

## Making Sense of Loss and Belongingness: Korean Transracial Adoptees' Journey from Europe to Korea

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From 1953 to 2015, approximately 200,000 children born in Korea were adopted into foreign countries. Many studies have focused on Korean adoptees growing up in the US, as the majority of these children were adopted by American families. In comparison, research on Korean transracial adoptees raised in European countries is limited. Thus, the current study aims to highlight the journey of Korean transracial adoptees from Europe to Korea. Three participants narrated their life stories as adoptees in two separate interview sessions. The findings of this study call attention to the adoptees' ongoing reconsideration of their identity as they assimilate life experiences within two disparate cultural settings in Europe and Korea. The study found that ambiguous loss faced by the adoptees from their childhood in Europe continued to their adulthood in Korea. Major themes of the participants' narratives in their journey from Europe to Korea focused on their feelings of loss and the lack of belongingness. This study found that the sense of loss and the lack of belongingness changed over time. Participants were active agents in the process of their journey from Europe to Korea, as they constantly worked to adapt to and improve their situation in face of adversity.

*Keywords:* constructing identity, journey from Europe to Korea, Korean transracial adoptees, sense of belongingness, sense of loss

### Introduction

When children grow up in transracially adoptive families, the process of developing an individual identity takes a very different pathway from the norm. Unique challenges of adoptees' identity development are described in the following quote:

*All human beings, as they develop, seek to understand who they are and what their*

*place is in the world. Adopted individuals have the additional overlay of discerning why they are not with the parents who created them and what relevance this has for their own identities. Those adopted across race and culture also face the reality of integrating racial/ethnic identity without input from a family with this lived experience" (McGinnis, Livingston, Ryan, & Howard, p. 12).*

McGinnis and colleagues (2009) examined Korean transracial adoptees' identity development and found that racial and ethnic identity became more relevant during their adolescence, as initially described by Erikson

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(1968). However, the significance of racial and ethnic identity did not peak during adolescence; rather, it heightened during young and late adulthood (McGinnis et al., 2009). Crocetti and colleagues (2008) also emphasized the life-long process of identity development by stating that individuals may rethink and readapt their identity, even after having developed a firm sense of self (Crocetti, Rubini, Luyckx, & Meeus, 2008).

Transracial adoption was once heavily criticized due to its negative impact on child development (NABSW, 1972). Racial differences among adoptees and their community is not the only factor that complicates the process of developing a firm sense of self. The adoptees' sense of belonging also influences the development of identity. Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, and Collier (1992) described belongingness as the personal involvement in a system in a way that people perceive their involvement as having value. In other words, individuals seek to "fit in" and have a sense of belongingness within a community. However, "fitting in" may be challenging for transracial adoptees, especially due to their racially distinct features (Hagerty et al., 1992).

Although there is a small body of research that focuses on the development of ethnic identity among transracial adoptees and how adoptive parents culturally socialize their children (Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater-Deckard, & Petrill, 2007; Lee & Quintana, 2005; Mohanty, Keokse, & Sales, 2008), these studies provide limited insight about the life-long process of adaptation within changing family dynamics. More research is needed to explain how transracial adoptees define themselves and their life experiences. In light of this gap, the current study sought to address the complex process of identity construction from the perspective of transracial adoptees who were born in Korea and adopted to European countries.

### **Adoption and Ambiguous Loss**

International adoption in South Korea dates back to the Korean War in the 1950's. Since then,

an estimated 200,000 South Korean children were adopted into homes in North America, Europe and Australia. The country that adopted the greatest number of Korean adoptees was the United States (111,574), followed by France (11,183), Sweden (9,515), Denmark (9,355), Norway (6,411), the Netherlands (4,099), and Switzerland (1,111) (E. J. Kim, 2010). Reflecting the country with the highest number of transracial adoptees, many studies have focused on Korean-born adoptees growing up in the US. However, there is a lack of research focusing on Korean transracial adoptees reared in European countries.

In the current study, particular attention was given to the notion of "ambiguous loss" by Boss (1999), since loss and belongingness were the most significant aspects of the adoptees' perception of their lives. Abrams (2001) mentioned that adoptees may experience a sense of loss for their birth parents, which may be ambiguous in nature and may hinder the grieving process. Passmore (2007) described that adoptees generally experience three different types of losses: the loss of birth parents, the loss of biological connection to the adoptive family, and the loss of identity or background information. The sense of loss experienced by adoptees is not a clear-cut loss; Boss described this nature of loss as ambiguous loss (Boss, 1999). It is the uncertainty of the situation, which makes closure impossible, and thereby, complicates the grieving process. Ambiguous loss is the most devastating loss among the types of losses people may experience in their personal relationships due to its unclear and undetermined nature.

