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Discussions about Racial and Ethnic Differences in Internationally Adoptive Families: Links with Family Engagement, Warmth, & Control

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Abstract

Discussions about racial and ethnic differences may allow international, transracial adoptive families to construct multiracial and/or multiethnic family identities. However, little is known about the ways family communication influences how discussions about racial and ethnic differences occur. This study examined associations between observed family communication constructs, including engagement, warmth, and control, and how adoptive families discuss racial and ethnic differences using a sample of families with adolescent-aged children adopted internationally from South Korea ($N = 111$ families, 222 adolescents). Using data collected during mid-adolescence and again during late adolescence, higher levels of maternal control and positive adolescent engagement were independently associated with a greater likelihood that family members acknowledged the importance of racial and ethnic differences and constructed a multiracial and/or multiethnic family identity. Adolescent engagement was also related to a greater likelihood that family members disagreed about the importance of racial and ethnic differences, and did not build a cohesive identity about differences.

Keywords

Adolescent; Adoption; Culture/Race; Dyadic Communication

Most international adoptions in the United States involve a White parent and a child from another country who is a U.S. racial and ethnic minority. Nine of ten internationally adoptive parents are White, whereas eight of ten children are from Asia, Latin America, or Africa (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013). It is not surprising then that more than 80% of international adoptions are considered transracial. The majority of internationally adopted children are from Asia (59%; U.S. Department of Health & Human

Services, 2013). In 2009, for instance, more than 105,000 children adopted from Asian countries were living in U.S. adoptive homes with White parents (Krieder & Raleigh, 2011). In particular, South Korea is has the largest overall international adoption sending country into the U.S., with more than 110,000 Korean children adopted into American families since the program's inception (Selman, 2012). Compared to domestic adoption, higher transracial placement rates into White families (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013) have culminated in researchers calling for examination of race and ethnicity issues in internationally adoptive families (Galvin, 2003). This suggests attention is warranted to understand families with White parents and children adopted internationally from South Korea, the most populous group of internationally adoptive families.

How adoptive families discursively engage with racial and ethnic differences may build a family identity around this topic (Galvin, 2003, 2006a), and promoting adopted children's racial and ethnic heritage is important for their adjustment (Johnston, Swim, Saltsman, Deater-Deckard, & Petrill, 2007; Lee, 2003; Mohanty, Keokse, & Sales, 2006). Yet, there is little research about which communication behaviors promote adoptive families' race and ethnicity discussions. This study examines how family communication (engagement, warmth, control) when children are in mid-adolescence contributes to how South Korean internationally adoptive families with White parents discuss race and ethnicity when children are in later adolescence.

Addressing Race and Ethnicity within International, Transracial Adoptive Families

Galvin (2006a, 2006b) suggests non-biological families are "discourse dependent," and construct their family identity through internal communication and management of boundaries with those outside of the family. Attention has been given in recent years to understanding how internationally adoptive families discuss adoptive family experiences (Ballard & Ballard, 2011; Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Harrigan, 2010) and manage boundaries in response to outsiders' comments about their often visibly different family form (Docan-Morgan, 2010a; Suter, 2008; Suter & Ballard, 2009; Suter, Reyes, & Ballard, 2011a, 2011b).

In addition to family discussions about adoption and external boundary management, the need to examine how international, transracial adoptive families internally engage with racial and ethnic differences has been stressed. Cultural socialization frameworks indicate racial and ethnic minority families, including adoptive families with racial and ethnic minority children improve children's heritage awareness and discrimination defenses by promoting knowledge of and pride in the child's background through activities and discussions related to cultural history (Hughes et al., 2006). Galvin's (2003, 2006a) discourse-dependency suggests discussions about race and ethnicity in transracial adoptive families strengthen the family's racial and ethnic identity. However, the practice of engaging with race and ethnicity is complicated in transracial adoptive families because predominantly White parents must seek out ways to connect with and discuss their child's differing racial and ethnic heritage (Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, Gunnar, & the MIAP Team, 2006). Compared to same-race ethnic minority families, transracial adoptive families have

limited cultural resources to teach the child about his/her heritage due to a lack of shared racial, ethnic, or national origin heritage, a greater likelihood of living in a racially White community, and parents' limited experiences with discrimination (Shiao & Tuan, 2008).

Historically, research has focused on how international, transracial adoptive families engage in racial and ethnic *activities* (e.g., culture campus) instead of discussions about race and ethnicity (c.f., Carstens & Juliá, 2000; Vonk, Lee, & Crolley-Simic, 2010). However, activities and discussions are distinct aspects of supporting racial and ethnic differences (Kim, Reichwald, & Lee, 2013). Recent communication research is filling gaps in how adoptive families discursively construct internal family identities about race and ethnicity (e.g., Docan-Morgan, 2010b; Gao & Womack, 2013; Harrigan, 2009; Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010; Suter, 2012). Adoptive parents appear to walk the tenuous line between promoting adoptive family similarities and acknowledging the child's birth heritage (e.g., Harrigan, 2009; Suter, 2012). Adoptees, however, tend to avoid race and ethnicity discussions with parents because parents' responses during such discussions are often viewed as unhelpful (Docan-Morgan, 2010b; Samuels, 2009).

