



Socialization of Transracially Adopted Korean Americans: A Self Analysis

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The sociologists Peter and Brigitte Berger state that **socialization** is “the process through which an individual learns to be a member of society” (Berger and Berger, pg. 9). There are many facets to this process that one can analyze, such as the mechanisms of this process, how the process is implemented, what role the individual plays in this process, etc. I will be addressing these issues and many more, as they pertain to me, a transracially adopted Korean-American.

Adoption presents a very unique aspect to the process of socialization, as we are speaking of becoming a member of *American* society by a Korean-born person raised in a Caucasian environment. What role does adoption, race, and identity play in this process? In this analysis, I will be addressing these issues and the central question of how, if at all, has transnational adoption affected my socialization into the American society, particularly my sense of self and my identity. Since socialization is a life-long process, I will also examine how adoption still affects me to this day in my

continuing process of socialization.

I was born in South Korea and adopted by Caucasian American parents when I was five years old. I was adopted along with my brother, who was a year old at the time. My adoptive family consisted of me and my brother, a sister who was also adopted from South Korea (from a separate Korean family), and a brother and sister who were both born biologically to my parents. The process of socialization begins from birth and continues throughout a person’s lifetime. Since I have no memory of my years in Korea and very little information about my birth parents, it is impossible to analyze my socialization during the first five years of my life. I will instead begin with my arrival at the U.S. and the beginning of the process of my initiation into American society.

Joseph Bensman and Bernard Rosenberg stated that, “[e]ven now no other institution matches the **family** as an early instrument of socialization” (Bensman and Rosenberg, pg. 79). Indeed, the importance of family in my early socialization cannot be understated or overlooked. It is one’s parents and siblings who start to teach us how to act and behave as a member of American society. For a five year old Korean like myself, it was a difficult transition. One of the big hurdles my parents had to get over was the initial language barrier. Berger and Berger emphasize the importance of language in a child’s early socialization: “the primary vehicle of socialization is **language**. It is in acquiring language that a child learns to convey and retain socially recognized meaning” (Berger and Berger, pg. 10-11). Although a five year old child’s language capabilities are limited, there was still that barrier to overcome. In fact, I remember having to take one year of extra kindergarten in order to fully adapt to the new language. This indeed affected my abilities to interact with my parents and peers which in turn affected my socialization.

Tobias Hubinette, a Swedish scholar,

presented a paper to the First World Conference of Korean Studies in July of 2002 in which he stated his view that, “adopted Koreans are considered a part of their host countries with no relation at all to Korea or their Korean families. The result is that adopted Koreans are expected to be loyal to their adoptive parents and assimilate fully to their host cultures” (Hubinette, 2002). The key words there are “fully” and “assimilate.” Until very recently, the adoption culture was such that “closed adoptions” were the norm, where adoptees knew nothing of their birth families and such records were kept sealed. The goal was to get the adoptee to fully assimilate and integrate into their new society as seamlessly as possible. The minimal information that I have about my birth parents are evidence of this kind of culture. Indeed, my parents also practiced a style of parenting where no discussion was brought up about the adoption, no discussion was brought up about “being different,” and no discussion occurred about the possible effects adoption could have on a child’s development. The main goal was to treat the child as if he were not different at all, when the child, even one as young as five, knows he is different.

This adoption culture and practice forged an early “Caucasian” **identity** for me. My parents wanted to socialize me into being an “all-American boy,” which meant a white, middle-class boy who played Little League and youth soccer. As my **significant others**, my parents were important role models for me growing up, showing me how to act and behave in order to be an American boy. I had mostly white friends, liked white girls, and did everything believing I was just another white American kid. I had fully **internalized** the Caucasian middle-class identity, with the social world around me becoming my world and my beliefs. One could say then, that adoption had little effect on my becoming a member of American society in the pre-teen years, save for the language barrier.