The type of loss Korean transracial adoptees experience aligns with the characteristics of ambiguous loss as defined by Boss (1999). In most cases, adoptees do not have any actual information about their biological family. Adoptees are aware that they have another set of parents somewhere, to whom they are biologically related, to whom they resemble, and who are generally labeled as the "real" parents. Especially for cases of international adoption, such background information is difficult to

obtain (Abrams, 2001). Only a small percentage of adoptees actively try to resolve this uncertainty by searching for their birth parents (Warner-Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010). Although the search for birth parents may be expected to lessen the degree of uncertainty experienced by adoptees, research by Powell and Afifi (2005) reported that levels of uncertainty and ambiguity actually increased with the active search for birth parents. Another challenge that adoptees' must face is the experience of living in their birth country. Encountering the Korean culture and Korean people may also pose new challenges for the development of adoptees' identity. Hübinette (2004) uses the metaphor of a "third space" to illustrate the situation of Korean transracial adoptees. The third space is the domain between the Korean utopian dream of a global ethnic community and the Western culture expecting assimilation and loyalty.

The current study aims to examine the narratives of Korean-born transracial adoptees, in defining who they are and where they belong. This study aims to set a foundation for understanding transracial Korean adoptees in European countries. In guiding the interviews to gain in-depth understanding of the adoptees' experiences, the following research themes have emerged: (a) How do Korean transracial adoptees make sense of who they are in their journey from Europe to Korea? (b) How do Korean transracial adoptees make sense of loss from childhood to adulthood? (c) How do Korean transracial adoptees perceive the lack of belongingness in constructing their identity?

## Method

### Interviews

Narratives of three Korean-born transracially adopted adults were obtained via in-depth individual interviews. Utilizing the methodological process of sequential interview by Seidman (2006), two interview sessions were held in order to gain a better understanding of the participants' experiences. The aim of the first

interview was to assess the context of the adoptees' experience. The interview questions addressed general experiences in the adoptive family, school, and community. The first interview began with the question, "*Can you talk about three days in your life you will never forget?*" The second interview focused on the meaning that participants gave to their experiences. There was a minimum of two days between the two interview sessions. The interview proceeded with questions addressing the adoptees' reflections and their perceptions. Before starting the second interview, the participants were asked about how they felt after the first interview, and if there was anything they would like to add to the contents of their first interview narrative. During the second interview session, questions such as, "*How did the experience of being a transracially adopted person affect/influence your identity over time?*" were asked. Each interview lasted between 1 to 2.5 hours. The interview included 42 open-ended questions that were formulated to gain insight on the adoptees' experience, in respect to the life span perspective, including personal life, adoptive family, school life, community, birth family, cultural socialization and identity, and the changes of perception over time. Some questions were adapted from previous qualitative research questions that focused on ambiguous loss and identity development.

Data collection took place during April 2015. All interviews were conducted by the first author who is fluent in English, German, French and Korean. Since participants were fluent in English, all interviews were carried out in English. German and French were occasionally used during the interview to clarify subtle meanings and to avoid possible language barriers. Interviews with two of the participants were conducted in a seminar room at the authors' university. Interview with the third participant was conducted in a public coffee shop. During the interview, the first author took on the role of a student while the participants became the "experts" who narrated their life stories. The authors maintained a respectful attitude to learn from the participants' life experiences

throughout the entire process of interviewing, transcribing, and analysing the narratives. The authors also reciprocated their understanding about cultural differences, and shared their values about personal life experiences within different cultures as international students and qualitative researchers.

## Participants

Procedures for participant recruitment and data collection were approved by the Institutional Review Board of Seoul National University. Given the possible difficulty of recruiting adoptees who grew up in a European country, multiple recruiting methods were utilized. Collaboration with a non-profit organization for Korean overseas adoptees was established. The organization published a flyer on their Facebook site, and two participants who were interested in the recruitment contacted the author via e-mail. The third participant was recruited using the snowball sampling method. After giving the participants detailed information about the aims of the research, all participants agreed to contribute to the study. To protect the identity of participants, pseudonyms were used. All three participants were Korean adoptees who grew up in European countries, and had lived in Korea for at least five consecutive years. One participant was female and the other two participants were male. One participant requested that his nationality be kept confidential. The nationalities of the other two participants were Dutch and French. Their ages ranged from 35 to 46 years. All three adoptees were unmarried at the time of data collection. The age of adoption placement ranged from 3 months to 6 years. All adoptees had at least one sibling who was also an adoptee from South Korea. Two participants had biologically-related siblings. All three participants grew up in a family with Caucasian parents, and lived in a neighbourhood which was predominately uniform. All three participants were either working or studying in South Korea at the time of the interview. Their length of stay in South Korea ranged from 5 to 8 years. All three participants came to Korea to

learn more about their birth background and had experiences of actively searching for their birth families.

