
Degrading attitudes related to foreign appearance

Interviews with Swedish female adoptees from Asia

Seventeen adopted young women from South Korea and Thailand (age 25–35 years) were interviewed about their experiences of degrading attitudes related to their geographic origin and physical appearance. Prejudices related to sexuality displayed four themes – exotic associations, availability, strong libido and exploitation – corresponding to prevailing Western sexualised cultural stereotypes about Asian women. Prejudices specific to adoption included expected gratitude and indiscriminate friendliness. The experiences usually involved recurring rather than single incidents and several women reported that they had adversely influenced their well-being and quality of life. Many had developed strategies for coping with such attitudes, usually from men.

Frank Lindblad and **Sonja Signell** argue that the psychological threats resulting from racism are perceived differently among adoptees than among non-adopted immigrants. The experiences may force the female adoptee to reject part of her self-image as she finds herself treated more as a representative of a group than as an individual in her own right. Furthermore, in the interaction with the perpetrators, she is afforded attributes that are unfamiliar to her and her family environment. All these factors pose major challenges to self-image and identity.

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Introduction

The increased risks among international adoptees of social (eg criminality and drug/alcohol misuse) and psychiatric (eg suicidal behaviour) problems (Verhulst *et al*, 1990; Hjern *et al*, 2002; Tieman *et al*, 2005) present continuous challenges to social work and medical professionals. For researchers, a major concern is to identify the background factors that explain these risks and show how they can be modified by individual or general interventions. For society, the challenge is two-fold: firstly, to fulfil an overarching responsibility for the adoption procedure and the well-being

of the families concerned; and secondly, to employ a variety of methods to improve interventions – for example, pre-adoption assessments of parental capacity, education for prospective adopters and instruments to monitor the development of the child.

Experiences of prejudice related to foreign appearance constitute one potential contribution to the problems described.¹ But, even if there is no link between exposure to racism and mental ill-health, racism is still an important issue for adoptees as it affects their quality of life and has obvious ethical implications.²

The impact of perceived ethnic discrimination on health is a relatively new research area of growing scientific interest. In a meta-analysis based on studies published since 2000, 25 studies (mostly on adults) explored the link between perceived discrimination and mental health (Williams *et al*, 2003). Twenty of these reported a positive association, three a conditional relationship and two no association at all. Even though the relationship seems fairly well supported, questions about causality and mediating mechanisms still need to be answered.

Williams (2003) described one type of discrimination as ‘non-events’. These are defined as ‘desired and expected experiences that fail to occur’. An example of a ‘non-event’ is discrimination when seeking employment. Indeed, two previous studies using a similar approach found that international adoptees with a foreign appearance had more difficulties entering the labour market than non-adopted individuals or adoptees without a foreign appearance

¹ Prejudice is defined in this article as an opinion formed before the full facts are known.

² Racism is defined as prejudice or discrimination based on an individual’s ‘race’, whereas discrimination refers to unfair treatment of a person or group on the basis of prejudice.

(Rooth 2001; Lindblad *et al*, 2003).

Racism also means exposure to ethnic stereotypes. For instance, gender-specific cultural stereotypes may affect Asian females living in Western countries (see, for example, Chan, 1987). From a social constructionism perspective, the social expectations placed upon American (white) women and Asian-American women can be diametrically opposed, for instance in the sense that a woman of Asian origin is expected to be more compliant (Pyke and Johnson, 2003). These prejudices have strong roots in history and are reinforced in media images. Many Asian children, especially from South Korea, are adopted by Swedish families but this occurs in a context of cultural prejudices about Asian women being exotic sexual objects, a stereotype fuelled by phenomena such as sex tourism. A Swedish study has demonstrated that young female Asians are more likely to experience unpleasant sexual encounters than other women in Swedish society (Berg-Kelly and Eriksson, 1997) and sexualised stereotypes may contribute to this.

