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### Transracial Adoptees: The Search for Birth Family and the Search for Self

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## **Transracial Adoptees: The Search for Birth Family and the Search for Self**

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*This study explored how transracial adoptees with different experiences in search and reunion with their birth families varied in ethnic identity and other aspects of their lives. Participants, 109 transracial adoptees (aged 18 to 37), completed an online survey that asked about demographic background, contact history and search interest, ethnic identity, and psychological adjustment. Results showed that ethnic identity varied across different search and contact groups, but psychological adjustment did not. Eleven respondents also participated in semi-structured interviews. They described the complexities of searching and contact and the challenges of connecting with both their adoptive and birth communities.*

**KEYWORDS** *transracial adoption, search and reunion, birth families, identity*

In previous decades, sealed adoption records and an environment of secrecy precluded many adoptees from seeking information about their birth families. However, now that the adoption landscape has shifted toward more openness (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000), the question of whether or not to embark on a search and/or have contact with birth families is more common, thus prompting a need for greater understanding of the search and

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reunion process and experience. Although a number of studies have examined these questions in depth (e.g., Aumend & Barrett, 1983, 1984; Howe & Feast, 2001; Triseliotis, Feast, & Kyle, 2005; Sachdev, 1992), most have focused on domestic in-race adoptees. Past researchers have called for more attention to the search interests of transracial adoptees (TRAs; e.g., Müller & Perry, 2001), many of whom were also adopted internationally. Tieman, van der Ende, and Verhulst (2008) pointed out that "... it is unknown whether results [about searching] pertaining to domestic adoptees also apply to international adoptees" (p. 679).

Closer examination of transracial adoption suggests that searching and reunions are potentially more pressing yet problematic for TRAs than they are for in-race domestic adoptees. First, previous studies have shown that in-race adoptees' perceptions of dissimilarity with their adoptive parents have been a predictor of search interest (Hollingsworth, 1998). Thus, TRAs who are usually conspicuously different from their adoptive parents may have particularly strong motivations to search. Second, because TRAs are usually people of color who often grow up in all-White communities, their desire to locate their birth families may also reflect a motivation to connect with others who are racially similar and who may serve as potential role models and sources of information that contribute to their ethnic identity development. At the same time, locating and connecting with birth families are more complicated for many TRAs because of international bureaucracies and language and cultural differences (Tieman et al., 2008).

This mixed-method study investigated differences in demographic background, identity formation, and psychological adjustment in TRAs who varied in their search interests and contact experiences. To capture the full range of search-related experiences, we included all phases or levels of searching (i.e., from no interest in searching, to thinking about searching, to actively searching, to making contact), as advocated by Sobol and Cardiff (1983) and illustrated in a more recent study (Henderson, Sass, & Carlson, 2007). More information about TRAs' experiences of search and reunion may benefit adoptees who are deciding whether or not to search for and/or contact birth families. Furthermore, these insights may be useful to those who participate in these decisions (e.g., parents, adoption workers, therapists).

## SEARCH MOTIVATION AND ACTIVITIES

Müller and Perry (2001) developed three theoretical models of search motivation: searching in the context of *sociocultural norms* that surround adoption and family life in general; searching as a *normative process*, a developmental task for many adoptees; and searching that is motivated by *psychopathology*, personal deficiencies, psychological difficulties, and

discontent with adoption and adoptive family. Müller and Perry pointed out that these models are not mutually exclusive and may overlap and be synthesized in different ways. Although these motivations may be common to adoptees in general, they may play out differently for TRAs. As Müller and Perry note, “clearly, internationally and transracially adopted persons’ interest in searching deserves more attention” (p. 12).

For TRAs, unlike in-race adoptees, relevant *sociocultural norms* may include attitudes about the TRAs’ racial backgrounds and whether or not their communities are diverse and include racially similar people. Likewise, *normative processes* may involve the challenges of learning about one’s birth ethnic group and forming an identity that embraces both birth and adoptive backgrounds. Finally, psychological difficulties or discontent about the adoption may be exacerbated by factors such as racial isolation, discrimination, and identity conflicts. In the following sections, we discuss our interpretations of these models and the ways they may be related to TRAs’ interest in searching and contact.

### Searching in the Context of Sociocultural Norms

Many prevailing sociocultural norms reflect overt and covert values that undermine adoption. Adoptees may long for biological kin because Western society tends to value blood ties and often stigmatizes adoption as second best (Fisher, 2003; Palacios, 2009). These values may aggravate adoptees’ common “experience of being physically, temperamentally, or behaviorally different from other family members” (Brodzinsky, 2011, p. 203) and heighten their desire to connect with birth families.

This sense of dissimilarity from the adoptive family may be especially acute for TRAs because of visible racial differences (Brodzinsky, 2011; Triseliotis et al., 2005) that make transracial adoption more public. TRAs and their families cannot avoid being perceived and judged against social norms that place a high priority on biological connections. Furthermore, because many TRAs are people of color, often growing up in predominately White communities, they may feel conspicuous and have to deal with racial incidents that their adoptive parents dismiss or ignore (Docan-Morgan, 2011; Samuels, 2008). In their study of in-race White adoptees and transracial Korean adoptees, McGinnis, Smith, Ryan, and Howard (2009) found that Korean adoptees raised in predominately White communities experienced more racist incidents than those raised in more diverse settings. Thus, for many TRAs, particularly those growing up in White communities, the sociocultural norms may be more burdensome and intrusive than they are for White in-race adoptees. These factors, in turn, may give rise to a desire to search for birth families in order to find social environments where they feel less racially conspicuous. To explore how sociocultural norms and context

relate to searching, this current study examined adoptees' perceptions of the diversity and racial composition of the communities where they had grown up. Although these measures do not provide objective demographic information, they do reveal how the respondents viewed and experienced their home communities, which is potentially germane to many aspects of their lives, including their interests in searching.

### Searching as a Normative Process

Many researchers (e.g., Baden & Wiley, 2007; Howe & Feast, 2001) have concluded that searching is a *normative process* to answer questions and develop a coherent sense of self. For example, Wrobel, Grotevant, and McRoy (2004) found that search interest of in-race adoptees was motivated by curiosity rather than dissatisfaction with adoptive families or life situations. Congruent with earlier findings (e.g., Kowal & Shilling, 1985; Triseliotis, 1973), Wrobel and Dillon (2009) found that a high percentage of adopted adolescents had strong or moderate curiosity about their birth parents and other family members, family traits, and reasons for being placed for adoption.