Despite the increased focus on race and ethnicity discussions in international, transracial adoptive families (e.g., Docan-Morgan, 2010b; Harrigan, 2009), little research has examined real-time conversations about adoptive families' racial and ethnic differences. Most research has examined parents' (e.g., Harrigan & Braithwaite, 2010) or adolescents' (e.g., Samuels, 2009) self-reports of their families' race and ethnicity discussions. However, parents and adolescents tend to perceive their conversations about race and ethnicity differently, and adoptive parents may over-report their engagement with racial and ethnic issues (Kim et al., 2013). Capturing real-time discussions about how international, transracial, adoptive families discuss racial and ethnic differences within their families as a whole provides additional insight into how families engage with and identify as multiracial and/or multiethnic families, if they do at all.

Acknowledging Differences Framework: Discussions about Racial and Ethnic Differences

To understand how international, transracial adoptive families discuss race and ethnicity, scholars have emphasized the importance of whether or not families acknowledge racial and ethnic differences (Kim et al., 2013; Kirk, 1984; Lee, 2003; Shiao & Tuan, 2008). In *acknowledgment of differences*, all family members agree that the adopted child's racial and ethnic heritage is a vital component of the family and discuss acting in ways that support the adopted child's racial and ethnic background. These families transform from seeing themselves as a same-race family with similar ethnic or cultural experiences to a multiracial and/or multiethnic family that embraces diverse heritages. This framework suggests families acknowledging differences cannot ask adopted children to learn about their heritage without familial engagement in learning about the child's birth culture; doing so isolates adopted children from the family.

This framework also suggests two forms of discussion where families do not universally agree that racial and ethnic differences are important for the family identity (Kim et al.,

2013; Kirk, 1984; Shiao & Tuan, 2008). In *rejection of differences*, families take a color-blind approach to conversations about racial and ethnic differences by indicating these differences are not relevant to the family, and end any conversation about the importance of their racial and ethnic diversity. Families who reject differences may also have discussions that diminish the importance of the adopted child's birth heritage. Finally, some families have *discrepant views of differences*, or disagreements, during their conversations about the importance of racial and ethnic differences and do not build a cohesive family identity about their differences. In families with discrepant views of differences, at least one family member may discuss how the family actively supports the child's ethnic and racial heritage as an entire family. However, another member may suggest the family's racial and ethnic differences are not salient life experiences.

How Families Discuss Racial and Ethnic Differences: Family Communication as a Pathway

Family communication may be one avenue influencing how international, transracial adoptive families discuss racial and ethnic differences, and the identities that are created. Theory on adoption-related communication (see the Family Adoption Communication Model; Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003) suggests the general family communication climate builds an atmosphere that may influence how adoption is discussed. This theory suggests parents' warm, empathetic behaviors may facilitate a climate where the family and child are encouraged to discuss adoption questions. Or, closed communication environments may not encourage future discussion of adoption-related issues because family members perceive this conversation to be off-limits for discussion (Wrobel et al., 2003). These ideas are mirrored in family communication theories (e.g., Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT); Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004, 2006), which suggest family communication behaviors create an environment that regulates what topics are discussed in families, who discusses topics, and which family members wield decision-making power. The goal of these communication behaviors is to create shared family realities, or cohesive family identities, about specific topics (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004, 2006).

Family communication and adoption theories (Burleson, Delia, & Applegate, 1995; Grotevant, Wrobel, van Dulmen, & McRoy, 2001; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004, 2006) cite warm, conversational engagement and control as vital in creating the environment that alters how sensitive conversations occur in families. Thus, three family communication behaviors—engagement, warmth, and control may be related to how families discuss the importance of their racial and ethnic differences and the adopted child's heritage. These three communication behaviors may also be related to whether families reach agreement about the importance (e.g., acknowledge) or unimportance (e.g., rejection) of racial and ethnic differences.

Studies exploring the relationship between family communication and how adoptive families discuss racial and ethnic differences are scarce and restricted by conceptual limitations. For example, parent-child engagement in cultural activities about the adoptees' heritage has been linked to relationship quality (Yoon, 2001, 2004). Qualitative assessments of *content* during racial and ethnic differences discussions suggest communication may vary

based on how families discuss racial and ethnic differences (Kim et al., 2013). Links between family communication and how families discuss racial and ethnic differences have not been explicitly examined; however, these studies provide initial support for the possibility that communication behaviors are related to how adoptive families discuss racial and ethnic differences.

Family communication: Differences across family members

Our study was informed by research indicating communication behaviors vary across family members. Individual family members' communication behaviors may each individually contribute to the family environment, teaching family members what topics are appropriate to discuss and providing family members with the skills to broach sensitive topics (Burleson et al., 1995). Adolescents may discuss distinct topics with each parent (Noller & Bagi, 1985) and communicate more with mothers than fathers (Noller & Callan, 1990; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Family members also relate differently to one another in systemic settings when more than just a parent-child dyad is present (Doherty & Beaton, 2004). Parents and adolescents also have different perceptions of their communication quality with one another (Laursen & Collins, 2004; Rosnati, Iafrate, & Scabini, 2007). This suggests each family member's communication behavior must be examined using observational data in settings that include more than just a parent-child dyad. This study takes this approach to explore which family members' communication behaviors are important for how families discuss racial and ethnic differences and build multiracial and/or multiethnic family identities. Based on theory and research described previously, we propose the following hypothesis:

H1: Engagement, warmth, and control will vary across categories of how families discuss racial and ethnic differences: acknowledgment, rejection, or discrepant views of differences.

