior year in high school until her freshman year in college. One funny thing she said was, “Freshman year, [my boyfriend at the time] roomed with the other kid that I had dated that year [laughter]. So that was always awkward.” When asked why they had broken up, she reflected,

We just didn’t have anything in common anymore. In high school, he was involved in everything, too. I was a cheerleader, I was in everything. Our families knew each other. We were pretty much the same version of each other in boy and girl form.

Then I came here [to the university] and he came here and I think we just got kind of different. A big part of my life is being active. I’ve always been in sports. I cheered here for two years. I really like that stuff and he just kind of faded away. I don’t have the same interests as [his friends]. It started to really not work out. We broke up for a few months and then we got back together for another year. It was just kind of hard to let go just ’cause it was so much time. But not meant to be [laughter].
During college, she dated another young man from her hometown for about a year. They had met at her job at the college in her hometown. She recalled, “I don’t know what happened to that one. It’s just a mess [laughter].” She was no longer in a romantic relationship.

Ellen’s decision to attend this university was a complicated one. She had visited eight different colleges across the country from New York to California before deciding to stay in the state. One of her close friends and her boyfriend had decided to attend the university. She also had decided, “I wasn’t quite ready to go that far away yet.” Also, she had earned a spot on the university’s cheerleading squad. She had cheered for two years and then she took a year off. She stated,

The thing about cheerleading is you’re technically a student–athlete, but you don’t get everything the athletes get. They get tutors and they get study halls. . . . We don’t get that stuff so you have to plan everything out on your own. . . . We get stipends as long we meet all the criteria. You have to fundraise a certain amount [of money] and do a certain amount of appearances. . . . The fundraising is definitely the most difficult part. The stipend increases with the number of years you’ve been on the squad. There are expenses with cheerleading. We pay out of pocket for camp and camp clothes. When we go on trips, we don’t pay for the flight, but once we’re there we pay for everything so it’s mostly recovering your expenses. It’s a lot. It was really fun. I loved it. I didn’t really feel like I had enough time, especially now that I’m trying to get more involved in the [student newspaper], that’s gonna really help me a lot.
When she started at the university, she had thought she wanted to be a history major with the goal of going into politics but she changed her major to journalism. She was interested in sports broadcasting and magazine writing. She recognized that it might be difficult to break into the field of sports broadcasting as a woman. She worked both at the university’s newspaper and one of the university’s magazines as a copy editor. She had started at the student newspaper over the summer and had learned how to be a reporter from the other students at the paper. Her roommate was working at the magazine and they needed a copy editor so she had taken the opportunity, and she also had written a column in the magazine. In the future, she might attend graduate school for journalism, get a professional job, or participate in a service program like Peace Corps. She said, “I would be interested in doing a service program even after I graduate [to] . . . just go and help and see what happens.”

Outside of cheerleading, the school newspaper, and the magazine, she did not have a lot of extra time for activities. During her first couple of years at the university, she had not attended church, but she had a renewed interest in the previous few months. She got involved in one of the local churches. She reflected,

I really liked the church and I went to it all summer and then they started talking about how they have the college student [group] on Thursdays once school started, so I just started going to that. I like that, too. The first time that I went to [the student group], I had no idea what to expect. I didn’t know how full it would be. It’s fuller than the church service on Sundays.
Ellen had experienced insensitivity from professors at the university. She recounted one situation:

A lot of professors assume that if you’re Asian, I live in China and I’m an international student. That’s what I get all the time. When I ask a professor a question or when I raise my hand, they talk to you different. They talk to you slower or louder. This last semester, I was in journalism, big lecture, and the professor was asking what movie everyone in the classroom had seen and somebody said, “Lion King” and she was like, “Okay, who in here hasn’t seen Lion King?” and nobody raised their hand ’cause everybody’s seen Lion King. She singled me out, and she was assuming that I was from China. She said, “Oh, did they have a Chinese version of Lion King?” It was that big lecture hall in [classroom building], that 300 person room. The people around me were like, “What?!’cause I said back to her, “I’m from Iowa.” That was not okay. She’s not an arrogant, ignorant woman. She’s educated, a respectable person, which is what blows your mind even more. When you see it from people that maybe really have no idea, that assume all Asian people are Chinese, you expect it from people like that. But from a professor, you don’t really expect that [laughter]. I understand that probably a lot of those Chinese students aren’t the greatest with English, but I’m also sure that those students don’t appreciate when professors automatically assume that they have to talk loud and slow to them either. Even if I was a Chinese student, I don’t think I would have appreciated any of that [laughter]. She has made numerous types of references like that. She needs to take a minute and think about not saying that again [laughter].
Ellen used this experience to better understand what international students may face at the university. She stated because she is Korean,

[I’m] getting another experience of what international students might have [to deal with]. It’s taught me to be more sensitive to other people. Sometimes international students do things that we might think are weird but it has taught me to be like, “Well you don’t know what it’s to be them.” Honestly, I’ve learned a lot from being different. I don’t really see myself as different.

When asked about her ethnicity, she hesitated and then questioningly said, “Korean?”

When asked what she would consider her race, she explained,

When I applied for college, I put “prefer not to answer.” So if it’s on a survey I will. If race matters in the survey, but if I’m applying for a scholarship or for college, then I never have put that I’m Asian. I don’t believe in the [idea that] you should get a scholarship just because you’re, I mean there are students that deserve those, but I’ve never thought of myself as . . . [Asian]. I’ve grown up just the same as anyone else. I don’t deserve a scholarship just because I was born in Korea [laughter]. That was just my take on that [topic] [laughter].

Ellen felt like her experiences in college have taught her a lot about herself. She reflected that she had,

learned a lot of independence. Not just [independence] . . . from my parents but from that relationship standpoint. I have friends now that I’ll tell them they’re serial daters and that’s what I used to be. I was in solid relationships for 5 or 6 years. I learned a lot about myself. . . . Just learning not to depend on someone else to define yourself.
I’ve also learned what it’s like for somebody else to depend on you. Since I was really close to my family, I depended on my mom and my dad for pretty much everything. When my friends have problems, it’s a totally different experience to be there for someone instead of you’re going to someone else for help. I like that role reversal [laughter].

She had grown into someone to whom her friends could go with their problems, and she seemed to embrace the responsibility to help them. She also had had the opportunity to be around more Asian people. She said that she easily could tell if a student is from the United States or another country:

I’ve definitely noticed that ’cause it’s easy for me, as being Asian too, I could look at someone and tell in an instant if they’re an international student or if they’re like me. It’d probably be based on what they’re wearing. Or even the makeup they’re wearing. It’s just completely different, which is why I think when people treat me that I’m like, “You can’t tell?” It’s easy for me to tell, but probably not as easy if you’re not looking for it, to tell.

She recognized that, although she is more attuned to differences between international and domestic students, other people might not have the same awareness. Her roommates may have been some of these individuals. She was living with three other people in an apartment.

My roommates are like, “I always forget you’re not White” [laughter]. They’re like, “Well, you don’t act like you’re Asian,” but I’m, “I don’t know what that means” [laughter]. It never would ever hurt my feelings ’cause I know what they are saying. I understand what they are saying. When they look at me, they don’t see an Asian girl.
I totally understand what they are saying but I just want to be, “Well, how do Asian people act then? What would make it so that you would see me as Asian?” ’cause obviously, I am [laughter].

One thing about Ellen’s appearance that she noticed on a daily basis is her scar from her cleft lip. She recounted, “I was born with a cleft lip. I do notice it. Other people notice it, ’cause they’ve asked me about it. I could change that but there’s not a whole lot more they can do.” She had a couple of surgeries to correct the problem and a couple of her teeth came in the wrong way. Otherwise, she has not had to deal with other issues related to it. Another health related issue she dealt with was anxiety. She experienced the symptoms last semester. She said, “I would wake up in the morning and not want to move. I didn’t have any energy or motivation. I just wanted to lay there.” She went back to her hometown for tests that were inconclusive. One day, she just snapped out of it.

In terms of campus support services, she had used the multicultural office. She had gone to some events but she questioned why she was receiving a notification about an event for multicultural students. She recounted her experience, saying:

Freshman year, they had something and I went to that. I went to something this year. It was [hosted by the multicultural office] and the athletic department, I think they called it “students of color” that were athletes, got together at [a local bowling alley]. I went ’cause there was free pizza and free bowling [laughter]. I didn’t understand what it was at first. I didn’t know if it was supposed to be for me or not. I think the reason it confused me is ’cause I don’t consider myself “multicultural.”’ I think it’s maybe labeled incorrectly ’cause I live in the same culture as everyone else and I have
since I was 8 months old. I would understand multi-, what would it be racial or multi-ethnicity or something like that. I just didn’t understand it ‘cause I was in multicultural, does it mean other cultures than actual people that are actually from other cultures? Because I’m not. I was confused as to if it really applied to me or if they were accidently spamming me [laughter]. Now I get it, so it doesn’t annoy me anymore. It was confusing at first.

Also, she knew about a Korean student group but had not participated in their events. She stated,

I think what’s always held me from doing that is I don’t know anybody else that’s Korean. It’s not that I don’t like going places by myself, but a new experience and by myself is [intimidating], that’s why I never went. It was easier not to go than to go.

When she graduated, Ellen was interested in living in a bigger city. She explained, “I like bigger cities. I’m not the cold weather person. So that’s where that whole South idea came from. . . . I guess it depends where I could get a job, too [laughter].” This lack of interest in living nearby is another source of conflict with her family.

When asked about her interest in adopting children, she stated that she didn’t think she would ever want kids:

If I do want kids, I’d probably would adopt them rather than have my own. From wherever. I’m not too picky. I know they have stricter . . . policies. I know I would adopt. There’d be a one percent chance of me having my own child. Some people will say, “Oh, it’s selfish to have your own kid, if there’s so many other kids that don’t have parents.” I don’t think that’s really true because everybody wants to have
their own kids. I totally understand that but for me since I was adopted and I know my life now and probably where it would have been and just thinking about stuff that, it would just make me want to adopt.

Ellen was a reflective thinker. She thought deeply about topics that were important to her. At the end of the second interview, I asked if she had anything else to add and she brought up an interesting topic. She told me,

One of the things that has always just struck me as odd is whenever there’s articles about, any discussions about how being Black is . . . how that community would get ignored or get treated differently. I always wonder why you never hear anybody talk about what it’s like to [be] Asian. I used to be a history major. All we ever talked about was the Japanese . . . because of the war and the internment camps. Sometimes they would reference Chinatown and urban development. But then it was all ethnic groups, how they grouped off. [Asian] is such a huge group that it’s odd to me. Maybe there’s not as much interest or maybe Asian people don’t care as much. There have been so many civil rights movements with African Americans. So, it makes sense that they are trying to make it better. It just seems weird to me that . . . there’s usually not much of an Asian perspective, other than Chinatown and the internment camps. There wasn’t that kind of discrimination, blatant discrimination, against Asians other than the internment camps, which didn’t affect a whole ton of people for a very long time so there’s not the fueling fire maybe, but I still think that it’s odd. All you ever really hear is a Black and White perspective. It makes you think, “Okay so I guess blacks are a minority, but does that make Asian a minority of another
minority?” It’s just confusing. The whole poverty thing, too. There are a lot of Asians that are in poverty, but I don’t think it’s as widely known as the intercity is known to be more African American. So that could be, too. [In history class,] we learned that it was half of the Asians that came here really succeeded and then the other half are in the same boat as every other immigrant. In history classes, when we learned about culture, it would be you talked about Asia as a whole. Or Africa as a whole, when really I don’t have a whole lot of knowledge about Asia but I do know enough to know, really how different each country is from Asia. It would almost be putting Mexico and the U.S. and Canada and talking about it as whole. That would be it ‘cause Chinese culture and Korean culture from this much knowledge that I have doesn’t seem much of the same at all. And Japanese really either. I don’t know much about anything else, but it doesn’t seem to be super related.

She had taken an African American studies class because she had a good friend who was Black. She would like to learn more about Korean culture. She stated, “I feel like I should. That African American class that I took, there were a lot of African American students there that were learning stuff about their history that they never learned. I feel I should. But I never really had.”

**Adam**

Adam was adopted when he was 5 months old. At the time of the interview, he was 23 years old. He had grown up in a large city in a state adjacent to the location of the university. While at the university, he had studied mechanical engineering. He had graduated in December 2010 with plans to join the Peace Corps, attend medical school, and
join the military medical corps. If he got the invitation to join the Peace Corps, he would live and work in Sub-Saharan Africa. This was the first time in his life he had rebelled against his family’s wishes. His mother, in particular, did not want him to join the Peace Corps or serve in the military; she preferred that he work as an engineer.

Adam had never asked his parents why they adopted. He had a sister who was three years younger than him who also had been adopted from South Korea. He also had a half-sister who was his father’s daughter. She was much older than he, and he did not interact with her.

Adam always had had an interest in learning about Korea. As a child, he read about Korean military history. Adam’s parents helped him pursue his interest in learning more about Korea and Korean culture. They purchased children’s books for Adam and his sister to enable them to listen to children reading the books in Hangul, the Korean language. He also had some Korean music including the traditional music and modern selections. His family had attended an international adoptees’ group in their hometown, and he also had participated in culture camps. He said,

I enjoyed being at those meetings where I would learn [about Korean culture]. [My parents] definitely had to take me to [laughter] those places. There was another camp in Wisconsin, and that was the one that I had been with the most. I was there from kindergarten until my junior year in high school. More than 9 years, my family was present—small to large contributions to that because of me and my sister. My parents naturally developed friends with the parents, as well.
His parents learned to cook Korean food, and they had taught Adam and his sister how to make some dishes. When Adam was about 13 years old, he traveled to Korea with his parents and sister. They took a tour and also purchased a special set of dishes. He said,

We went to Korea . . . my parents spent an exorbitant amount of money getting us over there and the tour was amazing. We were pampered beyond belief. My parents don’t like spending money . . . [that’s] just the way they are. And when we went, they let loose, which was amazing, and they brought back Celadon. It’s a greenish-blue hued pottery that’s glazed and it has the cracks. Korea is famous for that. We bought rice bowls and covers, and little wine flasks and those little tiny wine cups, and chopstick holders. . . . We used to bust those out at home and have our Korean meals with our nice chopsticks and my sister and I always like that. But the food was what was really transitioned into the home and learning that way.

Because Adam was an argumentative person, he often butted heads with his parents, particularly his mother. He explained, “I was always argumentative . . . I like to say, open to discussion. I loved just picking apart arguments and a defending this, defending that. Just because that’s the way I like it.” As he had gotten older, he and his mother had a better understanding of one another and wanted to spend time together having positive interactions. Adam’s mother got defensive if anyone questioned her relationship to her children. He said,

The one thing that does get my mom is the whole possessive—we are her kids. We are her children and she hates it when people ask us, “Do you know your real parents?” because she is my real mom. Without a doubt, 100 percent, [mother’s name] is my mom. I have a birth mom, but I don’t know who that is. It’s not like I
don’t love her . . . I bear absolutely zero resentment but I also don’t wish I grew up in Korea. There’s a reason why she put me up for adoption; that was a very loving thing. Even if it was for the simple fact, even if she wasn’t a good person and she just didn’t want me. I’m glad that she put me [up for adoption] ’cause I have THE BEST FAMILY in the world. Of course, I’m sure every person says, “My parents are the best,” but I wouldn’t have it any other way. My parents are the same way. My mom, if there’s one thing that she won’t have that stoic façade, is [my sister] and me.

Adam had a lot of respect for his family. He told stories about interacting with both pairs of grandparents who lived nearby. He reflected, “My best memories from my childhood would come from relationships . . . with family members. I guess that stems from belonging, being able to share something with somebody else. Those would be my favorite memories.”

Adam’s sister doted on him and she always wanted to be around him. He wished he had included her more in his activities growing up and even now. He said,

I don’t think that I included my sister as much as I should have. And some things, where I actually saw that while it was happening and I’d feel extremely bad. I was just never very inclusive with my sister. I love her as much as I can. If I could give her happiness, I would. If I could take it away from my own life and give it to her, I would want to do that. But when I was younger, I just didn’t care. Even now, I come home and she wants me to . . . go see a movie and [I say], “Well, I’m doing other things.” I don’t get to see my friends all the time. I don’t get to see her either so why am I prioritizing them over her? I notice that I’ve done that. I see that pattern and I try to not do that.
He recognized her desire to spend time with him, and he was trying to remedy that situation.

His sister also was a college student but at another university in the Midwest. Over the years, he had helped her manage her learning disability:

She has a learning disability that is moderate to severe at times. School was hard for her. It was taxing on my parents and they were emotional about it and they did therapy, they did drugs, the whole spectrum. I hated it all. I said, “Why are you making her do this, she hates this?” She was better when she was concentrating and it wasn’t like it dulled her down and made her less. ’Cause she was also very artistic in a way. She has an ear for music.

Adam seemed very protective of his younger sister.

As a youngster, Adam had spent time trying to fit in but he hadn’t been trying to fit into American culture but to distinguish himself. He remembered,

I wasn’t ever going for an American look. I remember looking at pictures of Korean pop icons and getting . . . the hair—it was parted and it was really long in the front and it was shorter in the back. That wasn’t the American guy . . . haircut, but that’s what I was going for. Basically I was just trying to look trendy. I’m sure a lot of people try to do that. Maybe I was trying to look like a cool Asian guy because maybe I didn’t think that I’d be able to look like a cool White guy.

Although Adam had grown up in a larger, affluent town, the population had been homogeneous, with some ethnic groups migrating in over time. He had a lot of friends in his neighborhood as well as in his church. He had been in the choir and the hand bell choir for several years. Because his mother worked as a teacher for special needs children and his
father worked as a veteran’s affairs representative, his family was well-respected and many people knew his parents.

His parents always had encouraged him and his sister to be physically active. As a teenager, he was involved in cross country skiing and he continued that sport at the university. He also was involved in track, mock trial, and band, among other activities. Adam had a tight knit group of friends with whom he spent time. His friends were athletes as well as classmates in his honors classes. He had relationships with girls but “it wasn’t like girlfriend/boyfriend. People assumed, but we never had that label. One of them went from junior year through senior year.” All of his friends were White because of the homogeneous makeup of the town. While in college, he said that he had not dated because, “I’m so busy. I use that as an excuse and it really is. But at the same time, if you don’t have a lot of time, but then again maybe [I] make myself busy for that reason.” He seemed interested in pursuing a relationship in the future, getting married, and having children or adopting them. He stated, “Every single one of my past relationships has been with a Caucasian person, but then again that’s what I’m around all the time. I don’t have any aversion to a relationship with a Korean person or an Asian person.”

Adam started at the university in 2005 as a member of a multicultural scholarship program. This scholarship provided 4 years of tuition, and there was an expectation that alumni give back to the program. Because he was an out-of-state student, the scholarship saved his family tens of thousands of dollars. Sometimes he felt conflicted about the scholarship for “people of color” when he felt ethnically American. He remembered,
They take the top 100 “people of color” in the incoming freshmen class and they offer them the scholarship. By accepting this [scholarship], it is understood that I will be putting money back into the program. . . . It helps people who wouldn’t be able to go to college. Even though it’s not any kind of legal obligation, I do expect to be putting money back in. So I feel like it’s a good thing, too.

Adam majored in mechanical engineering. He picked engineering as a major because: “People said that that would be a good thing for me to do.” He added:

In high school, I excelled in science. I excelled in math, I liked problem solving. I liked designing. I liked drawing. I like drafting. Engineering I always found to be a good fit because I do enjoy science. I enjoy math in order to understand science.

While in college, he had studied abroad for a semester in Australia because “they spoke English [laughter].” He participated in an organized program with 30 other students from the state. He learned about the culture and their more laid back approach to work and life. He had enjoyed the classes and learned a lot about the history and aboriginal people of Australia. He learned about things from a different perspective that had opened his eyes to different issues. He experienced some anti-American discrimination but not anti-Asian sentiments.

On campus, Adam had made use of a few resources, but he told me, “I’ve relied a lot more on friends or just myself. I’ve talked to other people, I mean with [the multicultural office]. I did some stuff with them my freshman year.” He also had served as an officer of the cross country ski club, so he had interacted with university offices to get tasks
accomplished. Adam was a social, friendly young man. He had found a lot of his friends through the scholarship program, classes, martial arts, and church.

Adam was working at the recreation center on campus. He felt comfortable there and had met a lot of people through his job. In the last couple of years, Adam had been exposed to martial arts. He studied taekwondo and hapkido on campus. Through martial arts, he met Korean and Korean American students and instructors. He also gained an appreciation for Korean culture. He saw the martial arts as an opportunity to mentor others. He said,

I’ve only been in [taekwondo] for a year and a few months. I naturally grasp some of it. But at the same time, failing over and over again is so nice, ’cause when you finally get it and then you can teach it and that’s what martial arts is all about is service. What you get from art, you owe the art and the people in it. So you advance rank but that rank is relative. There’s no such thing as a black belt, if you don’t have all the others.

During the fall semester, he had served as a teaching assistant for the hapkido class. He also felt strongly about the benefit of learning a martial art. When asked to provide advice to younger students, Adam replied,

I’m really happy I got involved with martial arts. I tell everybody [to] join. You have to have self-respect and confidence to even try to do something like that because it does look difficult but in all reality, everybody can learn. The concepts that you learn can be applied to life, in general. Not just actual physical defense, but self-defense. Self-defense is also maintaining competitiveness in all aspects. It’s something to
strive for to better yourself. If I could go back, I would have joined right away. Not only would [I] have a couple cool black belts, but I would be a better person.

Through martial arts, he had the chance to get to know his instructors. Two of them encouraged him to learn more about his Korean background. One of them talked with him about learning Korean. Adam remembered,

[My instructor] is always trying to get me to learn Korean. He’s always pointing boom on the chest [poked finger into chest], “You are Korean. You have Korean blood. You need to learn Korean.” He is very serious about it and we joke around about it but he is dead serious about me incorporating that in my life and that is a driving force for me. I wish I could have had that earlier in my college experience, which it’s really up to me. I haven’t once sat down with him. He has taught me a few words and I forget them and I relearn them and I remember some, but I always feel bad.