Answering these questions potentially contributes to the normative process of identity development. Pavao (2005) termed the integration of past into the present as a "normative crisis" (p. 75) that is necessary for adoptees to determine where they are going. McGinnis et al. (2009) noted that for adoptees "gaining information about their origins is not [only] a matter of curiosity, but a matter of gaining the raw materials needed to fill in the missing pieces of their lives and to derive an integrated sense of self" (p. 50). Lack of knowledge about birthparents and pre-adoptive history creates gaps that make it difficult to make sense of their stories. Thus, a period of "searching," either literally for birth parents or internally for sense of self (Grotevant, 1997), is a natural or "normative" consequence.

Beyond the identity challenges faced by all adoptees, TRAs have additional layers of complexity. First, TRAs have more unknowns to deal with than in-race adoptees. Whereas the latter may be curious about their particular birth families, many TRAs also lack an understanding of an entire culture and often a whole country. This gap in their knowledge and experience may make it difficult to feel connected with their birth culture or to develop a coherent identity. Second, TRAs may experience a dissonance between their racial and cultural identities, as suggested by Baden and Steward's theoretical model (2000). This gap was illustrated in one study, in which Korean adoptees often referred to themselves as "bananas" or "twinkies" because they culturally identified with their adoptive families, but racially with their birth families or group (Ramsey, Cobb, Do, & White, 2008). These identity issues echo those of biracial individuals who often feel torn between two or more groups and shift their identities over time, as described by Kich

(1992), Paladino (2008), and Phinney and Alipuria (2006). However, TRAs have the unique challenge of adapting to the culture of a family that has no connection with their racial or ethnic background (Baden, 2002).

In the McGinnis et al. (2009) study, several of the Korean adoptees reported that their adoptive parents tried to support their ethnic identity development by providing information and experiences about their birth culture through culture camps and celebrations. Although the adoptees appreciated these efforts, they noted that these activities were not sufficient for the formation of integrated identities. This failure is not surprising as most adoptive parents do not have the skills and “insider knowledge” to socialize their children into their birth culture and to raise them biculturally (Tessler, Gamache, & Liu, 1999, p. xi). In fact, McGinnis et al. (2009) found that despite these efforts, many of their respondents had identified as White while they were growing up.

However, McGinnis et al. (2009) also found that, as the Korean adoptees became adults, many began to view themselves as Korean Americans or Korean adoptees. In some cases, this shift was propelled by negative experiences of exclusion and racism. In others, it was a positive normative change as they grew up and began to appreciate their “difference” and wanted to learn more about their backgrounds (e.g., studying Korean and/or joining Korean or Asian American groups in high school and college). Several said that traveling outside of the United States and especially visiting South Korea were highly valuable experiences in developing their ethnic identities.

Given these interests, it is not surprising that the Korean adoptees scored higher than the White adoptees on the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992; McGinnis et al., 2009). Moreover, in contrast to the White adoptees, their ethnic identities were more salient than their adoptive identities. Thus, TRAs’ “search” may be more focused on learning about their birth country and culture and less about birth parents, relinquishment, and adoption per se. Although McGinnis et al. compared the ethnic identities of Korean versus White adoptees, they did not examine ethnic identity in relationship with searching, and the current study was designed to address this gap.

### Searching Motivated by Psychopathological Issues

Müller and Perry (2001) use the term “psychopathology” to refer to extreme mental health issues that motivate searching. However, other more moderate psychological variables may also be related to desire for searching and contact, especially in non-clinical populations. To examine the relationship between searching and a broader range of psychological adjustment, we changed the term “psychopathology” to “psychological distress and well-being,” which we conceptualize to include: self-esteem, overall

emotional and social functioning, and feelings about adoptive parents and adoption.

In the past, searching for birth families was considered a sign of an unsuccessful adoption (Tieman et al., 2008). Stein and Hoopes (as cited in Hollingsworth, 1998) concluded that searching was related to a feeling of mismatch with adoptive parents. Aumend and Barrett (1983, 1984) and Sobol and Cardiff (1983) found that searchers had more negative self-concepts and attitudes toward their adoptive parents than non-searchers did. More recently, Müller and Perry (2001) found a higher percentage of searchers than non-searchers experienced mental health issues and poor relationships with their adoptive parents. Furthermore, Tieman et al.'s (2008) study of Dutch international and transracial adoptees found that searchers had significantly more emotional, behavioral, and family problems than non-searchers.

However, the current literature also has raised questions about these assumptions. Tieman et al. (2008) noted that, despite the differences described above, the majority of searchers in their study were well adjusted. Likewise, Müller and Perry (2001) pointed out that recent studies show that most searchers are content with their adoptive parents and their lives in general. As adoptions have become more open and searching increasingly common (Grotevant et al., 2000), searching may be less associated with severe emotional difficulties and discontent. However, for TRAs the additional stressors of racial isolation, discrimination, and identity confusion mentioned in the previous sections may exacerbate psychological distress (Basow, Lilley, Bookwala, & McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 2008; Samuels, 2009) and factor into their desire to search.

Thus, the findings are mixed, and we should not assume that all searches are motivated by "psychopathology." At the same time, a complex mix of psychological strengths and vulnerabilities and pre-adoptive and post-adoptive histories may motivate searching and influence the emotional aftermath of searches and reunions. To explore these dynamics, this study included measures of self-esteem and overall emotional and social functioning in the survey and questions about emotional reactions to adoption and searching in the interview.

## CONTACT AND REUNIONS

Although many searches do not result in contact or reunions with the birth families, this phase, or the anticipation of it, is central to the searching process (Henderson et al., 2007; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983). Previous studies have shown that reunion outcomes are generally positive (Campbell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991). Howe and Feast (2001) found that a few people had negative experiences reuniting due to personality clashes and lack of a common social and/or cultural background. However, 88% of the participants found the search and reunion to be a worthwhile experience, and 63% of them

stayed in contact with their birth families for 8 or more years post reunion. Moreover, the reunions did not undermine their adoptive connections; in fact, about half indicated that the reunion had made them more appreciative of their adoptive families.