To test this hypothesis, observed family communication behaviors for mothers, fathers, and children in South Korean international, transracial adoptive families were assessed in mid-adolescence and compared with the three discussion categories assessed in late-adolescence.

Method

Participants

Participants were a subset of families drawn from the Sibling Interaction and Behavior Study (SIBS; McGue et al., 2007). The three largest adoption agencies in one large Midwestern state were used to recruit the adoptive family full sample; 90% of families on the sampling frame were located and 63% participated. The full sample was representative of state adoptive families at the time of data collection. Inclusion criteria specified: a) families had at least one parent and two adolescents fewer than five years apart in age, b) families lived within driving distance of the research lab, c) children had no disabilities, d) children were adopted prior to two years old, and e) adopted children were not biologically related to each other (see McGue et al., 2007 for full SIBS sample information).

The present study utilized a subset of the SIBS adoptive sample. For the present study, additional inclusion criteria were: a) at least one child was adopted from South Korea, b) families completed study Waves 1 and 2, c) families responded to questions about racial and

ethnic differences, d) parents self-identified as White, and e) a Korean adopted adolescent was present during the racial and ethnic differences discussion. Potential differences in communication behaviors between Korean adoptive families meeting and not meeting inclusion criteria are discussed in the Study Strengths and Limitations section, below. Based on these inclusion criteria, our sample included 111 families. Each family had two adolescents ($n = 222$ adolescents), and at least one of these adolescents was a Korean adoptee. In most families, both adolescents were adopted (83 families; 75%), although 25% (28 families) of the families had a Korean adoptee and a non-adopted adolescent. In our sample of 222 adolescents, 124 were female (56%). The average adolescent age was 14.5 years old at Wave 1 ($SD = 1.82$, $min = 10.7$, $max = 19.2$) and 17.6 years old at Wave 2 ($SD = 1.95$, $min = 13.7$, $max = 22.6$). Families had an average income between \$60,000–\$70,000 and parents were highly educated, with 67% of mothers and 68% of fathers holding at least a bachelor's degree.

Procedure

Using IRB-approved procedures, families visited the research lab to complete informed consent and observational tasks. Each family member received remuneration for participating in Wave 1 (\$50) and Wave 2 (\$100) of the SIBS. Families also received a bonus of \$25 per family for retaining their original appointment at Wave 1. Observational tasks occurred in a research lab that looked like a family's living room. Families were aware of being videotaped; cameras were placed in bookcases in the room. Wave 1 data collection started in December 1998. At Wave 1, families participated in two tasks later assessed for family interactions. At task one, families had a picture of a Rorschach inkblot and were asked to come to agreement about what it resembled (Exner, 2002). In task two, families discussed a moral dilemma and decided if it was acceptable to steal a life-saving drug for your spouse or a stranger (Kohlberg, 1981).

Wave 2 data collection began in February 2003 (88% Wave 1 retention rate). During the Wave 2 observational task, families were given index cards with questions about everyday conflicts they may have. Families were instructed to talk about each card in order before moving on to subsequent cards. One card included questions about race and ethnicity; this card was the fourth card in the list of cards to discuss. Families were given 15 minutes to discuss as many cards as possible, but were not required to finish discussing all cards.

Measures

Family communication—Family communication was rated globally across the Wave 1 family interaction tasks using three observational scales from the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales (IFIRS; Melby et al., 1998). The IFIRS has been used in a number of diverse samples across the United States, including adoptive families, with similar tasks and demonstrated reliability and concurrent validity (Alderfer et al., 2008; Melby & Conger, 2001). These three observational scales (described below) were rated by trained observers on a 9-point scale (1 = *not at all characteristic*, 9 = *mainly characteristic*). Observers received 100 hours of training and were required to pass written and observation reliability exams before rating video-recorded family interaction tasks. To estimate inter-observer reliability, 25% of the interaction tasks were rated by a second observer. Intra-class

correlations demonstrating inter-observer reliability are provided in Table 1 (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979; Suen & Ary, 1989).

The three observational scales used to assess family communication were engagement, warmth, and control. *Engagement* was measured using the IFIRS communication scale. This scale assesses verbal and non-verbal behaviors that demonstrate how well a family member positively or neutrally engaged in and promoted ongoing conversation by soliciting views of other family members, encouraging other family members to participate in the conversation, and explaining their point of view. This scale measures how well family members converse with others in the family in a way that promotes all members' participation in the conversation; higher scores indicate more engagement. The *warmth* scale reflects how often family members expressed care or loving feelings towards other family members, higher scores indicate more warmth. *Control* was assessed with the IFIRS dominance scale. The dominance scale assesses how often a family member tried and subsequently succeeded in controlling others' opinions and behaviors; higher scores reflect more controlling behaviors.

Because every family member received three scores on each scale (e.g., mothers received a score for engagement to fathers, the first adolescent, and the second adolescent), a factor score for each family member on every scale was computed using factor and principal component analysis in SPSS 20.0. To maximize statistical power, data for the first and second adolescent were treated as individual "adolescent" cases. This resulted in nine factors. The mothers' set of factor scores included a factor score for engagement, a score for warmth, and a score for control. Fathers and adolescents each had similar factor score sets, resulting in three family members with three sets of factor scores per family member (9 factors). See Table 1 for factor loadings.