One of his instructors worked with him to form a Korean adoptees group on campus. The purpose of the group is to integrate Korean culture into the adoptee’s American culture. Adam stated,

Last summer, [my instructor] approached me with it and he said he wanted me to start [a Korean adoptees group]. He asked me about it and said he wanted to start one because he’s done similar type of things in the past. I think more informal, not clubs but more of a mentoring type [program] or he brought a group of Korean adoptees together and let them become friends and do things together. His goal is to have a good solid group that you can be friends with, lasting friends. That you can use as an
intermediary between your life and the Korean community. 'Cause his ultimate goal is to bring the community, the Korean community in [the university town] and the Korean adoptees' community together. He’s always saying, “Your life, you’re doing just fine. And the Korean community is doing just fine. You’re prospering, you’re going to get better, but together you can do even better.” That was our opinion as well, and that’s why we wanted to start it, and his goal through that club was to get membership, become friends, meet once a month, twice a month, every week, as much as you can, as much positive influence as you can get. Then, [he’d] be able to take us over to Korea. He has connections that nobody else could have.

Adam’s co-leader for the group had lost interest, and the group collapsed. There had been small numbers of attendees at their events, which usually focused around meals and learning about the culture.

During the summer before his final semester in college, Adam experienced a renewed interest in religion. As a child, he had been required to go to church each week and he had enjoyed participating in activities. While in college, he went to church off and on. Now he was attending church on a regular basis. His martial arts and church worlds had collided. He reflected,

You’re hanging out with people from martial arts, you have an expectation on how YOU and how the others are supposed to act. We hold ourselves to a higher standard than we would other people. When we are around each other, we want to act that way. We don’t want to let them down. And then when you find out that you have a faith background and you hang out in that aspect as well, the more you hang out with
them, the more you are in that environment. So it makes it easy, having a shared accountability, which would be hard once you remove yourself from that environment. But hopefully you’ve nurtured a way of life that can sustain you.

During his final semester in college, he felt he had grown a lot. He recalled,

[I attribute that to] the people that I hang out with. And discussions I have with my parents. Also a lot of self-evaluation, a lot of it [is] spiritually driven. A lot of it’s through martial arts . . . then coupled with evaluating myself based on those standards gives me more conviction in my life and makes me want to change some things and also to preserve and to have continuity in other things.

As a part of this self-reflection, he said,

I’ve developed a sense of needing to do service. I was given an opportunity for better or worse, I want to say for better, living in a family here in the United States. Being adopted and getting dedication and upbringing that I did. It was something that I can’t ever repay. But I should do as much as I can to give back. And that’s something that I got a lot also here in university through the scholarship and through martial arts. We always say everything in martial arts that you gain you must give back, otherwise there is no [art], it would die out. I think that wasn’t really through school. That was more just developing my own sense of honor. My own sense of purpose.

Being a Korean adoptee had had an impact on Adam’s life and goals. He said, “It makes me feel positive, but it makes me feel driven. . . . I have a generally positive outlook on almost everything because that’s just the way my experiences are.” He felt a responsibility to give
back because he had been given a great opportunity to live in the United States and have a comfortable life.

When asked to identify his ethnicity and its importance in his identity, Adam said, without hesitation,

I usually say Korean adoptee. To me, it’s implied Korean American. I think it has a connotation of both. I don’t have to say, “Well, I’m Korean and I know some Korean things, but I’m American and I have American culture.” To me, it’s kind of easy as a starting point. . . . I have Caucasian parents who were born and raised in the United States by people born and raised in the United States. The only thing that is different for me is that I was born elsewhere. I was raised here but my parents did make a very pronounced effort to get me involved with Korean heritage things. I am different there, but I don’t see myself to be that much Korean. I’d like to be, because I find it very interesting. I think a lot of that was due to my parents making me interested [laughter]. I think I’d be better all around to have both of those cultures. If it’s just race, I always check . . . Asian or Pacific Islander [laughter]. But if there is clarification, I say 1.5 generation or Korean adoptee. Maybe I felt and still do feel kind of so assimilated to American culture that I just don’t see myself as a minority. I’m Asian. I’m not Asian. I think being that I’m adopted it’s even easier for me to do that because I’m not culturally Korean, but I do understand Korean culture. I think part of the reason why I just never had that [identity] crisis is because I’ve always considered myself to be the same as the people I’m with. Now if I were to get inserted into a Korean society, then I would definitely feel different. Amongst Korean
adoptees, I feel like everybody else. Obviously there’s a spectrum, some people don’t want or have anything to do with their Korean heritage, others are very, very into it. I would say I’m in the middle, but I’m trying to lean more towards the very into it. ’Cause I’d like to be a lot more [knowledgeable about Korean culture].

**Ben**

Ben was adopted when he was 6 months old. At the time of the first interview, he was 21 years old. For Ben’s first interview, I met with him in person. He sent the answers to the second interview questions via e-mail. The third interview was never completed.

Ben’s mother was South Korean and his father was White. When asked about their decision to adopt, he said, “My parents tried to have a baby but it didn’t work. So my mom said, ‘Why don’t we adopt a baby? . . . We should get a Korean baby.’ They did the paperwork and they followed through and it worked together okay.” His mother told him about his birth mother. He recounted, “I was born premature. My birth mom wanted to put me up for adoption because she couldn’t take care of me. She was living in too poor of conditions and she wanted me to enjoy a better life in America.” He did not have any other information about her or his birth father.

Ben had a younger sister, three years his junior, who also had been adopted from South Korea. She was currently a student at the university. He remembered, My mom wanted a daughter, too, and she felt I would become really spoiled if I was the only child. She wanted me to have a sibling. . . . When we grew up, we pretty much hated each other ’cause she would always tattle on me and it drove me nuts.

Ben’s relationship with his nuclear family changed over time:
I was really close with my mom when I was a kid, ’cause my mom took care of me. My dad worked a lot. But towards my high school years, I was very rebellious; I didn’t want to listen to whatever she said. I wanted to do my own thing. I wanted to shut my parents out. Tell them to leave me alone, I don’t want anything to do with you. I want to hang out with friends, play video games, be in my own little world.

His attitude caused strife in his family. One memory that he recounted was snapping at his mother and pushing her onto the floor. He was remorseful about the experience.

Since his mother was originally from South Korea, Ben learned about Korean culture at a young age. His mother tried to teach him the Korean language when he was younger. He said, “I didn’t really take it too well. I didn’t like it. I said, ‘Well, what’s the purpose of learning this if here in America I just have to speak English and I’m living in the American culture?’” He also learned about Korean culture by attending a Korean church and learning about Korean food. He stated,

I went [to a Korean church] through my whole life span. I still go occasionally.

Through that, you learn the culture subconsciously because one of the main things, other than the language and the singing style and the way they worship, but they serve lunch afterwards. It’s all Korean food. You’d get to know the food and I think one of the most attractive things about the Korean culture to me is the food. ’Cause that’s what everybody talks about. Also, the entertainment industry in Korea is huge. I started listening to some underground Korean hip hop when I was in high school, which you don’t really hear too much of. Then I got introduced into more mainstream stuff from my Korean friends that I met a year or two ago.
Also, Ben learned about Korean culture from being involved in taekwondo for 5 years. He elaborated:

I was going for my second dan, which is two stripes on the black belts on both sides. At that level, you are considered right under being an instructor. Through that you got to know the discipline side of Korean culture. Learning that martial arts is not for violence means, it’s for self defense. It’s understanding life at a new level. With taekwondo, I learned that you can push yourself to limits. . . . You can you stay focused. You keep yourself healthy. But at the same time, you learn to communicate with people on a different basis, not through talking, it’s through the martial art itself.

Ben also had participated in a trip with his youth group. The pastor had organized a trip to Colorado. He remembered,

These were all Korean people, some were adopted, too. It was interesting to see the clash between Central culture and Southern of the U.S. The way they talk is different. When we did break the ice, we bonded really well. I still communicate with some of those guys. It was really awesome experience.”

It was not a culture camp experience, but it was with a group of Korean Americans. During the previous summer, Ben’s family had traveled to Korea. His mother had not been there for 20–25 years:

She wanted to go back to visit her parents’ grave, but also she has a lot of brothers and sisters there. She wanted to introduce me to them, while at the same time allowing me and [my sister] to see the culture in Korea. Times change really quickly.
It was a new experience for her as well as us. It was phenomenal when we went. I would totally live there if I didn’t have a business here.

Ben hoped to travel to Korea again soon. He said, “I was talking with a friend yesterday with some other Korean friends that I have and we want to get together this summer and then go and visit the different major towns.”

When Ben went to Korea, he met a lot of his cousins and uncles that had influential jobs. One was a CEO of a company, one was an attorney, and another one was a port manager. He had a more difficult time relating to and understanding his family in the United States than his family in Korea. Ben reflected,

I really respect that [Korean] side of the family. They are financially independent, they’re secure, they love their family a lot. There’s no conflicts. . . . On my dad’s side of the family, they come [from] a poor side of town. . . . If I’m there for family gatherings, I feel out of place because they [have] lower class standards. For example, their language is different. They don’t use proper vocabulary. Their morals are different. If you are with family, there should be a set amount of morals, but it seems like that boundary is a little slimmer than what it usually should be, at least with my cousins. My cousins, who are my age or a little bit younger, they all got pregnant a year ago. If I hang around those people, my mindset will start to become more and more lax. I have high ambitions, high goals. I like to be very oriented with what’s the future going to be like. Don’t sit here and waste time because life’s too short for that. For them, it’s just go with the flow. It’s not me.
Ben grew up in an upper middle class town of 5,000 people outside a metropolitan area in the state. New residents have been drawn in because of the golf course in the town. He commented,

It’s a small, quiet town, very peaceful, and the community is very strong. A lot of people in town know me. Very laid back lifestyle. You can do what you want. I think growing up from there has caused me to feel at home when I’m in a really peaceful, more upper-class town.

The town was close to a couple of larger areas, and the community was racially homogeneous. There was one other Korean family in town, but the children were college age.

Ben had made some close connections to friends in his town. He had a core group of three male friends:

We’re brothers. It’s me and three other guys, and we used to call ourselves the “four families” ’cause we grew up together; everybody knew that we’re this circle. We never broke off from the circle so they were my roommates until last August. They are like brothers to me but otherwise, we’re just kind of normal people. We’re open-minded but at the same time, we won’t go extreme. Yet at the same time, we’re not boring and we’re not just going to sit and do nothing.

As a youngster, Ben was interested in computer animation, but he decided not to pursue it as a career because of the competitiveness of the job market. He did continue his interest in computers. He took the family computer apart much to the chagrin of his parents. He said, “I didn’t break anything, but I just wanted to look around.” He translated this love
of working with computers into a business. While he was in high school, he started his own company. He received a couple of special certifications, and he started repairing computers.

He also worked at the local electronics store. He stated, “I was working 30 hours a week with high school going on. I did basketball in seventh and eighth grade. I decided to drop out ’cause I didn’t have a passion for it anymore.” He loved to play video games, so he would frequently have friends over to play games in his basement.

College attendance was an expectation in his family. He said, “My mom always emphasizes education is important. College is definitely a way to go. I didn’t know any other route, a system of where you go to high school, get the diploma, go to college, get the degree, then find a job. If you didn’t go, it’s dishonoring the family.” He had considered one college in New York but decided on this university because

[The university] was known to have a good technology and business career program through their Management and Information Systems [MIS] major. . . . However, since the end of my sophomore year, I decided that MIS was not a major that projected my true passion for what I want to do with my life. I moved over to Executive Management for many reasons. As an entrepreneur, I can easily concentrate on learning about what roles and responsibilities are required of management of an organization. I have always had a passion since I was a child to bring together peoples’ great talents, strengths, and passions, to be able to work together as a concrete team to create never-ending, increasing value into today’s industries and their respective markets.
College changed Ben’s mind about a lot of things. He said that he became a different person:

My eyes opened up and I could see a whole new perspective on life, in general. I find that you should be aware of all cultures, but because I was born from Korea, even though I lived in America practically all my life, I still should know my heritage. I did not have an interest in the early years, even when I was in high school, I did take some interest but I was rebellious at that age. I used to be a computer nerd who wanted to stay inside his cave and play video games 24/7, with no exercising, no socializing, not trying anything new, etc. In college, I found myself slowly opening up to trying new things, gaining new perspectives based on taking action to personally take the time to know individuals based on their individuality and not stereotyping. I am open-minded to almost anything, I’m willing to see both sides of the debate, and I only judge for my own taste. I try not to influence people to make decisions unless I believe it is in their best interest.

His college experiences had made Ben more open-minded, more ambitious, and more multicultural. He had an interest in learning about others and more about himself. Since being in college, his relationship with his parents had improved. He commented,

I started to get really close to my mom. My mom’s really strict. She’s very prominent on being on time, you have to do things correctly the first time. There’s no second chances. It’s always continually, perpetual improvement. Nothing’s good enough. My dad is the perfect balance from that. He doesn’t really care too much what you do. . . . He won’t really mention it unless it becomes serious. He’s flexible
with stuff. My dad, I started to tend to move away from his personality because it was almost TOO laid back. My relationship with my dad is naturally a little bit closer because we click on things better ’cause he’s really laid back so he’s open to hearing stuff. I always have that connection with my mom because she raised me pretty much my entire life to be with the characteristics I have.

He also reflected on his relationship with his sister,

Now that she’s in college, I don’t know, in college you seem more open minded, once you hit college. So our relationship has changed dramatically. We hang out a lot, she hangs out with my friends a lot, too. She’s always like, “Let’s go eat dinner at the [Korean restaurant in town].” She used to be really uptight. She . . . used to be an insanely, radical Christian so she would judge on what I would do and . . . it really stressed on me. She would tell that to my mom. . . . I kept saying I’m not a perfect person, I forget things. She’s starting to become a little more open-minded on things.

Although Ben did encounter some discrimination in high school, he thought his experiences at the university were worse. He tended to get comments from random people driving by. He remembered,

It’s farm town kids. The guys who drive the big turbo diesel trucks. They wear . . . John Deere hats, the button-up shirts. They think I don’t speak English because I look like I’m Asian, so they automatically assume I’m an international student. . . . Sometimes I get a little rowdy and I decide to respond. Then they’re like, “Wow, you actually speak English.” I’m like, “You should probably get to know me a little better.” Usually I don’t care. I just laugh. I might be filling my car up at a gas station
and they pass by and they decide to make a comment or I’ll be at the grocery store and
I’ll be walking with my friends . . . and they’ll snicker and say something, but in my
head I’m just like, “Really you guys have to act like this, how old are you?”

He experienced an incident while living in the residence halls. He was confronted by some
White students and he argued with them. He said, “I don’t engage in such behavior anymore.
It’s really a waste of my time and I find it amusing that people would actually go about acting
like children in an adult atmosphere.” His perspective evolved over time and he has
mellowed.

One thing that stood out to Ben about the university was the ethnic diversity. He
stated, “There’s all sorts of cultures here and I’ve met so many people from different
countries. Not just Korea; Japan, Sri Lanka, Uganda, Germany, all sorts of countries
everywhere.” He has been able to get involved with the Korean language group on campus
and serve in a leadership role:

I like to promote it a lot. I have plans to make it bigger. . . . I want it to be more of a
social event more than a class. You’d be surprised how many different people of
different nationalities show up to learn more about the Korean language and the
culture.

His social network at the university reflected this exposure to people from different parts of
the world. When asked about his friends at the university, he responded,

The social network comprises of mostly Asian/Pacific Island nationalities; the most
being Korean, then Chinese, and following behind is Southeast Asian and Japanese.
The other segment includes Caucasian, European, Middle Eastern, and African
American. Many of my Caucasian friends are from high school and freshman year of college. Many of my Asian friends are whom I met from sophomore year and beyond.

Since being in college, Ben had dated. He told me that his most recent relationship was with a Taiwanese woman who was an international student. He said,

The relationship was fruitful in the beginning; we shared much in common with each other and saw life and its wonders and mishaps on an equal plane. However, as time progressed, I became more involved with the business I was creating at the time, and lost time to put into the relationship. I took some time to understand why the relationship went sour and realized that the reasons were because of my inability to analyze the balance of time put into the relationship and time away from it. I prefer to date Korean girls beyond any other cultural background. I feel more naturally attracted to Korean girls, and thus tend to have stronger relationships with them. This does not say I am only attracted to Korean girls, but I am skewed on this particular subject.

Ben was a small business owner. He owned a food stand near the college campus that catered to late-night patrons. He stated, “I realized shortly after starting my first business that my passion is to create businesses of immense value to its customers and to do things differently compared to our competitors.” The food stand sells Korean fusion food. They fused ingredients from one or more cultural background. According to Ben, one of the company’s goals is to “eventually become a nationally known icon for a Korean cuisine food franchise.”
In addition to the Korean language group, Ben had made use of the Korean adoptee’s group at the university to learn more about his background. He participated in events hosted by the martial arts instructor. The instructor brought Korean adoptees together for community-building and cultural activities. Ben stated that this group has helped to bring together other Korean adoptees in relating with each other and further progressing to get to know our native culture in a . . . laid back system. We also get to find out how other adoptees grew up in their hometowns throughout [the state], and often share stories of how we adapted to the American culture, and if we were exposed to any of the Korean cultural influences and atmospheres throughout our lifetimes.

Ben liked to spend time with Koreans and Korean Americans. He said, he liked to hang out with both Koreans and Korean Americans as much as possible:

I feel most connected with them and can share many values and experiences with them. I also feel more naturally accepted, because, in the end, we all look and behave similarly due to our DNA structures. I find that Koreans are bold; we like to take passion in what we do, whether it be work, play, study, or other activities. We also strive for productivity; we don’t like to wait with things to be completed.

One experience that Ben enjoyed with his friends was smoking hookah. He reflected,

Most of the Koreans I hang out with love hookah, and we have become avid hookah fanatics. We smoke hookah with style. . . . It’s an excellent social activity to bring us together, talk about random subjects, joke amongst ourselves, and overall have an awesome time enjoying the atmosphere.
After graduation, Ben was not interested in living in a big city. He related how he had gone to Chicago two or three months ago with his mom and sister to go to the Korean market:

When we went there a lot of the stores on one of the avenues, which used to be Korean town, it had vanished. But just feeling, breathing, living the city for couple hours, I liked it. . . . The city is good. I like the nightlife in the city, but the day, every day would kill me—the traffic, the people. ’Cause the people there are a lot more rude than they are in a quiet town and you bump into ’em they get pissed off. They’re very straightforward. If you try to buy something at a store, they’re not going to help you.

Chris

Chris was adopted when he was seven and a half months old. He stated, “I was supposed to come when I was about 3 or 4 months, but I got chicken pox. So I got to stay in Korea for a little longer.” At the time of the first interview, he was 24 years old. For the first two interviews, I met with Chris in person. The third interview was never completed. Chris was not a current student. He had stopped out of his chemistry program at the university and he was planning to attend culinary school.

His parents decided to adopt because his mother could not have children. She had a birth defect that prevented her from conceiving a child. He did not know much about his birth parents:

All we know is that my mother was pretty young so probably my age now or younger. I’m not too sure about the father. My parents told me at the time I wasn’t too
interested in it. I was pretty proud to be Korean, but no interest in learning more at that time.

Chris was an only child. He described his mother as of German–Irish descent and his dad as Swedish. He added,

My dad had a sister, and my mom had a brother. [My parents] grew up with American values—work hard, do well, be nice to everyone. I really appreciate everything they’ve done for me. My mom teaches, retired last year. My dad does works for a bath and kitchen . . . improvement shop.

Both of his parents had grown up in his hometown and both pairs of grandparents lived in the same town. His grandmothers were deceased. He stated,

Growing up I saw [my grandparents] many times per week; they’d come over all the time. I’d go over there when my parents were busy. I am still pretty close with them. . . . But growing up in the same town as your parents everybody knows you as a kid, it’s not too fun.

Chris had a tumultuous relationship with his mother. He recounted,

I had some arguments with my mom throughout high school. I got pretty close to my dad. . . . If he knew I wasn’t getting into trouble, he let me do whatever I wanted to do. At that time in high school when I was arguing with my mom a lot, even into college, I was getting really close with my dad. Now we’re all pretty close, equally close to both parents.

Chris’ parents pushed him to learn more about the Korean culture. He remembered that
they wanted me to go to the adopted Korean camps . . . and I didn’t really want to go. 
It was more me when I was little that didn’t want to do things. . . . They were pushing 
me towards it. [My parents] asked me several times . . . if I wanted to go [to camp], 
but I didn’t really want to so they left it up to me if I wanted to do something. I asked 
my parents once why they didn’t just send me there. “You didn’t want to go” 
[laughter]. That’s what they tell me. We went to a lot of the [adoption agency 
sponsored] picnics when I was young. They were really big—like hundreds, and 
hundreds, and hundreds [of people]. The parents of adoptees . . . attempted to make 
some food. . . . I remember there was kim chi always there and I hated it, the smell of 
it, because they didn’t make it right. [The adoptive parents] knew each other pretty 
well. The whole community then was a little bit bigger so they could pull people in 
really easily. Now they have them by regions but it’s [the state] only. They used to 
have different sections of [the state] that might have get-togethers. You know the 
people in that area the best. [You meet] more frequently and definitely a lot more 
people. Last year when I went to the picnic . . . that’s how many [people], what it 
used to be [at] the more regional ones.

His hometown is a mid-sized town in the state. He described it as similar to the town 
that this university is in but without the professors. He said,

Now, it’s about half Hispanic, half White. It’s pretty quiet but there’s not much to do. 
You have to drive over here to the university . . . to do anything too much. I really 
don’t like small towns. . . . They feel too small. I came from the second largest city in 
Korea. Even though I don’t remember it, they have a saying “you can’t get the city
out of a boy” or “can’t get the country out” whichever one you grew up with, even if you move to the other one, you always feel this draw back to large cities.

Chris’s hometown community was close knit. He recalled that it was a pretty caring community:

There’s always people watching out for you. They’re also watching what you do or if you’re misbehaving. You couldn’t get too deviant. . . . It really stinks as a kid and you want to cause some trouble and mischief, but you can’t because it’s going to get back to your parents. . . . I couldn’t do too many bad things when I was little. Looking back, I think it was good.

In school, Chris felt obligated to try to live up to the Asian stereotype. He remembered,

I think there were some expectations. There’s been studies . . . that Asians students excel and even though I grew up here in Caucasian family, they still expect that. I didn’t really try all through high school. I woke up in the morning right before school, 10 minutes to go, drove to school, got to school, slept [laughter] in school as much as I could ’cause I didn’t sleep at night, got done with school, went to work for 4 hours, stayed ’til 9, went home, ate again, and played video games all night. And then repeat the next day. [I was] held back by resources available to me. I knew what was available, but I would have to go an hour away to school to get these things [like advanced courses].