However, TRAs, in particular those born in other countries, may find reunions more difficult to accomplish because of closed or missing records and the intricacies of international bureaucracies. Furthermore, establishing relationships with birth families may be more challenging because of language and cultural barriers (Tieman et al., 2008). Despite these obstacles, McGinnis et al. (2009) found that 30% of the Korean adoptees in their study had made contact with their birth families. In this study we looked at the search and reunion experiences of TRAs from a number of racial backgrounds.

## CURRENT STUDY

The previous discussion has shown that because most search and reunion-related studies have focused on domestic in-race adoptions, we know less about how TRAs regard searching and contact and how these views are related to other aspects of their lives. While adoptees in general may search to satisfy their curiosity or fill emotional voids, TRAs' inclination to search might also reflect a need to find racially similar groups and to develop their ethnic identities. The purpose of this mixed-method study was to explore how TRAs with different search and contact experiences vary in their perceptions about the diversity of their adoptive communities, in the strength of their ethnic identities, and in their psychological distress or well-being. Müller and Perry (2001) noted that their models are helpful but do not capture the entire range of individual motivations and experiences because the decision to search "... is the outcome of a more complex process involving the weighing of different expectations on the basis of a specific biographical situation" (p. 27). Therefore, in addition to using a survey, we interviewed individual TRAs to delve more deeply into their search-related experiences.

## METHOD

### Survey

#### PARTICIPANTS

A total of 123 TRAs were recruited from collegiate institutions, community adoption support groups, adoptee forums, online adoptee networking sites, as well as snowball sampling. To get participants with a wide range of interest in searching and to avoid attracting only those with strong feelings about potential or actual contact with birth families, we did not mention



**TABLE 1** Demographics

	<i>n</i>	%
Participants' birth group background		
African/African American	2	1.8
Asian/Asian American	96	88.1
Bicultural/Multicultural	7	6.4
Latino/Latino American	3	2.8
Native American	1	.9
Parents' birth group background		
European/European American	213	100.0

searching or contact in the invitation to participate. Only participants who are people of color and were adopted by a single White parent or two White parents were included (see Table 1 for demographic information). Therefore, this analysis is based on 109 respondents between the ages of 18 and 37 years ( $M = 26.2$ ,  $SD = 5.8$ ). The majority of participants were female (75.2%). The age when adopted ranged from 0 months to 14.3 years ( $M = 1.22$  years,  $SD = 1.99$ ); however, most participants were adopted at 1 year or younger (72.5%). Fifteen different birth countries were represented from several regions, including Asia (76.1% from South Korea, 7.3% from India, and 6.4% from other Asian countries), North America (5.5%), and South and Central America (4.6%).

#### MATERIALS AND PROCEDURE

All materials and procedures were approved by the institutional review board at Mount Holyoke College. Before participants could access the online survey, they had to indicate their consent. The online survey included basic demographic questions (e.g., gender, country of birth) and questions specifically related to the adoption (e.g., age when adopted, type of pre-adoption placements).

Pertinent to this particular study, were questions about search interest and contact. Respondents indicated whether or not they had contact with their birth families. If they had no contact, participants were asked to indicate their search interest: no interest, ask questions but have no plans to search, think about searching sometime in the future, have plans to search, and have started to search and want a reunion. After preliminary analysis of these data, the search categories were collapsed into the following groups: "no interest," "thinking" (included questioning), "searching" (included plans to search), and "contact."

To address the context of sociocultural norms, we measured the participants' perceptions about the community where they grew up using two questions: "Do you feel that your community was diverse?" and "Do you feel

that there were many people in the community you grew up in who were similar to you in terms of your racial background?" Participants answered both questions with: definitely, somewhat, or not at all. After preliminary analyses, the "definitely" and "somewhat" categories were collapsed into one, providing two groups to compare for each question: "definitely/somewhat" versus "not at all."

To explore the normative process of identity development, we used the MEIM (Phinney, 1992). This 13-item questionnaire assessed participants' birth group ethnic identity by asking them to indicate on a 4-point scale how much they agreed with a series of statements (strongly disagree to strongly agree). The MEIM has demonstrated construct validity and yields a two factor structure in adolescents: exploration and affirmation/belonging (Roberts et al., 1999). An example of a statement targeting exploration is, "I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs," whereas an example of an affirmation/belonging statement is, "I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group." In the current study, MEIM subscale scores were calculated by averaging the respective individual statements in each category.

To measure psychological distress and well-being, we included multiple measures. Rosenberg's Self-Esteem measure (RSE) is a widely used instrument that has been shown to have a reliability coefficient of 0.92 (Rosenberg, 1979). This 10-item scale assesses respondents' self-evaluated abilities, attributes, and capabilities on a 4-point scale (strongly disagree to strongly agree). An example of a statement on the RSE is "I feel that I have a number of good qualities." After applicable items were reversed, an overall RSE score was calculated by averaging participant's level of agreement with the individual statements. Additionally, respondents rated their level of success on a scale of 1 to 4 (well below average to well above average) in regard to school, family, friends, and the community. Examples of these questions included "How have you done academically?" "How well have you done socially?" "How well have you related to you adoptive family?" Finally, participants indicated (yes or no) whether or not they had experienced serious emotional/behavioral problems.

## Interviews

### PARTICIPANTS

Upon completion of the survey, respondents were asked whether they were willing to be interviewed, and 20 people volunteered. Eleven were selected (8 females, 3 males) in order to have a subsample that was representative of the larger survey group in terms of demographics and responses to the questions on the survey. Using independent samples *t*-tests, we ascertained that the interview subsample was representative of the larger sample on all demographics (i.e., gender, race, age adopted), except for current age.

Interviewees ( $M = 21$  years) were significantly younger than the overall sample ( $M = 26$ ). The interview subsample also was similar to our larger survey sample in their responses to the MEIM Exploration and Affirmation subscales, RSE, and questions about search interest, diversity and racial composition of their communities, importance of birth race and culture, and importance of adoptive race and culture.

#### MATERIALS AND PROCEDURES

A semi-structured interview guide was used to give participants flexibility to discuss their unique experiences and the areas that are particularly salient to them. To provide more information about the role of sociocultural norms and contexts in the search process, interviewees were encouraged to speak about the adoption and racial attitudes of their families and communities. To explore the connections between identity and searching, the interviews included questions and prompts to encourage respondents to elaborate on their identities and how they had changed over time and, when applicable, during and after search and contact. Finally, to gain insights into the role of psychological distress and well-being, interviewees were invited to describe emotional responses to their adoption and to different situations including, when relevant, searching for and contact with their birth family.

