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Identity Formation in Vietnamese Adoptees of Operation Babylift: An Exploratory Study in

Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

This exploratory study considers the identity formation of adult Vietnamese adoptees who were airlifted out of Vietnam during Operation Babylift in 1975. It uses a critical humanist lens coupled with the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI). Research questions considered how the respondents experienced constraints on their identity formation, how they responded to those constraints, and how they described their collective culture. It was initially conceptualized that constraints related to interactions with similar aged non-adoptees, with native Vietnamese, with non-adopted Vietnamese Americans, and with individuals for whom racial ascriptions influence the interaction would persist. Results demonstrated the presence of constraints in two of the original four conceptualized areas: racial and adoptee. Constraints related to interactions with a native Vietnamese and non-adopted Vietnamese American demonstrated categories of not knowing the Vietnamese language and separation from birth country rather than the national and ethnic labels initially proposed. Descriptions of how these constraints generated sites of struggle and how the adoptees responded to each constraint are reported with the responses to the adoptee constraint providing the most depth and multivocality. This included both avowal and non-avowal of adoptee status as well as justification of non-disclosure by privacy and descriptions of negotiation as it related to the adoptee's "narrative burden." Responses to racial constraints led to negative self-feelings and self-concept while responses to language and cultural constraints generated similar reports of struggle to form personal identity. Additionally, perceptions of communal identity and ramifications of that are described with some adoptees describing the existence of a Vietnamese adoptee culture and others wondering if such a culture exists. Outcomes of connecting with other Vietnamese adoptees were positive. In sum, these results

both report and demonstrate the constant negotiation experienced by these adoptees as they continuously construct their individual and communal identities. It also demonstrates the verisimilitude of CTI's interpenetration of the relational, personal, enacted, and communal frames. Implications for CTI include its coupling with a critical humanist lens and its multilayered nature. Recommendations for future research involving this population are provided and include continued study on this population and their contribution to intercultural communication, notions of diaspora, and other international adoptees. The limitations of this study are also presented.

Introduction

Beginning on April 2, 1975 and lasting through early May of the same year, over 2,000 orphans from Vietnam were airlifted out of war torn Vietnam and transported to France, Australia, and the United States. The event is known as Operation Babylift, and it was an unplanned, mistake filled, crisis driven event (Peck-Barnes, 2000; see also Zigler, 1976). Most of the orphans were adopted into families in western cultures. Anecdotal narratives belie a struggle as the Babylifters grapple with the formation of their personal and communal identities.

Review of Literature and Rationale

While the migration from one geographic location to another is an obvious intercultural issue for this group, other intercultural issues also exist. According to a preliminary study, 66% of the Babylift adoptees were raised with Caucasian parents, 79% are racially distinct from their siblings, and most have Caucasian friends (Lieberthal, 2000). Valverde (1992) documents the Vietnamese “Amerasian” racial discrimination many of the orphans have experienced. Most lived in a community where they were one of few adopted children (National Adoption Information Clearinghouse, 2004). Intrapersonally, conflict between being Vietnamese and American is highly present among Babylift adoptees (Lieberthal, 2000; Williams Willing, 2004). One adoptee stated that she felt “pulled between being white and being Asian” (Coughlin, 1999, p. 1). To complicate the identity formation of Babylift adoptees, they are a part of the larger Vietnamese community (Olmsted, 2004; Phan, personal communication; Williams Willing, 2004), but still feel as though they “are not considered fully Vietnamese” by either the Vietnamese or Vietnamese American communities (Williams Willing, 2004, p. 658). Another level of complexity relates to privilege; many adoptees were told they should feel “lucky” or “saved” that they were adopted because they would “have died in the war” (Williams Willing,

2004, p. 654). Although strong connections exist to other Babylifters, the fragmentation of the communal formation has left many focused on differences and feeling a sense of incoherency and uncertainty regarding individual identity (Williams Willing, 2004). These complications of culture and fragmented identities offer ample opportunity for intercultural communication to offer insight into how Babylift adoptees form their personal identities.

From a broader perspective, Babylift adoptees can be considered international, transracial, and adopted, and a variety of studies have examined each of these groups independently. Quantitatively, research has shown that adoptees experience no significant difference in struggling with identity formation than do non-adoptees at any age (Gutcher, 1997; Rowlett, 1998) and in some cases scored more positively in regards to esteem and identity variables than did non-adoptees (Gross, 1991). Qualitative studies have used phenomenological and narrative approaches and identified factors and areas of concern to Asian and other international adoptees in their struggle to form personal identity and reconcile one culture with another (Dore, 1995; Farrar, 2002; Fertig, 2002; Jaggard, 2001; Reader, 1996; Traver, 2000). Others have found that adopted Asian children form and negotiate their identities well (Cao, 2004), that Asian adoptees struggle to fit into any culture (Pinderhughes, 1997), and that the development of racial identity is complex and problematic (Patton, 2000). On the whole, research related to international, transracial, and adopted children is inconsistent. It presents a mix of results that sheds doubt on the generalizability of the results beyond the populations under focus (i.e., international, transracial, or adopted groups). While these studies are beneficial to international and transracial adoptees on the whole, they assume a planned process of adoption and cannot account for an unplanned, spontaneous event like Operation Babylift. Further, all of this research originates outside of intercultural communication.

Two studies related to adoption do originate from the communication discipline. The first looks at how collective family identity is created and constituted in families with adopted children from China (Manning, 2002). Manning found that there are three family types (open, closed, and mixed), which are defined and delineated by the level of dialectical tension surrounding familial roles and the nature of family. Another study outlines an agenda for communication research regarding adoptive families. In this study, Galvin (2003) states that there has been “limited attention” by communication scholars in regards to adoptive families (p. 238). She offers that communication research could be expanded to include family identity development, family boundary management, socialization of the adoptive family, and the developmental processes of the family identity. Strengths of Galvin’s research are in recognizing the need to expand communication research and recognizing that identity issues impact the adoptive family well beyond the initial or recent years of the adoption; however, she does not specifically include adoptee identity in her call for research.