Given these findings, it is likely that expressions of racism will be experienced differently by international adoptees than by other immigrants. In transracial adoption, comments related to appearance imply a confrontation between the two origins: the biological and the adopted (Irhammar, 1997). Those who have been adopted have the additional task of integrating aspects of having two sets of parents. Identity issues consequently stand out as crucial challenges. It is probable that these may influence the way that degrading attitudes related to appearance are perceived and how they affect further psychosocial development. A connection between identity problems and behavioural difficulties has been reported among Swedish adolescent international adoptees (Cederblad *et al*, 1999), a 'Swedish self-identity' being associated with better mental health (Irhammar, 1997). According to Irhammar, having a 'non-Swedish self-

identity' probably reflects a sense of being different rather than belonging to a specific ethnic group.

David Fanshel (1972) studied the development of North American children of the First Nations who were placed for adoption with white US families. An important finding was that those who lived some distance from the reservations displayed better adaptation. This was interpreted as the result of lower levels of exposure to racial prejudices for these children. However, several studies have also shown that the frequency of exposure to pejorative attitudes related to racism varies among children from different backgrounds, with those of African origin facing the highest risk (Brooks and Barth, 1999). Feigelman (2000) reaches similar conclusions and describes parental reports indicating experiences of racism in the majority of adoptees from Africa, compared with figures of 32 per cent for those of Asian and 11 per cent for those of Latin American origin.

One way to assess the psychosocial impact of looking different from the majority host population is to compare outcomes of national and international adoptees. Von Borczyskowski *et al* (2006) have scrutinised a national cohort of children born in the 1960s for such a comparison and found that international adoptees showed worse outcomes than national adoptees in terms of suicidal behaviour. Prejudice against non-Swedish looking individuals was suggested as one contributory factor.

Sweden has become a multi-ethnic society, with a quarter of children below 17 years of age now having one or both of their parents born abroad (Statistics Sweden, 2006). Racism has traditionally been regarded as a minor problem in Sweden but Lange (1996) has warned against complacency, for example by showing that immigrants are exposed to threats and harassments five times as often as native Swedes, adding that experience of prejudice varies widely between immigrant groups. Moreover, expressions of racism have become more subtle and regularly take new

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forms (Akrami *et al*, 2000).

In Sweden today, adoption means transracial adoption: 48,000 foreign-born children were adopted in Sweden between 1969 and 2007, mostly from South Korea (www.mia.eu). This means that Sweden has one of the largest populations of intercountry adoptees in the world. National adoption (with the exception of adoption by relatives) is very rare – less than 20 cases per year – reflecting the fact that, due to Swedish legislation and policies, ‘special needs’ adoptions common in other countries are virtually unknown.

There are few scientific studies of the experiences of racism and discrimination among Swedish international adoptees. In one focusing on the situation at the beginning of the 1990s, 38 per cent of a group of young people adopted from overseas (age 13–27 years) reported having been teased for their appearance ‘often or sometimes’, mostly by schoolmates (Cederblad *et al*, 1999). In the same study, two-thirds had experienced being regarded as foreigners. However, we do not know how the gradual transformation of Sweden into a multi-ethnic society has influenced the degree and character of racism more recently.

Since the end of the 1990s, more Swedish adult international adoptees have described their experiences, including details of exposure to racism. One of the earliest reports was by von Melen (1998). This and other studies from Western countries (eg Harris, 2006) highlight racism as an issue and challenge researchers to explore this field further.

The study informing this article focuses on the experiences of degrading attitudes related to appearance in young female Asian adoptees. It includes not only experiences of racism but also unfair treatment related to adoption status. As South Korea and Thailand were the two major Asian origin countries for Swedish international adoption during the birth years of the women concerned, these are the countries we have selected for inclusion.

Methods and sample

Young women adopted from South Korea and Thailand aged 18–35 years were invited by announcements on adoptee web pages to participate in interviews focusing on ‘the experiences of violations related to geographic origin and appearance’. One web page was specifically aimed at Korean adoptees whereas Thai adoptees could only be reached by a page designed for all international adoptees. Those interested in participating were asked to get in touch with one of the authors by telephone or email for more information. A total of 28 women contacted the researchers and 19 came for an interview after signing a consent form. Two women chose to leave the study after the interview. One of them said that she had been misunderstood, the other that the study did not correspond to her expectations. Half of the women were over 30 years old at the time of the interview, the youngest being 25. Fifteen women came originally from South Korea and two from Thailand, and most of them (11) lived in the Swedish capital of Stockholm. Ages at adoption varied between a few months and four years, with the majority (10) having arrived in the first year of their lives.