The second author, who had extensive training and experience in interviewing, conducted all of the interviews over the phone. She read the informed consent form, and participants provided verbal consent before the interview proceeded. The interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Because of the interpretive nature of qualitative research, we wanted to include a variety of perspectives on the coding teams. Thus, three TRAs, one parent of TRAs, and three people outside of the adoption triad served as coders. The coding of the interviews was done in two phases. First, the transcripts were read several times by a team consisting of the second author and four research assistants. In a series of cross-case meetings, they identified ethnic and adoptive identity-related themes, including sociocultural influences and expressions of psychological distress and well-being that were common among the interviews and then coded all of the interviews for these themes. In the second phase of coding, the first and third coauthors individually identified themes related to searching and contact on each transcript. They noted level of search interest for each interviewee and any related comments about sociocultural influences and emotional motivations and reactions. They met several times to discuss codes and resolved differences and coded each interview for these themes. During this second phase, the coders also reviewed and affirmed the ethnic and adoptive identity codes of the first coding team. In both phases of coding, differences

were resolved through in-depth discussions in which coders identified and resolved discrepancies.

In addition, a matrix was compiled to visually depict the similarities and differences among the interviewees in terms of search interest and contact, identity themes, descriptions of home communities, experiences with others' views about race and adoption, and psychological distress and well-being. Through comparing notes on both commonalities and disparities among the interviewees, the first and third authors identified nuances and underlying meanings within and across interviews. To illustrate the depth and complexity of TRAs' individual and unique experiences, we also developed three case studies.

## RESULTS

### Survey

Based on responses to questions about contact and search interest, we divided the participants into four groups: those who had *no interest* in searching ( $n = 19$ ); those who were *thinking* about searching ( $n = 47$ ); those who were *searching* ( $n = 22$ ); and those who had *contact* with members of their birth family ( $n = 21$ ). Using a series of ANOVAs and correlations, we determined that the composition of these groups did not vary in terms of gender, race, current age, or age of at time of adoption. The following analyses explore how sociocultural contexts, ethnic identity, and psychological distress and well-being did or did not differ across search and contact groups.

### How Do Searching and Contact Groups Differ in Terms of the Types of Communities Where They Were Raised?

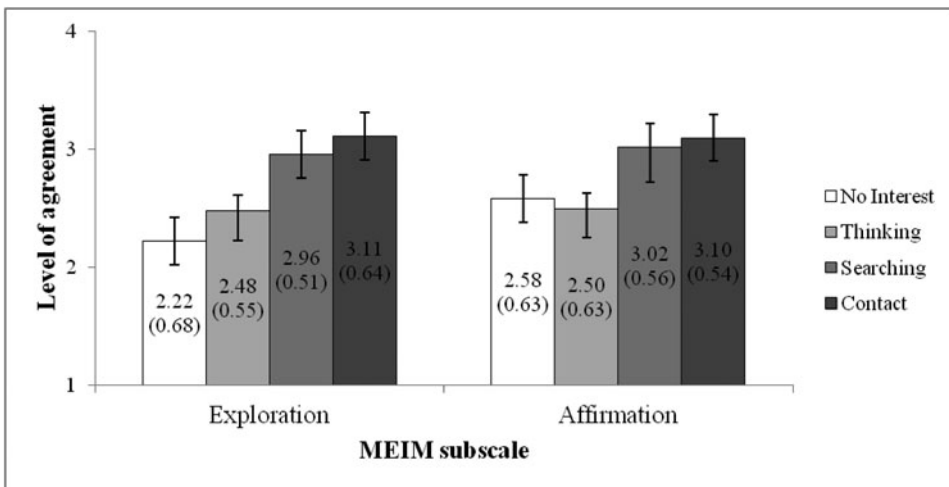
A chi-square statistic was conducted to see whether different search and contact groups had been more likely to grow up in what they perceived as diverse versus non-diverse communities. Results indicated that diversity of home community differed significantly across groups,  $\chi^2(3, N = 108) = 11.25, p = .010$ . TRAs in the "thinking" group were more likely than expected to come from a community that they perceived as "definitely/somewhat" diverse. However, adoptees in the "searching" group were more likely to come from communities that were "not at all diverse" (see Table 2 for the chi-square analysis). In contrast, perception of the racial composition of the community (i.e., presence of people racially similar to the TRA) did not vary across the groups,  $\chi^2(3, N = 108) = 1.87, p = .600$ .

**TABLE 2** Chi-Square Analysis of Search/Contact Group and Diversity of Community

Variable	<i>n</i>	Diversity of Community		$\chi^2$	<i>p</i>
		Not at All	Definitely/Somewhat		
Search/Contact group				11.25	.010
No Interest	19	12	7		
Thinking	47	26	21		
Searching	22	21	1		
Contact	20	14	6		
Totals	108				

### How Do Searching and Contact Groups Differ in Terms of Ethnic Identity Development?

One-way ANOVAs were used to see whether the searching and contact groups varied in their responses to the MEIM. The analysis showed that the search and contacts groups differed significantly on both the exploration subscale,  $F(3,98) = 10.26, p < .001$  and the affirmation subscale,  $F(3,95) = 6.35, p = .001$ . Post hoc Tukey Honestly Significant Difference (HSD) tests revealed that participants in the “searching” and “contact” groups had significantly higher exploration subscale scores than those in the “no interest” or “thinking” groups (see Figure 1 for MEIM mean subscale scores and standard deviations). For the affirmation/belonging scale, post hoc Tukey HSD tests revealed that the “contact” group scored significantly higher than adoptees in the “no interest” and “thinking” groups. The “searching” group scored significantly higher on this subscale than the “thinking”

**FIGURE 1** MEIM subscale scores by search groups.

Note. Means indicated (standard deviations in parentheses).

group, but not significantly higher than the “no interest” group (see Figure 1).

### How Do the Searching and Contact Groups Differ in Terms of Psychological Distress or Well-Being?

To address this question, we looked to see how members of the different search and contact groups varied on the following dependent variables: self-esteem (RSE); self-reported success in academics, social life, and family relationships; and the presence/absence of significant emotional and behavioral problems. A series of one-way ANOVAs revealed no differences across any of the search and contact groups for overall RSE or self-reported success in academics, social life, or family relationships. A chi-square analysis revealed no differences among search/contact groups and the presence or absence of serious emotional/behavioral problems.