While in school, Chris was involved in various activities including band, marching band, math team, and quiz bowl.
He spent most of his time in high school with Caucasian friends. He said, “We knew how to bend the rules a lot. We joked about whatever we wanted to joke about. If they said something that bothered you, they just dropped it right away. It wasn’t any big deal.” While he was in high school, he experienced his first romantic relationship with a Korean adoptee. He reflected on his high school girlfriends by saying:

I didn’t know my parents knew her parents until after we started dating. She [was adopted] about the same time. They knew each other from the picnics. She had an older brother that was adopted as well. Then the other two girlfriends in high school were Caucasian. They were pretty fun. A little different than the adopted Korean girl and then American Caucasian girls. There’s something different about them. [The] conversations that you could have [were different]. I had pretty in-depth conversations with the Korean adoptee and not so much with them [the White girls]. We could just talk about any topic, really, really in-depth [with] well-formed opinions about everything it seemed. [She] knew how to express those opinions about things without being mean, or like “This is how it is.” “This is my side but let’s hear what you have to say.”

His interest in Korean culture developed over time. In high school, he planned to study Korean language on his own and count it for course credit but his plan was not approved by the teacher. After going to college, he developed more of an interest in Korean culture. He stated, “I came over here and a lot of my friends were either international students from Korea or other adoptees that . . . knew more than me. It got pretty interesting to find out more.”
Chris chose to pursue chemistry. He explained,

Once when I was little, I told [my parents] I was going to be a scientist when I grew up. I was always going to go into science. I enjoyed it as long as I can remember. Then, my physics teacher, chemistry teachers in high school were supportive, made everything real interesting.

Chris decided to attend this university because of its good reputation for its chemistry program. He had visited the other universities in the state. He said, “I went and visited the chemistry department and saw what they had to offer, see what kind of facilities they have, what they can provide. It seemed the professors here were doing . . . cutting edge research.”

He started at the university in Fall 2004. Later, he added materials engineering as a second major. He said, “I was interested in materials chemistry . . . almost more of the chemistry that was out there, but I realized that you couldn’t do materials chemistry until grad school.”

Chris had earned a lucrative scholarship for multicultural students. The scholarship covered his tuition, books, room, and board. He had received another multicultural scholarship from the university, but he accepted this one because he preferred it. He had to take a class both semesters and complete community service work. He also had to maintain his grades in order to continue receiving the money throughout his college career. He made a lot of friends through this program but he also had views that conflicted with the views of his instructors. He remembered,

The instructor seemed to come from a different generation than us, maybe the next generation older. They are that group that was like “You can’t make jokes about people’s race. You can’t make jokes about this, that’s totally not acceptable. That
doesn’t show that you’re comfortable with your identities, if you can do that.”  

Whereas all of us were, if you’re comfortable making jokes about yourself, other people are comfortable making jokes and taking them, ’til they get to a certain point. You should be fine with your identity at least. “NO, you can’t do that, that’s not what we support,” so it was always a battle between the instructors in the classes. They had good points about why we shouldn’t do those things.

Their good points did not encourage him to change his thinking about using this type of language. Later, I asked him to explain it further for me. He stated,

I don’t know how to explain. Maybe it was just my class [laughter]; we’d all grown up here long enough to hear so many jokes, not take them personally anymore. You accept that people do it and make jokes about yourself. It seems the people can be either super uptight about it, not willing to change. They’re not the whole reason but some of the reason why people don’t accept things. I want to be accepted as this label only. Anything you say against that is super offensive. Let’s say ABC. And A doesn’t B. A likes C. B likes C. C doesn’t like A. Two of them get together and joke, A and C will get together and talk about B. C and B will talk about A. One of them doesn’t like anything. I can’t accept anybody different than me, things should be this way. Even though in this other place, I can’t accept those things anyway. . . . It’s just more personal, you take those jokes too personally or because of your focus on that one thing. You can’t see humor in it or you can’t find that somebody’s not picking on you. They’re not really picking on a group of people, it is picking on a group of people. I don’t think I refer to myself as a derogatory manner, but some of
the stereotypes against Korean people come out a lot when we’re out working. “What kind of meat is this?” ’cause Korean people eat dogs. So some people say, “What kind of meat?” “My dog was getting old, we ground it up.” Those things come out a lot when I’m working. They’ll say, “What kind of meat is this? Where did you get it?” “I got it at [the grocery store]. It comes from a cow.” I can’t explain it but sometimes those people just want to hear one thing. It doesn’t matter if it’s the truth or not. It comes, “Do you guys really eat dog?” “Yeah Korean people eat dogs. It’s not just a joke. We really do it.” Some of it I think is cultural awareness of what you grew up with. Some of it’s cultural awareness of where you are and the people that can’t not even fully, partially integrate into our culture there and it seems to take offense to it and most if I look at it from an immigrant side or even second generation. It’s hard to explain and it differs per first person, I think. ’Cause sometimes people say something to me and I just look at them.

While in college, Chris participated in intramural sports and a contest hosted by the radio station. He was also involved in the Korean language group, and he had some connections with the Korean student organization. He mentioned involvement with the Korean adoptees group. He had some contact with the multicultural office. He said, “That’s the only one I really dealt with a lot. They’re really helpful with anything. We tried to get some contacts for the business things, even . . . [the] adopted group. They give as much as they can to you.” Chris estimated that there are 100–200 Korean adoptees on campus.

During his time at the university, he had taken two semesters off. One break was because his grades dropped below the required level, and one semester was for ankle surgery.
He lost his scholarship because of his poor grades. During one of the breaks, he went back home and lived with his parents. He remembered,

Throughout . . . the first few years in college, my mom and I didn’t get along well. It was like, “You’re my son, I’m going to take care of you like you’re a little kid.” Once I graduated high school my dad opened up to me, “Okay, now you’re an adult.” He’ll talk to me as if he’s at same level, so then it was okay, but when I moved home, “I might be out late doing stuff with friends.” “That’s fine. Just let us know if you’re going to come home or if you’re going to stay.” That was the only thing I had to do and cook.

When asked about why his mother changed, he replied,

I think it was that semester before . . . when I thought I was going to finish. . . . I was getting them ready. I was going to move away. I wasn’t going home so much. She realized I’m growing up; I can take care of myself. I had some problems with credit cards for a while but I was working really hard to pay them off. Not asking them to help me and then just starving and not doing anything. They helped me pay off quite a bit of that. They paid off half; I paid off half.

They also were helping him with his student loans.

During his first few years in college, Chris found a passion for cooking. He said, “I really enjoy it. The best part of it to me is when people take a first bite of it. You see this look of pleasure on their face from what they are eating. That’s what makes it worthwhile.” His mother also helped to inspire the idea. He stated,
My mom teaches family consumer science. I was cooking and . . . helping my mom cook since I was really little. None of my ex-girlfriends could cook [laughter]. I thought I was going to starve if I didn’t learn how to cook. So I learned how to cook because of that.

He planned to pursue a culinary science degree:

I’m going to transfer out to a culinary school, maybe Chicago, maybe Seattle, and then after that, come back and finish the chemistry degree. [Culinary school] usually it takes about 2 years, but all my credits from here will transfer. They have a deal worked out with everybody to transfer credits in. So I got it down to about a year.

He also saw a direct correlation to his field of study at the university. He explained, “With the chemistry background, sometimes I describe things a little weird to people, but it helps me understand the flavors in things and the different cooking methods work.” After culinary school, Chris was planning to open a restaurant. He stated,

I want to open a restaurant in the culinary side—develop a menu, a complete menu, a complete look for the restaurant. Own, manage, run the kitchen and run front end, too. Once that gets going and I don’t have to take care of it too much, maybe get a more normal job as a lab tech in a hospital. 'Cause it doesn’t really matter where I am to do that.

His college friends were more diverse than his high school friends had been. While at the university, he was able to meet different people. He said,

To start with, it was mostly American friends or people I knew from [the scholarship program]. [They] were the only ones that I knew that were multicultural people from
different backgrounds. From there, I met more people. . . . I got introduced to the stuff that they had grown up with. I’m not jealous but wondered what it would have been if I grew up in a Korean family or in a town with more Korean people, Korean influence in it. Now I switched over to international students or first- and second-generation students. Then I went to all Korean people for some time, and now it’s back in the middle. I get along with American people pretty well, since I grew up here. Some of my closer friends are either international or first- or second-generation, adoptees as well in there. A lot more mixed than before.

In college, Chris had dated an international Korean woman for 2 years and then he had dated a woman from Laos who had come to the United States when she was 12 years old. He talked about his Korean girlfriend: “She’s really introduced me to Korean culture and how things go. It’s really different from American culture.” He remembered,

My friends before that got me into the food and culture a little bit, but with my ex-girlfriend [I] definitely had to fit that side of it [and] still keep the American side of it. Her friends were other international students. . . . I got used to it as long hard process. Every time you see someone older than you have to say, “Hi.” Stop, say, “Hi,” and talk to them for a little bit. Now I’m the older person so people stop and say, “Hi” to me. It’s pretty nice. If you see someone older than you here [in the American tradition], it doesn’t matter you just yell, “Hi,” wave and that’s it. [With my Korean friends], I had to stop, bow and say, “Hi” and then talk to them for a little bit and then go on. It was hard for me to understand then because I didn’t grow up with it. I didn’t know how older people were supposed to treat me and how I was supposed to
treat them. There were some things I should have taken advantage of. Older people always buy younger people drinks or some small food. I never took advantage of it. Now people are doing that to me. You have to speak to different people as different formalities based on how old they are. . . . in relation to you. Here, anybody can be your friend, it really doesn’t matter how old you are or how young they are. [In Korea] technically you’re only friends with the people born in the same year. Older people are older and younger people are younger. They can be your friends in American culture standards but there they still have to have that honorific title to them.

When asked about what he had learned about himself since being at the university, he struggled and then said,

For me, I always wondered growing up what it was like growing up as a Korean person. I grew up like an American person who was Korean. I learned that side. I learned the things I would have learned over there growing up in a town of more Koreans’ influence or Korean families. In a way you learn to be humble because how you have to talk to people and respect you give to people. You could have learned about how you should live your life in that way, too. It shows me what do I believe in, how do I want to grow up, what kind of image do I want to give to other people so that’ll have the respect that I show other people. Some people they expect it because I’m older than you. But they don’t live their lives how I think they should be when they’re older.
This experience had helped Chris develop a perspective on his ethnicity. When asked about his ethnicity and how his perception had changed during college, Chris gave a thoughtful answer. He said,

When I first came, it was, “I am an American person that’s Korean.” Rather than American Korean, Korean American. I had a good conversation with somebody about this the other day. To us, Korean Americans they’re the Koreans that come to America. Since I grew up in American culture, I would identify myself as American Korean. Like reverse. We think culture comes first. That’s how I would do it and that’s how those friends do it. I’m Korean by blood, but American by culture. We had a big discussion on it. . . . They’re Koreans but they’re in America so it’s a little weird the other way around. Korean American doesn’t work the same. This one was the best way to think about it.

When questioned about his awareness of his identity, he recalled that he was pretty conscious of it throughout his life:

Never really bothered me about it, just this is who I am. This is who I am, you can’t change it. I accepted it pretty early. Now I’m in between completely American side and completely Korean side, somewhere in the middle. I think that’s where a lot of Korean Americans are. It depends on how much you want to go the other way. You can’t go completely Korean or you can’t go completely American. You have to find a balance point for yourself. You shift if you’re with some people, you shift one way a little bit and other shift another way.
At one point, Chris had considered changing his name back to his given name in Korean. He was dissuaded by his parents, but they found a compromise. He said, “I came to that nice middle ground with them, ’cause . . . the last name that’s what they were worried about. The Chinese character I use for my Korean last name translates back to the same [last name as his parents].” At the time of the interview, he was not planning to change his name.

When asked about experiencing discrimination at the university, he talked about Koreans and Korean Americans not relating well to Korean adoptees. He stated,

I don’t think there’s too much. I think at first it was Korean people not knowing how to deal with adopted Korean people, but it’s gotten much better. I think since they’ve gotten to know who are adopted people they realize that some of us are interested and that’s why they’re doing things. I try not to let too much bother me so I never really felt too much. I think that sometimes people view you as an international student. Then, the international students view you as an American person even if you’re to get involved with stuff. Once you get involved in any of the international groups on campus they’re really supportive of whatever you want to do. They will help you find anywhere you need to go. Recently, it’s gotten a lot better.

When I asked about giving advice to share with the freshmen in the present study, he said,

Depending on what they want to do, how involved they want to get. Get involved with [the Korean student group]. It seems like a challenge. If there’s enough people there that speak only English, they’ll switch their language to English. They have a lot of events this year that they didn’t have before. If they’re interested in learning the
language, [Korean language group] is definitely the best way to go. From there you meet people. . . . There’s enough people there the leaders that if you’re kind of person, you can hang out with these people. They don’t teach you the bad things. You’ll learn those from the people you hang out with.

He also suggested the international student group and an international dinner event held each Friday night. He encouraged me to share his contact information if students are interested in exploring their Korean culture.

**Faith**

Faith was adopted when she was 4 months old. She was 21 years old at the time of the interview. She was a senior studying human development with plans to continue her education by getting a master’s degree in social work. Because of her experience being adopted, one day she hoped to work at an adoption agency.

Faith grew up in a small town adjacent to a metropolitan area. Her family was well-known in the town because her mother was a teacher and her father had a variety of professional jobs including working at a bank; both of her parents grew up in the town. Faith lived in the same house until leaving for college.

Faith had one sister who was 13 years her senior. Her parents decided to adopt after they tried in vitro fertilization and it failed. Her mother’s sister suggested adoption. Faith’s aunt adopted two children from Korea—one before Faith and one after her. Faith’s family was very religious. They went to church and Sunday school each week. As she said, it was “uneraseable from the calendar.”
When Faith was a senior in high school, her mother passed away from Alzheimer’s disease at the age of 55 years. Faith reflected,

It was hard because it was my mom, but both of my grandmas had already passed from Alzheimer’s. It was confusing because my dad didn’t tell me for a couple years. Obviously, I knew something was wrong, but he didn’t tell me to protect me. It was different than when my grandmas had it because I was actually living with it. I wasn’t sure what was going on. I think it made me a better person today. Obviously, I wish she was here but I think that’s what led me to do social work.

Faith seemed to see the good in the situation. During this time, the church family became more important to her. She said, “When the whole thing was happening with my mom, I did like going [to church] because it got my mind off of everything and I got to see people that I loved.” The church members were a close knit community within the larger close knit community. Later, her father married the pastor of their church.

The passing of her mother also brought her closer to her father and sister. Faith talked about her father: “Ever since my mom passed and even before that, we started connecting a lot more [with my dad] and we’re really close now, it’s not like I tell him everything, but I think we are really close.” She also became closer to her sister who she described as “more than a sister but not quite a mom. She was there for a lot of things with me.” She explained, “Obviously [my sister and I] don’t look anything alike, but when we’re together people can tell that we’re sisters.” Her family is important to her.

Faith’s parents were “so open about it, open to answering questions” about her adoption, and they encouraged her to learn about Korean culture. When they heard about a
culture camp in Colorado, they drove from the Midwest to attend this camp as a family. Later, they learned about a camp in a nearby state, where Faith went for the next 6 years. At the first camp, her interest in Korea peaked. She stated,

“...That’s just when it hit me, I’d never seen so many Koreans in one spot. Because I’d grown up in this really small town. I knew my two cousins, but besides that I think I knew two other Korean adoptees in town. So just to go there and see 200 kids. From that point on, I went to culture camps every year until my senior year, and then after that I started going to Korea. I thought it was really cool, to have that piece of me.

When asked about her ethnicity, she said, “Korean.” When asked about when she had become aware of her identity, she mentioned attending her first culture camp. She recalled, “I knew I was adopted, I knew I was Korean, but it never really hit me that that meant anything.” She saw being Korean as an important part of her identity.

Faith knew quite a bit about her birth parents, which she learned on a recent visit to Korea. She told me, “I know their last names; they weren’t married. My birth father is married to another woman. They both have high school diplomas and they met because they’re . . . a masseuse and masseur. . . . They were both blind.” She had a tattoo under each of her ears that are her birth parents’ last names in Korean.

Faith had traveled to Korea three times. First, she went with her father and cousin through a family program called Korean Ties. While in college, she went to a school for Korean adoptees for a semester and later to attend an adoption convention. During the first program, they visited three different areas of the country and participated in tours. Also, they went to orphanages and foster homes:
On the tour . . . they take you all over Korea and you go to adoption agencies and I thought that was the coolest thing. I loved going to the foster homes and adoption agencies and to see these babies that are going to be in homes in America and Sweden and Denmark one day. It’s really cool.

The semester-long program for Korean adoptees had given her a more in-depth understanding of Korean culture. In the program, she recounted, “We had two classes a day and each class was about 2 hours. We had language, history, [and] music, traditional Korean music. Basically, we learned about traditional Korean lifestyles.” While Faith was in Korea, she felt comfortable. She stated, “I felt so connected right away, just seeing Korean, after Korean, after Korean, not having to go and look twice. It’s amazing being over there.” Normally, she stood out because she is Korean but in Korea she was able to blend in, which felt comfortable to her.

To this day, her father celebrates her arrival day, the day she came to the United States. Faith explained, “My dad will cook a Korean meal for me. In my parent’s eyes, it is like a birthday. They weren’t there when I was born, but that’s like their birthday for me. We always do something to commemorate it.” Faith mentioned that her father sometimes forgets her actual birthday.

Faith started at the university in 2007. She chose the university because of the scholarships she received. Many of her family members attended the institution, including her grandparents, sister, and some extended family members. During the summer before her first year, she participated in a transitional program for minority students. Her dad encouraged her to participate in this program with 30 other students. She continued her
involvement with the multicultural office through a residential learning community for multicultural students. Through this program, she met her best friend, a woman from Puerto Rico.

Her transition to the university was rocky, she said. “When I first came here, I was petrified. I’d never moved before. I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t know how to get around, and I didn’t want to leave my dorm room because I was so scared.” Through the summer program she had made friends who she still spent time with. Also, she started dating one of the guys in the program shortly after they met. Her dad had invited him to eat with them at the orientation event and, one month later, they had started dating. They were still dating and were planning to move to the same city together after graduation. He was planning to get an internship and she would pursue her master’s degree. They had talked about marriage but she did not want to get married until she had a stable job. Her family liked her boyfriend and his family welcomed her, too.

Faith used the multicultural office’s services when she was a first-year student. She used the office to help pay for a tutor, she stopped in to visit the staff in between classes, and she used the computer lab. After her first year, she stopped going there as often. She said, “I feel more comfortable being at [the university] so I don’t feel like I need to be there as much anymore.” The office’s services had helped her transition but she no longer needed that support.

Faith did not have any interest in joining the Greek community although her family members were members. She stated, “I’ve never had any interaction with them. I don’t feel like I would have any connection with them. Plus, I can’t imagine living with that many
girls. I like living in an apartment by myself because it is clean and everything is where I need it to be.”

While at the university, Faith was working part time with adults with disabilities. She was enjoying working with a small number of clients, but the next semester, she also was going to work with the residential program. She saw the parallels between this work and her future goal of working at an adoption agency:

I think working at [the local agency] would be closer to what I’m working towards because a lot of [the children], either they’re there because their parents are having issues, they’re referred there by the state, or they’re there because their parents put them there due to behavioral issues so I think it’s more closely related to what I’m gonna do.

Faith was planning to attend graduate school because there is a strong expectation in her family to continue her education. She stated,

I am ready for a bigger city, especially after living in Korea for a semester. There are no small towns in Korea, and I really did like the city life once I got to know it more.

I think eventually [I will live in a small town] when I settle down and have kids, because that’s what I grew up in and I think that’s the best environment, but as of now I’m moving on to bigger and better places [laughter].

Faith’s decision to pursue social work as a career was in direct opposition to her family’s wishes for her. They had preferred that she would choose something more lucrative, like engineering. She said,
I do feel like they are disappointed [in my career choice], even my extended family. Every time we meet they’ll ask how’s school going and then, they’ll start joking about how I’m never gonna make any money. I’m going to make a living. It’s going to be a little bit of a struggle but it’s something I’d like to do. I like math, I don’t like science. It’s [social work] more along the lines of my interests and what I’d be good at. I did talk to them and I said, “I am good at this. You have to realize, I know you don’t see it. You don’t see me interacting with the kids or taking these classes, but I’m good at it.”

When asked if race was an important part of her identity, she responded that she really didn’t feel like race played a big role:

I don’t feel it really impacts me in what I do or how I interact with people, but as far as culture and ethnicity, I feel it impacts me more. I am Asian, but I don’t feel I should separate myself . . . in any way because of that, but I feel being of Korean heritage has influenced me and impacted me more. . . . I don’t think it’s [race] the most important thing in my identity. I’d rather see people see me in other ways ahead of race.

Faith had a different perspective on discrimination. Her boyfriend was Black. When I asked the question about if she had experienced any discrimination while in college, she responded,

I thought people are pretty open to mixed races dating. But when [my boyfriend] and I went down to Mississippi . . . we were in a huge majority Black people, some of the
looks that we’d get from people I think that’s where I feel the biggest discrimination.

I feel that’s where most of the discrimination is coming from.

Her experience may have been different since she did not experience that discrimination in the Midwest and it may not have been directly related to her race but to her boyfriend’s race.

Faith saw biological and adopted children in her future. She said she wanted to have her own biological kids,

because I haven’t met my biological family and [chuckle] . . . my big thing is to have someone that actually looks like me. I really do want to adopt because I think it’d be a great experience especially since adoption was kind of a newer thing when I was younger, but . . . if I adopt, my child will have someone to relate to and it won’t be as hard. It wasn’t really hard for me but they’ll have someone to relate to off the bat.

Her commitment to adopting children was reinforced during her first visit to Korea. She was able to bring an adopted child back from Korea:

Through the Korean Ties tour, you [can] sign up to bring an adopted baby back to the U.S. from Korea. Even if you sign up, it’s not guaranteed that you’ll get a baby. . . . Shortly before we left I found out that I was going to get to be the main person to bring the baby back. . . . She was 8 months old and I picked her up at the adoption agency. Her foster mom handed her over to me and we got on the bus, went to the airport, and then went to . . . O’Hare International Airport in Chicago. . . . Finally you go through everything, you get your baggage, and you walk down this hallway and then you walk into these two glass sliding doors. It was just the coolest thing because . . . her adoptive mom and dad were there and I don’t think they had any other kids.
She was their first and they had this little sign with their last name on it. . . . As soon as I turned around the corner, there were two other babies there but they must have had her picture because the mom started bawling. And we were still a good ways away from her. But as soon as she saw her, she was bawling, and they were holding each other, and I handed her over to her mom, and she was just hugging me and bawling. The baby’s bawling ’cause she doesn’t know what’s going on. All of a sudden she’s surrounded by Caucasian people. I did a full circle. I was adopted. I was brought over the same way to that same airport and then, I got the chance to bring a baby back, too. It was a cool experience to see it through someone else’s eyes.