While calls for research on the Babylift orphans were prevalent during the airlift (Zigler, 1976), few empirical research studies have been conducted. In the 30 years since Operation Babylift only three studies have been conducted on the orphans (Harvey, 1980; Williams, 2003; Williams Willing, 2004). In all of these studies, identity was a prevalent issue related to Babylifters. Each study was qualitative and explicated the struggles of the Babylift adoptees. A communication perspective, however, was not employed. Thus, an intercultural communication perspective is an excellent approach because it focuses on the communicative interactions Vietnamese adoptees find themselves in. As a group that fits into multiple conceptions of culture – adopted, transracial, American, Vietnamese, Vietnamese American – they will inevitably encounter conversations and interactions with someone from another culture.

The overall research question posed in this exploratory study is how do Vietnamese adoptees from Operation Babylift who were adopted into Western cultures construct, enact, and negotiate their identities? Answers to this question will expand research and offer practical benefits to the next generation of Vietnamese adoptees and to the adult adoptees themselves.

Theoretical Perspectives

Research is not conducted without assumptions; two levels of theoretical assumptions shape and guide this study. The first level is the “metatheoretical assumptions of culture and communication research” (Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 1) underpinning specific theories that guide methodological approaches. These metatheoretical assumptions make ontological and epistemological presumptions about the phenomena under focus. The second level is the specific theory that helps make sense of empirical observations, guides methodology and data analysis, and narrows the focus of the study to make the research more targeted and manageable.

The critical humanist metatheoretical approach is adopted as characterizing the metatheoretical assumptions of this exploratory study. It is subjective in its view of the ontological nature of reality and assumes that “reality is socially constructed and emphasize(s) the voluntaristic characteristic of human behavior” (Burrell & Morgan, 1988, as cited in Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 5). However, the voluntary and conscious nature of humanity is dominated and oppressed by larger structures creating a communicative context wherein “various communication meanings are contested” (Fiske, 1987, 1989, 1993, 1994, as cited in Martin & Nakayama, 1999, p. 5). Epistemologically, creation of knowledge and meaning occurs through communication because individuals in communicative contexts are actively negotiating identity formation during struggles against the larger “structures” of power which influence and

sometimes constrain the individual participating in the communicative act. Put another way, identity can be constructed through relations of difference as well as similarity.

Adult Vietnamese adoptees have self-reported experiences of racism, discrimination or oppression due to being adopted, a feeling of obligation to feel “lucky” or “saved” due to their evacuation at the end of the Vietnam War, feelings of separation from both the Vietnamese and Vietnamese American cultures, and difficulty assimilating to the mainstream Western culture they reside in (Lieberthal, 2000; Williams, 2003; Williams Willing, 2004; see also Adopted Vietnamese International, no date). There is a common theme of struggle for identity, active negotiation of when to enact identity, and difficulty in understanding which cultural heritage one is a part of (for example, “Vietnamese or American?” or “white or biracial or multiracial?”). Given the multiple dimensions of Vietnamese adoptees (adopted, international, transracial, migrated, Vietnamese, and American), they find themselves in a struggle to form individual and communal identity in the midst of larger ideological and cultural structures. This multiplicity and ambiguity coheres with the research of Chuang (2003), a critical humanist, regarding the construct of cultural identity. A critical humanist perspective, therefore, is an excellent approach to explicate and further understand this co-culture (see Orbe, 2004; and Orbe & Spellers, 2005).

The specific intercultural theory employed here is the Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) (see Hecht, Warren, Jung, and Krieger, 2005; see also Hecht, 1993). The theory, originally proposed by Hecht (1993), conceptualizes identity as an inherently communicative process enacted in layers or frames. CTI complements accepted concepts of identity from social psychology and anthropology disciplines and considers identity as a dynamic process inseparable from communication. “Identity is formed, maintained, and modified in a communicative process and thus reflects communication” (Hecht, et al., 2005, 262). Specifically, there are four frames of

identity: the personal, the enacted, the relational, and the communal. In the personal frame, self-cognitions, self-feelings, and self-being contribute to one's identity. In the enacted frame, one's identity is expressed and created depending on the nature of the interaction and the context. In the relational frame, identity is formed through relations with others and the relationships themselves construct a unique identity. In the communal frame, the group identity is the focus, wherein one's individual identity contributes to and is influenced by the collective consciousness of the group. These frames are layered, but not necessarily hierarchical, and they are not mutually exclusive. Rather they "interpenetrate" one another and occur simultaneously two, three, or four at a time depending on the context. CTI uses the individual as the lens in which to understand and study cultural identity. Cultural identity exists on all of these levels simultaneously, but the individual is the "voice" that tells about the cultural identity.

CTI has been applied to a variety of different cultural groups such as African Americans (Hecht, et al., 2003), Mexican Americans, Asian Americans (Hecht, Jackson, Lindsley, Strauss, & Johnson, 2001), Jewish Americans (Hecht & Faulkner, 2000; Hecht, et al., 2002), and first generation college students (Orbe, 2004). In each of these studies, the theory reveals how members of ethnic groups communicate differently depending upon the specific interpersonal context (Hecht, et al., 1993; Hecht & Faulkner, 2000; Hecht, et al., 2003; Orbe, 2004). Additionally, CTI can describe how one frame influences the others (Hecht, et al., 2002). The metatheoretical approach in common with most applications of this theory is that it employs a subjective interpretive paradigm. Newer versions of CTI, however, have extended the theory to a critical humanist approach (see Orbe, 2004). In this study, the coupling of a critical humanist approach with CTI assumes that in certain contexts individuals do not always enact their identity

due to structural constraints that are present such as dominant cultural ideologies, racism, white privilege, educational privilege, national privilege, or religious hegemony.

Two concepts are critical to this study. The first is identity, and is described above through the lens of CTI that joins communication and identity. The second is culture. CTI's limitation is that it does not define culture; rather, it assumes that ethnic groups, religious-ethnic groups, or co-cultural groups consist of a culture. For Vietnamese adoptees, objective descriptions may describe the culture of the group, however, a subjective cultural definition for this group is yet to be arrived at by members of the group. Thus, a definition of culture is needed in order to place this study within the rubric of intercultural communication. Borrowing from a dialogue between intercultural scholars (see Collier, Hegde, Lee, Nakayama, & Yep, 2001), this study conceptualizes culture as a socially constructed location for individuals and groups characterized by tension between the shared and unshared that creates, sustains, and renders meaning to the individual and the larger group. This definition is paraphrased from Yep (p. 234) with "location" substituted for "enabling fiction" to offer a more tangible idea rather than the abstract notion of "fiction." This definition enables the study to view the emerging cultural identity of Vietnamese adoptees as dynamic, ambiguous, interactive, constantly in motion, continuously being acted on, continually created, and simultaneously acting on group identity through intercultural communicative contexts.