### Interviews

Out of the 11 interviewees, 3 of the respondents had contact with their birth families. All three strongly identified with their birth cultures, but they also reported that their relationships with birth families were sometimes complicated. The three interviewees who were in the “thinking” group had disparate views about searching and identity formation. This heterogeneity was in sharp contrast to the two TRAs in the “no interest” group who adamantly identified as American and as members of their adoptive families; they dismissed any efforts to learn about their birth cultures. One interviewee (#9) noted that as far as he was concerned, his birth parents were “. . . just strangers that I probably wouldn’t like.” The final three participants had some connection to their birth culture (i.e., raised with a biological twin brother, visited the birth country), but they had no immediate interest in contact with their birth families. We termed this group as “no interest but other connections.”

Regardless of contact or search interest, common themes (*in italics*) emerged across interviews related to feelings toward birth families and identity development. First, sociocultural norms and contexts did affect TRAs’ feelings about themselves. Most TRAs reported that they often had to *deal with prevailing norms and assumptions that highlighted the gap between their birth and adoptive cultures/identities*. Several interviewees recounted times when strangers made assumptions based on their race that were incongruent with their own self perceptions. Although a few of the interviewees (e.g., #4) enjoyed watching and sometimes “playing with” others’ confusion, most expressed frustration at having to explain themselves. They also described their discomfort at being conspicuously different from their White adoptive

families, yet unable to completely integrate into their birth culture. One participant (#3) described her frustration when she joined the Asian American Association in high school, “[I] totally did not fit in . . . it kind of made me mad because I looked like them, so I felt like I identified with them, but once I got in, I learned I really don’t at all.” Caught between the expectations of two groups, TRAs often felt rejected by White people due to physical differences and by people of their birth ethnicity due to lack of language and cultural knowledge.

Reflecting both their sociocultural contexts and their normative efforts to develop more integrated identities, several participants talked about how they moved to more diverse communities when they had a chance. Many reported that they were *racially isolated* growing up. One TRA (#3) stated when she was younger, “I was the diversity,” and as another put it (#11), elementary through high school years were “very White.” Although many adoptive parents tried to *incorporate TRAs’ birth cultures into the family* through culture camps, festivals, restaurants, books, and other media, many of these efforts were intermittent and superficial, and the majority of interviewees stopped going to culture camps during elementary school. However, they were able to *find haven in diverse groups* when they got older. Almost all of the interviewees chose to attend colleges or live in areas that were very diverse and talked about how much they appreciated being in these environments. One interviewee (#10) said that at college “I am surrounded by people from every different country, and I feel like now I am much more comfortable with being friends with whatever country they might be from.”

In terms of psychological distress and well-being, several of the interviewees described *feeling distressed and fragmented as they negotiated between groups* but did not necessarily connect these feelings to searching. Moreover, despite these challenges, all of the interviewees viewed their *adoption as positive*. Some embraced the dual perspectives they had gained by being a TRA as “the best of both worlds” (#10). One reason that they cited for these positive outlooks was their *negative assumptions about their lives if they had grown up with their birth parents*. While all the interviewees expressed these latter sentiments, the intensity varied across search and contact groups. Those with NO INTEREST described particularly grim images of their lives had they lived with their birth parents. One participant (#6) said, “I can pretty much guarantee you that I would either have been dead or in jail.” Interviewees in the other search/contact groups (including those who had visited their birth family and/or country) talked about poverty and lack of opportunities but were more moderate in their tone.

These themes were reflected in most of the interviews, but individuals varied considerably in how they made meaning of their experiences. In order to illustrate the complex interplay among searching and contact, sociocultural contexts, identity, and well-being, we will present three case studies: Eunliz (#2) who is in the “thinking” group has not searched for her birth family

but has worked hard to affiliate with student groups from her birth country and has taken a heritage trip to Korea, and Selma (#5) and Jay (#8), who both have had contact with their birth families. These three participants were selected because they provided the most detailed and emotionally forthright accounts of how their searching and contact was related to other aspects of their lives. They also represented a range of experiences and feelings about the process.

### “Eunliz”

Eunliz was adopted from South Korea and came to the United States when she was about 5.5 months. She is now almost 20 years old and attends college, majoring in both American Media History and Asian History.

Although her adoptive parents did not know much about Korean culture, they encouraged her to learn about it. Eunliz said that she was “lucky enough” to live in an area with many Korean adoptees (KADs) and was able to attend Korean culture camp every summer. This access to other KADs reflects the sociocultural, geographical, and historical context of her adoption, namely the large number of Korean adoptions by families near her community at a particular point of time. She loved this camp and made many friends and used these experiences and subsequent ones to engage in the normative activities of developing her ethnic identity. Thus, despite growing up in an all-White community, she had strong and enduring connections with other KADs.

Eunliz said that her positive experience at culture camp motivated her to attend Korean language camp, where she met more KADs and Korean American peers. The contacts that she made there led to a trip to her birth country, where she looked at her birth records but did not attempt to find her birth family. Eunliz described her trip to Korea as “one of the best times I had ever had in my life.” She has since continued her cultural exploration by becoming a leader in several Asian clubs at her college and plans to continue studying the Korean language. She also hopes to integrate her Korean background into her future career as a journalist.

Unlike other interviewees who talked about being “Americanized,” Eunliz talked about being “Koreanized.” She made clear distinctions between various levels of Korean identity; in her words, there were the “adopted Koreans,” the “Korean-Koreans” (international students from Korea), and the “Korean-Americans” (students who had Korean parents but had grown up in the United States). Having many “Korean-Korean” friends in college helped Eunliz gain a better understanding of the language and culture. However she used the word “awkward” several times in describing her interactions with them. She noted that, even though she understands some Korean, “. . . I am not that great [and] I am not fooling [anyone].” She talked about how she monitors herself, “With Korean-Koreans, I have to like hold on to all these sets of [cultural] rules.” Eunliz noted that she feels “more Korean” than other



KADS “who do not understand the culture of respect.” At the same time, she still feels most comfortable with KADs because “. . . with just Korean adoptees you don’t explain anything; I am just like them.”