There is a lack of research focusing on the experience of Korean transracial adoptees after they settle down in their country of origin. This study aims to fill this gap by acknowledging the perceptions of transracial adoptees and their journey from Europe to Korea. Consequently, Korean transracial adoptees who have returned to Korea and spent some time in their birth country were included in this study.

## Procedures

The process of data analysis followed the steps of coding, memoing, and concept mapping as described by Babbie (2010). Six audio-recorded interviews were transcribed and read numerous times in order to identify the sections in the narratives that best reflected the adoptees' experience over time. Since the aim of the study was to describe the journey of transracial adoptees, similarities and differences among the experiences of the participants were highlighted. First, participant's unique life experiences and subsequent themes regarding their family situations were assessed. To create a visualization of the narratives, descriptive life themes were each listed on separate flash cards, symbolizing the participant's life span journey. The life span began with the day of adoption to the interview, and ended with the participant's future projects. Various themes emerged at different life periods: adoption placement, childhood, post-adoption, adolescence, early adulthood, and their return to Korea. By focusing on the main life periods, commonalities among the major themes throughout the participants' life span emerged. Major themes in the adoptees' lives included adaptation after adoption, school experiences, motivation to search for birth parents, coping with loss, and adaptation to the Korean society. After arranging the descriptive subjects of participants' narratives to reflect the life span perspective, a cross-case analysis was conducted.

## Results

The adoptees shared their experience of growing up in an environment, which was rooted in European traditions without any prior knowledge about the Korean culture. Their narratives reflected their journey of adapting to the European society and disregarding apparent differences during childhood and adolescence. Later, they shared their rising interest in Korea and their search motivation for their biological roots. After meeting their birth parents, two participants encountered new challenges during their adaptation process, attributable to the expectations set by the Korean society for the adoptees. Spending multiple years in their birth country after growing up in Europe and assimilating to European values and traditions allowed participants to become more aware of their preferences. All participants limited their stay in Korea, and had plans of returning to their home country in Europe. The narratives represented how life experiences of adoptees were challenged by identity development, coping with loss and the lack of the sense of belongingness.

### Ongoing Loss

The following passages in the participants' narratives illustrate their experiences of loss from childhood until the time of the interview. Growing up in Europe, participants had a continual sense of emptiness, which motivated them to return to Korea to obtain more information about their birth background. In Korea, the adoptees encountered multiple obstacles while in search of their birth parents.

*Something is missing.* Two participants had vivid memories about their first day arriving in the new country and meeting an unknown family. The following passages describe the adoptees' memories of being placed in a new family and the way this family managed the ethnical differences among family members. Mike's narratives describe his arrival in Europe, and how he met his adoptive parents for the first

time:

*I arrived in [European country]. And after the quarantine, our parents came to take us home. They came to the hospital, and they brought us to the station, and they were thinking to take the public transportation, the bus. And at that time, my father held me up in his arms, and I was crying and shouting so loud, that they thought it would not be possible to take the public transportation. They took a taxi. About my reaction, I think I was not used to being held by somebody I did not know.*

Orlando was adopted at the age of five, and he also shared intense memories of his placement into a new family:

*You know, I was young, I was five years old, but I can remember what happened. Maybe the first month, I was very scared. There was a new house. Why are we here? And after that, I knew they were taking care of us. Feeling safe, I think this is really important for children.*

The narrative of Mike and Orlando reflected their transition from South Korea to a completely new and unfamiliar environment where no one was able to communicate in Korean. During the time of Sarah, Mike and Orlando's adoption, their adoptive parents were advised to pretend like a typical family without giving any special attention to the differences among themselves and their children. Ahn-Redding and Simon (2007) argue that the first generation of Korean transracial adoptees grew up in families promoting the colour blind approach. Orlando explains how his adoptive parents were advised not to teach their children about the Korean culture:

*For my parents, people told them they have to cut us off. my sister and me. We have to cut everything related to Korean culture. No Korean food. No Korean TV. No Korean books. You have to cut*

*everything to blend into the French culture.*

The only memories that Sarah had about Korea were the 1988 Olympics and a small article in an encyclopaedia about female divers in Jeju Island. In her narratives, Sarah expresses the importance of teaching children where they come from, and her frustration about being adopted to a foreign country without knowing anything about Korea.