Categories of how families discussed racial and ethnic differences—Familial discussions about racial and ethnic differences were assessed using Wave 2 family conversation transcripts. Discussions about racial and ethnic differences were videotaped, and a research staff member of the third author later transcribed the discussion content verbatim and included non-verbal behaviors specifically relevant to the discussion categories in the transcriptions. Verbal and non-verbal content was transcribed from the time families started reading the questions about race and ethnicity until the family picked up the next card and began discussing subsequent questions unrelated to race and ethnicity. To ensure transcription validity via an audibility check (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the transcriber watched each tape after the discussion of racial and ethnic differences content was transcribed to ensure a match between the video recordings documenting the conversations about racial and ethnic differences and the transcriptions of discussion content.

The questions prompting families to discuss their racial and ethnic differences were: a) How do our ethnic and racial backgrounds affect us as a family? b) Provide an example of when your ethnicity or race has been an issue for you, and c) How well do we talk about ethnicity or race in our family? Using a modified Consensual Qualitative Research approach (CQR; Hill et al., 2005; Hill, Thompson, & Nutt Williams, 1997) to ensure coding validity, three coders analyzed transcripts of each family's discussion about racial and ethnic differences.

To establish initial reliability, the team reached consensus on 83% of 24 cases where all three coders independently reached the same code. Cases were then distributed among the three coding team members for an initial round of coding. During initial coding, cases where the code was not immediately clear (10%) were brought to the full team for consensus coding following the CQR approach (Hill et al., 2005; Hill et al., 1997). After initial coding, the coding manual was refined to more accurately reflect the conversations and ensure the overall conversation tone was being captured in the coding assignment (Charmaz, 2006). For example, if a participant acknowledged difference in any way (“I mean, you are Korean”) but then stated race and ethnicity did not impact the family, this case was originally coded as *Discrepant Views of Differences*, even though the overall tone of the conversation was *Rejection of Differences*. To be coded as discrepant, conversations had to be marked by disagreement among family members. To be coded as acknowledgement or rejection of differences, family members must have all reached the conclusion that race and ethnicity was either important or unimportant to the family.

After the coding manual revision, cases affected by the revision (82%) were consensus coded by all three members of the coding team to ensure coding validity and to establish that the overall gestalt of the conversation was agreed upon across multiple team members’ experiences (Charmaz, 2006; Hill et al., 2005; Hill et al., 1997). An outside auditor process, which included consultation and checking the code with the third author’s research lab, was used as an additional validity check to protect against coding biases. The coding team also met weekly to review the coding process to further prevent inter-coder drift for the few cases that were not consensus coded. See the Appendix for qualitative examples of each category; for extensive coding details and more qualitative examples of the codes, see Kim et al. (2013).

Families *acknowledging differences* had conversations reflecting ways they supported racial and ethnic differences as an entire family ($n = 23$ families, 21%). For example, families discussed visiting the adolescents’ birth country together or having positive, active conversations about racial and ethnic differences. Families in *rejection of differences* agreed racial and ethnic differences were not important to their family, or their conversations did not promote family racial and ethnic diversity ($n = 62$ families; 56%). Families in *discrepant views of differences* lacked agreement about whether their family places importance on the child’s birth heritage, and family racial and ethnic differences ($n = 26$ families, 23%). For example, one family member may have insisted the family supported their racial and ethnic differences and family diversity, while another family member indicated they did not do so. This coding scheme has demonstrated concurrent and construct validity with self-reported cultural socialization measures (Kim et al., 2013). Moreover, other studies of internationally adoptive families have similar proportions of families per category (Shiao & Tuan, 2008), suggesting coding validity.

Adoption status—Family communication quality differs across adoption status (Rosnati et al., 2007; Rueter, Keyes, Iacono, & McGue, 2009). To account for adopted and non-adopted sibling differences, adoption status was used as a covariate (1 = *not adopted*, 2 = *adopted*).

Data analysis plan—Family communication variable means were computed across the three discussion categories to provide descriptive information about potential differences in communication across the categories reflecting how families discussed racial and ethnic differences. Three sets of multinomial logistic regressions were used to test the significance of associations between mean family communication factor scores and how families discussed racial and ethnic differences, controlling for individual family members' other communication behaviors and adolescent adoption status. The first set examined the relationship between mothers' engagement, warmth, and control, and the three-category variable of how families discussed racial and ethnic differences. The second and third sets examined associations for fathers and adolescents. Correlations between variables were examined for multicollinearity; none existed. Data were analyzed at the individual adolescent level and the COMPLEX command in Mplus 7.1 (Muthén & Muthén, 2010) was used to account for nested data.

Missing data analysis—Family communication raw scores had 0% to 22% missing data, with most data missing < 2%. Missing data of 20–22.5% reflected lack of father participation in observation tasks. No data on how families discussed racial and ethnic differences were missing. Mean levels or proportions for all variables were compared across participants with complete data and participants missing data on any variable using t-tests and chi-squared tests. Differences were found, however the number was small and differences deemed unsubstantial. For example, although fathers with complete data were younger ($M = 48.9$) than those with incomplete data ($M = 50.0$, $t = -2.01$, $p = .05$), their age difference was one year. Missing data were imputed using expectation maximization in SPSS 20.0 before creating family interaction factor scores. Imputation is preferred to traditional methods of missing data analysis because it provides complete data sets, which is necessary for factor analysis, and accounts for missing data effects on statistical inference during the imputation process (Johnson & Young, 2011).