Being adopted seemed central to Eunliz’s identity, although she made a point that it was “not my defining characteristic.” She said, “I identify as a Korean American adoptee, which I am . . . I feel very strongly about having all three of those.” Although Eunliz identifies racially as Korean, she says that culturally she is “American mixed with Korean adoptee.” She embraces what she describes as her “hybrid culture” and appreciates the unique perspective she has, saying: “I think . . . one of the side effects of being an adoptee is that your background is no longer just White nor is it Korean. It is just like [an] entirely big mixture of what you choose it to be.” Rather than seeing her birth culture and adoptive culture as mutually exclusive, she has coalesced both into her identity. Even her name, that she herself created, is a mixture of her Korean (Eun) and her American adoptive sides (Liz).

In the interview, Eunliz said that she is not actively searching for her birth family at the moment, but she is thinking about contacting them in the future. After reading her birth records, she believes her birth mother is dead, so she thinks about possibly contacting her birth siblings. Eunliz reported that she has put a lot of thought into whether or not to search, acknowledging she now is “emotionally mature” enough to handle it, but probably was not when she was younger. To her, it all depends on what “you think you are ready for and what your family thinks you’re ready for.” Although she has not started searching for her birth family yet, she has been “searching” in other ways, in particular by exploring her birth culture and her identity within the KAD and Korean student communities and using these experiences to develop her adoptive, racial, and cultural identities.

### “Selma”

Selma was adopted from South Korea at 5.5 months and is now 22 years old and a full-time college student studying social work. She grew up with her adoptive mother, father, and a sister and brother who are also Korean adoptees. Her relationship with her adoptive parents was more conflicted than those described by other interviewees. She reported that her parents chose to adopt because they had “messed up” their older biological children (who had already left home when she was adopted) and wanted another chance. As a result, they were very protective (e.g., insisting that she be homeschooled as an adolescent) and authoritarian (e.g., requiring church attendance three times a week).

In terms of the sociocultural norms and context, Selma reported that her parents held very strong views that affected her feelings about being Korean, her attempts to develop her identity, and her desire to search. According to

Selma, her parents actively discouraged her from learning about her cultural background and dismissed her perspective and experiences with racism. When she told her parents about her classmates' racist comments, her mother advised her to "stop being the victim." Her father refused to acknowledge even the possibility that she could have a different perspective: "My dad, being a Christian, he sees humans as of one blood. He tells me all the time, 'Stop it, stop it, you're not Korean, you know you're American ...' He couldn't fathom what it's like [to be] a minority." Even though her father seemed to have good intentions, he adhered to the "color blind" approach to race and thereby negated a central aspect of Selma's identity. Moreover, Selma said that she could not discuss these issues with her adopted siblings because they also avoided conversations about race.

After years of having her birth race and culture denied, Selma was surprised at how good she felt when she finally was in a room of all Asian people at a Korean church: "I never realized how uncomfortable I was until I was comfortable ... I felt like for the first time that I didn't have to explain ..." In stark contrast to her adoptive parents' "color-blind" beliefs, Selma says, "I feel like it's part of our genetic disposition to feel more comfortable with our own kind."

Selma searched for her birth family for about 2 years and, after finding them, lived with them in Korea for a year. She believes that reunion was an "extremely rewarding experience" even though "it kind of felt like a dream. It didn't feel real." She was overcome with many emotions, and described it as:

It felt like [I was] laying on a rock in an ocean that was ... very like transparent. ... When I met them, it was like a huge wave just knocked me around, and ... I don't know how to explain it, it was overwhelming, in every single emotional, physical, spiritual ... way. ... But it was so worth it and I would do it again in a heartbeat!

Once she met them, Selma encountered quite a few cultural issues. Her birth sisters and parents expected her to be submissive because she was the youngest daughter. Moreover, her birth family "couldn't fathom my experience in America; they couldn't comprehend what I've been through." An awkward ethical situation arose when Selma's birth father insisted on giving her all of the money he had saved for his diabetes treatments. He said, "If you don't take this... then that means you don't love me, that means you don't forgive me. Just take it. I'd rather suffer with my diabetes to know that the daughter that I lost is in good condition."

Even though there were issues, Selma said the trip to Korea changed her for the better; it gave her "completion" by linking the past and future. This positive life change was apparent in the academic realm. Selma talked about her scholastic performance in terms of "before and after Korea." After

she returned from Korea, she was more focused and is now taking courses in Korean culture and studying social work in order to work with TRAs and their families.

Despite her successful search and reunion, Selma has not been able to form an integrated identity. She thinks being adopted made her “weird.” Whereas Eunliz felt being a TRA made her “fascinating” and a “pioneer” and able to blend in with multiple groups, Selma sees herself as “biculturally deprived,” asserting that “. . . no matter how Korean I am, I’m still adopted, and no matter how American I am, people still see me as Korean.” She continues to feel psychologically distressed and describes her racial identity as “. . . confused . . . beyond confused.” Yet, near the end of the interview, Selma says that adoption has been “the best experience of my life. And if I wasn’t, then I wouldn’t be who I am today.” Her ambivalence is apparent when, in the next sentence, she describes her experience of being a *transracial* adoptee as “lonely,” suggesting that she believes that being a TRA has more complex challenges than being an adoptee. In this case her particular socio-cultural context (i.e., parents who discouraged any racial and ethnic identity exploration) may have made the normative process of identity development more difficult and fragmented.

#### “Jay”

Jay was adopted from the Philippines at 3 years of age and is now 22 and a full-time teacher’s assistant in a school for autistic students. Jay grew up with his adoptive mother, father, and older non-adopted sister. Race and adoption were rarely discussed in the family. His parents took him to picnics for Filipino adoptees but were not able to meaningfully integrate his birth culture into their home because they did not know much about it. Jay does not blame them for this lack and, in fact, says he was lucky to have his adoptive parents. However, he notes that he often wished they knew more about his birth culture.

In terms of sociocultural context, Jay said that he grew up in a predominately White community but was able to find and befriend other Filipino people and start exploring his Filipino identity in high school. After high school, Jay first went to a predominately White college but then transferred to a very diverse urban commuter college. He described his current friends as mostly Asian Americans and Filipinos that come from broad interest groups ranging from community activists to graduate students to non-college friends who are interested in “gambling and money” and hanging out.