This all changed when my social world began expanding beyond the family to peers, friends, and school. Even though I, like most internationally adopted children, knew I was different, it really never was an issue within the family. However, as I grew older and became an adolescent, the realization that I was different became more acute. The struggle between the “I” and the “me” began to surface. The “I” knew I was racially different but the “me,” up to this point, had been socialized into believing I wasn’t different, that I was just another all-American white boy growing up in suburbia. My process of identity formation was ever changing. Berger and Berger state that “whether an identity is assigned or achieved, in each case it is appropriated by the individual through a process of interaction with others” (Berger and Berger, pg. 18). Our identities must be confirmed by others, for we cannot be something if others never tell us we are that thing. For example, a person can believe he is a priest, but if no one ever tells him or treats him as a priest, he cannot have the identity of a priest. In my case, there was a battle between the **micro and macro worlds**. In the micro world, my family and friends were telling me I was not different, just another American kid, even if I wanted to identify as an Asian. In the macro world, society and institutions were telling me I was an Asian, even if I wanted to identify as just another “American,” no different from anyone else.

During this time, I was having the sort of problems Billy Elliot was having, as portrayed in a movie named after him. In the movie, Billy was socialized into one way of behavior and thinking, but he knew he was different and went against the societal **norms**. The difference between Billy and I is that I didn’t rise up and fly in the face of what I had been socialized into believing. As a teen, while I knew non-discussion of my adoption wasn’t a good thing, I kept silent and continued to act as I had been taught. I continued to have this battle be-

tween the “I” and the “me” over what my true identity was. In a sense, I wasn’t being an active participant in the socialization process the way I would have liked. Instead, it was more of an unconscious battle between opposing sides the way Erik Erikson described in his eight stages of life.

All through school I had been a straight A student. I excelled in all subjects and was very book-smart. My friends and peers used to tell me it was because I was Asian, after all Asians were supposed to be smart, right? Here, we get into the issue of the **stereotype** of Asians as the “model minority.” They’re smarter and assimilate better than other minorities, as the stereotype goes. Unfortunately, I began to believe this. Not that I was a better minority because I was Asian, but that I must be smart because I was Asian. Much like blacks believe that lighter skin is better, as Virginia Harris described in *Prison of Color* (2000), I too internalized racist and stereotypical ideas of the larger majority society. I didn’t realize this was a form of **internalized racism** until much later. I believe that it was partly facilitated by my socialization into a white culture. Had I been socialized into an Asian culture, I believe I never would have internalized the idea that Asians are smarter and better than other minorities. Here is where adoption did have a great effect, as my socialization into a white culture clashed with my racial **ethnicity**.

A study by the Search Institute in Minneapolis in 1994 revealed some very interesting findings pertaining to Asian adopted adolescents and identity. The study found that fifty-three percent of Asian adopted adolescents had high self-esteem, compared to 51 percent of boys and 39 percent of girls nationwide in general. The study also found that 80 percent of Asian adopted adolescents get along well with people of all races, 4 percent wished their parents were of a different race, and 20 percent wished they were of a different race (Search Institute, 1994). I wouldn’t say I have high

self-esteem, but I do sometimes wish I was of another race. Am I going through an **identity crisis**? It would appear so, as I am battling to figure out who I am. The fact I don’t have high self-esteem exacerbates the problem. The only part of my self I have been able to rely on is the fact I can go to school and get good grades. This would certainly affect my socialization process, especially in terms of **secondary socialization**, as I don’t have the self-esteem or the confidence in who I am in order to socialize smoothly into another realm.

The many emotions and feelings that go through me in terms of my identity have to be managed. Arlie Hochschild calls it **emotional work**. I no doubt have gone through many of the types and techniques of emotional work she describes in order to grapple with how I feel about my identity and how it has been shaped and continues to be shaped. The battle between **evocation** emotional work, “in which the cognitive focus is on a desired feeling that is initially absent,” and **suppressive** emotional work, “in which the cognitive focus is on an undesired feeling that is initially present” (Hochschild, pg. 95) is especially vigorous within me. For example, whenever I am with a group of Koreans or Asians, I try desperately to evoke feelings that I belong to them and are like them. However, I just simply cannot feel like I belong, I feel like I am an outsider, a Caucasian trying to hang out with Asians. I look like them so I feel like I should try as hard as I can to evoke the feeling of belonging that just isn’t there. Similarly, I am working at suppressing the feeling that I am a white outsider, even when that is how I really feel. In this situation, the only thing that connects me to these other Asians is how I physically look. The undesired feeling of alienation is ever-present, no matter how much I work on suppressing it.