Research Questions

Given the multiplicity of intercultural contexts Vietnamese adoptees may find themselves in, methodological concerns, and time constraints dictate narrowing the possible contexts to be examined. The interactions under focus include communicating with similar aged non-adoptees, with native Vietnamese, with non-adopted Vietnamese Americans, and with individuals for

whom racial ascriptions influence the interaction. It is understood that these four interactional contexts are described by four different cultural or descriptive categories – birth status (non-adoptee), national (native Vietnamese), ethnic (Vietnamese American), and racial (racial ascriptions). Prior studies (Williams Willing, 2004; Lieberthal, 2000) have demonstrated a prevalence for considering these categories as constraints on identity formation for Vietnamese adoptees, but have not elucidated them empirically. The first research question, therefore, looks to understand how these “structural constraints” impact the identity formation of the Vietnamese adoptees included in this study. Further, this question falls within the concept of the relational frame of CTI wherein “a person’s identity is influenced by other people’s views of the individual, especially their ascriptions and categorizations” (Hecht, et al., 2005, p. 263).

RQ 1: How did the respondents experience a “structural” constraint or sense of struggle in any (or all) of the intercultural interactions considered here?

The second question shifts to the personal and enacted frames of CTI to look at the intercultural interactions in which a Vietnamese adoptee avows his or her status as an adoptee. Here, the focus is on both the actual avowal during the intercultural interaction as well as the self-characterization of the respondent’s feelings or disposition about the interaction. It is assumed that the respondents have the agency to choose to avow or disavow their identity as a Vietnamese adoptee. As Orbe (2004) states, “the enacted frame of identity connotes agency on behalf of the individual” (p. 145). By avowing one’s status as an adoptee, the respondent is enacting and simultaneously constituting his or her world. Additionally, feelings, attitudes, and dispositions cohere perfectly with the personal frame of CTI, where an identity is conceptualized as “how individuals define themselves in general as well as in particular situations” (Hecht, Collier, & Ribeau, 1993, p. 166-167).

RQ2: How do the constraints identified in RQ1 effect the Vietnamese adoptees avowal of his or her status as a Vietnamese adoptee?

The third research question focuses on the communal frame. In these intercultural interactions, subjects are asked to describe the Vietnamese adoptee culture and whether or not they perceive their status as an individual Vietnamese adoptee contributes to or detracts from that collective community. I take the position here that a communal identity exists from an objective, research perspective, however, I do not assume that the identity can be described or understood by the adoptees themselves. These subjective interpretations of the communal frame are valuable as they may indicate that the adoptees themselves do not feel connected to other adoptees or that the community of Vietnamese adoptees lacks the collective strength to consider themselves as a viable cultural location.

RQ3: Do Vietnamese adoptees perceive their identity contributes to or detracts from the communal identity of adult Vietnamese adoptees and how?

Methodology

There were 12 participants in this exploratory study. Seven females and five males participated, and they averaged 32 years of age. Seven lived in the United States with three participants from Australia and two from France. Six did not know whether they were biracial or multiracial while two indicated they were Chinese Vietnamese, two indicated they were full Vietnamese, one was an African-American-Vietnamese, and one knew she was biracial, but did not know her genotypic makeup.

Three email groups exist to help keep the Vietnamese adoptees remain connected. They are the Vietnamese Adoptee Network group, the Adopted Vietnamese International group, and the Adopted Parents of Vietnam group. It is not known how many adult Vietnamese adoptees are a part of these groups. The researcher is a member of all three email groups. The data for this

study was collected using a questionnaire posted on the email groups. The questionnaire is found in Appendix 1. Data collection took place from February 15, 2005 to March 6, 2005.

The survey instrument balanced short responses via email with the need for context and depth appropriate to this study. It combined close-ended questions with open-ended ones. The close-ended questions, of which there were eleven, measured demographic data. The open-ended questions were directional in order to gain responses suitable for a critical humanist perspective while allowing for variation and depth in the responses. There were nine of those questions, and they asked respondents to recall and describe situations where they were the following occurred:

- a) Their racial features impacted the conversation.
- b) Their adoption status impacted the conversation.
- c) Their status as a non-native Vietnamese impacted the conversation with a native Vietnamese.
- d) Their status as a Vietnamese American who does not know their Vietnamese family impacted their conversation with a Vietnamese American who does know and has connections with their Vietnamese family.
- e) When respondents chose not to tell someone they are a Vietnamese adoptee.

Additionally, they were asked to give their views of the adult Vietnamese adoptee culture and their views on the most difficult aspect of being a Vietnamese adoptee.

Data analysis was an iterative and evolving process. The responses were first organized by survey question. After two reads, they were then sorted into what responses best answered which research question. Some responses were sorted into more than one research question. For RQ1, the responses were initially “forced” into the four types of intercultural interactions. If a specific category did not seem to garner enough responses, that category was reconsidered. As will be reported, only two of these categories remained with two emergent categories replacing those for a total of four structural constraint categories. Those categories then became the basis for analysis of responses to RQ2. RQ3 was organized into categories based on the survey questions, with an additional category for outcomes.

Results

The results are presented in the order of the research questions. Description of organization and categorization for each research question is found in that section. Responses are reported with direct quotations; corrections to grammatical errors are conducted where it makes it easier for the reader to understand.

RQ1: Constraints and Sites of Struggle for Vietnamese Adoptee Identity Formation

With the relational frame as a guide, the responses reported here consider the relationship with the conversant in the intercultural interaction. Initially, there were four intercultural interactions conceptualized. Upon analysis, only two of the initial categories emerged as constraints on respondents identity formation – racial ascriptions and non-adoptee interactions. The interactions with a native Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans yielded emerging constraints related to not knowing the Vietnamese language and separation from birth culture.