All the interviews were audiotaped and a condensed version of the interview was compiled and mailed to the respondents for approval. Revisions and additional comments were added to the transcripts which were then – in anonymous form – used as the primary research data. Interviews were mostly undertaken at the research institute (14) but other procedures were followed in response to specific requests (one home interview, two by phone).

In addition to basic demographic data, the interviews focused on the following five themes:

1. experiences of degrading attitudes with probable relation to Asian appearance;
2. the perpetrators;
3. subjective reactions to such attitudes;

4. strategies for adapting to them;
5. communication about them.

Within these themes, the interviews developed differently depending on the specific experiences of the participants.

Concepts describing parts of the narrations (usually sentences or combinations of sentences) were then formulated by both authors separately once the transcripts had been collected, using a procedure of open coding informed by the grounded theory developed by Strauss and Corbin (1998). This procedure, as well as the further categorisations on several levels, was then elaborated in a continuous dialogue between the authors. The concepts were thus used for formulating categories and describing recurring phenomena. Categories were restructured several times and new concepts formulated until a final categorisation was agreed. The following discussion follows this hierarchy of categories, illustrated by typical examples. These are mostly presented as quotations from the women, reproduced verbatim and translated into English, but in a few cases it is the interviewer's account that is presented.

Interview excerpts

1. Degrading attitudes

Different kinds of manifestations of such attitudes will be described under three headings: degrading sexual attitudes, non-sexual degrading attitudes related to ethnicity and non-sexual degrading attitudes related to adoption.

Degrading sexual attitudes

Most attitudes reported were verbal. They reflected one or more of four themes: exotic associations, easy approachability sexually, strong sexuality and sexual exploitation. Often, more than one theme was identified in a single report.

Many women had been exposed to statements about their foreign origin that was associated with something exotic and exciting. These comments

could refer to more general aspects or to something specific, such as their physical appearance or fantasies about their vagina:

Men want to, sort of, fuck an Asian woman.

. . . and then you get the feeling that he is proud of me, because mine is so small. And then you don't really know, as other girls say, if he dates you because you're good looking. So it looks as if he is with me just because I'm from Asia. So this feeling is there, has been there too, and it isn't very nice.

Several women described it being taken for granted that they should accept sexual invitations to satisfy a man's sexual needs. Moreover, the women were expected to be sexually obedient. Related themes were that they were supposed to like having sex with middle-aged men and were less demanding than other women:

They think that you are much more easily accessible – or how to call it? It is . . . it is because I have this appearance.

Some interviewees had been told by men that Asian women have a stronger libido than other women, which also meant that they were supposed to accept sexual invitations readily. For example, one participant cited a man commenting:

Well, you are such an Asian type; you just want to have sex.

Sexual exploitation in this context not only meant prostitution but also suggestions about economic transactions underlying the presumed migration to Sweden, such as hints about being paid for as partners or wives. These prejudices also indicated a general degradation, demonstrating an attitude that the women represented a lower class of people, as in the comment, 'How much? I mean for one hour.' from a foreign man.

One woman told of how, on a visit to a restaurant with her boyfriend to whom she expressed tenderness, a waitress came up to her and told her not to conduct business on the premises.

Non-verbal manifestations of degrading attitudes were also reported, from gazing to physical contact. Child sexual abuse, rape and incest were described but in these more serious cases it was difficult – both for the women and for us – to chisel out the impact of the adoption and the Asian origin. In the ‘milder’ cases of abuse, the link to foreign appearance was clearer:

Strangers may comment upon your performance in bed, how you look or even touch you. They take the liberty of touching you.

One woman told of another episode in a restaurant when a lesbian woman came and cuddled up to her saying that she loved Asian girls:

And I stood there and just felt, there is no difference whether it is a man or a woman, it is all about violation. And it is a consequence of my appearance, because it was so obvious.