*I think it could have been different if I was raised differently. And if you know...people or my family didn't...of course they didn't know any better. But if they would have known that it is better to teach your child about where they come from...or if I weren't adopted into another country at all. I don't think it's good to adopt children to another country.*

*Trying to fill the gaps.* While all participants exhibited very low interest or rejection about Korean culture in their childhood and adolescence, a deeper attention arose during their early adulthood. Sarah, Orlando and Mike became more interested in their Korean heritage during their early adulthood, and decided to visit Korea in order to learn more about their birth heritage. The adoptees recount their confrontation experiences with untruthful and missing birth background information, and how they tried to fill the gaps. Mike described his search for his birth family as a fast and easy process:

*I had a file review with a social worker, showing your documents and so on. And also, I told them that I would like to find my birth mother. But I was thinking it would be really hard, and it would take a really long time, and I would be back in [European country]. So maybe, it was in the second or third week from the tour. But I stayed two more weeks for myself. And ten days after the visit of the adoption agency, I received a call from them, and they were asking me, "Are you still interested in meeting your*

*mother?" And I said, "Yes." And they said, "Okay. So, we found her. When would you like to meet her?" And so on.*

In contrast, birth mother search experiences for Sarah and Orlando were filled with frustration and disappointments. Sarah had searched for her birth family for more than ten years, and was unable to locate them due to the lack of some key information:

*If you don't have the necessary information, the organizations can't really do a lot for you. So they can only do standard things. I need other information or more information. For example, her ID number and her birth date. So, either they don't have that or they can't give it because of my mother's privacy. But I am not sure. The birth certificate doesn't have the necessary information to locate her through normal organizations.*

As described in Sarah's narratives, the adoption organizations are unable to provide constructive support for adoptees in the search for their birth family if the adoption file does not provide the necessary information. Orlando describes his interaction with a social worker from an adoption agency:

*I went there, and I remember, there was this French adoptee guy. And you know, this guy speaks French and Korean very well. And I talk with him about what happened, and he just opened the file and said, "Oh, there is nothing in your file, and it's going to be very hard for you to find your family." I said, "Okay." I was going to try everything: going on TV, in the newspaper. And you know, it was very frustrating for me at this time, because I only had the help of my Korean girlfriend. And, you know, she does not have any authority; she didn't work for any local government or anything in administration, but she found everything. And that guy, he just opened my file and said there was*

*nothing, okay, bye. He didn't help me a lot.*

Mike and Orlando had the opportunity to travel to Korea for a summer trip, which was organized by a non-profit organization for overseas adoptees. In Korea, all three participants established a connection to the adoption agency that possessed their adoption files. The narratives of all three participants reflect the lack of information about their birth and background. Orlando describes the moment when he opened his adoption file:

*So I went there [adoption agency] with my sister and opened my file, and there was nothing [emphasis added]. I only knew that I was born in Busan.*

*Sarah shared her frustration about growing up with wrong information about her background:*

*When I was growing up, I only knew that I was an abandoned baby at a police station, and that they brought me to my adoption agency. Then, I was adopted. I also didn't know my birth date, because it was estimated. Later, it turned out that my file had a birth certificate. So I was born at a midwife clinic. So now, I know my birth date, which is different. Well, I heard such stories before, that they change information (...) it was still a surprise or maybe even a shock. And I also felt kind of cheated.*

All three participants were very active in the search for their birth parents. They tried various methods to find their birth family, such as connection with adoptee organizations, participation in a TV program, and publication of an announcement in the newspaper. Orlando and Mike even arranged a meeting between their adoptive and birth families, and were aware of the rarity of that situation.

*Enduring with unanswered questions.* The following passages highlight the adoptees' ongoing desires to know the reasons of their

adoption and their frustration of being powerless in uncertain situations. Due to the lack of certain information, Sarah was unable to find her birth family. In her narrative, her obvious frustration regarding her inability to do anything to find her birth family is clearly identifiable:

*Because everyone else knows where he or she came from, and if you don't know [where you come from], (...) you always wonder.*

After an emotional search for their birth family, participants hoped to gain a deeper understanding in the reasons and motivations behind their adoption. Although Orlando and Mike were able to meet their birth mother and some extended family members, questions still remained. Mike expresses that the only responsible person for his adoption was his grandmother, and he cannot understand the reason why two of the three children were given up for adoption:

*My consideration is that, because they were a rich family, they could make an effort to have three kids, or three grandsons. For me, there was no reason to send us for adoption. I am just wondering why that person, who took the power, decided [for adoption], because I don't see rational or logic arguments. The only conclusion I could have is greediness. So this is my feeling. Of course, I could be totally wrong.*

Orlando emphasizes his remaining desires to know what happened, and why he and his sister were sent for adoption. In his narrative, the frustration of not getting a clear explanation is apparent:

*My Korean mum...she doesn't want to tell me what really happened. Like, every time I start questioning her about this, she starts crying, and I cannot do anything. So, you know, I tried to be close with them, but I know they are hiding something from me.*

As described earlier, the loss experienced by adoptees is not solely the loss of their birth parents; it is also the loss of background information and identity (Passmore, 2007). Even though Orlando and Mike were able to find their birth family, they do not know why their adoptions took place and why they were sent abroad. Without credible information about their adoption background, they still have a sense of uncertainty, which they had hoped to resolve by meeting their birth family.