Since I was around 18, I tried very hard to regain a sense of my “Asian” self. In part, I blamed my parents for suppressing that

part of me, for never talking to me about my adoption, for never taking me back to Korea, for never helping me to reconcile my two inner halves, for never socializing me into being a confident member of American society as a Korean adoptee. I read numerous stories about Korean adoptees going back to Korea with their parents and having their lives changed forever, and about other parents taking their adopted child to Korean culture camps and joining adoption groups. I wondered, why couldn't that have been me? Then there's that part of me that realizes that maybe all these feelings towards my parents are, in Hochschild's terms, morally and socially inappropriate. After all, it's not appropriate to feel anger and hatred towards my parents when they have given me a good home and opportunities far and above any I would have encountered had I stayed in that orphanage in Korea. To blame them for not helping me reconcile my own identity issues also seems inappropriate. Society tells me I should be grateful, and my own morals tell me I should be grateful, but I cannot help but feel what I feel. Thus, I must embark on more emotional work so that I may be able to be a socially acceptable being, for that is what I have been socialized to do.

So how does all this affect me today and my continuing process of socialization? Perhaps, more importantly, how does adoption continue to affect my identity formation in relation to socialization? One way to look at it is through secondary socialization. Since my primary socialization has already mostly occurred, being socialized into new realms such as college, grad school, work, and career becomes very important. Is socialization into these realms going to occur in a similar fashion to how I was primarily socialized? I would say not, for the realms of higher education and the workplace tend to focus on the macro dimensions. These institutions label someone based on outward appearance and socialization into the realm then follows these as-

sumptions. In the micro world of my primary socialization, I was seen as just another person, with all attempts made to mitigate the differences and socialize me in such a way that I didn't feel I was different. In the macro world, it seems to be that the differences become much more acute and socialization is then affected.

In her essay "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack" (1989) Peggy McIntosh talks about racism from a white person's point of view. She speaks of how she was socialized into believing racism was an individual thing, not a systemic problem. Having been socialized into a white culture, I too was socialized into believing this. However, as a young adult, I realize there are systemic and institutional racist problems. Her list of twenty-six everyday instances in which white dominance is portrayed is especially intriguing. Until I read this article, I never realized that racism, even towards me, was anything more than someone squinting their eyes and shouting out "chink" or saying I was a model minority for being a smart Asian. I now realize there are things that happen in everyday life that confer white dominance throughout society. This especially affects me in that I *feel* I am white for the way I was socialized as a child. Am I the dominant or minority group here? Even I grapple with this question. On the surface, it seems like a very simple answer: I'm a minority. However, I have been socialized as if I were a white child and know nothing of my cultural heritage. Save for my physical looks I am truly 100% American. So how do I react to the issue of white dominance and racism?

To the outside world, I am an Asian and should be socialized as such. This has affected the way I look at myself and identity today. Berger and Berger described how identity is formed through others, that a person can't have an identity without having it confirmed by others. My desire to reconnect with my Korean roots in recent years has been facilitated by my interac-

tions with other people and the way they view me. Other people see me as Asian, so I see myself as Asian. I even got a tattoo on my arm of my Korean name in Korean characters. Am I saying that society made me do it? Of course not, but it was easier to do when others accepted and even encouraged it. The sentiment was, well, he's Korean, so of course a tattoo of his Korean name is appropriate. I have friends with tattoos and a lot of times they run into people that give them quizzical looks, or disapproving comments like, why a skull-and-crossbones? I, however, have never gotten any disapproval, in fact I usually get the "that's so cool" comment. As more and more people accept me as an Asian person, it has been easier for me to accept myself as Asian.