**Conclusion**

This chapter provided profiles of each of the eleven participants in the study. The purpose was to provide a snapshot of each student’s experience before and during college as well as their thoughts and feelings about a variety of topics. The next chapter focuses on a synthesis of themes about the participants as a whole.
CHAPTER 5. FINDINGS

The findings of this study are presented in this chapter. The data, collected from the interviews with the students, are presented and organized into three sections reflecting the three-interview format: youth and background experiences, college experiences, and thoughts about the future. The majority of the chapter focuses on the college experiences of the students as those experiences relate to the themes that emerged. At the end of the chapter, there is a discussion of the cultural–racial identity model (Baden & Steward, 2007) and where each participant fits into this model.

Background Experiences

This section addresses the youth and background experiences of the participants. The themes in this section were developed from the content of the first interview with the students. The themes include strong connection to family, religion as an important part of childhood, and connection to Korean culture as a child.

Strong Connection to Family

Most of the participants mentioned that their adoptive parents were the only parents they had ever known and they considered them their parents. When asked about their interest in finding their birth parents, several of them mentioned the idea that their adoptive parents were their parents. Dylan said, “My adopted parents are the ones that I really know. It seems that’s all you’ve known as your parents and you forget about you’re adopted.” Gwen did not have an interest in meeting her birth parents and said, “It doesn’t matter who my [birth] parents were, [my adoptive parents] are the only people I’ve ever known. No one else is ever going to be a parent to me.” Harry made a similar statement:
I’ve lived here my whole life for 18 years with the family that I have so it hasn’t really been something that was strange and it’s not like I ever felt out of place with the family that I’m with now. I don’t think it’s really a big concern of mine to find [my birth parents].

Other students expressed similar sentiments. Two of them (Kelly and Adam) did not want to disrupt the lives of their birth parents. Kelly said, “If they didn’t leave any information, then it probably should be reciprocated then and I’m okay with that.” A couple of the students wanted to find out more information about their birth parents to satisfy their curiosity about their biological past, but in most cases, the participants were content with the information provided at the time of their adoption.

Overall, the students saw being adopted as a blessing in their lives. They considered themselves fortunate to have been adopted into a family in the United States. They have had opportunities in the United States that would not have been possible in South Korea. Several students talked about how grateful they were to their parents for their decision to adopt. Adam said,

I bear absolutely zero resentment [toward my birth mother], but I also don’t wish I grew up in Korea. There’s a reason why she put me up for adoption. That was a very loving thing [to do]. I have THE BEST FAMILY in the world. I wouldn’t have it any other way.

When put on the spot in a high school government class discussion about Roe v. Wade and adoption, Adam said,
I love my life. I love my parents. I love my birth mom for putting me up for adoption. I don’t have any desire to meet her, partly the fear of hurting her. I have a family. I don’t need two [laughter].

Harry stated,

There’s a lot of kids that are in my situation that honestly need the help, but they never get it. I happen to be lucky. [My parents] thought it would be good to adopt somebody and give them a nice home.

Jasmine said, “I think adoption was a really good thing for me. . . . I like my life and where I’m at. I wouldn’t trade my family for anyone else.” Kelly talked to one of her friends about being adopted. She stated,

I’m very blessed with the life that I have. Instead of looking at it like I’m being put up for adoption and being given away, these . . . people don’t want me. My parents chose me. They looked at a picture and said, “We want her.” They chose me. They pursued me.

Kelly’s brother, Dylan, had similar feelings about his adoption. He said, “I have a good life now and a second chance to actually grow up and have a life ’cause somebody adopted me. I feel adoption is a good opportunity, [a] lifesaver.” Gwen felt lucky to have been adopted, saying, “I’m lucky. I don’t think that I would have the same opportunities over there that I have over here and the same kind of family I do. It was just more reinforced [since I have been in college].”
The students saw their adoption as an opportunity to have a more fulfilling life, and a couple of them shared their desire to give back. Adam felt he should do service in order to give back, saying,

‘I’ve become a more service-oriented person for the outlook of my life, wanting to serve. I definitely know that my upbringing’s part of it. . . . The actual idea of me being adopted . . . does play a bit of role. I was given something, a gift, and I need to give back.

Faith chose a career path related to being adopted. She was planning to get a masters degree in social work and then work at an adoption agency to help match children with adoptive families. The students were able to see the benefits adoption afforded them as children and to find ways to make a difference in other’s lives. When asked about adopting their own children, most of them had at least considered it and were keeping it as an option for when they reached that stage in their lives. This topic will be covered in more depth later in this chapter.

Participants’ relationships with their parents were both ideal and strained. If there were any parental issues, those issues were typically with their mothers. Chris reflected on his relationship with his mother, saying:

Growing up I was more close to my mom when I was younger until about 14, 15, 16 and then [I] started wanting to do stuff on my own a little more. My mom still didn’t want to let me go. I had arguments with my mom . . . throughout high school a lot. At that time . . . when I was arguing with my mom a lot even into college, I was getting really close with my dad.
Harry had similar feelings about his relationship with his mother, but he realized that their similarities made it difficult for them to coexist. He said,

   When I was in middle school and early high school, I really did not get along with my mom all that well. We actually fought quite a bit, and now that I look back on it, I honestly think it was because we were so alike. We both have very, very strong personalities. We don’t like to be told what to do. She knows how to tell people what to do and she’s probably the most intelligent person I know. Now that I look back, that was really stupid of me, and we get along just fine now. My dad was always the man in the middle. If she would get upset about me, the way I was acting or if I would get upset about her and the way she was acting, he would always . . . be the one in the middle of everything to get us on the same page; sometimes it worked [and] sometimes it didn’t.

Ben also had a strained relationship with his mother. He remembered,

   [During] my high school years, I think because I was very rebellious, I didn’t want to listen to whatever she [my mom] said. I wanted to do my own thing. I wanted to shut my parents out. I really hated my mom for awhile in high school. I don’t know why.

   In other cases, the students were very close to their parents. Jasmine’s parents divorced when she was in elementary school, and she developed a deep connection with her mother. She reflected, “She’s [my mom] the best mom you could ask for. My mom and I [are] REALLY close. I call her, pretty much every day [laughter]. I really admire her. She raised three children on her own pretty much.” Whereas Jasmine had a close relationship
with her mother, Kelly had a closer relationship with her father because he was around the most as she was growing up and he always advocated for her. Kelly said,

I’m very, very close to my dad. He’s helped deal with my hands in the way that they are. He’s never let me say that I can’t and he’s just been my number one supporter from day one. He encouraged me to be as involved as I was and even if I thought that I couldn’t do it, he found a way or he helped me find a way. He’s just my number one fan. She’s [my mom] quite the workaholic. She doesn’t really know a balance between work and family. The last six years, we haven’t lived together. I understand that they did it so I could graduate from the same school that I began in. Still you don’t have a mom and you’re a teenage girl. All the girls are fighting with their moms and what do I get to fight with—a dad and a brother [laughter]. I’ve always been torn about that because she’s serving the Lord and I admire that but there’s no balance.

Faith also had developed a close relationship with her father. Her mother had passed away when Faith was in high school. She said,

Growing up, I was always a mama’s girl. I followed her around everywhere she went. She actually made me have weekends with my dad just because we didn’t connect like that. Ever since my mom passed and even before that, [my dad and I] started connecting a lot more and we’re really close now, it’s not like I tell him everything, but I think we are really close.
Several of the students talked about their relationships with their parents improving since being in college because of the distance and desire for positive interactions when they are together.

**Religion as an Important Part of Childhood**

As the participants were growing up, each of them was involved to some extent in a local church. Because Ben’s mother was Korean, Ben went to a Korean church as he was growing up. The rest of the students went to a variety of Christian churches including Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist, Congregational, and others. Many of the students considered the church family like a second family, especially in the smaller communities. Faith talked about how, during the time that her mother was sick, the church family became more important to her: “When the whole thing was happening with my mom, I did like going [to church] because it got my mind off of everything and I got to see people that I loved.” The church members were a close-knit community within the larger close-knit community.

As teenagers, several of the participants were involved in youth group, mission trips, and other church activities. Harry was able to participate with his siblings in one of their trips. He remembered,

My favorite memory of my childhood . . . it would probably be my brother and sister were in high school and they were in our church’s youth group and they were going to take a trip to New York. Since both my siblings were in it, they asked both my parents to go and they said, “Sure, but we don’t really want to leave [Harry] behind.” I was 11. So they said, “He can come, too.” So I went. I was like the little brother to everybody. It was a lot of fun and New York is . . . such a cool place, there’s so much
stuff there. All the high school guys kind of looked after me, they protected me, took me under their wing. It was good for me.

As Harry got older, he continued to be involved and served as president of his church youth group for 2 years.

While in college, the students did not participated in church services to the same extent they had when they were growing up in their hometown. They were not required to go by their parents. Ian and Ellen went with some frequency and Kelly and Adam went each week. Both Chris and Adam periodically went to one of the Korean churches in town. They attended the services with the martial arts instructor.

**Connection to Korean Culture as a Child**

There were various levels of childhood interest in Korean culture as well as varying levels of parental encouragement in learning about Korean culture. Some of the participants had had the opportunity to attend various cultural exploration activities such as culture camps, special events, martial arts, and learning how to prepare Korean food. In most cases, the young people whose parents were more interested in Korean culture were themselves more interested in learning about the culture. Some of the participants did not enjoy participating in these activities as children, but they were more interested in Korean culture as a result.

Of all of the participants in the study, Faith seemed to be the most interested in learning about Korean culture. She talked about her parents, saying:

They were just amazing. When we went to these culture camps, they had a lot of things for parents, too, like children’s books that explain why do I look different and
what not. By the last year, I had every book on the table. They were just so open about it. Open to answering questions and people ask me so when did you find out you were adopted and I don’t remember any specific time. It was just that knowledge and it’s because they had . . . these books about, some families look different and it’s just normal. That’s just how [my parents] are so [laughter]. When I was younger, my dad had this desk. One drawer was full of my adoption papers. That’s why I’ve always been so comfortable with it. He let me go in there anytime and flip through the pages. When I was younger, I would spend day after day just looking at all the pages and reading them.

When Ellen was a youngster, she showed an interest in learning the Korean language. Her mother hired a local graduate student to tutor Ellen. When asked why she had been interested in learning the language, she replied, “At that point I realized that it was different that I didn’t know anything about Korea so it was finding out an identity type of thing . . . At one point, the interest just went away.” Her interest waned and she discontinued the lessons after 4 years.

On the other hand, although some parents did not discourage an interest, some parents did not encourage the interest in Korean culture either. Dylan recalled,

We had a couple books about Korea, but other than that they really didn’t say much. If I asked they would say as much as they knew about it, but other than that it was really up to me to go out and see where I wanted to look for stuff.
Kelly had a similar experience as her brother, Dylan. She said, “They gave me an option. They said that if that’s something that you want to pursue then we will help you, but I was very content with where I was at.”

In Ian’s case, his parents suggested that he ask others for information about the Korean culture. He remembered,

They said if I wanted to go find stuff out, actually read about it and ask questions, ask your teacher if they know anything about the country. They would try to answer questions if I asked, but they really didn’t know.

The parents’ interest in Korean culture and encouragement of their children to explore it seemed to affect the child’s future interest in learning about Korean culture.

**Cultural exploration opportunities.** Several of the students who seemed more interested in the Korean culture participated extensively in cultural exploration opportunities as youngsters and young adults. Some of the participants’ parents forced them to participate, whereas other participants welcomed the learning opportunities and experiences with other Korean adoptees. Due to the homogeneous racial background of people in the Midwestern United States, there were limited opportunities in the participants’ small to mid-sized towns to interact with a Korean American community or other Korean adoptees. Some of the participants traveled to culture camp in other states, a couple of the larger communities had resources available for the young people to connect with other adoptees, and some participants participated in martial arts as a way to connect to the culture and traditions of their birth country.
Culture camp. One of the more common experiences among students most interested in learning about Korean culture was culture camp experiences. A culture camp is a summer camp experience where young people learn about Korean culture including the language, food, martial arts, and customs. Typically, the camps are hosted by an adoption agency or they are developed by a group of parents. The parents heard about them from other parents of adoptees. The camps the participants attended were in the Midwestern United States, but culture camps take place all over the country. In the case of younger children, both the children and parents participate in the camp. As the children get older, they attend overnight camp on their own. Four of the participants, Adam, Harry, Ian and Faith, went to culture camp as they were growing up. Adam’s parents helped to start one of the camps; he recalled,

I was excited to go to my Korean camps because I knew the Korean people; I could fit in there. I always felt bad for . . . the token Caucasian kids who went to the camp, too, because their siblings were in it and of course, we were like, “What are you here for?” Which is not a good thing to say but I’m sure they felt the same way. They were out of place racially. I’m sure they feel that way ’cause I felt like that before.

Faith’s camp experience also allowed her to feel comfortable surrounded by other kids who looked like her. She remembered,

I went to the culture camps. The first one I went to . . . was summer after my sixth grade year; we drove all the way to Colorado for this culture camp. That’s just when it hit me, I’d never seen so many Koreans in one spot. Because I’d grown up in this really small town. I knew my two cousins, but besides that I think I knew two other Korean adoptees in town. So just to go there and see 200 kids. From that point on, I
went to culture camps every year until my senior year, and then after that I started going to Korea. I thought it was really cool, to have that piece of me.

Ian had a similar feeling of connectedness while at camp. He recalled,

We went to this camp for a little while. . . . I did like learning about my country. It was cool to be surrounded by people who weren’t completely different to me. When I walked down the hall, I wasn’t like, “I am totally different looking” and seeing that was interesting if anything else.

Harry also experienced culture camp, but he was not as interested in staying involved. He remembered his experience while in elementary school:

[My parents] would go with me ’cause I was just so young. There were parts of it where it would just be the kids and the parents would go do something else. They would take me there in the morning and then drive me home at night. I don’t remember too much about it. It was fun, but that was really the first time that we tried any kind of food anything. I do actually remember trying seaweed and it was really bad. I almost threw up. It was the first time that we did taekwondo and we did—not necessarily Korean stuff but other fun things with people that were adopted. It was a three- or four-day period that we went every day. I went to a different overnight one—that’s actually the Holt one. That was either the next year, maybe two years after that.

**Adoptee events.** In addition to camps, there were a couple of communities that held events for adoptees and their families. Two of the communities with these events included a small city in a state adjacent to the university’s location and one mid-sized town in the state.
Adam lived in the small city of 100,000 people. His family would meet on a regular basis with other adoptees and their families. He remembered,

Almost everything was Korean themed. People made their best attempt at Korean food or very good attempts and we had native Koreans either visiting or immigrants and first, second generation families there as well that often either taught classes or [led the sessions] for parents [which] was discussion [based]. For the kids, it was more class time, and we had speakers, and food was generally involved or games, tradition.

He remembered going to these events and spending time with the other children. He also said that the families in this group would go to the airport to welcome new adoptees to the community. Chris mentioned his experiences with picnics and other events in his community. He recalled,

We went to a lot of the picnics when I was young; they were really big. Like hundreds, and hundreds, and hundreds [of people]. [The adoptive parents] knew each other pretty well. The whole community then was a little bit bigger so they could pull people in really easily. [My family would attend] get togethers [a] little more than just the picnics. . . . They used to have different sections of [the state] that might have something and get together. You [get to] know the people in that area the best. More frequently and definitely a lot more people [than now].

Chris’ parents had friends who sent their children to culture camp, but Chris never had an interest in the camp so he was not forced to attend.
Martial arts. In a couple of cases, martial arts have been instrumental in teaching the participants about Korean culture along with the art itself. Adam started hapkido and taekwondo while in college. He learned the importance of respect from his instructor. Adam remembered,

In martial arts . . . the Korean people that have come to the United States always call me [my Korean name], which is my Korean name. [My instructor] doesn’t. He always calls me Adam, well sometimes he calls me other names ’cause he forgets my name. My dobok says [my Korean name] on it. He doesn’t like calling me that because he thinks it might be disrespectful to my parents, ’cause my name is Adam. That’s the name they gave me. So he doesn’t call me [my Korean name]. I naturally grasp some of [the martial art] so that’s nice. But at the same time, failing over and over again is so nice too, ’cause when you finally get it, and then you can teach it, and that’s what martial arts is all about is service and what you get from art you owe the art and the people in it. You advance rank but that rank is relative. There’s no such thing as a black belt if you don’t have all the others. We always say everything in martial arts that you gain you must give back, otherwise . . . it would die out. We hold ourselves to a higher standard than we would other people. When we are around each other, we want to act that way. We don’t want to let them down. I’m really happy I got involved with martial arts. The concepts that you learn can be applied to life, in general. Not just actual physical defense, but self-defense. [My instructor] is very adamant about that all the time of grades, studying, protecting yourself in relationships . . . but growth in everything is self-defense. If you spend all your time
working out with martial arts, and you don’t study, and you scrape by with a 2.0, and
you can’t find a job that is your fault. . . . Self-defense is also maintaining
competitiveness in all aspects. It’s just something to strive for is to better yourself. If
I could go back, I would have joined right away. Not only would have a couple cool
black belts, but I would be a better person.

Ben was involved in taekwondo as a youngster. He remembered that he did
taekwondo for 5 years:

I was going for my second dan, which is two stripes on the black belts on both sides.
At that level, you are considered right under being an instructor. Through that you got
to know the discipline side of Korean culture like learning that martial arts is, of
course, it’s not for violence means, it’s for self-defense. It’s understanding life at a
new level. With taekwondo, I learned that you can push yourself to limits you’ve
never seen before. You can . . . stay focused. You keep yourself healthy. . . . At the
same time, you learn to communicate with people on a different basis, not through
talking, it’s through the martial art itself.

Gwen also participated in taekwondo, but she only practiced it for a year. She said, “It was
good and then I quit. Like a lot of kids you start something and then you don’t realize you
don’t like it as much and then you quit fairly soon.” A couple of the other students (Ian and
Harry) saw martial arts demonstrations at culture camp but they did not participate.

Preparing Korean food. One way that parents tried to connect their children to the
Korean culture was to prepare Korean food. Faith’s mother checked out a Korean cookbook
from the local library and made a few dishes. Ian’s mother made Korean food for his
brother’s birthday, though Ian did not prefer it. Adam worked with his dad and sister to learn how to prepare authentic meals. When his family traveled to Korea, they brought back special china and chopsticks. He and his sister had Korean food at their high school graduation parties. Chris learned to cook and now owns a business that specializes in Korean fusion food. Ben is his partner in that business endeavor. Several of the parents of these adopted children saw food as a way to connect their child to Korean culture.

Summary

In summary, the participants had strong relationships with their parents and other family members, they participated in religious activities at a high level, and they were given some opportunities to learn about Korean culture through various experiences.

College Experiences

Because this dissertation focuses on the college experiences of students adopted from South Korea, this section will be the most thorough section of the chapter. The themes in the college experiences section include interacting with others while in college, experiencing life as an Asian person, and exploring racial and ethnic identity while in college.

Interacting with Others While in College

During their time in college, the participants experienced different ways of interacting with others. They treated their parents differently. They interacted with people of different races, and in some cases, they interacted with Koreans and Korean Americans. Also, they discussed the pros and cons of interacting with other Korean adoptees. This section includes data and discussion related to the interacting with others theme.
Change in family relationships while in college. The students mentioned a change in their relationships with their families since they had been at college. Although they did not see their family members every day, they still connected with them on a regular basis. Some of the students mentioned being more respectful and appreciative of their parents than they had been earlier in their lives. Also, they tended to have positive interactions when they had the chance to get together. Harry said that his relationship with his family is stronger, recalling,

I’ve learned to appreciate my parents a lot more [since being in college]. I didn’t always get along with my mom, but now I’m really getting a lot closer to her, it’s hard to leave after I go home to come back. . . . It’s definitely gotten stronger especially since I don’t see them as much.

Harry’s sister was attending the same university, so he had been able to develop a deeper relationship with her, too.

A couple of the students mentioned reconnecting with their siblings and getting to know them on a different level. Faith mentioned connecting with her sister more after their mother passed away. Kelly and her siblings started to spend more time getting to know each other as adults instead of as children. Kelly said,

My older siblings are trying to get to know me better because we’ve all realized that we know each other, but we don’t know each other. The two oldest ones, they only know me as a child. They don’t know me as the woman I’m becoming.

Racial background of friends in college. Although the students had more opportunities to interact with Koreans, Korean Americans, and other Asian people at college,
many of them did not reach out to these individuals or groups. Ben and Chris had a diverse network of friends including people from all over the world, whereas the other students did not have as many Asian friends; several of them had friends of races other than White. Several of the students commented on having friends from a variety of different groups including from the transitional summer program, minority scholarship programs, their majors, and student organizations that they had joined. Ben said,

[My] social network comprises of mostly Asian/Pacific Island nationalities; the most being Korean, then Chinese, and following behind is Southeast Asian and Japanese. The other segment includes Caucasian, European, Middle Eastern, and African American. Many of my Caucasian friends are from high school and freshman year of college. Many of my Asian friends are whom I met from sophomore year and beyond.

Chris had seen a transformation in his network similar to his friend Ben’s transformation. Chris said,

To start with, it was mostly American friends or people I knew from [the minority scholarship]. [They] were the only ones that I knew that were multicultural people here from different backgrounds. Now I switched over to international students, or first- and second-generation students here. Then I went to all Korean people for some time and now it’s back in the middle.

Dylan had several multicultural friends from various connections. His two best friends were Latino. Also, when he attended the national conference about race, he was assigned to the Latino group, so he has learned a lot about Latino culture since he has been at
the university. Dylan also had a few Korean friends including the president of the Korean Club on campus.

Faith also had friends of different racial backgrounds. Her boyfriend was Black and most of his friends from his hometown were White. They also knew several multicultural students from the transitional summer program in which they both had participated. Faith’s best friend was from Puerto Rico.