Results

Relationships between possible demographic covariates and the three categories reflecting how international, transracial adoptive families discussed racial and ethnic differences were tested to ensure hypothesized associations between family communication constructs and discussion group membership were not due to spurious demographic differences between categories. Minimal demographic differences between categories were found. For example, no differences existed in father or adolescent age, adolescent sex, family income, or maternal or paternal education across the three ways families discussed racial and ethnic differences. Sibling composition (e.g., both adopted or one adopted and one not adopted child) was also unrelated to how families discussed racial and ethnic differences. Mothers in families in acknowledgement of racial and ethnic differences were older ($M = 48.50$, $SD = 4.05$) compared to mothers in families in rejection of differences ($M = 47.08$, $SD = 3.60$; $F(2, 570) = 3.37$, $p < .05$). Due to this difference between categories, maternal age was added as a covariate in further analyses. Maternal age was unassociated with how families discussed racial and ethnic differences; all non-significant covariates discussed in the section above were removed from final models.

Discussions of Racial and Ethnic Differences: Family Engagement, Warmth, and Control

Table 2 presents descriptive standardized means and standard deviations for engagement, warmth, and control for each family member across each of the three categories reflecting how families discussed racial and ethnic differences (acknowledgement, rejection, and discrepant views of differences). Results from the multinomial logistic regressions testing the associations between each family member's communication behaviors and the three discussion of racial and ethnic difference categories are presented in Table 3. Significant findings are discussed below.

Maternal communication and discussion of racial and ethnic difference categories—The first model tested associations between maternal communication behaviors and the three categories reflecting how families discussed racial and ethnic differences. Maternal control was significantly different across categories such that an increase in maternal control was associated with greater likelihood of families acknowledging differences compared to having discrepant views of differences, $OR = 2.14$, $p < .05$. Other maternal communication factor scores were not significantly different across categories.

Paternal communication and discussion of racial and ethnic difference categories—The second model tested relationships between paternal communication behaviors and the three categories reflecting how families discussed racial and ethnic differences. Notably, paternal communication factor scores were not significantly different across the three categories.

Adolescent communication and discussion of racial and ethnic difference categories—The third model tested the relationship between adolescent communication behaviors and how families discussed racial and ethnic differences. Adolescent engagement was different across categories, such that an increase in adolescent engagement was associated with greater likelihood of families acknowledging compared to rejecting differences, $OR = 1.46$, $p < .05$. An increase in adolescent engagement was related to greater likelihood of having discrepant views of differences compared to rejection of differences, $OR = 1.51$, $p < .05$. Adolescents' other communication scores and adoption status were unrelated to the three categories.

Discussion

This study tested the hypothesis that family members' communication behaviors are related to how international, transracial adoptive families discuss racial and ethnic differences, which is a component of building multiracial and/or multiethnic family identities (Galvin, 2006a). A limited number of communication behaviors varied across the three categories of how discussions about racial and ethnic differences occur. However, maternal control and adolescent engagement were related to differences in how families discussed racial and ethnic differences. In accordance with previous literature (Burleson et al., 1995), this suggests that the manner in which family members create communication environments that influence how discussions of racial and ethnic differences occur may be tied to family roles.

Other maternal and adolescent communication constructs, and fathers' communication, when children were in mid-adolescence were unrelated to how families discussed racial and ethnic differences when kids were in late-adolescence.

Relative to families with discrepant views of differences, families that acknowledged differences had mothers who exhibited higher levels of control. In light of FCPT's expectation that having at least one family member exert control over the family environment will improve the family's ability to reach a shared reality (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004, 2006), it is not surprising that families with higher levels of maternal control were more likely to have family members all reach agreement that racial and ethnic differences are important to their family.

Families in rejection of differences are also in agreement about their families' approach to discussing racial and ethnic differences, albeit they agree that racial and ethnic differences are unimportant to their family. One might expect families that do not wish to have sensitive race and ethnicity conversations may exhibit more control because there is an underlying familial agreement that sensitive topics are not to be brought up (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004, 2006; Reiss, 1981). Contrary to FCPT-based expectations, families rejecting the importance of racial and ethnic differences did not exhibit high levels of control. It is possible the control measure may have obscured differences between rejection and discrepant views of differences. Two distinct dimensions of control, behavioral and psychological, have opposite impacts on family adjustment (Barber, 1996; Gray & Steinberg, 1999); inclusion of both elements in control measures may confound outcomes. Future research should account for the unique elements of behavioral and psychological control, and examine the possibility that the influence of control on reaching a shared reality or identity may depend on the content of what topic was discussed and what conclusion was reached by family members about the salience of the topic.

Maternal, and not paternal, control was related to how internationally adoptive families discussed racial and ethnic differences. As specific family members exert control over others in different aspects of family life (Noller & Fitzpatrick, 1993), this study indicates mothers' influence is important for an environment that acknowledges the importance of racial and ethnic differences and builds a multiracial and/or multiethnic family identity. Maternal control may be related to environments that incorporate racial and ethnic heritage differences because greater control is associated with elevated knowledge of adolescents' interests and needs (Henry, Robinson, Neal, & Huey, 2006) and adolescents are more likely to discuss sensitive topics with mothers (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Mothers may have greater knowledge of adolescents' need for conversations related to acknowledging and supporting their racial and ethnic heritage compared to fathers. Mothers with knowledge about the importance of racial and ethnic differences may exert control over other family members to create environments where racial and ethnic differences are discussed and multiracial and/or multiethnic family identities are built.