In a sense, most of my life I have felt like I have been a passive pawn in the grand scheme of socialization. It feels like I have been socialized through the policeman's point of view, not really being an active participant in how I am socialized. In fact, sometimes I feel like I don't want to be an active participant, I'd rather just not think about it and let the process happen. In a way, my attitude is much like that of Winona Ryder's character in *Girl, Interrupted*. She refused to see herself as "crazy" and preferred not thinking about it. The system had diagnosed her as "crazy" and while at first refusal and denial was her reaction, she slowly accepted what she was and let the process take over. Growing up, I had always let whatever the process was telling me dictate how I saw myself. As a child, I was told I wasn't different, and I believed it. As a teen, I knew I was different and ignored it. As a young adult, I'm told I'm different and accept it, but there is much more of my own control now than there ever was.

It is important to note, however, the context and social location in which I have been, and continue to be, socialized. My socialization has been affected by the time and location. I grew up in a middle class suburb in central Massachusetts. I never

had to worry about food, clothing, or shelter. Education was a priority and all efforts were made to give me the best education possible. I am also male and the oldest child in my family. Since America is a male-dominated society, it certainly has been easier for me to integrate than it would have been for a female. I now live in Boston on my own. Certainly, had I chosen to live in Los Angeles or San Francisco, with large Asian populations, my social experience would have been vastly different. I am living in a time of rapid technological and unprecedented material transformation while studying adoption and the issues adoptees face. I grew up during a time of closed adoptions, which no doubt affected how I was raised. Certainly, had any of the above variables been different, my socialization would have been different, but I can only profess knowledge for my own unique situation.

In her article about adoption, Eileen Smit states, "To say an adoptee doesn't have adoption issues is like saying a girl hasn't been affected by being female, or that an African-American doesn't have race issues' (as quoted from Melina). Adopted children must determine how adoption has affected them and come to terms with their adoption" (Smit, 2002, pg. 144). This is the central idea all adopted children must work with, especially for internationally and transracially adopted ones. As I analyze my own socialization into American society, I realize the importance of identity and coming to terms with who I am. This has played a crucial role in the process by which I have become a member of American society.

I view my socialization as a changing process. As a young child and teenager I was more of a passive player in the process. I let my family, friends, and peers dictate who I was and how I would be integrated into society. This is not to say that I wasn't active at all, but rather that my identity and feelings of myself was shaped for the most part by others. I look at it through a police-

man's point of view. If what I did pleased someone, then I did it. If it angered someone, then I wouldn't do it. This goes to the issue of power and just how much power social factors have on a person. I believe it could be different for everybody, but at least for me, the social surrounding played a huge role in my identity formation.

As I became older, I became aware of the differences between myself and others. I began to see the processes by which I was being socialized. When I speak of differences I mostly mean racial differences, for that is the main issue I have been and continue to grapple with. As my social world expanded beyond the family to peers and school, a changing and malleable identity was forming. I certainly felt white on the inside, but the usual school-age teasing made me realize I wasn't white on the outside. It was a confusing time, as the process of making me into an all-American white boy was continuing.

Recently, and in the present moment, I have begun to embrace my cultural heritage that for so long has been suppressed. That is not to say I am comfortable with my identity, far from it. What it does say is that I am taking a more active role in discovering myself and how I am socialized. I see it now as more of a process of initiation, much as Berger and Berger described. Rather than sitting back and letting the social environment form my identity, I am now deciding for myself what factors I want to influence me. It could be due to maturation and age, I just don't know. However, I can unequivocally say that I am happier with my identity now than I have ever been, although it's a continuing process.

At the beginning, I posed the question how has adoption affected my socialization into American society. I can now say that it has affected my socialization in many ways. To say that it hasn't affected my socialization would be a failure of critical self analysis. The main aspect of my socialization that adoption has affected has been in my iden-

tity formation and sense of self. It has been and continues to be a confusing and emotional process. Despite all the changes, I still feel like I'm "white" on the inside and "yellow" on the outside, a Twinkie, to use the term common among Asians. Socialization is a life-long process, and I doubt if I will ever completely come to terms and accept who I am. I can only deal with what I have.

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