### Making Sense of the Lack of Belongingness

The narratives in the subsequent paragraphs show different feelings of adoptees throughout their journey, beginning with the experience of racism and discrimination during their school life, to the lack of belongingness during their stay in Korea. The participants described their feeling of incongruity between the way they look and the way they feel. In the last session, the adoptees clearly defined what it means to be a Korean adoptee who grew up in a European country.

*Feeling different.* Growing up in an environment which is predominately uniform and attending a school as a minority presented some challenges for the participants. All three participants were familiar with being in a school environment where the majority of children were European. The following narrative relates experiences of racism, and their loneliness while coping with such adversities:

*That was very tough. I remember when I was in the classroom, everybody spoke French except me. So, I didn't have friends, because nobody wanted to talk to me, because I didn't understand anything.*

Sarah, Orlando and Mike experienced racism throughout their lives. In the following passage, Sarah explains how she started to feel uncomfortable by the way she looks due to racist comments from other children or adults:

*Having a sense of being discriminated*

*against, you know, like other school kids. They always have to call out that you look different. But also, by other adults, because in the Netherlands, it's really much like, if you are not White, then you are not really Dutch.*

The research conducted by McGinnis and colleagues (2009) found that a majority of Korean transracial adoptees (78%) experienced racial discrimination. The results showed that 80% of adoptees reported experiences of racial discrimination from strangers, 75% from classmates, 48% from childhood friends, and 39% from teachers (McGinnis et al., 2009). The experience of racial discrimination is not solely limited to these areas; adoptees also experience racial teasing within the family system (McGinnis et al., 2009). The anger and frustration of adoptees are well reflected in their narratives. Orlando recounts how he was unable to discuss the issues related to racism with anyone:

*I never talked about this [racism] with my sister. I don't know, maybe to protect her. But at the same time, I remember I wanted to see, not a doctor, but kind of a shrink [therapist], because my mom saw that something was wrong with me. But still, I couldn't talk with this shrink. She did not help me a lot.*

Sarah also reflects on how she tried to speak about the challenges related to racism with her parents and how she remained aggrieved:

*They would just say, you have to ignore it, because if people say bad words, words don't hurt. You know, they would say those kinds of things to me, when we were little. But it doesn't really. I felt...I didn't feel [that I was] taken seriously, because it really hurt me.*

The racial dissimilarities between adoptive parents and their children have created a unique context, which may lead to a lack of

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understanding. This situation is well displayed in Mike's interview. He mentions the difficulty that adoptive parents have of fully understanding their children's experiences:

*And with my parents, I think there is a certain level of understanding, but some parts they are not able [to understand]. It's not because of them, but because of their situation.*

Adoptive parents may not be aware of the racism that their children experience due to racial differences, which put adoptees in a completely different context. This is also shown in the study by McGinnis and colleagues (2009), in which many Korean transracial adoptees describe the lack of understanding and awareness that their adoptive parents have regarding a person of colour in a predominately uniform society.

*Discrepancy between how they feel and how they look.* All three participants had the feeling of discrepancy between the way they looked and the way they felt. Growing up in a predominately uniform society made them feel different from other children. The following passage from Orlando's interview reveals how difficult it was for him to look Asian among a predominantly Caucasian environment:

*Tough! Very tough, because I didn't understand. I understand when I look at my face in the mirror [and see] that I don't look like the other children. But [it's] very tough. I didn't choose it. I feel like I was a victim.*

Sarah also narrates the disparity between how she grew up and the way she looks:

*So, we didn't, I didn't, know anything about Korea. It was basically growing up as a normal Dutch person, but I still looked...I didn't look Dutch.*

For Mike, the sense of being European was so strong that he needed some time to become

aware of his Korean heritage. The following passage illustrates this situation:

*When I came for my first extended stay here in Korean, it was back in '99. I was 30 years old, and at that time, I really realized that I am not White because at that time, I saw an advertisement for a pharmacological or hospital survey, and they were looking for some White, or Caucasian to participate in some tests. And I thought, yeah, I could go and get some easy pocket money. And I needed a day to realize that, of course, I can't go because I am of Korean ethnicity.*

All three participants grew up in a predominately uniform society with unique European cultures and traditions. This socialization gave them a strong sense of European identity, which diverges from their phenotypical appearance. This is confirmed by one of the largest studies focusing on identity development of Korean transracial adoptees conducted by McGinnis et al., (2009). In this study, 78% of adoptees reported that, as children, they had considered themselves or wanted to be Caucasian.