Non-sexual degrading attitudes related to ethnicity

All women reported experiences of non-sexual negative attitudes related to their ethnicity. The ethnic violations concerned either expressions of hostility or more ‘neutral’ reactions to difference. A common type of hostile expressions was humiliating invectives, as in ‘damned Chinese’, ‘ching-chong’, ‘black-head’ and ‘slant-eyed’.

One woman said that she avoided going alone to shops where she had noticed that the staff followed her around. She stated the only option was to accept this but felt that she did not take it seriously since she had been exposed to it for so long:

Society is like that, in some way, and there is nothing to do about it.

Even relatives could express hostility associated with origin. One woman told of being alone with her grandmother who said:

We don't want such types [alluding to the interviewee] in our family.

Reactions to difference without or with only minor components of hostility usually concerned one of three different aspects: language, association with immigrants and physical appearance. Even if the reactions to difference were intended to offend, they could still be perceived as degrading. Some women described feeling seen as a representative of a group rather than as an individual.

A common experience was that people took it for granted that the women did not speak Swedish and consequently approached them in English. Depending on the circumstances, this could cause irritation or weariness or could even be regarded as comical:

And then you may think, it is not that offensive but it is more tiring I think.

Several women had experienced being regarded as immigrants. To witness degrading attitudes towards immigrants could also be perceived as a personal violation against oneself, though the interviewee was not the target:

In other situations you defend the immigrants since you understand the ambiguity of being but not feeling like an immigrant. They are rather complicated these identity issues.

Comments about appearance could be expressed in positive and negative ways:

You get all this attention thanks to your appearance.

I am not very tall and look very young and then, sometimes, you feel that people form an opinion of you from your appearance. Then they think that

you are that way. That you are young and green and those sorts of things, although you have experienced quite a lot . . . That could be degrading, that people look upon you as if you were a little girl. Still.

The workplace was an environment where degrading attitudes were reported to be less frequent, even though half of the women cited at least one such experience. Three types of situation were described: employment interviews, personal violations and collective violations.

Many women used to worry about attitudes at employment interviews. One woman said she would never respond to an announcement where a photo was requested for fear of being rejected on account of her Asian appearance.

The women reported pejorative attitudes from workmates, customers and clients. These included humiliating and questioning comments as well as obvious rejections. One adoptee who worked with clients in their homes told of situations when people, suspicious of her foreign appearance, did not dare to let her enter their property. She had also been called a 'whore'.

Women could also feel humiliated at their workplaces when negative comments about immigrants were made. After listening to a manager, one woman reflected:

. . . it was fine to have somebody with sort of African origin standing there . . . looking nice. Yes, somebody who was there and then of course, since I have a different appearance than a normal Swede, then it sort of, well, I had such a function.

Non-sexual degrading attitudes related to adoption

Some attitudes were associated with the adoption itself rather than with ethnicity. The two most salient themes concerned expected gratitude and indiscriminate friendliness. Quite a few people had commented on adoption as something

the women should be eternally grateful for – grateful to the adoptive parents and to Sweden. One respondent had been told:

You should be very grateful for having come here and you would certainly have been a whore like your mother if you had still been there.

Similar reports had also been made by some parents:

Yes, they try this thing – you should be grateful for having come here – and then you feel like something that could be bought.

Several women cited experiences of strangers coming up to them, asking them about the adoption, about their family and other personal matters, issues that they would not ask anyone of Swedish appearance:

Where do you come from? Have you been back in your home country and things like that. A lot of personal matters that I would certainly not ask an ordinary Swede about. I think that is tough but humiliating, yes I don't know . . . maybe.

2. The perpetrator

The perpetrators described were of all ages, which implied different effects and experiences of degrading attitudes at different life phases for the women. Middle-aged men were most often mentioned. Comments from men more frequently had a sexual association, whereas comments from women concerned other areas. For instance, elderly people usually remarked on foreign appearance and origin:

They [elderly people] say nasty things . . . 'Yellow woman', 'Japanese'.

Insulting attitudes from children were perceived differently, depending on the age of the respondent. Most of these concerned appearance and Asian origin, usually expressed in negative terms.

One respondent told of other children saying that she was disgusting with her flat nose. They wondered if she had run into a wall.