Of all the interviewees, Jay made the most explicit connection among psychological distress, identity issues, and searching. He reported that, prior to searching for his birth family, he felt lost. He had a period of depression due to identity issues, was diagnosed with attention deficit disorder, dabbled

in drugs and alcohol, and had a few minor legal infractions. He was doing poorly in school and was estranged from his adoptive parents while he struggled with questions about who he was. Jay dropped out of college and traveled to his birth country to volunteer at the orphanage where he was born because “I didn’t know what I wanted, and I wasn’t participating in school, you know . . . and I just needed some time to cool off . . .”

While volunteering, he met extended birth family members, but not his birth mother who lived on another island. About a year after he returned home, she contacted him via text message:

It was basically, um, “Good morning, I’m your mother.” (laugh). Um, it was crazy . . . and I was like, “Wait what?” (laughs). And then. . . I asked her in Tagalog, I know a little Tagalog, that’s the language in the Philippines, I was like, “Wait, who’s this again?” and . . . she said her name, “E\_\_\_, your mother.” And I was like “Holy crap!” . . . Um, initially, I didn’t really want to talk to her for a while . . . the main reason was I couldn’t speak to her [due to his lack of skills in Tagalog] . . . and it’s still kind of an issue.

In addition to the language barrier, Jay also noted that there were cultural obstacles, “Every time I talk to her [his birth mother] she still asks for money . . . she knows that I’m in America, you know? And so, it’s really difficult to kind of get around it.”

However, despite these obstacles, Jay and his girlfriend visited his birth mother for 10 days, and he said that the journey was a rewarding worthwhile experience. It “filled like a gap, or a void, it’s opened up a lot of the questions that I had growing up . . . Having a picture of her and being with her really, um, really healed up patches that were missing in my life.” Jay was able to function better after the reunion and is planning to return for another visit.

Like many other TRAs, he says that he identifies racially as Filipino but, despite his considerable exposure to Filipino culture, he still sees himself as culturally “more American than Filipino.” Similar to Eunliz, he seems proud that some people assume that he’s Filipino and are surprised when they learn he is adopted. Jay seems to exhibit what we came to call “cultural and adoptive generativity.” He is active in many Filipino organizations and, as a musician, plays piano and guitar for Filipino churches. Furthermore, he plans to use his experiences to help others by working with the Filipino community and helping TRAs talk about and understand their stories.

Jay explicitly talked about how his visits to the Philippines and time with his birth mother were healing and helped him figure out who he is. Unlike Selma, who seems to feel fragmented by her experiences, Jay,

possibly because he grew up in a family that encouraged his explorations, is able to hold his multiple worlds and selves in an integrated identity. He embraces diversity and enjoys the dynamics of his widely varied friends and experiences.

## DISCUSSION

We surveyed and interviewed TRAs to understand how search interest and contact is related to their sociocultural contexts, ethnic identity, and overall psychological distress and well-being; below is a synthesis of our findings.

### Sociocultural Contexts and Norms

Growing up feeling racially conspicuous and physically and culturally dissimilar from their adoptive families and communities may provide a strong impetus to search (Brodzinsky, 2011; Hollingsworth, 1998). This interpretation is corroborated by our finding that almost all the TRAs in the “searching” group came from what they perceived to be predominately White communities. In contrast, more members of the “thinking” group than expected came from diverse communities. This difference suggests that exposure to a wider range of ethnicities during childhood may stimulate an interest in one’s birth culture yet also may satisfy some of the needs that would be met by committing to an actual search.

In terms of sociocultural norms, several interviewees talked about their frustrations of having to “explain” themselves to outsiders, similar to experiences that biracial and multiracial individuals also describe (Kich, 1992; Paladino, 2008; Phinney & Alpuria, 2006). They described feeling more “at home” once they left their predominately White adoptive communities and became part of diverse social groups in college. Interestingly, joining these diverse groups was in some ways easier than trying to fit in with their birth ethnic groups, where their lack of language and cultural background was sometimes an obstacle. This pattern may help to explain the survey finding that search interest was not related growing up in the presence of racially similar people. As noted by Baden and Steward (2000), TRAs are from complex racial and cultural backgrounds and may be struggling to bridge their adoptive and birth cultures and racial identities. Therefore being with other TRAs or in heterogeneous groups of peers might be easier than trying to join homogenous groups, even if they racially appear to belong. Diverse groups may provide a more flexible space for them to explore their birth and adoptive identities and affiliations. Again, these patterns are somewhat similar to those of biracial people who, after trying to fit into one or the other of their racial groups, often seek out multiracial groups where they

can express all aspects of their identities (Kich, 1992; Phinney & Alipuria, 2006).

### Normative Processes of Identity Development

The survey results suggest that TRAs in the different searching and contact groups do vary in their ethnic identity development. It was not surprising that TRAs in the “contact” and “search” groups scored higher than the “no interest” and “thinking” groups on the exploration subscale of the MEIM, as searching is a form of exploration. The connections between the affirmation and belonging subscale and searching and contact groups were less straightforward. The “contact” and “searching” groups had similar scores, but only the “contact” group was significantly higher than the “no interest” and “thinking” groups. These patterns suggest that direct contact may enhance a sense of affirmation and belonging or that a sense of belonging may facilitate making contact.

The survey findings were echoed in the interviews with some participants, such as Jay and Selma, explicitly linking their searching to forming their identities. However, others such as Eunliz focused identity development more on affiliating with their ethnic groups than searching for their birth families. Furthermore, in the interviews several TRAs talked about feeling racially similar to their birth families but culturally like their adoptive families as predicted by Baden and Wiley (2007) and found by Ramsey et al. (2008). Thus, searching and contact seem to have a strong connection to identity formation, but that relationship may play out differently across individuals and time.

### Psychological Distress and Well-Being

Several earlier studies (Aumend & Barrett, 1984; Sobol & Cardiff, 1983; Stein & Hoopes, as cited in Hollingsworth, 1998) found that searchers were more discontent with their adoption and their lives than non-searchers. However, the data from this study did not reveal any differences across the contact/search groups in terms of scores on the RSE; self-reported success in academics, social life, and family relationships; and presence/absence of significant emotional and behavioral problems. These patterns corroborate more recent findings with domestic in-race adoptees (Wrobel et al., 2004) that indicate that the desire to search is not primarily motivated by poor family relationships or psychological maladjustment. This shift may reflect the fact that, compared to the past, adoptions now are more open, and searching for birth family members is more common and often endorsed by adoptive parents (Grotevant et al., 2000).