*Lack of sense of belongingness.* The adoptees' journey does not end with the reunion of birth family members. Even after contacting the birth family and visiting their birth country, challenges arise. The following passages describe the challenges found in their relationships with their birth parents, difficulties encountered in the process of living and working in Korea, and the reconstruction of their identity. Orlando expresses his frustration about the actual relationship he has with his birth mother:

*I really feel like I want to be alone with my mum. Like, let's have coffee, and let's talk. And every time, my grandmother or other family members come with us. But nobody speaks English. It's not even like someone is coming with her to help me with the translation. I feel like they don't*

*trust me, or... I don't know.*

Mike describes the feeling of confusion toward his birth mother:

*So, logically, rationally, I know she is my birth mother. But emotionally, it's still, like, in between.*

Even after returning to Korea, a country where the majority of the people look like him, he was not exempt of discrimination:

*I was very upset. They [birth family] were more interested in meeting my French parents, like my White parents, compared to me and my sister. They said, "It's so cool to have a White family."*

The challenges related to reconnecting and building a relationship with the birth family may differ from the adoptees' initial expectations. In her book about Korean transnational adoption, Prébin (2013) emphasizes that not all reunions and relationships with the birth parents are successful and harmonic. She discusses the issues related to Korean cultural values and expectations, which influence the relationship between the adopted person and the birth family. At the time of the interview, all three participants had been living in South Korea for at least five years. Life in Korea allowed the adoptees to interact with other Korean people, and this made it possible them to become aware of the expectations that the Korean society had towards them.

Orlando regularly contacts members of his birth family, who expect him to behave like a Korean. His narratives reflect how he feels upset because of certain comments and situations:

*Every time I speak, you know, I can speak Korean, but they always tell me that my accent is really bad. Or my accent is not like from Busan or America. So, sometimes, I feel like why do I even try to speak Korean? So, I should just speak English and that's all. But, I feel very*

*frustrated...frustrated also because they treat me like I have to behave like a Korean. And I'm not. I don't want to. Why should I?*

Orlando experienced such comments not just among his birth family, but also at his work place with other Korean people who want him to behave like a Korean:

*Challenges with work because they see me as a Korean...so I have to behave like a Korean. And I don't want to. I don't have to. Everybody told me, "You have Korean blood. You have to behave like that." Like in the company, it's not even my family. And I say, "No, no, no." I behave like the way I want. I don't have to. Always, I am polite, of course! But, I don't need to be like that. I don't want to pretend. Even if they see me as a Korean guy, I am French inside. Deal with it! I am not going to change for you.*

In their narratives, Sarah, Orlando and Mike mentioned that many people wrongly assume that Korean adoptees are aware of the Korean culture and view themselves as multicultural people. Sarah explains in her narratives that this is not the case:

*It's not like we have two cultures. People always think that. But that's not true, because Korean adoptees...we were adopted overseas, so we don't have Korean culture or a Korean identity.*

Mike uses a metaphor to explain his feelings about being a European on the inside while looking Korean on the outside:

*I developed with a feeling of being [European]. I also have to mention that the family and the extended family never discriminated us against White children. I had no feeling of rejection or to be differentiated. So, it's a really positive point. So, I developed an identity of a White person, but of course, with a Korean face.*

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*So, in English, we call this "banana".*

Mike recounts the process of his identity formation and his uncertainty about how much he would like to adapt to the Korean society without losing his European identity. In his narrative, he explains the changes of his perception:

*Several years ago, I was thinking of [the issue of] belonging and identity (...) But talking with other people, I changed my conception and I can be 100% [European], but I don't have to be less [European] to be Korean. So, I changed the concept so I can become more Korean without being less [European].*

The process of identity crisis is also observable in Orlando's narratives. He recounts how the uncertainty of his identity affects the relationship with his girlfriend:

*I am sure it affects my relationship with my girlfriend. I told her that maybe I have some issues, like identity. Am I French? Am I Korean? She asks me all the time, "Are you sure [that you] will you forever live in Korea?" And I say, "No, I am not sure." But [when asked], "Are you going back to France?" [I say], "Yeah, of course." If I really want to be committed to her, she really needs to know.*

During the last interview session, participants explicitly explained what it means to be a Korean adoptee who grew up in a European country. Orlando expresses the lack of connection with Korea and the great significance of knowing that he is not alone:

*We all are born in Korea, we have both Korean descents, but we are raised by European or American families. So, we all have, kind of, for me especially, French values. You know, it's very different from the Gyopo [immigrants]. They have Korean families and speak Korean. They*

*have a Korean connection. But for us, the connection is with the adoptive family. So, that's why it's different. But you know...now I know that I'm not alone. You know, [there are] more than 200,000.*

Mike describes that, as a Korean transracial adoptee, one can never really be invisible in the crowd, and that there are always situations that make him feel different:

*It's not to belong to the mainstream, to be different. How do they say, to have a third place, not to belong to the [European] population [and] neither to the Korean [population]; something in between to have to play the bridge role. I mean, Western people expect me to know about Koreans, and Koreans expect me to know about [European country] or everything about [European country]. But when you see the complexity, sometimes, I have no idea. But they are still expecting an answer, so they are expecting you to be a bridge. I think it used to be different. So, something like, you cannot blend in. You cannot be anonymous in the crowd. I mean, you can be in the subway with all other Koreans, but it doesn't last long because there will be somebody coming to you and asking for the way, and you don't know. You cannot exactly understand what they are asking for, and you don't know the way. So, well, okay, I look like a Korean. But definitely, ultimately, I am not Korean. So, you have this kind of relief that you are disbarring in the crowd, but again, something is coming and reminding you that you are not. So, you are, at the end, in between. I would say to be different and to have that distortion between the outlook and the inner side.*

Sarah describes transracial adoption as an injustice, due to the lack of belonging it causes among adoptees:

*That you're kind of an exile, I think that*

*describes my feeling the best. So, not an expatriate or immigrant, because an immigrant...we are not immigrants, we moved up. You know? Immigrants usually move down. So, we didn't have those hardships. But we are also not expatriates, because it's not like we have two cultures. People always think that. But that's not true, because Korean adoptees...we were adopted overseas, so we don't have Korean culture or a Korean identity. So, it feels like it is denied to you, or it's taken away. Being adopted transracially feels for me like injustice. I would even say, for me, it's a violation of our human rights. So, I know they meant well. But, it was not the right thing to do. You always feel a longing or a desire for your motherland, or for the place where you were born. But you don't live there. And the place you live, you are always like an outsider. So, you don't feel in place. Wherever the country you grew up, you don't feel at home there. But, you also don't feel at home in Korea. Because you don't...most don't speak Korean. And you are not really Korean. Not like normal Koreans.*

All three participants mentioned the difficulty of belonging to a place, to feel at home, and to blend in, as major challenges in their lives. Sarah, Orlando, and Mike planned to return to Europe and visit Korea during the holidays. Sarah explains in her narrative that she plans to settle down in the Netherlands and to send her daughter to school there in the future, because school life in Korea is very different from the school experiences that European children have:

*Well, I want to settle down somewhere, because my daughter is going to school. And I don't really want her to go to school in Korea. So, I prefer to go to the Netherlands.*

Orlando emphasizes that once he has a child, he plans to settle down in France, where he can teach his child French values. Additionally, he

underlines that his values fundamentally differ from the values that Korean people have:

*I think it's important for me to have a child on my own to teach my kids the same values, my [adoptive] parents taught me, like, not to have enemies and to have a good life. Not about having money...I don't care about it. Here, it's all about money. But for me, it's not like that. I really think that to find someone I really love and start to be something really important...I think that's really important for me.*

Mike narrates that he plans to return to Europe or a Western country in the future. He adds that the place where he really feels at home is the country where he grew up:

*So, I imagine myself being back in [European country] (...) and coming back to Korea for vacations, and after retirement, spending my life in [European country]. So basically, the "home sweet home", for me, is [European country].*

## Discussion

"Whether adoption 'works' cannot be answered by a simple 'yes' or 'no', because just as there is no single adoption experience, there is no single correct response" (Ahn-Redding & Simon, 2007, p. vii). As stated in the quote, every adoption experience is unique and this makes it difficult to judge whether or not transracial adoption is a constructive intervention. Sarah, Orlando, and Mike give us insight on life as transracial adoptees by sharing many private and sensitive experiences. There were subjects which made them relive both joyful and painful moments in their lives.

As Irving (2002) emphasized, the major loss that adoptees experience may not be solely explained by the loss of their birth parents. This experience of loss may be the loss of identity or background information, loss of biological relatives, and the loss of biological connection to

adoptive parents (Passmore, 2007). The loss recounted by participants in the study was related to the inability to receive complete information about their biological background, the secrecy related to the adoption motives, and the lack of belongingness. Sarah's ongoing and unsuccessful search for her birth mother reflects the concept of ambiguous loss. Sarah described feelings of exhaustion and uncertainty of whether to continue or stop her search. On the other hand, Orlando and Mike were able to find their birth relatives, but there still remained unanswered questions, which they believed were vital in gaining a deeper understanding of their adoption. The narratives showed how their sense of loss changed over time. As they grew up in Europe, they experienced a rising interest in their birth background. Participants wanted to fill the gaps of missing information and wished to learn more about themselves. They came to Korea, hoping to find the mislaid pieces and to obtain answers about their biological background. However, instead of answering these questions, new questions emerged and remain unsolved even after reuniting with their birth family.