These attitudes seemed to change when adolescents were involved, with more emphasis on female and sexual characteristics:

As a child, it was negative to be from Asia but during my teens it suddenly turned into something positive. But still it can turn into something negative again due to this sex trafficking in Thailand and it gets all fused and then you get . . . there are many sexual hints.

As adults, the respondents less often regarded comments from children as violating, but their remarks made them wonder about the parents' attitudes:

Well, in some children, for instance, you could see if they are influenced by their parents, that it is actually the parents talking. Yes, then I get angry.

In adulthood, comments from children were often experienced as expressions of curiosity rather than prejudice:

'Do you play pingpong?' and such things and it's so different because I heard that it was not that sort. Ah, it was just out of curiosity.

3. Subjective reactions to degrading attitudes

Subjective reactions differed according to the life phase of the woman. As a child, shame and embarrassment for being different were the main focus. Several women said that nowadays they would more often react by getting sad or angry. Negative reactions were perceived most strongly at the time of the exposure but later became easier to handle. However, emotional associations with the violation often endured. Their psychological reactions were either emotional or cognitive – or both. They could also be expressed through a changed lifestyle and new ways of acting and relating to others.

Fear was reflected in most interviews but a wide variety of emotions were described, from sadness, surprise and shame through to discomfort and anger:

It is mostly anger . . . I have lived here my whole life, sort of, and I have Swedish thoughts, Swedish language, Swedish culture, all that stuff. Then I get so angry for being exposed to this because I should feel safe here, I think . . . I can be very afraid. I get very angry if I feel that I do not dare to go out there.

Sadness was a recurring theme, in many cases linked to the feeling of being an outsider:

Sometimes I get really sad and I feel that I do not really belong here, feeling it may have been better if I had stayed in my birth country.

And then I know that I do not really mean that. Still, but sometimes I can feel that I think that it is unfair. I feel that I am accused for no reason and that people condemn me for having come here.

Two women described continuous thoughts about looking different. One woman said that she was always prepared to defend herself against others as a result:

It bothers me a little to always be reminded of looking exotic. It's like that. It bothers you at times.

The other told of how she once regarded her foreign appearance as a heavy emotional burden. As a consequence, she took away all mirrors from her home in order to avoid seeing her reflected image.

Different psychological reactions were expressed in ways of relating to others, especially men. Some women could not trust men and were afraid of entering into a relationship. Some were afraid of being misunderstood by them. They experienced a lack of confirmation as

individuals and felt part of a group of women whose mission was to satisfy the needs of others. They were worried that men only wanted to relate to them because of their Asian origin and the fantasies attached. For example:

You are sort of public property, you are not a person of your own.

There were also highly individual descriptions about, for instance, paranoid feelings or self-destructive behaviour, which the women themselves related to their experience:

I accepted humiliation and sexual exploitation to see if I would stand it. To simply expand your limits and it was very much during a period when I had a lot of sexual contacts.

4. Strategies for adapting to degrading attitudes

The women adapted in different ways. Usually these adaptations were consciously selected and could be seen as well-planned strategies but there were also examples of sudden or unconscious responses. Occasionally, a woman was exposed so abruptly to degrading attitudes that she did not react until later. The only way to cope seemed to be to accept the situation:

To cope, I can't do that, because I do not know at all what to say.

Some women consciously reacted by being passive. Others seemed to have adapted more or less automatically, without having made a conscious choice. One woman said that on being insulted she would make grammatical speech errors, unconsciously adapting to the expected prejudices of the environment.

Actively selected reactions were described more often. Thus, most women mentioned four strategies for managing insults. The first one aimed at *minimising the negative emotional reaction*. This could be done by taking a 'matter-of-fact-approach' or by focusing

mentally on something positive in one's life, for instance someone close who brings support and joy.

One respondent tried to enlist sympathy for the adoptees' situation by telling the perpetrator facts about her friends and how they looked upon her as a person, which made her feel better. She also used to think about the kind treatment that she usually experienced as an adoptee under other circumstances.