Adolescents engaging well in conversation with other family members were more likely to be in families acknowledging or holding discrepant views of differences than in families in rejection of differences. One might interpret this to mean the responsibility of discussing

racial and ethnic differences rests on adolescents. Yet, families creating open, expressive environments often encourage children to have their own opinions and express these opinions within the family context, and these families may also acknowledge the importance of a greater variety of topics (Burleson et al., 1995; Halberstedt & Eaton, 2003; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004, 2006; Reiss, 1981). Adolescents whose families cultivate expressive environments may also disclose more information to parents, resulting in greater parental knowledge of the adolescents' interests and difficulties (Padilla-Walker, Harper, & Bean, 2010). We believe families in acknowledging and discrepant views of differences may facilitate environments encouraging opinions of all family members, resulting in more positive adolescent engagement. Adolescents growing up in these two environments may know how to engage with others in conversation in a way that allows adolescents to divulge information about diverse racial and ethnic experiences. Theory on adoption-related differences (Grotevant et al., 2001; Wrobel et al., 2003) speculates adolescents may not discuss their adoption-related differences due to lack of familial support. To test this possibility, differences in family-level behaviors across the ways internationally adoptive families discuss racial and ethnic differences should be examined.

Future Research Directions

This study examined family communication constructs that may have an influence on how international, transracial adoptive families discuss racial and ethnic differences and build cohesive family identities or shared realities about this topic. We examined three communication behaviors that are theorized to influence what topics are discussed in families, but other behaviors could be considered. Although individual family members are thought to contribute to what topics are discussed in families (Burleson et al., 1995), FCPT suggests four typologies that likely also have an important influence on the family environment and should be examined in future research (Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2004, 2006).

This study contributes to the growing literature on the possible correlates of discursively constructing family identities in international, transracial adoptive families. Previous studies have examined external boundary management processes that alter family identities specific to race and ethnicity (Docan-Morgan, 2010a; Suter et al., 2011a), and this study suggests general maternal control and adolescent engagement in families may influence how families approach internal family conversations that build or diminish multiracial and/or multiethnic family identities. Future research should consider the intersection of internal and external conversations specific to race and ethnicity and how this relates to family identities (Galvin, 2006a). We believe studies should examine how international, transracial adoptive family members engage in internal conversations about race and ethnicity after discriminatory comments are made and boundaries breached. This and examination of other mediating or moderating factors may allow researchers to identify techniques that help adoptive parents effectively discuss racial and ethnic differences in such a way that builds multi-racial and/or multi-ethnic family identities.

Study Strengths & Limitations

Strengths—Several methodological and theoretical strengths increase confidence in findings and provide implications for future research. Among this study’s methodological strengths is our use of observational data that reduces biases (Larsen & Olson, 1990), particularly in adoptive families where self-reports of communication may be biased due to adoption stigma (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002). Observational data of discussions about engaging with family racial and ethnic differences may provide more information than parent self-reports of such discussions (Hughes et al., 2006; Kim et al., 2013). Longitudinal data also added clarification about the direction of association between family communication and how internationally adoptive families discuss race and ethnicity. This study suggests a temporal relationship exists between several communication constructs and how families later discuss racial and ethnic differences. Finally, many parent-child relationship studies do not include mothers and fathers (Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006; Grolnick & Gurland, 2002). By assessing mothers’ and fathers’ communication behaviors, this study gives insight into which parental role assists in creating environments that later influence how racial and ethnic differences discussions occur. Paternal communication constructs were not related to how families discussed racial and ethnic differences, which may suggest fathers do not influence how adoptive families discuss differences. However, it seems more likely fathers contribute in a way that is not yet understood.

Several theoretical strengths also have implications for forthcoming research. The adoption field has been largely a-theoretical (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010). This study contributes to adoption literature by utilizing theoretical frameworks that elucidate how adoptive family communication is occurring regarding general topics, and also specifically how international, transracial adoptive families may be discussing racial and ethnic differences. This study also used a “distinct dimensions” approach of examining engagement, warmth, and control separately, which yields information that is masked when these behaviors are combined into typologies (Bean et al., 2006; Gray & Steinberg, 1999). This study’s approach provided insight into distinctive contributions of engagement, warmth, and control, and the influence of each family member on the environment that influences how discussions about racial and ethnic differences occur.

Limitations—As this study included only families with at least one Korean international adoptee from one region of the U.S., generalizability limits should be considered. Although the largest populations of U.S. international adoptees are from South Korea (Selman, 2012), this sample does not include international adoptees from other sending countries, including China, Ethiopia, or Guatemala. Nevertheless, the sample was reflective of the eligible population of adoptees at the time of data collection (McGue et al., 2007). Caution should be exercised when generalizing this study to internationally adoptive families with children from other racial or ethnic minority groups, as adoptive families that adopt racial and ethnic minority children from other countries have differential access to cultural resources aiding in discussions of racial and ethnic differences (Vonk et al., 2010). Parents may discuss racial and ethnic differences more or less frequently as children age (DeBerry, Scarr, & Weinberg, 1996). Those generalizing results should take care to consider the changing landscape of adoption across sending countries, as well as the child’s age.