Racial Constraints

Many of the Vietnamese adoptees in this study described how their facial features and skin color caused them to experience a sense of struggle. For example,

Whenever I am asked "Where did you come from"?, it is usually asked in the first few lines of a conversation. This is because Vietnam is considered to have 'Asian looking people' like myself as the norm, and the Western country I am from is considered to have 'White looking people' as the norm. (32-years, female, Australia)

Another female, age 30 from Washington, experienced racism among a group of Asians: "I was at one of the college ethnic campus groups and the Asian people in the group kept commenting about how 'white' I was." For two others, racial epithets have been a part of their growing up. A 30-year old male from Connecticut recalls, "Most 'conversations' consisted of me being called "gook", "chink", or "slope", and they weren't really conversations. This has happened daily as far

back as I can remember, which is about 1st grade.” How these Vietnamese adoptees look affects how others interact with them.

The experiences of racism expressed by the Vietnamese adoptees create a site of struggle to form individual identity as well as placing the adoptee in difficult, constrained communicative positions. The 30-year old male from New York expresses this well:

I am forced to think about how my face deceives people. I think of how my face is a symbol of something I have no control over. My face puts fear into stranger’s eyes. If people only knew me inside.

Adoptee Constraints

A sense of struggle was present when considering adoptee status, but on multiple levels and in varying ways. One theme of struggle for identity formation occurred in relation to a sense of belonging (or not-belonging) to the adoptive family. A 30-year old male from Australia lives with “the awareness of being the other inside the adopted family.” A 36-year old female from Australia says, “However, as much as I love my current family, I don’t truly belong.” A 37-year old female from France recalls a sobering episode when her status as a Vietnamese adoptee led her to experience a constraint on her identity:

Conversations with my grand father when I was around 5, at a time when I was asking him to shout less at my adoptive father, he retorted me to go back where I came from. My parents were there and they didn't react. I felt rejected by the people who were supposed to support me the most.

In addition considerations of belonging to their adoptive family, the adoptees reported a “narrative burden” from being an adoptee. Says a 32-year old female from Australia, “I didn’t want to draw attention to myself so I did not disclose I was adopted. Saying you’re adopted almost demands a conversation about this unusual topic. I am expected to supply a migration narrative.” Put another way by a 30-year old female from New York,

I feel almost an inclination to inform people that I am adopted when the conversation starts with 'Where are you from.' From that point on, the conversation almost always leads to my upbringing, etc. The nature of these conversations have always been uncomfortable for me.

As a 30-year old male from California put it, the most difficult thing about being an adoptee is "repeatedly telling/explaining my adoptee status to others." A 30-year old female from Colorado did not echo this burden, however, saying she "never came across a situation where I chose not to tell (she was an adoptee)." Clearly, the burden of being an adoptee is an individually negotiated perception.

In addition, disclosure of adoptee status was met with many negative ascriptions like "lucky, "a victim," "mystified by me," and "sad looks and apologizing sentences." The adoption status of Vietnamese adoptees responding here demonstrated how structural constraints related to their adoptee status affected identity formation. Results indicate that for most of these respondents, being adopted is neither "lucky" nor privileged, but filled with considerable struggle regarding their identities.

Language Constraints

Respondents were asked to consider in what ways conversations with a native Vietnamese or a Vietnamese American generated struggle on their identity formation. However, responses to these questions yielded two different kinds of constraints not related to the national or ethnic categories originally proposed. As such, not knowing the Vietnamese language and being separated from their birth culture become the constraint categories emerging from the data.

When asked what the most difficult part about being a Vietnamese adoptee was, a 32-year old female from Australia said pointedly, "Not knowing the language," and describes this:

Some Vietnamese Americans who took me out to dinner were very surprised that I did not know how to speak Vietnamese and had to adjust their conversation over

to English for my benefit. The conversation focused on how to 'fix' me or help me learn my mother tongue.

For a 30-year old male from Connecticut, merely looking like a Vietnamese means he must automatically speak the language:

When entering Viet Nam, you have to go through customs. Since I look Vietnamese and my passport says I was born in Viet Nam, I guess they just assume I should speak Vietnamese. And when I informed them that I didn't, they looked at me like I had 3 heads and rambled on about something in Vietnamese before reluctantly letting me through.

Others recall being offered sympathy: "My Vietnamese friends think it's sad I can't speak the language. I'm just lucky to be here (they tell me)" (30-years, female, Colorado).

At times, the lack of being able to speak the language resulted in hostility:

An older man asked if I was Vietnamese, and I replied "yes". He started speaking in Vietnamese and I stopped him half way and explained I didn't know the language. He looked at me and said, "Then you aren't really Vietnamese." (30-years, female, Washington)

Not knowing the language is a site of struggle for individual identity among these Vietnamese adoptees. Whether offered a chance to learn the language, outright insulted, or led to question their cultural identity, intercultural interactions can generate struggle based on lexical ability.

Cultural Constraints

The language constraint is closely connected to these Vietnamese adoptee's loss of birth culture. Says a 33-year old male from Colorado,

One of the most difficult parts of being a Vietnamese adoptee is that you lose the culture, you lose the language so basically you become what you're adopted family is like. And I think that the hardest part is because I lost it, and I did not experience that on a daily basis. When I look at other Vietnamese families, and their kids, it kind of hurts to know that I did not gain that experience for part of my life. (I) have conflict between two inner cultures.

For this adoptee, loss of language means loss of culture. Being adopted means "adopting" one's adoptive family's culture and often grieving the loss of one's original birth culture. The result is

an inner struggle and search for personal and cultural identity. A 37-year old female from France characterizes this struggle well:

I could understand that I was loose from any Vietnamese roots, and felt more like a cat being brought up by dogs. And I also understood I had to fight or toil to learn by myself what is naturally and slowly taught to any baby among a Vietnamese family.

Other respondents felt constantly questioned or “in between” cultures:

I knew that I was an outsider not having lived in the Vietnamese culture for years. I feel that I'm in two worlds. Knowing that I don't really belong in Australia but also knowing that I don't really belong in Vietnam. (36-years, female, Australia)

Or as a 30-year old male from Connecticut says, “My ‘Vietnameseness’ is always in question, it seems, by members of the Vietnamese-American community, the American community, or the native Vietnamese community. Can't win in any of them, it seems.”

Cultural loss or lack of a cultural “home” has left these adoptees struggling with which cultural identity to appropriate. The self-ascriptions of “conflict,” “fight or toil,” “an outsider,” always feeling in question, and not “winning” all characterize the individual struggle these Vietnamese adoptees feel and experience during many intercultural interactions.