A further strategy was to *focus on the perpetrator* (which is also evident from the first of the two examples above). This could be achieved by communicating with him directly, which usually also meant confronting him with his behaviour. One woman used to say, 'Well that's how *you* look upon this.' This was meant as an invitation for him to reflect as well as a suggestion that he might be misinterpreting facts.

An unusual method for overcoming degrading behaviour was to exaggerate as a way of confronting the man with his prejudiced attitude. One respondent described a conscious strategy to play on her Asian appearance in an attempt to live up to the prejudices about Asian women. Her aim was to 'strengthen the violator's case' in order to make him aware of his own narrow-mindedness.

Focusing on the perpetrator could also be achieved through a mental process without resorting to any direct confrontation. Several interviews included comments about them as the ones to blame, often seeing them as mean or unrefined. One woman said she realised they were the ones with the problem and needed to assert themselves.

The third strategy for overcoming pejorative attitudes was to *identify with other minorities*, for instance pointing to an increased awareness of being different. Learning about other cultures and identifying with social 'outsiders' were ways of avoiding loneliness and feeling different. One woman described her experiences of sympathy for individuals whose lives differed from the social norm and how this helped her

to cope with negative attitudes.

Another way was to identify with immigrants as belonging to a larger community – ‘the immigrants’:

But I strongly dislike jokes about immigrants. I really take it rather . . . yes, seriously.

The fourth strategy concerned *avoidance*. Anxiety about being subjected to degrading attitudes led some women to avoid places, people and situations where this might be expected. Going to a discotheque or party was a common example but this also applied to every-day activities like shopping. A few adoptees even avoided going out at all because they could not bear predictable attitudes:

I think it has had some influence on my avoiding of nightclubs, because you are judged before you are there . . . that you . . . that my personality has perhaps made me a little more reticent.

The women not only told of how they overcame their experiences of degrading attitudes but also described how to prevent them. Three main strategies were identified: choice of clothes, language and an attitude of rejection.

Although most women dressed according to their own tastes, the choice of ‘non-provocative’ clothes was seen by some respondents as an important avoidance tactic. Very short skirts and décolletages were cited as two examples of dress just as unsuitable as Asian clothes. Many women opted for a sober, ‘correct’ way of dress with the aim of passing unnoticed. One interviewee referred to not accepting the ‘very female side’ of herself as a way of avoiding ‘living up to the myth’ about Asian women.

Language had a prominent position among preventive strategies. Several women described speaking very loudly in order to make clear that they spoke Swedish. Talking loudly could also be used to prevent misinterpretations about relationships. For instance, a respondent

who was at a restaurant with her father and wanted to deter people from assuming that he was her sexual partner proclaimed at the top of her voice: ‘Yes, Daddy, that was a nice dinner!’

Being at a discotheque was a situation where an attitude of rejection was applied from the start, as in turning your back to a person looking at you. One woman said she avoided dancing with new acquaintances in order to avoid expectations about something more. Nobody was allowed to buy her a drink: ‘It’s something you grow up with’, ie to protect yourself.

5. Communication about degrading attitudes

The majority of women said they had someone to turn to after being exposed to such attitudes but others refrained from talking to anyone:

I have a slight feeling as if, when you are adopted, you should be very grateful for having been allowed to come here, so you would have had a much worse life if you had stayed in your native country. And then I have a feeling, sort of, that you haven’t got the right to be dissatisfied and to complain.

It was regarded as important to choose the right person with whom to communicate these matters and different groups expressed different preferences. The main choices were parents, siblings, partners and friends.

Most women mentioned difficulties when talking to their parents about insulting behaviour. Many were afraid of making them feel sad and guilty for having contributed to the vulnerable position of their daughter by adopting her from Asia. Some adoptees also mentioned that they owed a debt of gratitude to their parents. Feelings of shame and guilt for being exposed were other reasons for remaining silent:

Firstly, I don’t want them to be sad and I know that they will get sad because if I mention anything that has troubled me, they react very strongly. And then I don’t

want, my mother especially, to feel that she maybe did the wrong thing when she brought us here. Hm, because new thoughts have been brought up, there has been a strong focus on adoptees and the risk of developing depression and such things.