This study also only included internationally adoptive families with White parents who adopted transracially. More than 90% of internationally adoptive parents are White (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013). However, a small proportion of internationally adoptive families may have racial and ethnic minority parents, which could have transracially adopted children. As international, transracial adoptive families with racial and ethnic minority parents have discrimination experiences that aid the family in discussing race and ethnicity (Hughes et al., 2006), transracial adoptive families with racial and ethnic minority parents may have different experiences with building multi-racial and/or multi-ethnic family identities and were not included in our study. Despite the important experiences of these families, demographic data suggest these families are rare and have not been examined in research to our knowledge.

Time lags between data collection of communication constructs and how families discussed racial and ethnic differences should be considered when interpreting results. These data were collected between 1998 and 2003, which may suggest results are dated. However, communication behaviors are consistently cited as relatively stable over time (Laursen & Collins, 2004; Melby & Conger, 2001) and the same communication domains of engagement, warmth, and control have been cited as important for families over decades of research (Steinberg, 2001). This suggests minimal biases related to the study time lag and provides support for the relevant nature of our family communication data. Recent research on race and ethnicity discussions in international, transracial adoptive families also concur that many adoptive families with adolescents downplay the importance of race and ethnicity in their family (Docan-Morgan, 2010b), suggesting our findings are relevant for today's adoptive families.

Selection biases for Korean adoptive families meeting and not meeting other inclusion criteria should be considered. Post-hoc independent samples t-tests between Korean adoptive families that met and did not meet inclusion criteria yielded few differences in 36 family communication raw scores for engagement, warmth, and control prior to factor analysis (see Table 1). Differences between ineligible and eligible families included engagement from adolescent 1 to father (Ineligible: $M = 3.79$, $SD = 1.26$, Eligible: $M = 3.42$, $SD = 1.28$, $t = 2.17$, $p < .05$), control from adolescent 1 to father (Ineligible: $M = 3.96$, $SD = 1.36$, Eligible: $M = 4.40$, $SD = 1.26$, $t = -2.45$, $p < .05$), and control from adolescent 1 to adolescent 2 (Ineligible: $M = 4.17$, $SD = 1.59$, Eligible: $M = 4.55$, $SD = 1.36$, $t = -2.03$, $p < .05$). Mean differences were small (e.g., less than 0.5 apart on a 9-point scale). We suggest bias due to eligibility criteria for Korean adoptive families were minimal. Despite cautions, this study generalizes to South Korean international, transracial adoptive adolescents and their families in the Midwestern U.S.

Conclusions

Maternal control and adolescent engagement were associated with acknowledging the importance of racial and ethnic differences and building a multiracial and/or multiethnic family identity. Findings imply the need to improve adoptive family communication in these two areas in mid-adolescence to improve the likelihood of acknowledging the importance of racial and ethnic differences in later adolescence. By encouraging families to facilitate

environments where adoptees can freely express opinions, adoptive families may have a greater likelihood of opening the door to discussions where some family members consider racial and ethnic differences as important, even if all family members do not agree on the importance of this issue. With potential implications for other transracial adoptive and non-adoptive families, results should be explored across other family forms and family populations.

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Appendix: Abridged Codebook of Racial and Ethnic Differences Conversations

ACKNOWLEDGE

A family that acknowledges race & ethnic differences in/outside of the family in a way in which the family is supportive with one another. All members of the conversation acknowledge and ACCEPT racial and ethnic differences in the family. It is something integrated into their lives on concrete, symbolic, and behavioral levels. Example: Comfortable discussing race and ethnicity, openness and willingness to discuss instances when race/ethnicity is salient, comfortable talking about discrimination, explicit (culture camp, Korean food) or implicit (conversations, role modeling) cultural socialization.

Wendy: “Yeah, we just talk about when dumb stuff happens. That old guy at Kowalski’s asked me how I got my name and then he was all pissed off.”

Dad: “Or when you worked at that restaurant and people thought were you were like J-Lo.”

Wendy: “That’s right.”

April: “Or when grandpa used to say, when I was in Korea I saw a lot of Koreans over there.”

Dad: “He was loony, but that would be me.”

Wendy: “Or just when we were little, then it was a big deal. Kids are mean.”

Dad: “Well, and didn’t you have somebody call you Chinese eyes all the time?”

Wendy: “Kyle was the worst though, he told me my mom didn’t want me and he told me I had burnt potato skin.”

REJECTION

A family that rejects race and ethnicity affecting the family in any meaningful way.
Example: Ignoring acknowledgment comments, avoiding discussion of race and ethnicity, colorblindness (“I don’t see race, I just see Kevin”), dismissal of importance or impact (“I’m White, you’re Korean...so what?”), making slanty eyes at one another, joking/racist comments

How do our ethnic or racial backgrounds affect us as a family?

Brian: “It doesn’t”

Provide an example of when your ethnicity or race was an issue for you.

Andrew: “When?”

Brian: “Come on...” (Mom shrugs)

Andrew: “Alright, next.”

How well do we talk about ethnicity or race in our family?

Brian: “Never.” **Andrew:** “Exactly, moving on.”

Mom: “Because it’s not really an issue, is it? **Andrew:** “No, it doesn’t seem to be.”

DISCREPANT VIEWS OF DIFFERENCES

One member of the family rejects race and ethnicity in a meaningful way and another member acknowledges race and ethnicity. One member states it impacts the family and the other person dismisses, denies or challenges that assertion.