RQ2: Vietnamese Adoptee Response to Constraints

This research question considers the personal and enacted frames and how Vietnamese adoptees responded to the constraints identified in RQ1. The categories generated out of RQ1 serve as the primary categories reported here: racism, adoptee status, language, and culture. The racial and adoptee categories are considered separately. Responses in how the Vietnamese adoptees reacted to language and cultural constraints were similar and reported here as one category. Results for RQ2 are reported in a way to demonstrate the interpenetration of the enacted and personal frames. While these can conceivably be separated, reporting them together demonstrates the verisimilitude of CTI and the complexity of identity formation of the

respondents. The enactment frame captures any avowal or non-avowal by the Vietnamese adoptees. The personal frame captures respondents' characterizations of their feelings regarding the interaction. Finally, considerations of any outcomes of their avowal are reported to provide a context of the interaction. For the adoptee category, two additional sub-categories related to negotiation and privacy were added because of their prevalence in response to this constraint.

Responding to Racial Constraints

In response to having to break up a fight between two Asian students who questioned his authority based his race and being an adult, a 33-year old African American adoptee was direct: "I told (the student) what right do you have to judge me. You don't even know me. I asked them what nationality he was. . . . He was Vietnamese . . . so I said to him that I was Vietnamese." After disclosing this to the student, the adoptee said he "gained a certain respect. And that I knew I was able to be trusted, and I gained a huge respect for the Vietnamese culture." Another is merely "polite," acknowledging her racial status, but not avowing her adoptee status. "When asked 'Where are you from?,' I am polite and respond with the name of the country I was born in" (32-years, female, Australia).

Still others respond negatively or not at all. Says a 36-year old female,

The principal at the school I was then attending had said that she did not want me to come to her school. She wanted for me to stay in Vietnam and, to grow up a Vietnamese lady. I admit, I was shocked. I could say nothing at the time. I know that I felt confused.

And after having someone make fun of the shape of her eyes, an adoptee recalls,

When I returned home, I cried. My adoptive mother held me in a rocking chair while I cried. I remember telling her that I didn't understand why my 'friend' did what he did. More so, I recall telling her that I hated being different and felt ashamed for being so. (30-year s, female, New York)

For a 37-year old female from France, being told her skin color meant she did not belong in the family caused her to “grow a strong sense of guiltiness for being different, and made me become a very shy girl. ”

Racial constraints generated varying reactions, ranging more from negative to neutral than positive. Some were confused, guilty, uncomfortable or felt shamed, while others experienced an increase of respect for themselves and for others. On the whole, however, characterizations of personal feelings were negative. Racial ascriptions led to inhibition of adoptees’ avowal of their personal identity and ambivalence and uncertainty surrounding their racial identity.

Responding to Adoptee Constraints

In regards to constraints placed on these Vietnamese adoptees because of their adoptee status, responses are mixed. Says a 30-year old female from Colorado, “I (have) never come across a situation where I chose not to tell.” Another wants to enter a dialogue: “I like to talk about this so I can work out if I agree with their interpretation of adoption – or wish to enter a friendly or even hot debate about it,” says 32-years, female, Australia. She goes on to say that I (am) more interested in what this person had to say than talking about my life story (again!)” A 33-year old African American adoptee feels “as if all I am is a cultural ambassador” in his local community, and a 30-year old male adoptee from New York expresses a loss of agency when it comes to enacting his adoption status: “There’s no way around that confrontation.”

A 30-year old male adoptee from Connecticut went so far as to make up information in response to a school assignment:

In 3rd grade we had to do a family tree. Obviously, when the teacher asked me to put information down about my "real" parents, it was rather confusing. I ended up filling in the blanks with my adoptive family members, however since they weren't my "real family", I didn't receive good marks on my family tree.

For another, a 36-year old from Australia, she chooses to not avow by simply relaying where she was born: “I don’t tell many people that I’m adopted. However, I do tell people that I am Vietnamese should they ask where I am from. If this is confusing, I apologize.”

Privacy.

In addition to the enacted responses and feelings described above, many used privacy as justification for choosing not to avow their adoptee status. A 30-year old male from Connecticut says, “People don’t need to know one way or the other if I’m adopted or not.” A 30-year old female from Washington says, “They don’t need to know anything that deeply personal about me unless they become a friend.” “This belongs to my very private life and this is none of their business,” says a 37-year old female from France. And a 34-year old female from France says, “I think that’s something private, you don’t want to tell everybody you’re adopted.” For many of the adoptee respondents, privacy is a primary reason for not disclosing one’s adoptee status.

Negotiation and strategy.

Unlike the other constraint categories, enactment of adoptee status generated reports of strategies, motivations, negotiation of disclosure. A separate sub-category is used to report the negotiation behind disclosing one’s adoptee status. A 32-year old female from Australia seeks to avoid disclosure of her adoptee status and personal narrative. In one account, she reports, “I simply said I am from Vietnam and left it at that. They seemed to be happy just knowing this much information, and I didn’t want to draw attention to myself so I did not disclose I was adopted.” In another conversation, “I usually do not ask why people want to know because that sounds intrusive, although I realize that they are possibly intruding on my own personal experiences, which may not be relevant to our meeting.” A 30-year old female from New York best summarizes her strategic considerations of enacting and sharing one’s personal narrative:

I feel that if I tell them, upfront, that I'm adopted, that will prohibit people from asking more probing/intimate questions. Naturally, that tends to do the opposite, yet I still do not change the way in which I handle those situations for one reason or another, which I cannot identify.

For this adoptee, enacting her adoptee status is a strategic negotiating process depending on the context of the interaction, a negotiation strategy she remains uncertain about. Another adoptee, this one a 30-year old male from California, says it more succinctly: "Recently, I have just chosen to shorten it pending any further inquisitiveness on the other person's part."

Clearly for the respondents in this study, disclosing and avowing adoptee status can be a painstaking experience. It is not simply a matter of choosing to or not to avow, but rather a strategic process of exercising or limiting one's agency based on the constraints communicated by the other. Besides feeling an increased amount of attention that draws away from forming a relationship, it is both uncomfortable and work for these adoptees. A 30-year old female from Washington offers this response to the "narrative burden": "I am just Kelly who happens to be adopted and Asian and that is fine with me."