**Fitting in with Koreans and Korean Americans.** There were mixed views among the participants on interacting with Koreans and Korean Americans. A few of the students, including Ben and Chris, mentioned an interest in spending a lot of time with people of Korean heritage. Ben stated,

> I like to hang out with both Koreans and Korean Americans as much as possible. I feel most connected with them and can share many values and experiences with them. I also feel more naturally accepted, because, in the end, we all look and behave similarly due to our DNA structures. I find that Koreans are bold; we like to take passion in what we do, whether it be work, play, study, or other activities. We also strive for productivity; we don’t like to wait with things to be completed. Much of American culture is more laid back in general than Korean culture. I have seen this with my own eyes, by living in America for most of my life, and surrounding myself with Koreans, and visiting and living in Korea for a bit of time. I also prefer to date Korean girls beyond any other cultural background. I don’t have an explanation as to why I do. I feel more naturally attracted to Korean girls, and thus tend to have
stronger relationships with them. This does not say I am only attracted to Korean girls, but I am skewed on this particular subject.

Chris found it difficult to balance his friendships with Asian people. He did not always feel like he fit into that group. He reflected,

The beginning [of college] is pretty hard ’cause American people even though you grew up here, they still view you as different. Even though you grew up here and that’s all you know. It’s not your fault that you look different them. Then, it seems international people, or first, second generation they give you funny attitude because you look like them but you don’t understand what’s going on. It’s a tough road, if you want to do it, fit into both, be comfortable with both situations. Usually you see something from both, at first it’s tough to go to that one side that you don’t know, but once you go to that then it’s tough to balance the other side. Perfect would be 50/50 balance between them but it’s up to that person how comfortable they are one way or the other.

Chris seemed to see the benefit of having interactions with Koreans and Korean Americans but he had a difficult time figuring out how to balance between White culture and Korean culture. He was met with resistance because he did not feel like he fit into either group fully.

Dylan took a different perspective on feeling Asian versus looking Asian. He said he “hang[s] out with Koreans”:

For me, I feel like I’ve grown up too Americanized actually [to] hang out with Korean friends. . . . They’re still strong with . . . their culture ties and . . . they speak Korean. They have everything about them is different for me. I’ve grown up White, so I really
can’t connect to what they’re talking about or what they’re saying or current events.
I’m still interested in what they have to say or what they do. There’re two Korean people in my drawing class. I’ve really got to know one of them really well. The other one is just like me, she got adopted so she doesn’t know a lot about Korean culture. I’m part of the Korean club.

A couple of the participants mentioned the dress of international students as being different from that of domestic students. Dylan, Ellen, and Ian discussed how they can easily tell the difference between an American student and a student from Asia. Dylan said,

Koreans have a very unique dress style. . . . When I see Asians . . . it’s not something that you would see a White person wear or an Indian person wear or a Latino person wear, it’s their signature style of clothing. A lot of Asian people wear tight skinny jeans and they have different types of shoes, the colors, designs. They wear shirts with crazy designs or symbols. They’re a little bit more fashionable. They always wear these vests or these weird shirts that are very baggy, but yet still have structure to them. Their style sticks out. You see a lot of Asians with different types of hairstyles, not all necessarily down or curled, but they have bits and pieces of their hair just sticking up or they choose to color their hair. You see a lot of Asians with . . . glasses with really thick frames. The girls they dress differently, too. They wear more colors. . . . They always have cute little outfits they wear. If you look around you can tell, ’cause I can tell.

Ian also mentioned that Asian women seem to dress differently than American women, saying,
I’ve noticed that some—a lot of—Asian girls seem to like to dress up. It might be part of when they were in school they had to. They might have had a school uniform they had to wear. Over here, you can wear whatever . . . you want but they still have that, I have to dress up thing. I’m walking to class and you—it’s like 5 degrees out when I went out to my 8 o’clock class. There are these two Asian girls wearing a short skirt and tights and I’m like, “Aren’t you freezing?” [laughter].

Ellen’s comments related to what Dylan and Ian said. She found it easy to determine if a student was an international student or not:

I’ve definitely noticed that ’cause it’s easy for me, as being Asian too, I could look at someone and tell in an instant if they’re an international student or if they’re like me. It’d probably be based on what they’re wearing. . . . Or even the makeup they’re wearing. It’s completely different, which is why I think when people treat me that I’m like, “You can’t tell?” It’s easy for me to tell, but probably not as easy if you’re not looking for it, to tell.

Dylan, Ellen, and Ian all commented on the difference in the dress among international students and domestic students at the university.

**Interest in interacting with Korean adoptees.** During the second or third interview, I asked each of the students about their interest in interacting with other Korean adoptees. I told them about the Korean adoptees group at the university, which is led by one of the martial arts instructors. I asked each of the students who was not already connected to that group if they were interested in me sharing their name with the instructor. All of the students
replied, “Yes.” Ellen said, “That would be [good] ’cause I honestly . . . I don’t really know anything anymore at all.”

When asked about connecting with other Korean adoptees while in college, some of the students provided more in-depth responses. Ian said,

Maybe if the opportunity presented itself. I don’t know if I’d actively go around asking people, but if I happen to find some that’s kind of cool. Me and my friend, we went to church. . . . Before that we’d gone to dinner and my friend has a lot of Asian friends. I wonder if any of these [people] are from Korea. It would be kind of cool to hang out either an Asian group in general or other Korean adoptees so I could sit there and not stick out. . . . I enjoy sticking out. I enjoy being the unique one in the group. It’d be interesting to see if I’m not the random black-haired Asian kid sitting with a bunch of Caucasian people [laughter].

Adam helped to serve as one of the peer leaders of the Korean adoptees group on campus. I told him about mentioning the group to one of the first-year students and receiving a noncommittal response. He replied,

A freshman coming in and it’s still early enough being a freshman that you feel . . . it’s a very individual. On one hand, you feel alone. On one hand, you feel like you can do anything. And juggling those trying not to feel alone and trying to be that individual and what should I do? Back then I didn’t feel like exploring my cultural heritage as much as I did working with [my student organization] or working out at the [recreation center] or hanging out with friends, staying up late watching movies or eating pizza. We had parties, but they weren’t alcohol related. Messing around, just
running around at night, just to feel part of a group. And if you were like, “Join this 
Korean adoptees club.” I might have said, “Yes.” I would have at least looked into it 
but I don’t know if I would have joined it. Even now . . . I’m not part of that. I’m not 
part of Korean language [group]. I’ve been invited to go to it multiple times, but I 
haven’t made that commitment yet. I place other things above that. I know for a fact 
that back when I was in his shoes I put more emphasis on other things that my cultural 
learning for better or for worse. I don’t know any Korean adoptees back in the day, 
when I was younger, who were all about being Korean. They were all about being 
American and trying to fit in with friends, not necessarily due to race, but everything. 
Now that I have a different perspective, I’ve been open, I was opened a little bit 
always, but I was more and more open to the aspect of being Korean and 
incorporating some of that culture in my life. They’re not necessarily wanting to be 
Korean right now. They are trying to be American because we have . . . two halves, 
Korean/American, in the label but my life, part of it on my own doing is I’m more 
American. It’s not an equal relationship for me and I think that’s a pattern I see with 
other people.

Dylan mentioned that his friend, the president of the Korean Club, was planning an 
event for Korean adoptees. He said,

I would [go] to check it out. And see how many other adopted Koreans are on 
campus. I feel like there’s not many people that are actually adopted that are 
minorities. I feel they’re very spread out. I’d like to see what would happen if he 
invited a bunch of other people who are adopted as well. Hang out time or
introducing them to their culture. Re-educate them on Korean culture and what kids their age are doing.

Harry told me that he had never really thought about reaching out to other Korean adoptees and told me that his mother would be pleased if he attended:

That’s something that my mom would want me to do more than I would even think about it. Ever since we had that exchange student [in high school], that was actually from Korea, to live at our house for that month, she’s always been so interested in international students, people from diverse cultures, and diverse families. . . . I can’t say I’ve ever really thought that I’m going to go find other people that were adopted from Korea [laughter]. It’s never really crossed my mind. I could but right now I would ask myself, I don’t know, “Why?” [laughter]. What’s it gonna do for me. I don’t think it would be necessarily good or bad. Good in the fact that I would just be meeting other people that happened to be in a similar situation to me.

Harry did not see many benefits in reaching out to others in a similar situation. Faith had the opposite experience. She participated in a lot of events where she interacted with other Korean adoptees, including a 4-month program in Korea. Although she never went out of her way to meet Korean adoptees, she has met other adoptees. She said,

From going to all those camps and on the tours of Korea, I’ve just met a lot [of adoptees] along the way. I’ve had Korean adoptees add me on Facebook because we have mutual Korean adoptee friends. I don’t even know you, but some people are serious. Some people are just really into trying to get to know every Korean adoptee,
I swear. Kind of like Chris, if you’re a Korean, he wants to know you [laughter]. I’ve met a lot of people along the way. I don’t need to go out and stalk anyone [laughter].

**Experiencing Life as an Asian Person**

Several of the students talked about being considered Asian for the first time when they arrived at the university. In every case, the students were from hometowns with little racial diversity, so college was the first time they experienced being around other Asian people and being considered a member of that group. Also, some of the students experienced racial stereotyping for the first time while in college.

**Experiencing diversity on campus.** When asked about why they chose the university, the students talked about the academic programs, the close proximity to their hometown, and their familiarity with the university. None of them mentioned the cultural diversity, but after they arrived on campus, they noticed the large numbers of Asian students on campus. Because many of the students were from small, racially homogeneous towns, they had not interacted with or even seen many Asian people. The university town was the first time that they had experienced a large Asian population. Jasmine compared the university to her community college:

At the community college, there weren’t many other Asian people there. Not many at all. It’s pretty much like high school. It was a little bit more diverse than high school just because there were more African America people there. But other than that, not much diversity. Here you see a lot more, just around town, you see a lot more Asian people and different people, different backgrounds.
Gwen talked about the difference between the university and her hometown, saying that because she grew up in a small town,

I was one of the only Asian people in the school. I really didn’t even know that many Asian people from around, even just in the whole area, in general. Coming to college, where there are all these international students, it’s interesting.

Ian mentioned that it felt different to be on campus with so many other people who looked like him. He compared his experience at culture camp to being on campus, saying

It was cool to be surrounded by people who weren’t completely different to me [at camp]. When I walked down the hall, I wasn’t like, “I am totally different looking” and seeing that was interesting if anything else. I get that here, too. In my hometown, it was basically all Caucasians and then when I come to college . . . there’s lots of minorities so it just feels different.

Ben also experienced the multicultural nature of the campus. He commented that the university had been

The most multicultural experience that I’ve ever had in my life. In fact, I’d rather call it a way of life than a single experience. I’ve become so accustomed to how a college student interacts with its surroundings here in [name of town] combined with my passions as an entrepreneur and business community individual that it has naturally become a lifestyle that I cannot move away from. I have gotten to meet and know so many different people from various cultural backgrounds that my previous perspectives on these backgrounds have changed dramatically.
Ben interacted with a variety of people on and off campus and considered his experience a way of life rather than an isolated experience.

Harry had never felt he was identified as the “Asian kid.” At the time of the interview, he had been on campus for about three months. He commented,

I see myself more of being unique now even though there’s thousands of Asians around me. Now it’s definitely more common for people to refer to me as, or see me as an Asian person, but I see myself as a regular American kid who happens to be Asian and also happens to be on the same campus where there are thousands of other Asian people.

Because most of the students came from small towns, they were not exposed much to people of other races. At the university may have been the first time that they experienced being considered part of a racial group.

**Experiencing stereotyping.** The participants mentioned experiencing stereotyping in a variety of forms. The common stereotypes they mentioned included that Asians are smart and good at math. They also brought up Asians being stereotyped as bad drivers and eating dog meat.

Although Kelly had known her college friends only for a few months, they expected that she was smarter than they were and that she could explain concepts from class to them. She stated,

There’s still that stereotype that all Asians are smart. I think my friends expect more of me than of themselves. Sometimes they’re like, “Will you explain this to me because you’re smart?” I’ve just met these people a few months ago. I was like,
“You’re perfectly capable of understanding this, how do you know I’m so smart?”

Everyone underestimates their own abilities. As a friend, you can see your friend’s abilities and you’re not going to take that from them. It’s ridiculous [laughter].

Ellen also experienced stereotyping related to being smart. She remembered,

I think [my family] always thought that that was one thing, that Asian people are always smart, which isn’t necessarily true because the other Asian people that went to my school are just normal kids. I got lucky because my brain just naturally . . . like math especially; it just always worked for me. I couldn’t explain it to anybody, but I always just got it. Then I was like, “Maybe it is true” [laughter]. But I don’t really think so.

Ian experienced Asians being stereotyped as being good at math, commenting,

People say, Asians are good at math. I’m like, “No I’m not. I’m terrible at math [laughter].” I HATE math and I suck at it in all honesty. I want people to know is think before you say something because you never know. Generally speaking stereotypes . . . like, “All Asians are good at math.” It’s actually not true. There’s just like, “Ian’s the exception.” “No, I know lots of Asians who suck at math” [laughter].

Dylan related to experiencing the stereotype that Asians are good at math, but he also experienced the stereotype about Asians being bad drivers. He stated,

It’s just like you’re Asian [and] you’re supposed to be good at this math . . . I’ll answer like, “No, I’m Asian but I grew up White and I don’t like math.” I want to be the farthest away from math as possible. That’s why I’m in design. There’s a lot of
things been going around like Asians don’t know how to drive right. I know how to drive. I think [in] a lot of Asian countries [they] actually walk or bike ride. Once you get here, you can get your license to drive. They really don’t know how or haven’t driven a lot.

Because Gwen was a music major, she experienced different stereotyping. She reflected, “There’s always that stereotype of Asians being good at the piano, the cello, the violin.”

Chris also experienced a different type of stereotyping. He and Ben were owners of a Korean fusion food stand located on a popular street. He encountered the stereotyping that Asian people eat dog meat. He said,

Some of the stereotypes against Korean people come out a lot when we’re out working. “What kind of meat is this?” ’Cause Korean people eat dogs. [I say], “My dog was getting old, we ground it up.” They’ll say, “What kind of meat is this? Where did you get it?” “I got it at [the grocery store]; it comes from a cow.” Sometimes those people want to hear one thing. It doesn’t matter if it’s the truth or not. They’re just ’cause it comes, “Do you guys really eat dog?” “Yeah, Korean people eat dogs. It’s not just a joke. We really do it.” Some of it is cultural awareness of what you grew up with. Sometimes people say something to me and just to shake them up I just look at them. “How can you say that?” “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” “No, it’s funny.” Some of it comes from that view. They grew up this way. And they’re not willing to see this. These people also grow up this way and they can’t see it, how people look this way. There’s a lot of misunderstanding. I think
humor is a good way, even if it pokes fun at people for a while, to break that barrier. These people are still people but that’s how this group lives, this is how this group lives.

Ian offered a positive view of dealing with stereotyping. He commented that there may be other Korean adopted kids who maybe do experience stereotypes and just don’t worry about it. It’s not you, it’s them. Just keep going because eventually you’ll find out, just be yourself, and then the world will eventually appreciate you for it because that is what is the best thing to do in life.

He kept a positive outlook on the situation.

*College as the first time experiencing certain stereotyping.* College was the first time that a couple of the students learned about some racial stereotypes. Dylan discussed his first summer at the university and his interaction with another Asian student. He remembered, I was walking down the hall with a group of people, and this kid came out and started talking. Nobody really liked him a lot because we felt he was full of himself. . . . We talked to him, and we were laughing, and he calls me a “chink” out of nowhere. At the time, I didn’t know what that meant because . . . I’d never experienced that, so I was just, “Okay cool.” I walked off. It didn’t bother me and to this day it doesn’t really bother me either. Then everyone else was laughing at me ’cause the funny thing was he was Asian, too. They were like, “Why did he say that, ’cause he’s Asian as well?” He was a bit immature sometimes. I know what it means now, but I didn’t
know what it meant back then. I never heard it ‘til college, until that point. I didn’t hear it afterwards.

Ian talked about the fascination in Korea with a computer game called Starcraft. He said,

In Korea, the video game Starcraft is really popular and they have national tournaments. It’s their version of football in America. It’s on TV. It’s some strategy based game. It’s like Warcraft, only it’s with futuristic technology. When I told the trombone section I was from Korea, they’re like, “Do you play Starcraft?” I’m like, “No, what’s Starcraft?” They’re like, “Aww, you’re unKorean.” I’m like, “I was adopted when I was one.” That [interaction] ticked me off ’cause you don’t have any right to say that. You guys are stupid. Apparently it’s a big deal I don’t play Starcraft [laughter].

The students were confused by the stereotypes that they had never heard in their small towns.

*Being mistaken for being Chinese or another ethnicity.* Several of the female students mentioned having been mistaken for being Chinese. They had encountered both White and Chinese people who assumed they were Chinese. Kelly said, “People always assume I’m Chinese. Some Chinese people actually come up and ask me for help in Chinese and then I speak in my American accent and they’re really embarrassed.” A young man asked her for directions in his native language. She was embarrassed for him, and she helped him find his desired destination. Jasmine had a similar experience and recalled, “People always think I’m Chinese. People automatically assume that I am. Maybe that’s what
they’ve heard of and they assume: ‘You’re Asian, so you are Chinese.’ I do get that often.”

She did not seem bothered by it but considered it stereotyping.

Gwen also had been mistaken for being Chinese or another ethnicity. She said that a lot of times people would assume she’s Chinese,

but some people will ask me, “What are you? Korean? Japanese? Vietnamese?” I don’t really appreciate this . . . the fact that people that work here and people that are on the campus will assume that because I’m Asian, I don’t speak English [laughter]. I’m like, “Why would you make that assumption?” so they talk to me differently once in a while. Then, they realize I do speak English and they’re like, “Oh, you actually do understand what we are talking about.” I went to this guy [in the convenience store on campus], he looked at me, [and] he’s like, “Can I help you find anything?” in this slow [pace], typically how you act when someone, they don’t speak English. I was like, “I’m looking for the microwave popcorn” and he looked, “It’s over there” [laughter]. You could tell that he was like, “Oh, she understands me.”

People expected that Adam spoke Korean because of a patch on his backpack. He explained,

I used to have a Korea patch on my backpack and it was . . . a taekwondo patch. It had a Korean flag and it said “Korea” underneath it. I had some Korean people that come up and speak to me in Korean and I’m like, “Oh, I’m sorry, I don’t speak Korean.” Like, “Oh, okay. I’m sorry.” I’m like, “Oh, no worries.” It’s not their fault [laughter]. It’s pretty easy [to make that mistake].
Dylan experienced something similar. He was in the bookstore, and a student came over to him to ask a question. Dylan said,

My freshman year, I was buying books at the bookstore and some guy comes up to me. He’s Asian and he starts speaking to me and I don’t know what he’s saying. I was like, “Oh, I’m sorry but I don’t know what you’re saying.” He’s like, “Oh, you don’t know how to speak this language?” “I’m sorry.” It’s like, “Oh, that’s cool. I’m sorry, too.” He walks off. I’m not really bothered by it much because I grew up White; it’s just who I am.

None of the students seemed particularly bothered by the misunderstanding because they knew the individuals were not treating them with malice. Chris mentioned using his race to avoid conversations with solicitors; he said,

Sometimes you really don’t want to be bothered walking through campus. Somebody looks at you, asks you a question, the people standing out, “Hey, do you want to fill out this survey for some drink?” I look at them [like I don’t know] what [they] are saying. I don’t understand. Just keep going and they don’t bother you ever again [laughter]. You have to understand how that stereotype works. Then use it against them. You walk by with your friend and you’re me speaking English to a Korean person ’cause it’s easier for me. I’m, “Shhh. Don’t say anything. Or just talk in Korean. Don’t say anything.” ’Cause if there’s two and one’s talking and they don’t understand, they won’t bother you. If you’re not talking, they won’t bother you.
Dealing with discrimination and insensitivity. Several of the students shared experiences with discrimination and insensitivity before and during their time in college. The source of the insensitive comments varied from strangers to professors to family members.

Ellen had experienced insensitivity from professors at the university. She recounted a situation:

A lot of professors assume that if you’re Asian, I live in China and I’m an international student. That’s what I get all the time. When I ask a professor a question or when I raise my hand, they talk to you different. They talk to you slower or louder. This last semester, I was in journalism—big lecture—and the professor was asking what movie everyone in the classroom had seen and somebody said, “Lion King,” and she was like, “Okay, who in here hasn’t seen Lion King?” and nobody raised their hand ’cause everybody’s seen Lion King. She singled me out and she was assuming that I was from China. She said, “Oh, did they have a Chinese version of Lion King?” It was that big lecture hall in [classroom building], that 300 person room. The people around me were like, “What?!” I said back to her, “I’m from [the state where the university is located].” That was not okay. She’s not an arrogant, ignorant woman. She’s educated, a respectable person, which is what blows your mind even more. When you see it from people that maybe really have no idea, that assume all Asian people are Chinese, you expect it from people like that. But from a professor, you don’t really expect that [laughter]. I understand that probably a lot of those Chinese students aren’t the greatest with English, but I’m also sure that those students don’t appreciate when professors automatically assume that they have to talk
loud and slow to them either. Even if I was a Chinese student, I don’t think I would have appreciated any of that [laughter]. She has made numerous types of references like that. She needs to take a minute and think about not saying that again [laughter].

During a recent trip home, Kelly experienced discrimination from a customer while she was at work. She remembered,

I was mistaken for being Vietnamese and a veteran would not go through my line. He must have had a very traumatic experience. He made quite a scene [laughter]. I even told him like, “I’m not even Vietnamese, sir. I’m Korean from South Korea,” and he’s like, “It doesn’t matter. You’re all the same.” I’m like, “Is there something that I can do?” Then, I referred him to the next line, and the managers saw it, and they tried to help but he was very emotional. [My dad] had the same mindset as I did. He’s like, “Well, you don’t know what he’s been through. All we can do is pray for him that his heart would be softened.” I didn’t hold it against him because it’s not my place to judge him. When you’ve faced war such as Vietnam, you are messed up. I understand that. It’s not like I was bitter about it. I was just really taken back [laughter]. I’m like, “Oh my goodness. Is he going to hurt me or what?”