Mom: “We talk about being Danish and being Korean.”

Melissa: “How much?”

Emily: “We don’t talk about being Korean.”

Melissa: “We don’t.” **Emily:** “We don’t.” **Mom:** “Yeah, we do.”

Melissa & Emily: “No, we don’t.”

Mom: “You don’t think you talk about being Korean?”

Melissa: “Because I’m American.”

Mom: “Oh so you’re saying that you don’t talk about it. We’ve had a lot of classes and we’ve gone to Korean camp.”

Melissa: “Yeah, but I think that was like 5 years ago though.”

Mom: “Well, I don’t bring it up everyday, ‘Gee good morning, how does it feel to be Korean?’”

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Intra-Class Correlations and Summary of Factor and Principal Component Analysis for Family Interaction Measures from Raw Scores to Individual Family Member Factors (N = 111 families)

Table 1

Item	Factor loadings											
	WM M	WM F	WM E	WM Y	CO M	CO F	CO E	CO Y	E M	E F	E E	E Y
MF	.76				.85				.78			
ME	.89				.91				.91			
MY	.88				.84				.88			
FM		.08				.93				.91		
FE		.93				.95				.88		
FY		.93				.95				.88		
EM			.90				.90				.91	
EF			.77				.80				.78	
EY			.85				.90				.89	
YM				.77				.92				.85
YF				.80				.89				.81
YE				.85				.89				.86
E.V.	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00	3.00
Var.	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100	100
ICCs	.61–.72	.56–.66	.44–.68	.37–.61	.57–.61	.56–.59	.66–.71	.74–.76	.60–.66	.61–.71	.71–.75	.68–.71

Note. WM = warmth, CO = control, E = engagement. The final letter for each factor loading indicates family member: M = mother, F = father, E = first (elder) adolescent, Y = second (younger) adolescent (i.e., WMM is the factor of warmth for mother). Letters in items indicate the direction of the interaction, where the first letter indicates the person that is interacting and the second letter indicates who the first person is interacting with. M = mother, F = father, E = first (elder) adolescent, Y = second (younger) adolescent (i.e., MF is the mother interacting towards the father). E.V. is the total sum of all three eigenvalues, Var. is percentage of total variance captured. The range of ICCs (intra-class correlations for inter-rater reliability) for each participant to the other three family members is also provided. Factors for younger and elder adolescents were combined after factor creation, prior to data analyses.

Table 2

Means and Standard Deviations of Factor Scores for Engagement, Warmth, and Control by How Families Discussed Racial and Ethnic Differences (N = 111 families; 222 adolescents)

Categories Reflecting How Racial and Ethnic Differences were Discussed					
Acknowledge <i>n</i> = 23 families (46 adolescents)		Discrepant <i>n</i> = 26 families (52 adolescents)		Rejection <i>n</i> = 62 families (124 adolescents)	
Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>
WMM	-0.08	0.57	-0.08	0.71	0.07
WMF	-0.26	0.80	0.07	1.17	0.07
WMA	0.10	1.13	-0.15	0.85	0.03
COM	0.32	0.92	-0.28	1.09	-0.00
COF	0.04	1.12	-0.09	1.13	0.02
COA	0.09	0.98	-0.14	1.04	0.03
EM	0.05	0.83	-0.04	1.02	0.00
EF	-0.11	1.29	0.11	0.96	-0.01
EA	0.22	1.03	0.09	1.11	-0.12
					0.93

Note. WM = warmth, CO = control, E = engagement. Final letter indicates family member: M = mother, F = father, A = adolescent.

Table 3

Multinomial Logistic Regression Analyses for Engagement, Warmth, and Control, and How Families Discussed Racial and Ethnic Differences (N = 111 families; 222 adolescents)

Predictor	Acknowledge to Rejection			Discrepant to Rejection			Acknowledge to Discrepant		
	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR	B	SE	OR
Model 1: Mom									
EM	-.02	0.32	0.98	.19	0.27	1.20	-.20	0.34	0.82
COM	.44	0.35	1.55	-.33	0.24	0.72	.76*	0.38	2.14
WMM	-.24	0.24	0.79	-.11	0.23	0.90	-.13	0.25	0.88
Adopt	.07	0.14	1.08	.55	0.51	1.74	-.48	0.53	0.62
Model 2: Dad									
EF	-.15	0.34	0.89	.29	0.26	1.33	-.44	0.36	0.65
COF	.06	0.30	1.06	-.25	0.29	0.78	.31	0.35	1.37
WMF	-.38	0.28	0.69	.02	0.24	1.02	-.40	0.32	0.67
Adopt	.09	0.13	1.10	.77	0.53	2.15	-.67	0.54	0.51
Model 3: Adolescent									
EA	.38*	0.18	1.46	.41*	0.18	1.51	-.03	0.20	0.97
COA	-.04	0.21	0.97	-.24	0.18	0.79	.21	0.24	1.23
WMA	-.05	0.22	0.95	-.27	0.23	0.77	.22	0.27	1.24
Adopt	.14	0.19	1.16	.57	0.51	1.77	-.43	0.53	0.65

Note. WM = warmth, CO = control, E = engagement. Final letter indicates family member: M = mother, F = father, A = adolescent. Adopt is the adolescents' adoption status (1 = *not adopted*, 2 = *adopted*). The reference category is the category after the "to" in the header.

* $p < .05$.