These results vary from Tieman et al.'s (2008) findings that Dutch international adoptees who searched had more emotional and family problems than non-searchers. This discrepancy may reflect the different sociocultural contexts of the two countries. Until recently, the Netherlands has been a racially and culturally homogeneous country, whereas the United States is a nation of immigrants and diversity is more of a norm. Although the majority of the TRAs in this study grew up in predominately White communities, many had some access to other groups through culture camps and other activities and were able to move to diverse communities when they were older. These options may provide American TRAs with opportunities, outside of searching, to explore and resolve the discomfort of growing up as minorities in their families and communities.

Although searching in general was not associated with psychological or family problems or low self-esteem, the interviews illustrate how individuals' motivations to search are complex and may embody both negative and positive emotional experiences. For example, both Selma and Jay talked about searching because they were struggling with their identities and other aspects of their lives; they reported that their reunions made them feel more whole and connected to their birth communities. They also planned to use their own experiences to help other TRAs. We termed this positive purpose "cultural and adoptive generativity," and it is particularly evident in Jay's enthusiastic participation in the Filipino community and Selma's aspirations to become a social worker to help adoptees. However, positive outcomes do not ensure psychological well-being, as indicated by Selma's continued feelings of confusion and loneliness, despite her desire to help other TRAs. These two examples underscore how each search experience is unique in terms of how individuals respond to them.

### Implications

The findings of the survey and interviews offer some suggestions for supporting TRAs who are interested in searching. First, TRAs and practitioners working with them should consider the adoptive communities and what opportunities they had or lacked for exploring their complex ethnic identities while they were growing up. Second, parents, practitioners, and TRAs themselves should not assume that interest in searching is a symptom of psychological distress and dissatisfaction with the adoptive family. Rather they should see it as both an expression of and a contributor to the normative process of identity development.

The interviews revealed many practical ways that that parents and practitioners might support TRAs more effectively. Several interviewees reported that their adoptive parents had good intentions in terms of exposing them to their birth culture. However, their parents did not know much about their children's birth cultures, so they could not impart authentic and meaningful

information, as discussed by Tessler et al. (1999). At the same time, as seen in Eunliz's story, ongoing contact with other KADs at her Korean culture camp did provide a sense of belonging and an impetus to take practical steps (i.e., learn to speak Korean) to connect with her birth community. Thus, similar to the advice in the McGinnis et al. (2009) study, adoptive parents and adoption workers might do better to provide practical language skills, cultural information, and opportunities to travel to the birth country rather than focus on short-term "cultural experiences" such as weeklong or daylong culture camps and annual picnics. Acquiring language skills might help adoptees begin to bridge cultural differences with members of their birth group, thus possibly facilitating a greater sense of belonging, and would also be useful if adoptees are reunited with their birth families. Furthermore, instead of "introducing" TRAs to their background, the purpose of ethnic socialization could be reframed to focus on integrating the adoptee's birth culture into the whole family. These efforts might enable the family to share the onus of bridging gaps between birth and adoptive worlds, rather than placing this responsibility solely on the child.

Adoptive parents can also create opportunities and encourage their children to connect with diverse communities and with local/college ethnic groups. However, parents should be aware that, for some TRAs, attempts to connect with adoptees' birth groups may be hampered by their lack of shared cultural knowledge and language, as indicated by several interviewees. As a result, connecting with other TRAs and/or racially and culturally heterogeneous peer groups may provide the most compatible space for adoptees to explore their identities. Furthermore, given the negative assumptions that several TRAs expressed about living with their birth parents, they might benefit from talking with other TRAs who have reunited with their birth families to sort out what images are accurate and what ones are based on negative stereotypes.

### Limitations

These findings need to be seen in the context of several limitations of this study. Although we had a reasonable overall sample size, the four search/contact subgroups were small for conducting comparisons. In addition, all survey participants were self-selected, and, despite vigorous recruiting efforts among different TRA groups, the majority of the respondents were South Korean women, which may weaken the external validity of the study. Although this distribution is somewhat representative of the current population of young adult TRAs (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2008), we cannot assume that these patterns would generalize to all TRAs. In particular, because of the uneven distribution, we could not compare search interest across countries of origin to see if intercountry variability on accessibility of birth records was a factor. Also given the different



stereotypes and school success rates associated with males versus females and African Americans and Latino Americans versus Asian Americans, we might see different patterns in identity formation and well-being with a more evenly balanced gender and racial sample. Another limitation is that the participants were mostly college students or recent graduates who had been quite successful in their academic and social worlds. Thus, these findings may not generalize to TRAs who have had problems in those areas. Finally, as with all of the survey respondents, the people who volunteered to be interviewed were also self-selected and that may have introduced some bias.

There were also limitations in regards to the survey instrument. We did not include questions that directly asked about early socialization to birth culture, search motivations (e.g., curiosity, need for medical information), or changes in search interest over time. We also did not inquire about what region of the country participants had grown up in, information that might have added to our understanding of effects of different sociocultural contexts. Moreover, our survey instructed participants to answer one MEIM with their *birth* ethnic background in mind so that biethnic respondents had to choose one of their heritage groups rather than having the option of completing a MEIM for each one. Future studies might include multiple MEIMs to accommodate biethnic participants and to measure respondents' *adoptive* ethnic identity to allow a more systematic comparison between birth and adoptive identities.

Finally, the survey utilized a cross-sectional design, in that we assigned participants to different search and contact groups based on their responses to a set of questions at a particular point in time, and then we compared these groups' responses to several measures. Thus, we could not systematically identify how respondents' interest in searching changed or how the experiences of search and reunion affected their identities and psychological well-being. Our interview results and past studies show that searching is an evolving process. We hope that in the future, longitudinal studies of TRAs' experiences in searching and contacting birth families will answer many of the questions that this study has raised.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the majority of TRAs in this study were at least thinking about searching, and many had already searched and or made contact with their birth families. Given the sociocultural contexts of their lives and the pressure that many had felt as children to identify as White, it is not surprising that searching was highly related to the normative process of ethnic identity development. Moreover, TRAs often went beyond focusing on birth

families to learning homeland languages, joining cultural clubs in college, and visiting their birth countries. Finally, although search interest was not related to serious emotional or social problems or lower self-esteem, the interviews revealed that individuals approach and react to searching with a variety of strengths and needs that reflect many of the dilemmas of transracial adoption. Thus, we need to see searching as a broad, fluid, and multifaceted process that plays out differently across individuals, situations, and time.

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