Ben also mentioned experiencing discrimination from strangers in the college town. He said,

It’s farm town kids. The guys who drive the big turbo diesel trucks. They wear . . . John Deere hats, the button-up shirts. They think I don’t speak English because I look like I’m Asian, so they automatically assume I’m an international student. . . .

Sometimes I get a little rowdy, and I decide to respond. Then they’re like, “Wow, you actually speak English.” I’m like, “You should probably get to know me a little
better.” Usually I don’t care. I just laugh. I might be filling my car up at a gas station and they pass by and they decide to make a comment, or I’ll be at the grocery store and I’ll be walking with my friends... and they’ll snicker and say something, but in my head I’m just like, “Really you guys have to act like this, how old are you?”

In other cases the insensitivity came from other Asian people. Dylan was called a racial slur by a member of the transitional summer program. Ian also experienced some insensitivity from his brother who also was adopted from South Korea. He remembered, “If I make [my brother] mad, he’s like, ‘Ian, why do you have to be the dumb Chinese kid?’ and like, ‘Because you’re also adopted, I’m not Chinese’ [laughter]. It makes no sense to me.” In some cases, the students talked with their parents about these situations but in most cases, they seemed to handle them on their own.

Exploring Racial and Ethnic Identity While in College

The participants had different feelings about race and ethnicity. Some of the older students had more well-developed ideas about their race and ethnicity because they had talked with others about their experiences and had thought about what it would mean to consider themselves part of a certain group. On the other hand, the younger students and the students less interested in Korean and Asian culture struggled to define themselves. They seemed to had not given much thought about their ethnicity and culture.

Ethnic descriptors. The participants gave a variety of responses to the question about ethnicity, including Korean (4), Korean American (1), South Korean (1), Asian American (1), American Korean (1), Korean adoptee (1), and regular kid who happens to be Asian (1); one student did not answer.
Adam, who called himself a Korean adoptee, said that he would define himself as Korean:

If I got down to it . . . I would put more emphasis on my experiences, not so much my race. There’s not that large of a correlation because I have Caucasian parents who were born and raised in the United States by people born and raised in the United States. The only thing that is different for me is that I was born elsewhere. I was raised here, but my parents did make a very pronounced effort to get me involved with Korean heritage type things. I don’t see myself to be that much Korean. I’d like to be, because I find it very interesting. I think a lot of that was due to my parents making me interested [laughter].

Chris felt the term, American Korean, better represented his feelings about his ethnicity. He explained,

When I first came, it was, “I am an American person that’s Korean.” Rather than American Korean, Korean American. I had a good conversation with somebody about this the other day. To us, Korean Americans—they’re the Koreans that come to America. Since I grew up in American culture, I would identify myself as American Korean. Like reverse. We think culture comes first. That’s how I would do it and that’s how those friends do it. I’m Korean by blood, but American by culture. We had a big discussion on it. . . . They’re Koreans but they’re in America so it’s a little weird the other way around. Korean American doesn’t work the same. This one was the best way to think about it.
Ellen related ethnicity to culture. She stated that she would identify more with being Korean racially than ethnically, if that makes sense. Race is something you can’t really change. You can’t really change your ethnicity either. . . . I’ll always be Korean, but growing up here rather than growing up in Korea has changed my view of my own ethnicity quite a bit. I identify way more with my White parents, my White family than identifying with any Korean people that I know. Because Ellen grew up in the United States surrounded by a White family, she felt more connected to White culture than to Korean culture. Jasmine also thought that her location was more important than her heritage. She said, I thought ethnic was a cultural thing, the way you celebrate your culture. I thought racial was more genetics. That’s how I always thought of it. I would say American, since that’s all I’ve really ever known. ‘Cause of my family celebrates that’s why I do.

When asked to label herself with an ethnicity, she said that when people ask, she tells them that she’s Korean American.

Harry had a perspective similar to that of Ellen and Jasmine. He considered himself a regular American kid who happened to be Asian. He recalled, Honestly . . . almost until I got here, I never really thought of myself as being so different from everybody else that they would refer to me as, the first thing that they would say is, “He’s Asian.” I have different skin and different hair color and that was really it. Personally, I thought the same thing. I was obviously different, but I’ve
been an American citizen for how long so it wasn’t like I was an outcast. It wasn’t like I was so incredibly unique that people were picking me out of a crowd and staring at me. I see myself more of being unique now even though there’s thousands of Asians around me. Now it’s definitely more common for people to refer to me as, or see me as, an Asian person, but I just see myself as a regular American kid who happens to be Asian and also happens to be on the same campus where there are thousands of other Asian people.

Kelly had similar thoughts about the importance of ethnicity in describing who she is. She said, “My ethnicity is Korean. I think of it as adjective that describes me. I haven’t divulged [sic] in the culture or anything. It’s just another adjective to me.” She did not feel it was important to knowing more about her.

Dylan considered himself South Korean. He explained, It’s like, “Oh, I’m Korean.” I would say probably when I was younger, I identified as Korean. But I didn’t really feel I was. Growing up White, with a White mom and dad [I had] become Americanized. People don’t believe I’m Korean, they feel I’m Korean American ’cause I was adopted when I was 4 months [old], but I was born in Korea. Sometimes I think like, “Oh wait, I am Korean.” ’Cause I do feel Korean American. . . . But I’m not.

Dylan seemed to be struggling with feeling like he was Korean yet feeling more closely connected to his White parents.

**Importance of race as part of identity.** Of the students who were asked about the role of race as an important part of their identity, most of them did not think it was one of the
most important parts of their identity. Only Dylan seemed to feel as if it was a crucial part of who he is, saying,

I think [race is] very important. To anybody you might stand out and maybe you don’t want to be like everybody else. It’s kind of boring. I feel race makes it exciting for some people, ’cause we’re not all the same. And even then we could be, two people from South Korea could be totally different. Individually speaking everyone’s different. Race-wise everyone’s different. It’s an important part of my life.

Dylan seemed to be an outlier in terms of the rest of the group. The other students said that they thought it was not as important as other aspects of their identity. For example, Harry said,

I really don’t think it is. If I was going to say importance of 1 to 10, I would say 2 or 3. It was never an issue. It’s never really brought up that much. It’s not like I sit around and talk to people about it. It hasn’t been a barrier. It just hasn’t ever been something I’ve had to worry about and deal with a lot.

Faith had a similar thought, saying,

I really don’t feel like race plays a big role. I don’t feel it really impacts me in what I do or how I interact with people, but as far as culture and ethnicity, I feel it impacts me more. I feel being of Korean heritage has influenced me and impacted me more. Faith saw her ethnic background as playing a larger role than race in terms of her identity.

Ian did not want the focus to be on his race. He said, “Academically or in the job world, I don’t want to be treated differently ’cause I’m Asian. If there’s a more qualified person I think they should get the job ’cause I want them to do a good job.” Other
participants mentioned that other parts of their identity, including personality traits, being adopted, and their hometown, are more salient in their lives.

**Being like a White person.** When asked about ethnicity and culture, participants in the study mentioned feeling more connected to White, American culture than to Korean culture. Kelly learned about her ethnic background when she was in elementary school. She remembered,

Growing up I knew that I was adopted, but I still thought of myself as White. It wasn’t until the [standardized test] when my teacher corrected my bubble for ethnicity. I put White and she put Asian/Pacific Islander. She had to explain to me that even though I grew up in the United States, that’s not my ethnicity, and I was shocked. I’m like, “NO!” [laughter]. I think that was fourth grade. I had been putting White up ’til then.

As they were growing up, Ben and Dylan called themselves a Twinkie. In a conversation with one of his friends, Ben said, “I’m like a Twinkie; I’m yellow on the outside, white on the inside.” Dylan used the same term when he talked about himself. He stated, “I call myself a Twinkie sometimes. ’Cause you know it’s yellow on the outside, but I grew up White. I have all this White culture inside me.” At another time, Dylan said,

Being Korean, myself I am Korean, but I grew up White. There are days when I feel Korean and there are days I feel White. Being Korean at [the university], it’s not different. There’s other Asians, Japanese, Chinese, Korean. You don’t feel left out physically, but inside I feel left out a bit because I don’t know their language. I don’t know their culture. I’m not as close as ties with any other Korean people either.
I asked Gwen to identify her race and she said, “Asian, but in every other way I’m basically White. I feel like I am [White].” In a later interview, Gwen also said, “I would say the word ‘Asian’ is more of an outward descriptive, but it doesn’t really change how I act or how I see myself or how I would hope that others see me.” In her second interview, she said, “I see myself as Asian but I’m more personality-wise like a White person. I’m not really like an international student. I knew I was Asian, but I had never really been around that many Asian people before to know what their culture was. I may be Asian skin-wise but I’m really nothing like them culturally.

All three of these participants felt like they had a strong connection to White culture, but they just looked Asian.

A few of the students had friends tell them that they did not think of them as Asian. For instance, Harry related,

My senior year of high school I had friends tell me, “All these years that we’ve known each other, I didn’t even think of you as an Asian person because we’ve known each other so long. You don’t even come across as Asian. The only thing that you have is your skin and your hair.” They just never thought of me as being different. I have different skin and different hair color, and that was really it. Personally, I thought the same thing. I was obviously different, but I’ve been an American citizen for how long so it wasn’t like I was an outcast. It wasn’t like I was so incredibly unique that people were picking me out of a crowd and staring at me.

Adam knew a woman who frequented the recreation center where he works. She was an older woman who used the recreation center to swim. He said,
[The patron at my job] doesn’t group me with the Asian community because of my upbringing, and honestly, I feel the same way. I can’t connect or I can’t identify with a lot of the cultural aspects. As a Korean adoptee in America with American parents, growing up is easy for me to just fit right in. Any kind of identity type of fitting in issues would be beyond that, not relating really to race.

Ian said,

I’m not sure if America really has an ethnic group. I’ve more or less been assimilated by this culture. I never learned enough about Korea. I didn’t live there long to really feel out of place; this is where I grew up. I don’t really like Korean food. I like American food. I’m more or less American.

Jasmine saw being Korean as part of her genetic makeup but not important to her identity. Kelly also did not see being Korean as important to her identity. She said,

Sometimes I forget that I’m Asian. I forget a lot. That’s not a label that I automatically slap to myself you know. I forget that I don’t look like an American. People say that to me, too. I like it because they are knowing me as a person rather than me as my ethnicity. My closer friends they always say that they just forget. That is just reassuring to me because they’ve looked past it. They’ve also looked past my ethnicity. I just don’t think physical things should define a person. I just don’t like it.

Ellen explained a feeling similar to Kelly’s sentiments. She stated that she really didn’t see herself as different:

My roommates are like, “I always forget you’re not White” [laughter]. They’re like, “Well, you don’t act like you’re Asian,” but . . . I don’t know what that means
[laughter]. It’s just confusing. I do understand what they mean but at the same time I don’t. All my roommates and all my friends, know other people that are Asian as well and aren’t actually from China or from Korea or from Japan. They know people that are Asian American. They know people that are Black. It never would ever hurt my feelings at all. . . . I understand what they are saying. When they look at me, they don’t see an Asian girl. I totally understand what they are saying but I just want to be, “Well, how do Asian people act then? What would make it so that you would see me as Asian?” ’Cause obviously, I am [laughter].

In a subsequent interview, Ellen brought up the same topic again, saying,

A lot of times my friends will be, “I forget you’re even Asian.” Which is maybe easy for them but obviously I’m never going to forget that about myself or completely ignore the fact that that’s there. It’s not a whole lot either but that might be.

Sometimes I think that’s just because there’re not a whole lot of an Asian community in [the state], in general. So there’s nothing really to identify with.

Ellen seemed to have more conflict with her friends’ attitudes than Kelly did. Kelly appreciated that her friends disregarded her race and physical disability whereas Ellen seemed more conflicted as to why her friends did not see her as Asian and appreciate that piece of her identity.

**Birth culture versus family culture.** As described in the previous section, most of the participants saw their family culture as more important than their birth culture. I asked several students about this concept in the third interview. Most of the responses related to being more closely tied to their parent’s culture.
Dylan told me about why he is more connected to this White, American culture, as he stated,

I’ve been more affected by [my parent’s culture] since I’ve been around it longer or most of my life. I really don’t know a lot about my birth culture. I know some things about it but I don’t know a lot—enough to sway me toward that direction.

Ellen said she was more familiar with American culture than with Korean culture so she felt more tied to American culture. Gwen said the same thing: She was reared in the United States so she didn’t “know anything different.” Ian, Kelly, and Jasmine related similar feelings.

Faith was the only participant who answered this question from a different perspective. She said,

When I’m here, I feel American, not necessarily Caucasian but I just feel American, but when I’m over . . . in Korea, I feel very comfortable. You do get some discrimination, but at the same time, I feel like it is my homeland. I’m right in the middle, but I do feel strong ties to both sides.

Because this question was asked during the final interview, neither Chris nor Ben answered the question. From conversations with the two of them in earlier interviews, they likely would have had feelings more similar to Faith in her feeling of leaning to the middle. Chris may have considered himself closer to his birth culture at various times in his life.

**Summary**

The overarching themes in this section included interacting with others while in college, experiencing life as an Asian person, and exploring racial and ethnic identity while in
college. The participants were able to interact with people from different backgrounds on campus, something they had not able to do in their homogenous hometowns. The individuals with more interest in ethnicity and culture had thought about and talked with others about race and ethnicity. Others did not seem as interested; they considered themselves to be White and felt connected to American culture, which makes sense given that they had lived in the United States for their entire lives.

**Thoughts about the Future**

This section focuses on the thoughts and musings that the students shared about their futures and their interest in learning more about Korean culture in the future. The theme in this section is interest in learning about Korean culture.

**Interest in Learning about Korean Culture**

Many of the participants had an interest in learning more about Korea and Korean culture in the future. One of the main ways they planned to learn about Korea was to visit the country and experience the culture firsthand. Ben, Adam, and Faith were the only participants who had already visited Korea. Ben and Adam had gone with their families. Faith had traveled to the country three times, the first time with her family and the next two times on her own.

Dylan said,

I want to go visit Korea. I’d like to go back to the country, near my hometown. My home country to see what the actual culture’s now, how it’s changed over the years. I like their style of living. How they dress and they’re very big in some music in hip hop over there.”
He mentioned that Kelly, his sister, may be interested in traveling with him. Ellen wanted to go visit her childhood language tutor. Most of the participants in the study desired to tour the country and see the sights. Ian was the only student who spoke about wanting to meet his birth parents and have a relationship with them. He would want his adoptive parents and his significant other there with him.

Faith’s previous travels to Korea had a big influence on her. She had been to Korea three times including once for an extended, semester-long program. She stated,

They do have programs for minorities and they have the [Korean language group], but I don’t really feel like those have impacted me as much as actually going to Korea. . . . Just growing up, too. Become more aware of it. I’m honestly more proud of it just because I did go to culture camps when I was younger. You met Korean adoptees there, but actually being in Korea and meeting Korean adoptees, I feel proud to be a Korean adoptee ’cause you go to camps but you can only meet so many people. We are our own little group [laughter]. My story’s pretty easy; I was really young when I was adopted. Some people have pretty hard stories and I think especially for them to find other people with similar stories because there are a lot of similar stories. It makes it a lot easier and you don’t want to hold as much of a grudge. I’m proud of being a Korean adoptee and I’m glad I have the Korean adoptee friends that I do.

When asked to provide advice to younger students, she said,

For some of my younger Korean adoptee friends, I’ve told them like you should go on this tour. Or do this program because it opens your eyes up so much. You can learn about Korea all you want, but until you go there, it’s a whole different world. . . . I felt
so comfortable there. It’s an amazing experience. . . . You can learn the basics about Korea, if you haven’t been in another country before it’s just a whole new world just going into a different country. And on top of that when in these tours and programs they tell you and teach you about traditional Korean culture and style. There’s just something about it, being there and it’s not for everyone, it’s true. You get the full feel of what it’s like to live in Korea, and you get time to meet other Koreans and form these friendships with Koreans, and that was really, really hard to leave. When . . . my friends took me to the airport, we were all bawling [laughter]. It was the saddest day, ’cause you are there for 4 months and you see the same people day after day. They became some of my closest friends after 4 months of seeing them every day. It was really cool.

Another way to learn about the culture would be to interact with Koreans or Korean Americans. Ellen envisioned having a friend from whom she could learn about Korea. She said,

Even just having a friend that’s also Korean or even a close friend that was adopted, too. None of my friends are adopted or Korean, much less Asian. It’d be something [we] can talk to each other about. Not that I wouldn’t feel comfortable talking to my friends about being Asian or being Korean but obviously it’s not really something that they could understand or have the same experiences or thoughts.

She saw a good friend as an opportunity to explore the culture more and understand someone else’s experiences. Other students discussed learning the language, staying connected to
Korean individuals they met in college, and reading more about the culture and traditions.

Dylan dreamt of living in Korea before he dies.

**Summary**

The thoughts about the future section focused on the theme of learning more about Korean culture in the future. Most of the students were planning to visit Korea in the future, but others considered making friends with Korean individuals in order to learn more about the culture.

**Cultural–Racial Identity Model**

The cultural–racial identity model (Baden & Steward, 2007) provided a context for this study. Each of the participants experienced connections between culture and race. In this section, I will provide insights into where each of the students fit in this model.

Several of the students fell into the pro-parent cultural identity/pro-parent racial identity. According to the model, people in this quadrant are characterized as:

High in knowledge, awareness, competence, and comfort in the culture of their parents’ racial ethnic group and feel most comfortable with individuals of their parents’ racial ethnic group. May have been raised in a neighborhood in which the parents’ racial group’s culture predominated. May not be visibly racially different from their adoptive parents’ appearance and/or may have had negatives experiences with individuals of their own racial ethnic group (e.g., perceived rejection due to visible differences or transracial adoption status). May have been exposed to members and/or role models of their parents’ racial ethnic group. (Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 105)
Jasmine was one of the students who fell into the pro-parent cultural identity/pro-parent racial identity quadrant. She focused on White, American culture as her cultural background and related more to the White race than the Asian race. When asked to identify her ethnicity, Jasmine struggled and chose Korean American. In a later interview, she said, “Korean is just genetics” and “I would say [I am] American, since that’s all I’ve really ever known. ’Cause . . . my family celebrates [being American], that’s why I do.” She focused more on White culture because of her perspective growing up in the United States.

Gwen fell into the same category as Jasmine—pro-parent cultural identity/pro-parent racial identity. Gwen talked about being Asian, but “in every other way I’m basically White.” She said, “I see myself as Asian but I’m more personality-wise like a White person. I’m not really like an international student.” When asked how she realized that, she responded, “I knew I was Asian, but I had never really been around that many Asian people before to know what their culture was. I may be Asian skin-wise but I’m really nothing like them culturally.” Her parents did not provide opportunities to learn about Korean culture as she was growing up, and she had no interest in it.

Unlike Gwen, Harry had had some opportunities to learn about Korean culture including attending culture camp once or twice. He was never interested in learning more about Korean culture. Harry fell in the same category as Jasmine and Gwen: pro-parent cultural identity/pro-parent racial identity. When asked if race was an important part of his identity, he replied, “I don’t think it is. If I was going to say importance of 1 to 10, I would say 2 or 3. It’s never brought up that much. It’s not like I sit around and talk to people about
it. It just hasn’t ever been something I’ve had to worry about and deal with a lot.” Harry felt more connected to White, American culture than to Korean culture.

Kelly seemed to be in the same category. She was more connected to White, American culture than to Korean culture. Kelly discussed the lack of importance of her ethnicity as a part of her identity:

I think [being Korean] has little to do with who I am. My ethnicity is Korean. I think of it as adjective that describes me. I haven’t divulged in the culture or anything. I try not to make my ethnicity a part of my identity because I was only born in South Korea and that’s just what I look like. I don’t feel Korean at all. Maybe when I look in the mirror. I am not familiar with the customs or the language or the culture. Maybe if I felt . . . more knowledgeable, maybe I would identity myself more as Korean, but since I’m 100% American that’s just who I am. Korean is just how you describe my eyes to me.

Kelly felt 100% American and related more closely to people of her parent’s race than to anyone else.

Ian fell into the same category as the previous four students discussed—pro-parent cultural identity/pro-parent racial identity. He stated,

I’ve more or less been assimilated by this culture. I never learned enough about Korea. I didn’t live [in Korea] long to really feel out of place; this is where I grew up. I’m more or less American. I don’t really like Korean food. I like American food. I’m more or less American.

Ian related to his parents’ cultural and racial identity. He felt more American than Korean.
Ellen also fell into the pro-parent cultural identity/pro-parent racial identity at that point in time. As she was growing up, she may have been in a different quadrant, given that she had had an interest in learning more about Korean culture and had had a Korean role model while studying Korean language with a graduate student at the local university who was from Korea. However, at the time of the present study, her experience seemed to fit best in the pro-parent cultural identity/pro-parent category. Ellen reflected,

I was really interested for awhile. I took Korean language lessons for a long time. I did a lot of research. It would have been middle school age—sixth, seventh grade. At that point, I realized that it was different that I didn’t know anything about Korea so it was finding out an identity. At one point, the interest just went away. I took language lessons from fifth grade until eighth grade. Then, after that, I really didn’t want to anymore. I pretty much cut that whole thing off. When I stopped, I could still write. If the language is in front of me, I could read it and I could tell you what parts of it meant, but I couldn’t tell you the whole sentence. I’m definitely not fluent anymore but I could make it maybe [laughter].

Before Dylan went to college, he may have been in the same category as the previously mentioned students, but while in college, he had been able to participate in a variety of multicultural programs and to meet people of diverse backgrounds. He fell into the bicultural-racially undifferentiated identity. Individuals in this category are characterized as:

High in knowledge, awareness, competence, and comfort in the culture of both their own and their parents’ racial ethnic groups and feel most comfortable with individuals of multiple racial ethnic groups. May have been raised in a neighborhood in which
both the adoptee’s and the parents’ racial groups’ culture predominated. May have been exposed to members of multiple racial ethnic groups and to role models from multiple racial ethnic groups. A “human” identity may have been endorsed by parents. (Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 105)

Dylan had made two good friends who were both Latino. He stated,

I have a lot of ethnic friends [laughter]. [My best friend’s] from Puerto Rico. My other best friend, she’s Mexican. Coming from an all White school, I had a lot of White friends in high school, but here a lot of color, a lot of culture around you. You get to see different type of people. My groups of friends here is spread out, culturally speaking.