Overall, the struggle surrounding how to respond to an adoption constraint demonstrates the most complexity and depth of the those identified in this study. Besides some not experiencing a sense of struggle to others feeling resigned to having to disclose their adoptee identity, many respondents also went on to explain how justifications of privacy and negotiation of disclosure of personal narrative characterized their personal struggle. Avowal of adoptee status for these adoptees is fraught with tension regarding how much, when, and for what reason.

Responding to Language and Cultural Constraints

The responses to not knowing the language and being separated from her birth culture as reported by the Vietnamese adoptees are combined into one category because they were similar

for both constraints. Recall that these constraints arose out of interactions with either native Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans.

A 30-year old female from New York recalls a negative interaction:

While I was in one particular salon, the gentleman who was doing my nails was Vietnamese, which he identified through conversation. The way he asked me my nationality was to ask, "Are you Chinese?" When I said no, he asked, "Korean?" I said no, again, and then told him that I was Vietnamese. He stopped filing my nails, looked up at me and said, "You don't look Vietnamese." That response immediately made me feel SO non-Vietnamese. He then proceeds to tell me that I had certain facial features that did not identify with native-Vietnamese qualities. When he asked me if I had ever been "home" and I told him no, he started hitting my hand with the nail file, yelling at me for not going "home" yet. I pulled my hand away, calmly told him that I was not ready to do that yet, and ended the appointment. I walked out of the salon without paying.

And a 30-year old female from Washington who was told she wasn't really Vietnamese because she could not speak the language seems angry:

An older man asked if I was Vietnamese and I replied "yes". He started speaking in Vietnamese and I stopped him half way and explained I didn't know the language. He looked at me and said, "Then you aren't really Vietnamese." I didn't know how to respond. So I just said, "Okay..." and walked away. I feel that I don't ever want to learn the language and also feel I shouldn't have to. Just because I am from Vietnam doesn't mean I have to 'act' Vietnamese."

For these two respondents, not knowing the language or not going back to the culture was met with extremely hostile responses by the other. Both were ascribed as not Vietnamese because of their lack lexical ability and familiarity with the Vietnamese culture. Another respondent, a 37-year old female from France, recalls negative feelings as well:

I was 16, and met a Vietnamese for the first time, he talked to me in Vietnamese and I couldn't answer. That was made with a lot of kindness, during a conversation when he was talking about OUR country, but I felt guilty and bitter for not having been taught my mother tongue. I became aware of some kind of gap with no hope for a bridge.

A 30-year old male from California describes how he limits what he discloses for fear that it will harm the relationship with a native Vietnamese:

I responded by toning down my answers to their questions about my life in America. (I) did not want to seem like I was bragging or rich simply because I was adopted. (I) just wondered through the conversation, what, if any, thoughts they had about me. Was I too “White Bread” and if so, would that impact the relationship they would allow me to have with them?

Two offer positive outcomes of enacting their adoptee status in the face of language or cultural constraints. Says a 30-year old female from Colorado, “My experience is that they have a better understanding of the matter.” For a 33-year old male African American Vietnamese adoptee, his disclosure of this adoptee status led to being put in a role where “I was (the) only person that they were able to relate to about Asian Vietnamese issues. And that I was the first person they would talk to, before that only principles or teachers (who didn’t understand).”

To summarize, the constraints of not knowing the language and being separated from birth culture tends to lead to ambivalence about avowing one’s adoptee status as well as negative feelings surrounding one’s identity. It also leads these adoptees to feel a disconnect from either the native Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans they interact with. The struggle is not with the group, however, but the language and cultural expectations placed on them by members of those groups. Some adoptees experienced positive outcomes when avowing their adoptee status during these kinds of interactions.

RQ3: Communal Identity of Vietnamese Adoptees

Results for this research question are organized into three sub-categories. The first two categories, description of the Vietnamese Adoptee culture and personal perception of fit/non-fit into that culture are taken directly from the survey questions. In addition, outcomes of connecting to a Vietnamese adoptee culture are reported here. All of these fit within CTI’s conception of the communal frame.

Description of Vietnamese Adoptee Culture

In describing the Vietnamese adoptee culture, the theme of a culture that included sharing and understanding was strong.

I do however feel that there is a natural understanding and sympathy for our situation even though (our) stories vary in many ways. The theme that seems to run through is that we were all brought up in different countries, different from our birth ones, and that there is a need for most of us to find our identity. (36-years, female, Australia)

A 30-year old female from New York says “that Vietnamese adoptees appear closely knit and bonded in an inexplicable way that is unknown to those not adopted.” Argues a 32-year old female from Australia: The “adopted Vietnamese are a community that is culturally at odds with Vietnamese traditions from the older generation and with the language. However, the adoptees invent new norms from which to identify themselves in.” For this respondent, the Vietnamese adoptees are creating a new culture. She goes on to call this community “a location for identity formation,” which coheres excellently with the cultural definition adopted in this study.

Some respondents do not see a sense of connection, sharing, or creation. A 37-year old female from France characterizes the Vietnamese adoptee culture as one without a culture:

It's like the ying and yang symbol, sometimes I feel the need to be Asian, sometimes I feel the need to be French, but there's always a hint of the other side present that spoils (or is part of ?) harmony. Up to now it's hard to be both at the same time. I'm not fully Vietnamese, I'm not fully French, yet I would like to experience both cultures, but as of now I don't know much about my Vietnamese side. It's quite exotic to look different and to be able to boast of another culture, yet it's not easy. It's like being an alien always, and everywhere.

In other words, if there is a Vietnamese adoptee culture, it is one filled with a sense of being caught in between two cultures, never having a home “location.” Others questioned whether or not there was even such a thing as a Vietnamese adoptee culture:

- A bit lost on this question. (30-years, male, Australia)

- I'm not sure if we have a culture as such . . . As mentioned before, I do not think there really is a culture as such. (36-years, female, Australia)
- I don't know if such a culture exists. (30-years, male, Connecticut)
- Good question. Is there one? I see our group as a unique population of people who carry the face of another culture. (30-years, male, New York)

One respondent, a 30-year old female from Washington, simply denies any semblance of a Vietnamese adoptee culture and says Vietnamese adoptees are "American."