In some cases, telling your parents about negative experiences was even associated with feeling worse:

. . . then you get even more of a bad conscience. First you are depressed and then you have to suffer from a bad conscience.

Siblings were often also adopted from Asia and shared similar experiences of exposure to prejudice. The women had preferred to tell their siblings rather than their parents:

Yes, I speak more with my sister than with my parents, since they get very sad.

About half of the women had talked about it to their partners and most – but not all – reported sympathetic reactions. Telling your partner was regarded as important, no matter what his or her response:

But I have been able to talk about this also in relations, ie with boyfriends.

Most women had female friends with whom they could discuss their experiences. Talking to a friend was commonly perceived as being less emotionally intense than talking to siblings. The reactions from those who are non-adopted varied strongly, from sadness and surprise to a lack of empathy, as in the statement that the adoptee has ‘over-reacted’:

. . . It may actually be easier to talk with friends because they . . . then it won't be that explosive. I can just come out with it and then it is done.

Discussion

In this study, data are presented from interviews with 17 female adult adoptees from South Korea and Thailand concerning their experiences of degrading attitudes related to their appearance. Attitudes referred both to ethnicity and adoption but the ways in which the two experiences were expressed were quite different. Prejudices related to sexuality displayed four themes – exotic associations, availability, strong libido and exploitation – corresponding to prevailing Western sexualised cultural stereotypes about Asian women. Prejudices specific to adoption concerned expected gratitude and indiscriminate friendliness. The experiences usually did not concern single events but recurring types of encounter. Several women emphasised the harm done to their well-being and quality of life. Many had developed strategies for coping with such situations.

The interviews demonstrate the specific psychological threats that international adoptees face in relation to racism, threats that differ from those experienced by non-adopted immigrants. Firstly, exposure to degrading attitudes seems to force the adoptee to reject part of her self-image. She is not treated as a Swedish woman brought up in Sweden despite this being an important part of her personal identity. Thus, ‘being different’ was a recurring theme from childhood, where it aroused shame and embarrassment, through to adulthood. Secondly, she is treated not as an individual but as a representative of a group and, furthermore, of a group that she probably does not identify with, at least not in a significant way. Since international adoptees are usually from middle-class families and immigrants are often socially underprivileged, a social ‘mismatch’ is likely. Thirdly, in the interaction with the perpetrator(s), she is endowed with attributes that are unfamiliar to her and her family environment. This increases the feeling of being different and also contributes to the sense of injustice often reported during the interviews.

All these factors present major challenges to self-image and identity. Moreover, many women had been confronted with adoption-related violations indicating considerable disrespect for their personal integrity. Strangers could be familiar with them about personal adoption issues in a way that the women perceived as indiscreet. The adoptees had also been exposed to expectations about being grateful for having been cared for. They were, thus, not acknowledged as individuals with rights of their own but as people who should be thankful to others for a life situation that they had not chosen.

In an interview study involving 29 female and male adult (20–27 years of age) international adoptees, Irhammar (1997) has described strategies when adoptees are (wrongly) identified by others as immigrants. The study does not deal explicitly with racism but reports on narrations from the 20 adoptees for whom being identified as an immigrant had been related to a confrontation. In this group, three strategies were found. The first, termed ‘explain and defend oneself’, seems closely related to one of our categories – ‘focus on the perpetrator’. The second one was titled ‘highlighting the Swedish identity’. One of our categories also deals with identity but, interestingly, in quite another way: increased awareness of being different or identifying with immigrants. The third strategy reported by Irhammar was ‘avoidance’, meaning avoiding immigrants and situations where one might be identified as an immigrant or where questions about origin might be asked. We have described a similar pattern and used the same word when categorising the phenomenon. The third category in our presentation of strategies, minimising emotional reaction, seems to have no counterpart in Irhammar’s model. So, to summarise the findings from these two studies, we can identify four key concepts characterising different ways of adapting to negative confrontations related to ethnicity: defending oneself, identity vicissitudes, avoiding

provocative circumstances and minimising emotional reactions.