Adam fit in the pro-parent cultural identity/ racial undifferentiated identity category. People in this category are characterized as:

High in knowledge, awareness, competence, and comfort in the culture of their parents’ racial ethnic groups and feel most comfortable with individuals of multiple racial ethnic groups. May have been raised in a neighborhood in which the adoptee’s racial group’s culture predominated. May have been exposed to members of multiple racial ethnic groups and to role models from multiple racial ethnic groups. A “human” identity may have been endorsed by parents. (Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 105)

Adam considered himself to be a Korean adoptee. He explained,

[When asked about my ethnicity,] I usually say Korean adoptee. To me, it’s implied Korean American. I think it has a connotation of both. I don’t have to say, “Well,
I’m Korean and I know some Korean things, but I’m American and I have American culture.” To me, it’s kind of easy as a starting point . . . I have Caucasian parents who were born and raised in the United States by people born and raised in the United States. The only thing that is different for me is that I was born elsewhere. I was raised here but my parents did make a very pronounced effort to get me involved with Korean heritage things. I am different there, but I don’t see myself to be that much Korean.

Adam focused on a White cultural identity with a Korean racial identity. He also had access to Korean role models in the university setting through his martial arts experience.

Ben, Chris, and Faith fell into the pro-self cultural identity/racial undifferentiated identity. The description of individuals in this category is:

High in knowledge, awareness, competence, and comfort in the culture of their own racial ethnic groups and feel most comfortable with individuals of multiple racial ethnic groups. May have been raised in a neighborhood in which both the adoptee’s racial group’s culture predominated. May have been exposed to members of multiple racial ethnic groups and to role models from multiple racial ethnic groups. A “human” identity may have been endorsed by parents. (Baden & Steward, 2007, p. 104)

Ben’s experience was a bit different to categorize because his mother was Korean. College had allowed Ben to get more exposure to different people and to learn more about Korean culture. He said,
I became a different person; my eyes opened up and I could see a whole new perspective on life, in general. I find that you should be aware of all cultures, but because I was born from Korea, even though I lived in America practically all my life, I still should know my heritage.

When asked about his friends at the university, Ben also mentioned the multicultural background of his friends:

The social network comprises of mostly Asian/Pacific Island nationalities; the most being Korean, then Chinese, and following behind is Southeast Asian and Japanese. The other segment includes Caucasian, European, Middle Eastern, and African American. Many of my Caucasian friends are from high school and freshman year of college. Many of my Asian friends are whom I met from sophomore year and beyond.

Chris also had a pro-self cultural identity/racially undifferentiated identity. He did not have many opportunities as a child to interact with other Koreans or Korean Americans, but when he arrived at the university, he had connected to a lot of multicultural students through the scholarship program of which he was a part. His college friends were more diverse than his high school friends were. While at the university, he was able to meet different people.

He said,

To start with, it was mostly American friends or people I knew from [the scholarship program]. [They] were the only ones that I knew that were multicultural people from different backgrounds. From there, I met more people. . . . I got introduced to the stuff that they had grown up with. I’m not jealous but wondered what it would have
been if I grew up in a Korean family or in a town with more Korean people, Korean influence in it. Now I switched over to international students or first- and second-generation students. Then I went to all Korean people for some time and now it’s back in the middle. I get along with American people pretty well, since I grew up here. Some of my closer friends are either international or first- or second-generation, adoptees as well in there. A lot more mixed than before.

Faith also had a pro-self cultural identity/racially undifferentiated identity, which can be attributed to her experience in multicultural programs at the university and her experiences traveling to Korea. Her boyfriend was African American, and her best friend was Puerto Rican. She also has made connections with several Korean adoptees. Faith was first exposed to Korean culture through culture camp. At the first camp, her interest in Korea was piqued:

That’s just when it hit me, I’d never seen so many Koreans in one spot. Because I’d grown up in this really small town. I knew my two cousins, but besides that I think I knew two other Korean adoptees in town. So just to go there and see 200 kids. From that point on, I went to culture camps every year until my senior year and then after that I started going to Korea. I thought it was really cool, to have that piece of me.

Baden and Steward’s model (2007) provided a good foundation for understanding the student’s experiences. It helped me to understand the students’ experiences and to categorize them. The model is accessible and easy to understand so parents and adoptees could review it and understand the possible categories and what factors contribute to more interest in and learning about birth culture.
Summary

The categories within the cultural–racial identity model were assigned based on the students’ responses during the interviews. Half of the students fell into the category of pro-parent cultural identity/pro-parent racial identity, whereas the other half were in four different categories. Half of the students were focused on their parents’ cultural and racial identity, and the other half had varying experiences based on their cultural exploration opportunities as a child and as a college student.

Conclusion

The findings of this study were presented in this chapter. The data, collected from the interviews with the students, were presented and organized into three sections reflecting the three interview format: youth and background experiences, college experiences, and thoughts about the future. Themes that had emerged through the experiences the students shared were presented. The themes included strong connection to family, religion as an important part of childhood, connection to Korean culture as a child, interacting with others while in college, experiencing life as an Asian person, exploring racial and ethnic identity while in college, and interest in learning about Korean culture. The final section of this chapter focused on where each participant’s identity was located in the cultural–racial identity model (Baden & Steward, 2007). Chapter 6 will focus on the discussion and implications of the study.
CHAPTER 6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This chapter focuses on the results of the study. In this chapter, I will address each research question as well as the strengths and the limitations of the study. In addition, I will comment on implications for various groups including student affairs professionals and adopted students and present ideas for future research projects. The chapter concludes with some personal reflections.

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand the college experiences of Korean adoptees related to their personal development and Korean cultural awareness while at a mid-sized Midwestern university. The data collection took place over a semester at a land-grant institution in the Midwestern United States. Eleven participants were interviewed for the project. Nine of the 11 students completed the three in-depth interviews. The other 2 participants completed two of the three interviews. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed. I created profiles for each student and analyzed the transcribed materials to develop overarching themes. The themes presented in Chapter 5 were organized into three sections including youth and background experiences, college experiences, and thoughts about the future.

Findings

The research question that guided this study was: What are the college experiences that influence the personal development and Korean cultural awareness of students adopted from Korea? In this section, I address the subquestions and the results from this study.
Research Question #1: In What Ways, if any, Do Korean Adoptees Develop as Individuals while in College?

This research question focused on the developmental changes Korean adoptees experience while in college. The students experienced a variety of changes as a result of their time in college. Based on student development theory, the changes experienced by the students would likely be experienced by most college students. These changes can be better understood using the frameworks of King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model and Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) seven vectors of development.

The students mentioned a change in their relationships with their families during this time. Although they did not see their family members every day, they still connected with them on a regular basis. Some of the students mentioned being more respectful and appreciative of their parents. Also, they tended to have positive interactions when they had the chance to get together. A couple of the students mentioned reconnecting with their siblings and getting to know them on a different level. Kelly and her siblings started to spend more time getting to know each other as adults instead of as children. During her first semester in college, Kelly began to develop in the mature interpersonal relationships vector of Chickering and Reisser’s theory (1993), forming a deeper relationship with her siblings. Faith mentioned connecting with her sister more after their mother passed away.

The students also saw changes in themselves and how they interacted with others, evidence that they had progressed in two of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) seven vectors, developing mature interpersonal relationships and moving through autonomy through interdependence, in relationships with their friends. Ellen realized that her friends were coming to her for advice and suggestions and she liked the transition from being dependent
on others to being more independent. She experienced the moving through autonomy toward
interdependence vector. Ellen said, “It’s a totally different experience to be there for
someone instead of you’re going to someone else for help. I like that role reversal.” Faith
learned about independence, too. She realized that she needed to do things on her own and
that she had a responsibility to herself to accomplish her goals. Kelly appreciated being able
to be separated from her family to develop her sense of independence. Ben was able to
interact with a lot of multicultural students and to learn from their experiences and create a
more multicultural worldview from this experience. Dylan also appreciated the diversity of
the campus. He had many Latino friends and he was able to see things from a different
perspective because of his diverse group of friends. Appreciation for diversity is an aspect of
developing mature interpersonal relationships (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

In addition to developing stronger relationships with family and friends, most of the
students developed or refined their career goals while in college. These students showed
progress in Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) developing purpose vector which “consists of
developing clear vocational goals, making meaningful commitments to specific personal
interests and activities, and establishing strong interpersonal commitments” (Evans et al.,
2010, p. 69). Adam and Faith committed themselves to career goals even though their
parents were not satisfied with their choices. Adam decided to transition from engineering to
medicine. He graduated in December and planned to join the Peace Corps and, then, become
a member of the military medical corps. He felt a deep sense of service and the importance
of giving back because of all of the things his family gave to him. Faith also committed
herself to a life of serving others. Although her father and her sister wanted her to study
engineering or another lucrative career, Faith chose to pursue a degree in social work so that she could work in an adoption agency and assist other children like her. Both Adam and Faith experienced the reflective thinking stage of King and Kitchener’s (1994) reflective judgment model. They were able to think about their experiences while in college and their interactions with their families at a different level than were some of the first year students in the study.

Some of the other students became more committed to career fields during college. Both Dylan and Jasmine committed themselves to being artists with a focus on scientific illustration. Gwen re-evaluated her role as a future music teacher and considered the difference between being a student and a teacher. Ben enhanced his learning about entrepreneurship and opened his second business venture while in college. The other students had similar major and career explorations throughout the time at the university.

Overall, the students did exhibit changes over the months or years they had spent in college. They became connected to their families in different ways. During their college experience, they enhanced their career plans as well as learned about their own personal strengths and skills.

**Research Question #2: How Do Korean Adoptees Make Meaning of Their Korean American Identity while in College?**

This research question focuses on the students’ understanding of their Korean American identity. According to the research on general adoption, there is a continuum of the salience of adoption in an adolescent adoptee’s life (Grotevant, Dunbar, & Kohler, as cited in Grotevant et al., 2007). At one end of the continuum, the person does not want to know anything about his or her adoptive culture, and at the other end of the spectrum, the
individual is preoccupied with his or her adoptive status. In the middle of the continuum, the individual’s adoptive identity is equally as important as other parts of his or her identity like social, religious, or sexual orientation. About half of the participants in this study had limited interest in Korean culture, which would put them at the low saliency end of Grotevant, Dunbar, and Kohler’s continuum, whereas the other half of the group was more interested in learning more about what it means to be Korean American, perhaps placing them closer to the middle of the continuum.

In most cases, the students in this study did not consider themselves to be Korean American, but most of them did include Korean as part of their ethnicity description. Most of the participants did not expand their understanding of the concept of being Korean American or change their minds about their ethnicity while in college.

When asked about how they labeled themselves with regard to ethnicity, the participants gave a variety of responses. The answers included Korean (4), Korean American (1), South Korean (1), Asian American (1), American Korean (1), Korean adoptee (1), regular kid who happens to be Asian (1), and 1 student did not answer. The only consistency in their responses was the use of the term “Korean.” Almost all of the students considered themselves to be some variation on Korean. Half of the 10 responses were “Korean” or “South Korean.” Although the students used these terms, they do not carry over to their identity. The terms are merely descriptors of the way they looked. When the students answered the question about ethnicity, some of them hesitated and did not know how to respond.
Given that 6 of the 11 participants fall into the pro-parent cultural identity–pro-parent racial identity on the cultural–racial identity model (Baden & Steward, 2003), it is not surprising that these students did not consider themselves to be Korean American. The students in this category focused more on their experiences growing up in a White family than on a multicultural identity. Most of the students seemed to provide responses to the question about ethnicity with little thought. A couple of them mentioned that they used the word “Korean” to describe themselves physically but not to share any information about their culture or their experiences.

Chris and Adam had the most well developed thoughts about their ethnicity. They had spent a lot of time thinking about ethnicity and talking with others about their ethnicity. Chris, who fell into the pro-self cultural identity–racially undifferentiated identity category (Baden & Steward, 2003), described his ethnicity as American Korean because, in his case, he felt culture was more important than national origin. Adam, who seemed to be in the pro-parent cultural identity–racially undifferentiated identity category, considered himself a Korean adoptee. This label helped others understand his experience and his lack of knowledge of the language and customs. These 2 students talked with friends and acquaintances about these labels and they felt comfortable using them to describe themselves. Although a couple of students worked to understand their Korean American identity while in college, most of the students, including the ones in the minority scholarship program, did not indicate any college experiences that helped them to consider their Korean American identity.

If this research question had been broader to include ethnic identity development in general, it would have been possible to discuss how more of the students made meaning of
their ethnic background. The language of the question forces a focus on Korean American identity, whereas the students experienced situations that allowed them to better understand their ethnic identity in general.

**Research Question #3: Do Korean Adoptees Interact with Koreans and Korean Americans to Explore Their Identity while in College? If So, How Is Their Identity Affected?**

This research question relates to getting to know Koreans and Korean Americans and what the influences of those experiences are on the students. Some of the students in the study spent time reaching out to Koreans and Korean Americans in order to learn more about Korean culture and to experience that aspect of their identity. Most of the students did not reach out in these ways. They were focused on other groups of friends and activities and did not have an interest in martial arts or student clubs focused on Korean culture or they did not know any Korean Americans and felt uncomfortable going on their own to the meetings or events. Although there is no research about adoptees interacting with people of the same ethnicity, the related research about adopted children encourages parents to connect their children with children and adults of the same ethnic background (Brodzinsky et al., 1992). Many of these students had opportunities through culture camps to experience connections with other Korean adoptees, but in their hometowns they were not afforded the option to interact with Koreans and Korean Americans because of the homogeneous nature of the areas where they lived.

The students who were more involved were older students including Adam, Chris, Faith, and Ben. These 4 students had the benefit of early exposure to Koreans and Korean Americans as well as cultural activities. This early exposure may have influenced their
interest and comfort level in interacting with other Koreans and Korean Americans and learning more about Korean culture. They had friends who were Korean American and Korean, and they participated in activities with these individuals. In each case, except Faith’s situation where she travelled to Korea, the opportunities that the participants had were available at the university or in the local community. A couple of the students helped with the Korean adoptees group that the martial arts instructor led. They also participated in the Korean club on campus and the Korean language group as well as periodically attending one of the local Korean churches. Adam participated in martial arts, which allowed him to meet the instructors and some other students with Korean backgrounds. These opportunities helped the students become more committed to learning about their ethnic identity. Ben said,

I like to hang out with both Koreans and Korean Americans as much as possible. I feel most connected with them and can share many values and experiences with them. I also feel more naturally accepted, because, in the end, we all look and behave similarly due to our DNA structures.

Ben felt a close connection to other Korean Americans. Chris had similar feelings. He dated an Asian woman and learned more about how to behave with other Asian people. Although he felt like he had a difficult time getting into Korean groups, over time he integrated himself into these groups and felt more comfortable. These students took the opportunity to learn from Koreans and Korean Americans in order to develop their identities. According to Marcia’s (1980) ego identity statuses, individuals in identity achievement have experienced both crisis and commitment. First the individual encounters the crisis and then it is resolved with a new focus and path. Ben, Chris, Faith and Adam were all in this status. They were
exposed to other Korean and Korean American individuals and they each experienced a crisis regarding their identity that concluded in a new path to learning more about Korean culture. The students thought more about their lives and their identities, and they resolved to include more of a Korean focus in their identities. The other students in the study were in the foreclosure status. They accepted their parents’ cultural identity and did not explore their birth culture. There may be ways for student affairs professionals to assist students in exploring their culture. Programs could be developed to allow students to engage with one another to talk about race, ethnicity, and culture in order to think more deeply about their experiences and the experiences of others around them.

Several of the other students were aware of the clubs and ways to meet Koreans and Korean Americans, but they did not make an effort to seek out these groups or individuals. During the interview process, I asked the students if they would be interested in me sharing their names with the martial arts instructor who brings Korean adoptees together to discuss culture and get to know each other. A couple of the students hesitated and either nonverbally or verbally seemed confused by this question. Harry, one of the first-year students, said that he thought his mother would like him to attend the group but he did not have as much interest in it. Ian, another first-year student, said that it would be nice to know some Korean people but he did not think he would seek anyone out. In the end, each of the students agreed to let me share their information with the martial arts instructor.

The students who did not seek out these experiences did not have the opportunity to learn more about a Korean American identity, whereas the students who did seek out the opportunities learned about themselves and more about what it means to be Korean
American. In some cases, lack of interest was related to students’ developmental stage in college. All 3 of the first-year students were in the pro-parent cultural identity–pro-parent racial identity category of the cultural–racial identity model (Baden & Steward, 2003). As they develop throughout their college years, they may or may not branch out and interact with people who are Korean or Korean American.

**Research Question #4: Do Korean Adoptees Use Campus Support Services, Including Multicultural Offices and Cultural Clubs, to Explore Their Identity? If so, How Is Their Identity Affected?**

This question focuses on the use of campus support services to help students explore their identity. Campus support services are broadly defined to include the multicultural office, cultural clubs, and other activities on campus. As is the case with the other research questions, there were some students who used on-campus services to learn about Korean culture and their identity as a Korean American, but most of the students did not use these resources or see them as contributing to their understanding of identity or culture. These students are in the unexamined ethnic identity stage of Phinney’s (1993) ethnic identity development model. They are disinterested in learning about Korean culture.

Six of the 11 students in the study received one of the two lucrative minority scholarships offered at the university. When asked about the focus of the courses required as a part of the scholarship program, a couple of students mentioned that the classes did not really do much to explore culture but focused more on interacting with others and transitional skills. Although the courses did not focus on culture or ethnicity, the classes were taught by staff from the multicultural office. Some of the students experienced more interaction with
this office than did others. The students used the office for free printing, access to tutors, and other perks like free football tickets and early class registration.

Dylan was in the ethnic identity search/moratorium stage of Phinney’s (1993) model. He was trying to learn more about Korean culture. Dylan was active with the multicultural office, and he attended a conference about race and ethnicity on the West Coast. Although he saw this event as an opportunity to learn more about Korean culture, he ended up learning more about Latinos because he was assigned to a racially mixed group of students to learn about Latinos. The purpose of the conference was to learn more about an ethnicity other than your own, but in an adoptee’s case it would have been a great learning experience for the student to learn more about Korean culture. Because of the current structure of the program, Dylan was unable to use this experience to move to the final stage of Phinney’s model—the ethnic identity achievement stage.

Some of the students mentioned being aware of the Korean club and Korean language group on campus, but they did not join the groups. One student mentioned being uncomfortable about going to the meetings. Ellen said,

What’s always held me from doing that [attending a Korean club meeting] is I don’t know anybody else that's Korean. It’s not that I don’t like going places by myself, but a new experience and by myself is [overwhelming], that’s why I never went. It was easier not to go than to go.

Ellen seemed interested in learning but she was uncomfortable going to a group where she did not know anyone else.
One thing that a participant brought to my attention was that some of the Korean student organizations on the campus run their meetings and host events in Korean. This fact may dissuade students who do not speak Korean from being involved and reaching out to other students. Recently, I visited one of the student organization’s websites and the majority of it was in Korean. I could not even find out the date of an upcoming event because none of it was in English. When I contacted the student leader, he quickly answered my question, but some students may not feel comfortable reaching out to individuals they do not know. If some of the information on the website was in English, adoptees might feel more comfortable joining the group or at least have the opportunity to gather more information.

Although the students did not use campus support services to explore their identity, they did use other services to help them succeed in college. A few of the students mentioned having a tutor and attending supplemental instruction workshops. Also, students participated in church groups and student organizations. One student made use of the counseling center on campus. The students seemed aware of the resources provided on campus and they were able to use the services.

**Research Question #5: What Other Factors in the Campus Environment Influence the Identity Development or Cultural Awareness of Korean Adoptees?**

The fifth research question asked about what factors in the campus environment assist in the identity development and Korean cultural awareness of the participants. Before attending college, these students may have experienced the foreclosed subtype of the unexamined ethnic identity stage of Phinney’s (1993) ethnic identity development model. These individuals take on views about their ethnicity based on the perspectives of others around them so they would see themselves more as White than as Korean American.
Because many of the students were from small, racially homogeneous towns, they had not interacted with many Asian people. After the students arrived on campus, they noticed the large numbers of Asian students on campus. Living in the university town was the first time that they experienced a large Asian population. This difference encouraged the students to consider their race in a different way and provided the impetus for the movement into the ethnic identity search/moratorium stage of Phinney’s model. In some cases, young people may react to this exploration with guilt for not having explored their ethnic background sooner or with anger at the dominant group because of their discrimination or racism. In some cases, as with Chris, Adam, and Dylan, this exploration leads to the final stage of the model, the ethnic identity achievement stage. In addition, they developed a more bicultural identity.

The students reflected on feeling different and being interested in being around so many people of diverse backgrounds. Harry talked about feeling different. He said,

I see myself more of being unique now even though there’s thousands of Asians around me. Now it’s definitely more common for people to refer to me as, or see me as, an Asian person, but I see myself as a regular American kid who happens to be Asian and also happens to be on the same campus where there are thousands of other Asian people.

Harry and other students have started thinking about their racial background in a different way. Although at this time, these students are in the ethnic identity search/moratorium stage, over time, this experience of being around Asian people may influence their exploration of their Korean culture.
The campus environment was supportive and caring, which helped students stay connected to the university and others as well as persist. Students felt comfortable on campus and able to be themselves. They experienced what Schlossberg (as cited in Evans et al., 2010) called mattering. The students felt attended to and important because of their involvement in the scholarship programs and other groups. Attention means “the feeling that one is noticed” and importance is “a belief that one is cared about” (Evans et al., 2010, p. 32). Kelly mentioned that the vice president for student affairs talked to the students in her scholarship class. He encouraged the students to stay in school and be dedicated to their school work in order to graduate from the university. She felt inspired by his talk. Other students mentioned the multicultural office and other staff as being concerned about their success, which allowed them to feel connected to the university. Because of feeling comfortable on campus, the students may be able to open up to campus staff to explore their identity.

In contrast, Kelly and Harry, both first-year students, mentioned the relief of feeling anonymous on campus. They enjoyed not being called on in class and not being singled out for being smart. This type of environment may allow the students to interact with others with whom they have not interacted before. Also, the 3 first-year students in the study may not have had an interest in learning about Korean culture at that point, but they may change their minds during the time they are in college.