Another important challenge that the three participants faced was the lack of the sense of belongingness. One of the many challenges faced by transracial adoptees while growing up in a European country is developing a sense of belonging in an unclear context of ethnical and cultural values in a certain society, while maintaining a conspicuous racial appearance. The reverse challenge is experienced when they return to Korea; they share similar phenotypical appearances with other Korean people, but their ethnicity is marked by European culture, which causes strains in their interaction with members of the Korean society. Sarah, Orlando, and Mike narrated the difficulty to find a place where they belong, due to the discrepancy between their inner and outer self. This challenge of belongingness was also described by Hübinette (2004), who illuminated the idea of a "third space." The results of this study adhere to the findings from previous research on Korean transracial adoptees who have expressed their challenges to find a place where they truly fit in

(Hübinette, 2004; Trenka, Oparah, & Shin, 2006; Kim, 2007; Kim, Suyemoto, & Turner, 2010). An important finding in this research is that the insufficiency of the sense of belongingness that adoptees experienced had changed over time. Growing up in Europe, adoptees looked different from the people around them, and they had to cope with racism in their daily lives. In Korea, they shared similar racial appearances with others in their community, but their ethnicity actually led to an even bigger variance between themselves and the Korean society.

## Conclusion

Observing the experiences of adoptees in respect to the life span perspective was useful in accurately demonstrating the journey of coping and adaptation among Korean transracial adoptees. As described by the participants in their narratives about returning to their birth country, a firm sense of self may be challenged throughout the lives of adoptees (Crocetti, Rubini, & Meeus, 2007; Crocetti et al., 2008; Crocetti, Scignaro, Sica, & Margin, 2011). Growing up in a European country and having a Korean birth heritage made the participants feel as though a part of themselves was missing. In order to develop a firmer sense of self, Sarah, Orlando, and Mike decided to travel to their country of origin to find out more about the void of their birth and background information. Coming into contact with the Korean society and Korean culture helped participants to become more aware of their European identity and the European values they acculturated during their development. By comparing their experiences in Korea and European country, participants were able to develop a fuller sense of self by integrating certain values from each culture that best fit their cultural identity. The findings of the current study, which reveals how adoptees have become more aware of their European values and the importance of transmitting such values to their children, are new observations in the research on Korean transracial adoption.

Although the overall process of the study

allowed extensive insight into the lives of transracial adoptees, there were some limitations. The recruitment of the participants was not a random sampling, and only self-selected participants were included. Additionally, all the participants returned to and resided in their birth country for multiple years. The duration of residency may have an impact on the experiences narrated in the interviews, and may not be comparable with all adoption experiences. The in-depth interviews were retrospective, addressing issues related to adoptees' experiences during the past 30 to 40 years. As a result, certain memories may have been distorted or forgotten. It is also important to note that every adoption experience is unique (Passmore, 2007) and that the journey of Sarah, Orlando, and Mike do not reflect the life experience of all Korean transracial adoptees.

Based on the results of this research, we can draw some significant implications for future studies in child development and family relations. The study conducted by McGinnis and colleagues (2009) states that adoptees benefit from their interaction with other children who are also adopted. Hence, adoption placement of Korean children into families with other Korean adoptees or with their biological siblings should be promoted. A majority of Korean adoptees experienced racial discrimination in their school, neighbourhood and even in the family system. Unfortunately, many Korean transracial adoptees reported that their adoptive parents lacked understanding and awareness in regard to their experience as individuals of Korean heritage in a predominately uniform society (McGinnis et al., 2009). Analogous narratives emerged in the interviews with Sarah, Orlando, and Mike. Experiences of racism among Korean transracial adoptees indicate serious concerns that necessitate attention. Adoptive parents should receive more education in order to support their adopted children who may have to cope with racism. Although a more sensitive methodology of parenting regarding racism may not completely prevent experiences of discrimination against their adopted children, it may help adoptees to feel that they are supported

and cared for. Cultural programs for Korean overseas adoptees should implement additional interventions that support adoptees in coping with racism and discrimination. Furthermore, adult Korean adoptees emphasized that their experiences and identity development could have been enhanced by growing up in a community and school with more diversity (McGinnis et al., 2009). Similar comments were reported in the narratives by Sarah, Orlando and Mike. In other words, a community with more diversity may offer supplementary support for Korean transracial adoptees in finding role models and reducing the feeling of alienation. As described by Trenka, Chinyere, Oparah, and Shin (2006), the responsibility of many adoption agencies is not to find parents for children, but rather, to find children for parents. For Korean transracial adoption to be considered as constructive, the child's well-being and development at the time of adoption and in the future should be the greatest priority in every adoption placement.

In the narratives of Sarah, Orlando, and Mike, the authors found a recurrent theme of constant challenges faced in the process of identity development, mainly caused by the people around these adoptees. Further quantitative research is needed to identify specific external variables such as racial discrimination and cultural expectations. All participants in this study had at least one Korean sibling in their adoptive family. Future research is suggested to examine the significance of communication among transracially adopted siblings.

This research provided insight on the life experiences of Korean transracial adoptees who have grown up in a European country. Their narratives revealed the ongoing process of identity development and coping with ambiguous loss. More longitudinal and representative research is needed to better understand the ongoing, lifelong journey of adaptation and identity development of Korean transracial adoptees.

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