It is especially striking that the adoptees did not regard their parents as potential helpers and people with whom to discuss their exposure to degrading attitudes. As they felt forced to be grateful and were exposed to a variety of challenges to their self-esteem, the women had a limited capacity for initiating discussions with parents about negative experiences. Versluis-den Bieman and Verhulst (1995) previously noted that many of the problems perceived by transracially adopted children are unknown to their parents. This illustrates another difference in comparisons with non-adopted immigrants – that adoptees lack socio-cultural prerequisites and shared experiences for coping with violations related to racism. Among other immigrant groups, cultural protective factors usually exist (Stansfeld *et al*, 2004) that may prevent or mitigate degrading attitudes. For instance, in one study being an immigrant was found to be protective against dating violence, even if effects of this kind vary with age, race and ethnicity (Silverman *et al*, 2007).

Kirk (1984) described two adoptive parental strategies, namely rejection or acknowledgement of differences between themselves and their adopted child/ren. In order to create a cultural socialisation process that promotes their child’s capacity to cope with racism, adoptive parents firstly need to acknowledge the differences. Furthermore, they need to be involved in enculturation and racialisation activities (Lee *et al*, 2006). Enculturation means promoting ethnicity-specific experiences that facilitate the development of a positive ethnic identity. Racialisation means promoting race-specific experiences facilitating the development of coping skills in relation to racism and discrimination. Racialisation is probably the more difficult task for the parents as they almost always lack personal experiences in this matter.

An important question is how the

adoptees and their parents can be given support in preventing and coping with expressions of racism. How can adoptive parents achieve 'enculturation and racialisation skills'? One idea is to get into contact with a 'cultural mentor' or a 'mentor family' (Vidal de Haymes and Simon, 2003; Rojewski, 2005) that is of the same ethnicity/race as the child. These mentor families can serve as teachers and guides to the culture in focus. They may also be able to contribute to developing a larger 'ethnic network' around the child and the family. Another suggestion is to learn from adult adoptees from similar ethnic backgrounds. Adoption agencies could be involved in establishing such contacts, which could be organised as groups with more than one family invited to join.

Questions about adoption details from strangers were perceived as a lack of respect for the personal integrity of the adoptees. This is an area where adopted people could also be better prepared – by parents or others. They should be offered techniques to defend their integrity without necessarily insulting the person who might only have asked out of imprudent curiosity.

When discussing the results and possible support measures, it should also be emphasised that the interviewees not only described victimisation. They also told about several innovative ways to adapt to and cope with violating experiences. They should not just be identified as victims as they are active agents, practising varying degrees of resistance. These findings echo those of Koskela and Tani (2005) in a study with a different but related focus: how women respond to sexual harassment on the street.

As in this article, the identity issues of international adoptees are often discussed from a problem perspective. The question may also be approached from a value perspective. In a recent self-report book by Swedish adult international adoptees (Arctadius Svenungsson, 2003), one woman put it this way:

I am Swedish plus. I am a Swede with an extra quality: I am also an Asian woman.

This statement illustrates the findings recently reported in this journal by Patel (2007). She describes a particular type of mixed-heritage racial identity, including both birth and adoptive heritages, in a sample of transracially adopted adults. Along the same line, there were examples of transforming the feeling of being different into something positive. For instance, an enhanced interest in other cultures and a capacity for identifying with social 'outsiders' were mentioned. This improved capacity for empathy may thus be one example of a successful adaptive outcome.

Even though this study does not seek to establish frequencies of exposure to degrading attitudes, it does project the image of a cluster of prejudices that female international adoptees from Asia may encounter in Sweden. The wide variety of violations questions the assumption that racism is only attractive to marginal groups in Sweden, as manifestations clearly occur on a daily basis. The reactions to and strategies for preventing and managing such negative incidents further illustrate the importance of these experiences in the lives of the women. We cannot be certain about how much these experiences increase the risks of social and psychological problems but it is obvious that the women's quality of life was affected in most cases.

To conclude, female adoptees from South East Asia may be exposed to a wide variety of degrading attitudes related to their foreign appearance. In several respects these violations influence the women in other ways than non-adoptees, foremost by challenging their self-image. Further exploration of these identity processes are called for. There is also a need for prevalence studies that include men and women as well as adoptees from different origins and for research that links the experiences to social and psychological health.

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