Perceptions of Fit No-fit

In regards to how the respondents perceived they fit into the Vietnamese adoptee culture, however that was described, one expressed "a good level of comfort talking about Vietnamese adoption as an experience and a cultural disposition. I feel at ease with other Vietnamese adoptee's stories" (32-years, female, Australia). Also says a 30-year old male from California, I contribute a "shared history and desire to share my experiences (because I) have not yet felt that I don't fit into that culture in any way."

Others discussed how they perceived themselves to not fit in or detract from the culture.

Expresses the 32-year old female from Australia,

I am probably a little older than the majority of babylift orphans as I came out 3 years before them. I probably don't share the same experiences as everyone but I hope I can have empathy and that's the pathway to fitting in with people.

And a 30-year old male from Connecticut comments about having no culture: "I do not have enough traits of any of the two cultures to fully fit into either one, to be fully accepted by either one," and thus do not have any culture to fit into.

Outcomes of Interacting With Other Vietnamese Adoptees

Some reported the impact of connecting with other adoptees or with the Vietnamese adoptee culture had on their lives. Most reported positive outcomes. Says a 37-year old female from France: "It's only since I first contacted other Vietnamese adoptees that I'm proud to be

born in Vietnam.” A 34-year old female from France stated that, “This had an important impact in my life; until I met recently other Vietnamese adoptees. Now I’m much happier.” For a 30-year old female from New York, connecting with the Vietnamese adoptee culture led her to “become linked with parts of VAN (the Vietnamese Adoptee Network), and I will be attending one of the 30th Anniversary Baby Lift events.”

Two other respondents see it as an opportunity to influence others, one more positively and one not as much. A 30-year old male from New York sees it as a chance to “perform music and volunteer for organizations that promote our native Asian cultures. The joy of educating myself and learning about Asian culture drives me and inspires me.” Another, a 30-year old female from Washington is less altruistic: “I like being an anomaly to people who expect that I like Pho (pronounced ‘fa’) and speak Vietnamese and have Vietnamese parents. I like twisting people’s perception.”

For RQ3, most respondents reported a sense of connection and understanding that binds this unique group together in ways not experienced by others, with one adoptee offering that a new culture is being created. Others wondered if there even was a Vietnamese adoptee culture and still another outright denied the existence of a Vietnamese adoptee culture. Regardless of conception, adoptees felt mostly positive impacts from connecting with other adoptees.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the results of this exploratory project, the Vietnamese adoptees in this study perceive individual sites of struggle on their identity formation arising from structural constraints in many ways and on multiple levels. Constraints based on the color of their skin emerge from a variety of intercultural interactions – from Caucasians, from native Vietnamese, and from Vietnamese Americans. This may take the form of stereotypes, negative ascriptions, or labeling

of the adoptee. To complicate these racial challenges, the respondents also experience struggles based on the fact that they are no longer under the legal status of their biological parents – in short, because they are adopted. This results in a negotiating of when to enact one's adoptee status as well as negotiating how much of one's personal narrative to share. The adoptee constraint was by far the most dominant for the respondents in this study as it included not only varying enactments and impacts on the personal frame, but also justifications by privacy, descriptions of negotiation, and the idea of a narrative burden. Additionally, constraints not originally conceptualized emerged – those of not knowing the Vietnamese language and of being separated from their birth culture. These arose from reports of intercultural interactions with either native Vietnamese or Vietnamese Americans. This exploratory study has shown how constraints act upon the formation of Vietnamese adoptee identity. Therefore, it demonstrates the utility of a critical humanist lens on this population.

Additionally, adoptees find themselves in a constant, on-going state of tension regarding their personal identity as it relates to others during intercultural interactions. Cohering with the relational frame of CTI, these struggles emerge as relations of difference which are articulated during the interactions. The impact of negative ascriptions on the personal frame can result in poor self-characterization including negative self-conceptions and negative feelings. In turn, these personal characterizations influence how and when the adoptees enact their identities during the conversation. In other ways, the relation of difference leads to specific enactments or non-enactments by the adoptees which impacts both the relation with the other and personal characterizations. In short, a multilayered, complex interpenetration of frames occurs as these Vietnamese adoptees communicatively and dynamically form their individual identities. There is

no “one” path of identity formation during communicative processes. It all depends on context, the other, and the adoptee.

Collectively, the adoptees can sense a certain level of shared understanding and bond. This coheres well with the communal frame of CTI. However, some adoptees feel “in between” cultures or characterized themselves as “alien.” In itself this demonstrates a communal location of struggle. The notion of a national/geo-political conception of what “culture” is persists among the communal identity of the Vietnamese adoptees in this study. In short, they continue to see a need to fit into pre-conceptualized ideas of culture, whether externally or internally ascribed, and as such perceive a constraint wherein they feel torn between cultures without a social location of their own. This offers up the idea that cultural conceptions themselves are a structural constraint on the communal formation of some co-cultures.

Overall, the identity formation of the Vietnamese adoptees in this study involves a constant negotiation of choosing to enact/not enact, avow/not avow, respond/not respond along with the characterizations of one’s self, either positively or negatively, within intercultural interactions. The results reported here describe the social construction of the adoptees’ individual and communal identities. While multivocality is prevalent in all frames, each individual’s discursive process *is* the formation of one’s personal identity as a Vietnamese adoptee. From a critical humanist perspective, the agency of these adoptees was constrained due to the different structures shown here. But the emphasis remains on the process and its dynamic and ever-changing nature, not on finding an individual or communal location, as if there could ever be such a destination. In fact, the mere act of responding to these questions exemplifies the on-going construction and communicative formation of identity for these Vietnamese adoptees.

Theoretically, this study has advanced CTI in two important ways. First, it justifies the use of a critical humanist meta-theoretical perspective with CTI. While Orbe (2004) discovered the presence of structural constraints on first generation college students thereby demonstrating the theory's usefulness beyond an interpretive perspective, this study demonstrates that an *a priori* assumption of communicative constraints on identity formation can work well with CTI. Second, this study demonstrates the multilayered quality of CTI (see Hecht, et al., 2005) as well as the interpenetration of frames. Here, all four frames influenced each other back and forth sometimes with more than one frame acting simultaneously within a given interaction.