In summary, the results of the study suggest that students with more interest in their Korean identity and cultural awareness had more involvement with Koreans and Korean Americans. These individuals sought out experiences to explore Korean culture, whereas
others did not. This involvement may be related to their year in college given that older students (Adam, Chris, Ben, and Faith) seemed to be more interested in learning about Korean culture. Other students, including the 3 first-year students, did not explore their ethnic identity in the same way as did some of the older students. They were disinterested and spent their time on other things while in college.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study had a few limitations. One limitation was the lack of diversity in the students’ hometowns. The largest hometown was 100,000 people, but most of the towns were very small (1,000–3,000 people). I was unable to locate any students who were from a large urban area. A reason for this homogeneity may be that a large percentage of the students at the university are from within the state and the state does not have many large cities or metropolitan areas. I am interested to know if young people who grew up in more urban, diverse areas had a different experience than did the students I interviewed. Another limitation of the study was the difficulty of finding participants. Those who were connected to the Korean adoptees group may have slanted the perceptions presented in the findings. The 3 first-year students who participated may not have had enough college experiences to adequately speak about them, and their interest in learning about Korean culture may change over time.

**Strengths of the Study**

One of the strengths of this study was the methodology. The in-depth interviews allowed me to get to know the students and to feel comfortable with them over multiple weeks, and they felt comfortable with me. The students were forthcoming with information
and spoke candidly with me. The depth and breadth of information could not have been collected from a single interview or a survey. In addition, the study was narrowly focused on students adopted from South Korea. Because of their common racial background, they may have experienced similar stereotypes. Also, the narrow focus helped to guide the literature review and other aspects of the project.

Implications for Student Affairs Professionals

I hope that student affairs professionals, especially individuals in multicultural student affairs, will consider integrating more discussion about race, ethnicity, and culture into their work. College may be the first time that transracially adopted students will be identified as “multicultural,” and it may be difficult for this population to grasp because of their experiences in White families and homogeneous environments. When one of the study participants, Ellen, received an e-mail from the multicultural office, she thought it was misdirected. She said,

I didn’t know if it was supposed to be for me or not. The reason it confused me is ’cause I don’t consider myself [to be] “multicultural.” I live in the same culture as everyone else and I have since I was 8 months old.

Ellen was confused by the invitation to the event for multicultural students. More education and outreach could be done to reach this group of students in order to help them explore their racial and ethnic identity and help the students adjust to being one of many Asian people on campus. In addition, education about racism and how to deal with insensitivity would be helpful for these students to learn how to handle these situations, if they are not already familiar with them.
Other student affairs professionals can assist adopted students navigate the resources available on campus. Professionals should not assume that, just because the student looks Asian, he or she considers him or herself to be part of an ethnic group. A student who does not identify as Asian may not be interested in visiting the multicultural office, but he or she may be experiencing issues that could be better served in another office such as the counseling center on the campus.

There are several other areas in student affairs that would benefit from information about this particular group of students. A more in-depth training about diversity issues is needed during residence hall staff training, counseling center staff training, and faculty and staff training. The issues transracially adopted students face may be different from those faced by other students. Also, the development of programs for students to discuss issues of race, culture, ethnicity, and identity would allow for an outlet for individuals to learn more about themselves and one another. The best time to target students is not their first year. First-year students are focused on transitioning to college and getting settled on the campus. The students in the study started to explore their birth culture more as they progressed through their college years, so targeting sophomores or juniors would be ideal. Another option would be to talk with student leaders and advisers of cultural organizations to encourage them to make their events and activities welcoming and accessible to all students.

It is important for student affairs professionals and faculty to remember that students who may not look White are not necessarily from outside of the United States. Faculty and staff should not single out these students in front of their peers. A conscious effort should be made to refrain from saying insensitive comments. Students should not have to experience
insensitivity in the classroom or on campus, especially from faculty members and administrators.

**Implications for Students**

This research has implications for both adopted students and other students. Adopted students have the opportunity to reach out or not reach out to other Korean adoptees, Koreans, and Korean Americans as well as multicultural offices or culture clubs on their campuses. The decision to reach out or not reach out is a personal one based on his or her previous experience and interest in developing this part of his or her identity and deciding if race and/or ethnicity are key parts of his or her identity. If students are interested in getting involved in student groups, martial arts, or other activities, they need to step outside of their comfort zones and push themselves to participate in these events. Adam, one of the participants, considered participating in martial arts for many years, and when he was a senior, he finally decided to join. He felt like the experience not only taught him about self-discipline and self-defense in all aspects of his life but also about Korean culture. Adopted students may experience similar learning if they get involved in groups with Koreans and Korean Americans.

In addition, there are implications for Korean and Korean American students. If Korean and Korean American students want to be welcoming to Korean adoptees, they should consider the ways they present themselves. If the student organization websites are predominantly in Korean, Korean adoptees may not be able to access the information and they may feel discouraged from getting involved. Also, if meetings are held in Korean, Korean adoptees would not have access. From talking with the participants, I think each of
them would consider attending events with Koreans, Korean Americans, or Korean adoptees if they felt included in the group and had a connection to at least one person in the group. Korean and Korean American students may learn from the Korean adoptees and vice versa.

**Plans for Sharing Research**

I want to share my research with a variety of different audiences including adoptees and their parents and student affairs professionals. I presented my research on campus at the Iowa State Conference on Race and Ethnicity (ISCORE). Through my ISCORE presentation, I reached out to a graduate student in the multicultural office staff on campus. I plan to meet with the staff to share the information and host a discussion with the staff members so they can learn how to better serve transracially adopted students. I plan to share my dissertation with Holt International Children Services, one of the international adoption agencies. The coordinator for youth adult adoptees has asked me to write an article for their website. I plan to find additional ways to disseminate my research. I will publish my dissertation using the open access option, which means people searching the Internet will be able to access it without needing access to a university library. I will share the document with people I have met who have transracially adopted children in order for them to better understand their children’s experiences. I hope to present my research at regional and national conferences targeted at adoptees and student affairs professionals. In order to share the information with an academic audience, I will submit an article to a scholarly journal. There are many options for sharing the research and I plan to employ multiple options listed above.
Recommendations for Future Research

This study filled a gap in the literature about Korean adoptees. Previously, there were no studies about the college experiences of students adopted from South Korea. There are many avenues for further research about college students adopted from other countries. It would be interesting to learn more about the college experiences of students adopted from South Korea. It would be interesting to interview students in other regions of the country (i.e., Pacific Northwest, Northeast, South) to see if their experiences are similar to the students in this study.

Another topic to consider would be the experiences of adopted college students who attend different types of institutions. The experiences at a small, private institution or a religiously affiliated institution may be different from a mid-sized, land-grant institution. Also, it would be interesting to find students from urban hometowns to talk to about their experiences learning about Korean culture as a youngster. These students may have had more opportunities to interact with Koreans and Korean Americans and have a different perspective on that part of their identity. Another topic to explore may be focusing on another subset of adoptees such as Chinese or Indian adoptees. There are groups of other adoptees within the United States, so there would be many opportunities to learn more about intercountry adoptees and their experiences. Also, a study of female, transracial adoptees may be interesting. These participants may experience different expectations and stereotypes. Another interesting study would be a lifespan developmental study of transracial adoptees. Another piece of research could include the experiences of White siblings of transracial adoptees and the experiences of adoptive parents dealing with helping their child understand
his or her culture. There are many options for future research about young adult adoptees and their families.

**Personal Reflections**

*Expanding beyond what we know we can be.* Corita Kent

In the room where I did the majority of my interviews for this project, there are four small paintings framed in two frames. In each of the corners of the four quadrants, there are words. When read together, they form the quote above. This quote relates well to my experience as a researcher in this project and to the students’ sharing of their experiences. As a researcher, I was stretched beyond my comfort level and my strengths to complete this project. The students were also stretched. They shared deeply personal information with me throughout the interview process. They were candid and open. A few times, they surprised themselves by how they felt about an issue or how they communicated it to me.

I considered selecting other topics for my dissertation, but I am glad that I committed to studying the college experiences of students adopted from South Korea. Although it was difficult to identify students and some students did not follow through with meeting times, I believe that this project has allowed me to better understand students, in general. I know more about the challenges they face and my role as a student affairs practitioner in helping them to overcome these challenges. I believe that the process of writing a dissertation has not only made me a better qualitative researcher but also a better student affairs professional. I have recommitted myself to having positive interactions and meaningful relationships with students.
In September 2009, I wrote about my interest in this topic and how my identity plays into the topic. I referred back to this memo as I analyzed the data and presented the findings from the students’ point of view. I wrote,

I tend to project my own values and beliefs onto [people who were adopted]. If I were adopted from another country, I think I’d want to learn about the country, culture, and language. I’d want to eat the food, read books by native authors, and visit the country. I have these assumptions about how I would act and react in this situation. What I have learned in practice is that few people I meet get this entrenched. I have to remember that parents and the adoptees themselves will be at different places. Some will not even think about their Asian American identity, some will eat the food or attend an event or two but nothing else and others will travel to Korea to meet their birth parents. I need to learn to accept that everyone is at a different place in their development and that my way isn’t the “right” way. This will be something that I have to remind myself of constantly.

Throughout this process, I have been reminded that my thoughts and feelings about this topic do not matter. I am not the one experiencing life as a person of color who may not understand or feel like that racial background is salient in his or her life.

Through this process, I have talked to a lot of friends and colleagues about my work and what it means. I am grateful to have a network of people who care about and support me and my work. I was reminded on many occasions that, as a White woman, I do not see firsthand the experiences that people of color face. It is rare that I am in a situation where I
am the only White person. These students encounter being the only Asian person on a daily basis even though many of them feel White.

I am proud to have met these students. In my career, I plan to reach out to Korean adoptees to help them find the resources to explore their Korean cultural awareness and identities. I hope to partner with the multicultural office on my campus to encourage the development of a group and to identify South Korean faculty members who are willing to share their culture and perspective with these students.

I am forever indebted to the participants of this study because without them I would have been unable to complete this project. Thank you to Adam, Ben, Faith, Chris, Ian, Harry, Kelly, Dylan, Ellen, Jasmine, and Gwen. I enjoyed getting to meet each of you and better understand your story and your perspective. I appreciate the time you spent talking with me and sharing your stories. I wish you all the best in your lives.
APPENDIX A. E-MAIL INVITING PARTICIPANTS TO PARTICIPATE

Dear _________________,

My name is Jennifer Nissen and I am a doctoral student at Iowa State University. For my dissertation, I am looking at the college experiences of students adopted from Korea. I received your name from the [name source here]. For my dissertation study, I am looking for current college students in the Midwest (Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota) who are 18-24 years old, and were adopted from Korea before the age of 5. The data collection methods will consist of three in-person interviews. I hope that you are interested in participating in this research.

The purpose of the study is to better understand the college experiences of Korean adoptees related to their personal development and Korean cultural awareness while at a mid-sized Midwestern university. If you choose to participate, I will ask you to participate in three 90 minute interviews about your background before college, your experiences while in college, and the meaning you have made of your experiences. All information you provide will be kept confidential and during the study, you will be asked to provide a pseudonym.

If you meet these criteria and you are interested in participating in this study or you would like more information, please contact me at garrett1@iastate.edu.

Thank you for your interest!

Jennifer Garrett Nissen
Doctoral Student
Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
Iowa State University
garrett1@iastate.edu
727-542-4252
APPENDIX B. CONFIRMATION E-MAIL

Dear ________________,

Thank you for your interest in my doctoral dissertation study exploring the college experiences of students adopted from Korea. The purpose of the study is to better understand the college experiences of Korean adoptees related to their personal development and Korean cultural awareness while at a mid-sized Midwestern university.

Please review the attached informed consent document. At our first interview, after you ask any questions, we will both sign the document.

I would like to set up our first 90 minute interview. Will you please send me a few dates and times that you are available to meet?

If you would like more information or have any questions, please contact me at garrett1@iastate.edu.

Thank you for your interest!

Jennifer Garrett Nissen
Doctoral Student
Educational Leadership & Policy Studies
Iowa State University
garrett1@iastate.edu
727-542-4252
APPENDIX C. INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

Title of Study: Exploring the College Experiences of Undergraduate Students Adopted from South Korea

Investigator: Jennifer Garrett Nissen

This is a research study. Please take your time in deciding if you would like to participate. Please feel free to ask questions at any time.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to better understand the college experiences of Korean adoptees related to their identity development and Korean cultural awareness while at a mid-sized Midwestern university. You are being invited to participate in this study because you are a college student who was adopted from Korea by a White family.

DESCRIPTION OF PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in this study, your participation will last for approximately four months during which you will be interviewed three times. Each interview will last approximately 90 minutes. You will also be asked to keep a journal beginning after the first interview until one month after the final interview. You will receive an email from me after each interview with questions to consider as you write. During the study you may expect the following study procedures to be followed: the first interview will focus on your background, the second interview will focus on your college experiences, and the third interview will focus on the meaning you have made of your experiences. The interviews will be recorded and transcribed. At any time, you may refuse to answer a question that makes you feel uncomfortable.

RISKS

While participating in this study you may experience the following risks: Since you may be asked about sensitive topics, you may experience discomfort. You are free to refuse to answer any questions and to provide as little or as much information as you are comfortable providing to the researcher.

BENEFITS

If you decide to participate in this study there may be no direct benefit to you. It is hoped that the information gained in this study will benefit society by providing valuable information about the college experiences of Korean adoptees.
COSTS AND COMPENSATION

You will not have any costs from participating in this study. You will not be compensated for participating in this study.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you may refuse to participate or leave the study at any time. If you decide to not participate in the study or leave the study early, it will not result in any penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Records identifying participants will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by applicable laws and regulations and will not be made publicly available. However, federal government regulatory agencies, auditing departments of Iowa State University, and the Institutional Review Board (a committee that reviews and approves human subject research studies) may inspect and/or copy your records for quality assurance and data analysis. These records may contain private information.

To ensure confidentiality to the extent permitted by law, the following measures will be taken- you will be asked to provide a pseudonym and audio files, transcripts, and journals will be labeled with your pseudonym. All audio files, informed consent forms, transcripts, and journals will be kept on the researcher’s password protected computer and at the researcher’s home in a locked safe until December 2011. If the results are published, your identity will remain confidential.

QUESTIONS OR PROBLEMS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

- For further information about the study contact Jennifer Garrett at 727-542-4252 or Dr. Nancy Evans, major professor, at 515-294-7113.

- If you have any questions about the rights of research subjects or research-related injury, please contact the IRB Administrator, (515) 294-4566, IRB@iastate.edu, or Director, (515) 294-3115, Office for Responsible Research, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa 50011.

***************************************************************************
PARTICIPANT SIGNATURE

Your signature indicates that you voluntarily agree to participate in this study, that the study has been explained to you, that you have been given the time to read the document and that your questions have been satisfactorily answered. You will receive a copy of the written informed consent prior to your participation in the study.

Participant’s Name (printed) __________________________________________________________

__________________________________________  (Participant’s Signature)  (Date)

INVESTIGATOR STATEMENT

I certify that the participant has been given adequate time to read and learn about the study and all of his/her questions have been answered. It is my opinion that the participant understands the purpose, risks, benefits and the procedures that will be followed in this study and has voluntarily agreed to participate.

__________________________________________  (Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent)  (Date)
APPENDIX D. INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview #1- Background

How do you identify yourself in relation to ethnicity?

BEING ADOPTED

How old were you when you were adopted?  
How old are you now?  
What country were you adopted from?  
What agency were you adopted through?  
Do you know anything about your biological parents? If so, what do you know?  
At the time that you learned about being adopted, did you have any interest in learning about your birthplace?  
As a child or teenager, did you do anything to explore the culture?  
If so, what? (Anything else?)  
If not, why not? At what age did you seek out these experiences?  
What knowledge do you have of the culture, traditions, language? How did you learn?  
Have you ever traveled to Korea? If so, when? Why? With whom?  
As a child or teenager, were you involved in Korean culture experiences such as culture camp, martial arts, etc?  
When you were growing up, did you ever feel discriminated against? If so, tell me about a time.

FAMILY

Tell me about your family. What are your parents like?  
What is the racial background of your parents?  
Do you have any siblings? Please describe them to me.  
What is your relationship like with your parents and siblings?  
Do you feel like your parents treat you differently than their biological children? If so, in what ways? Why do you think this is the case?  
Was there an expectation in your family that you go to college? Why or why not?  
What preconceived ideas does/did your family have about people of Asian descent?

HOMETOWN

Tell me about your hometown. (Where did you grow up? Was it an urban or rural area?)  
How diverse was it?  
Were there other kids adopted from other countries at your school or in your town? If so, where were they from?  
In your hometown, was there a Korean American community?  
How did you feel about your community when you were growing up?
How do you think you were perceived within your community as a child and adolescent? Describe any particular experiences that stand out for you.

SCHOOL EXPERIENCES

Tell me about your experiences in elementary, middle, and high school. Were your schools like? Were there other children with similar ethnic identities? Tell me about your high school activities. Did you participate in any clubs or groups? What were your high school friends like? Are they White or other races? Did you date in high school? Tell me about the person/people you dated. What is your favorite memory of your childhood? What is your least favorite memory of your childhood? When did you become conscious of your identity? How old were you? What encouraged you to think about it?

OTHER QUESTIONS

What role did religion play when you were growing up? Is there anything that I didn’t ask about your childhood that you’d like to tell me? Are there any questions you thought that I would ask about your childhood and I didn’t ask it?

Interview #2- College

Follow up questions from the first interview and/or journal. What year did you start college? Did you start at your current institution? If not, how would you compare your experiences at the different institutions? Why did you select the college that you did? What has your experience been like at your college? How many years have you been in college? What are you studying? Why did you choose this major? Why are you seeking a college degree? What is the expectation in your family? If you weren’t in college right now, what would you be doing? When will you graduate? What are your plans after graduation? Where do you plan to live? Where do you live while in college? Why did you choose this location? What activities do you participate in outside of class? Why did you choose those activities? Describe your network of friends and acquaintances on campus. Have you dated in college? Tell me about the person or people you dated. What have you learned about yourself since being at ISU (or college he/she attends)? What is it like to be a student at Iowa State University (or college he/she attends)? What is it like to be (self-identifier) at Iowa State University (or college he/she attends)?
Since being in college, have you experienced discrimination? Will you share an experience with me?
Has your perception of your ethnicity changed since attending college? If so, what contributed to this change? How has this change impacted you? Your family?
Do you ever refer to yourself in a derogatory manner? If so, what do you say? In which situations do you use this language?
Do you think you are discriminated against because of your ethnicity? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
Do you think you are discriminated against because of your gender? If so, in what ways? If not, why not?
How satisfied are you with your physical appearance? If you could change one or more things about your appearance, what would you change and why?
Have you sought out any experiences with Koreans or Korean Americans while in college? If so, what?
Tell me about an event at college that caused you to think about your ethnicity.
Being a Korean adoptee on campus, what struggles and challenges have you encountered? What have you done to manage these challenges?
Is there anything that I didn’t ask about your college experiences that you’d like to tell me?
Is there any question you thought that I would ask about your college experiences that I didn’t ask?

**Interview #3- Meaning making**

Follow up questions from the first two interviews and/or journal.
When you think about being (racial/ethnic descriptor that the student uses), what is that experience like for you?
How do you describe your racial identity?
How do you describe your ethnic identity?
How important is race to you in terms of your identity?
How have your thoughts and feelings about being adopted changed while in college?
Do you envision adopting your own children? Why or why not?
Have you ever had any experience that caused stress or anxiety? What did you do?
Have you ever dealt with any other issues, such as academic, personal, or health issues, while in college? How did you deal with these issues?
While in college, has your relationship with your family changed or stayed the same? How?
What role, if any, does religion play in your life?
In the future, do you envision trying to learn more about the Korean culture? If so, how and why? If not, why not?
Is there anything that I didn’t ask about that you’d like to tell me?
Is there any question you thought that I would ask and I didn’t ask it?
APPENDIX E. INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

IOWA STATE UNIVERSITY
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Institutional Review Board
Office for Responsible Research
Vice President for Research
1138 Pearson Hall
Ames, Iowa 50011-2207
515-294-4566
FAX 515-294-4467

Date: 4/6/2010
To: Jennifer Garrett
204 Cooper Court, Ames, IA 50014

CC: Dr. Nancy Evans
N247 Lagomarcino Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Exploring the College Experiences of Undergraduate Students Adopted From South Korea

IRB Num: 10-043
Approval Date: 4/5/2010
Continuing Review Date: 4/5/2011
Submission Type: New
Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

Your study has been approved according to the dates shown above. To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 50), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting the "Continuing Review and/or Modification" form.

- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.

- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Research investigators are expected to comply with the principles of the Belmont Report, and state and federal regulations regarding the involvement of humans in research. These documents are located on the Office for Responsible Research website http://www.compliance.iastate.edu/irb/forms/ or available by calling (515) 294-4566.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.
Date: 10/7/2010
To: Jennifer Garrett Nissen
204 Cooper Court, Ames, IA 50014
CC: Dr. Nancy J Evans
N247 Lagomarcino Hall

From: Office for Responsible Research

Title: Exploring the College Experiences of Undergraduate Student Adopted for South Korea

IRB Num: 10-043

Approval Date: 10/6/2010
Continuing Review Date: 4/5/2011
Submission Type: Modification
Review Type: Expedited

The project referenced above has received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Iowa State University. Please refer to the IRB ID number shown above in all correspondence regarding this study.

Your study has been approved according to the dates shown above. To ensure compliance with federal regulations (45 CFR 46 & 21 CFR 56), please be sure to:

- Use only the approved study materials in your research, including the recruitment materials and informed consent documents that have the IRB approval stamp.

- Obtain IRB approval prior to implementing any changes to the study by submitting the "Continuing Review and/or Modification" form.

- Immediately inform the IRB of (1) all serious and/or unexpected adverse experiences involving risks to subjects or others; and (2) any other unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects or others.

- Stop all research activity if IRB approval lapses, unless continuation is necessary to prevent harm to research participants. Research activity can resume once IRB approval is reestablished.

- Complete a new continuing review form at least three to four weeks prior to the date for continuing review as noted above to provide sufficient time for the IRB to review and approve continuation of the study. We will send a courtesy reminder as this date approaches.

Research investigators are expected to comply with the principles of the Belmont Report, and state and federal regulations regarding the involvement of humans in research. These documents are located on the Office for Responsible Research website http://www.compliance.iastate.edu/irb/forms/ or available by calling (515) 294-4566.

Upon completion of the project, please submit a Project Closure Form to the Office for Responsible Research, 1138 Pearson Hall, to officially close the project.
REFERENCES


Ng, J. C., Lee, S. S., & Pak, Y. K. (2007). Chapter 4 contesting the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes: A critical review of literature on Asian Americans in

doi:10.3102/0091732X07300046095