Finally, this study adds to a small, but growing body of literature that considers Vietnamese adoptees as the study population. This exploratory study has only begun to scratch the surface of this rich source of empirical data that can contribute to not only the identity formation of Vietnamese adoptees, but also for Asian adoptees, the Vietnamese American communal identity, and the Vietnamese diaspora. Additionally, many other intercultural theories and perspectives could come to bear on this population which would deepen and richen our understanding of adult Vietnamese adoptees. Use of CTI need not be the sole lens under which to consider the identity formation and communicative interactions of Vietnamese adoptees.

There were a variety of limitations associated with this study. First, one of the questions asked about a conversation with a Vietnamese American. This researcher naively assumed that more adoptees residing in the United States than internationally would respond to the survey. Future studies with this group should consider "Vietnamese Westerner" to better operationalize the diasporic Vietnamese. Second, conceptualization of a difference between a native Vietnamese and a Vietnamese American was erroneous. Based on the results here, priorities of language and an appropriation of the Vietnamese culture are important to both of these groups

during interactions with Vietnamese adoptees. Third, the researcher himself is a Vietnamese adoptee. Part of the reason for selecting a critical humanist perspective was based on the researcher's own identity formation; in part I assumed that other adoptees would have similar experiences as I have. Fourth, those involved with the email groups used to collect data tend to be adoptees who are active in the adoptee community and highly aware of their personal identities and identity formation. Other adoptees who are not as aware or not as active may not experience what is reported here. Lastly, gender and age constraints were not considered. These bear consideration in future studies when examining this population.

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APPENDIX 1:
QUESTIONNAIRE

Subject: Survey for adult Vietnamese Adoptees

Dear Vietnamese Adoptee,

My name is Bert Ballard, and I am an adult Vietnamese adoptee as well as a PhD student at the University of Denver. As part of my coursework, I am conducting a survey of adult Vietnamese adoptees who were evacuated at or near the end of the Vietnam War. This survey is part of an exploratory study that aims to understand how we, as Vietnamese adoptees, form and communicate our identities when we talk to others.

Any of you who are adult Vietnamese adoptees and were evacuated at or near the end of the Vietnam War are eligible to and invited to participate in this survey.

Following the survey will be the legal disclosure required to accompany any and every study involving human subjects. You may wish to read these prior to beginning the survey. If so, please scroll to the bottom of this email. If you choose to participate in this study, your responses as an email reply will serve as your consent.

This survey should take about 20 minutes of your time depending on the length of your responses. Participation in the study involves responding to 20 questions. Your participation is strictly voluntary, and the risks associated with participation are minimal. If, however, you experience discomfort, you may discontinue.

If you choose to complete the questionnaire, please answer the following questions. Many of the questions are short response. There are some, however, that require more time. The deadline for responding to this survey is Friday, March 11, 2005, so please do not spend too long answering a question; provide just enough information to adequately answer the question. The survey includes three main sections. The first section asks you to recall conversations with various individuals and discuss your status as a Vietnamese adoptee in those conversations. Section two asks you about what you think the adult Vietnamese adoptee community is like and about being a Vietnamese adoptee. Section three asks some demographic questions. Please respond to following questions by typing in your responses and then sending them to bert@van-online.org.

1. Please describe a time in your life where you perceived your racial features impacted the conversation you were having. What was the situation and how did you respond?
2. Please describe a time in your life where you perceived your status as an adoptee impacted the conversation you were having. What was the situation and how did you respond?
3. Please describe a time in your life where you were having a conversation with a native Vietnamese individual (i.e., from Vietnam) and you perceived your status as a non-native Vietnamese impacted the conversation. What was the situation and how did you respond?

4. Please describe a time in your life where you were having a conversation with another Vietnamese American who was not adopted and you perceived your adoption status impacted the conversation. What was the situation and how did you respond?

5. Please describe a time when you chose not to tell someone you were a Vietnamese adoptee. What was the situation and how did you respond?

6. Describe what you perceive is the adult Vietnamese adoptee culture.

6a. How do you fit into that culture?

6b. How do you not fit into that culture?

7. What is the most difficult part of being a Vietnamese adoptee?

Short answer:

8. What is your current age?

8a. Where do you live (state or country)?

8b. How many siblings do you have?

i. Of those, how many are adopted?

ii. Of those, how many are biologically related to your parents?

iii. What is the ethnic/racial origin of your siblings (Caucasian, Asian, Latino/a, African American, Native American, East Indian)

8c. What is your religious orientation?

8d. What is your present occupation?

8e. What is your gender?

8f. Are you biracial or multiracial or don't know?

i. If you know that you are either biracial or multiracial, of what racial makeup are you or do you know?

The survey is now completed. Please make sure the return address is bert@van-online.org or your responses will be posted to the whole email group. If you have any questions, you may email me at bert@van-online.org or call me at 720-254-5138. Thank you very, very much for your time. Please read on for an explanation of procedures being followed for protection of the rights of all respondents.

The study is being conducted to fulfill the requirements of HCOM 4220: Intercultural Communication Theory, and the results will be used to receive a grade in this course. Bert Ballard can be reached at 970-724-5138 or bert@van-online.org. This project is supervised by the course instructor, Dr. Mary Jane Collier, Human Communication Studies, University of Denver, Denver, CO, 80208 (303-871-4492 or mcollier@du.edu).

Realize that when you respond your email will be a part of the response. Your information will be held in the strictest confidentiality. Only the researcher will have access to your individual data and any reports generated as a result of this study will identify patterns or report direct quotations in a manner that retains confidentiality of participants. However, should any information contained in this study be subject of a court order or lawful subpoena, the University of Denver might not be able to avoid compliance with the order or subpoena. Although no questions in this interview address it, we are required by law to tell you that if information is revealed concerning suicide, homicide, child abuse and neglect, it is required by law that this be reported to the proper authorities.

If you have any concerns or complaints about how you were treated via this email or during any interviews associated with this study, please contact Maria Riva, Chair, Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, at 303-871-2484, or Dawn Nowak, Office of Sponsored Programs at 303-871-4052 or write to either at the University of Denver, Office of Sponsored Programs, 2199 S. University Blvd., Denver, CO, 80208-2121.

You may wish to retain this email for your records. If you understand and agree to this disclaimer, your reply to the email and responses therein will be considered consent. If you do not understand any part of this disclaimer statement, please ask the researcher any questions you have.