There is a growing interest in research that centers the experiences of adopted individuals, including the role of culture, ethnicity, and race in the lives of transnationally, transracially adopted individuals. Within psychology and related fields, this research has largely focused on the content, prevalence, and impact of perceived discrimination, cultural socialization, and ethnic-racial identity. Given the prevalence of transnational adoption from Korea, research on transnationally, transracially adopted individuals has largely focused on adopted Koreans. We review this research to highlight some of the ways in which adopted Koreans, and their adoptive parents, navigate these cultural, ethnic, and racial experiences during childhood, adolescence, and into adulthood. We integrate a critical adoption studies framework (Homans et al., 2018) with an Asian Americanist perspective (Lee, Kim, & Zhou, 2016b) to guide our review and to suggest policy implications and future directions for research.

Adoption as natural experiment and intervention

Adoption research typically approaches adoption as a natural experiment or a natural intervention. Adoption as a natural experiment uses the lack of genetic similarity found in families formed through adoption to disentangle the roles of nature and nurture (Haugaard & Hazan, 2003). This use of adoption as a study design has been applied to study genetic and environmental influences on a wide range of psychological phenomena (e.g., Buchanan, McGue, Keyes, & Iacono, 2009). Adoption as a natural intervention characterizes adoption as an event that alters the developmental trajectory of the adopted child. Seminal studies by Rutter (1998) have highlighted how adoption can promote developmental catch-up among Romanian children who had experienced severe institutional neglect and abuse growing up in orphanages. Similarly, Juffer and colleagues...
concluded that adopted individuals are generally well-adjusted (e.g., Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005) and that “adoption is an impressive intervention leading to astonishing catch-up” (van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006, p. 1240). While these two types of adoption studies contribute to our understanding of human development, adoption is utilized as a research methodology. The adoptive experiences of individuals and families are not central to the research.

**Adoption (and race) as a risk factor**

Haugaard (1998) argues that adoption can function as a risk factor for adjustment problems due to an over-representation of adopted individuals in the tail ends of distributions despite similar mean scores. National registry studies of transnationally adopted individuals raised in Sweden support this tail phenomenon hypothesis. Most transnationally adopted individuals in these studies did not report serious psychological problems (e.g., suicide attempts, substance abuse) (Hjern, Lindblad, & Vinnerljung, 2002; Lindblad, Hjern, & Vinnerljung, 2003). However, the adopted individuals were more likely to report these problems, as well as other maladjustment indicators (e.g., unemployment, alcohol and drug abuse), when compared to their non-adopted peers. These higher rates of suicide ideation and attempts among transnationally adopted adults have been replicated elsewhere (e.g., Keyes, Malone, Sharma, Iacono, & McGue, 2013). Notably, the odds for suicide attempt and death by suicide were greater for the transnationally adopted sample than the within-country adopted sample (von Borczykowski, Hjern, Lindblad, & Vinnerljung, 2006). Further, transnationally adopted individuals, who were all from Asia or Latin America, reported similar or worse levels of mental distress as non-adopted immigrant adolescents from these same regions (Hjern et al., 2002). Combined, these findings suggest that race-based discrimination is a likely cause of distress.

These studies present two important points to understanding the development of adopted individuals. First, the tail distribution phenomenon suggests that adopted individuals might be at greater risk for adjustment problems than their non-adopted peers. Second, cultural, ethnic, and racial experiences likely play a significant yet under-studied role in the well-being and adjustment of transnationally adopted individuals. This argument corresponds with that of other adoption scholars who have noted the need to further study the cultural, ethnic, and racial experiences of transnationally, transracially adopted individuals (e.g., Kim, 2010; Park Nelson, 2016). In the next section, we advance a new framework for adoption studies that privileges the adopted persons’ experiences and directly considers the importance of culture, race, and ethnicity in untangling the relation between adoption and mental health.

**A critical adoption studies and Asian Americanist integrative approach to adoption studies**

We integrate a critical adoption studies framework with an Asian Americanist perspective to understand the experiences of adopted individuals and their families. Both approaches developed out of critical race theory, yet they present distinct perspectives that individually acknowledge and contest systems of power and oppression (Homans et al., 2018; Lee et al., 2016b). An integration of these approaches recognizes that transnational, transracial adoption is driven by the global adoption complex and is impacted by systemic racism, and highlights the importance of considering these systems to understanding the experiences of transnational, transracial adopted individuals.

Critical adoption scholarship considers the role of the global adoption complex in creating and sustaining adoption as a practice, as well as the pivotal roles that power and privilege play in
who is adopted, who is allowed to adopt, and how birth families are treated. Critical adoption studies complicates adoption research by critiquing and questioning the dominant narratives of adoption, such as adoption as an act of rescue – ignoring that “orphans” have been created as an act of supply and demand (Condit-Shrestha, 2018); adoption as a win-win – ignoring the loss, trauma, and stress associated with both abandonment and adoption (Brodzinsky, 1990); and adoption as a singular event – ignoring that coming to terms with one’s adoption is a life-long process (Grotevant, 1997). Ultimately, critical adoption studies forces us to consider how we know what we know about adoption (e.g., by asking whose voices are represented in adoption research) (Homans et al., 2018).

We apply an Asian Americanist lens to critical adoption studies in order to critically approach the ethnic and racial aspects of the experiences of transnationally adopted Koreans. Applying a critical race and ethnic studies approach (Lee et al., 2016b), an Asian Americanist lens reveals and critiques dominant racial and cultural narratives in adoption studies (e.g., those that Orientalize and homogenize the stories of birth parents and sending countries) and calls for psychology to consider history and context as they reveal systems of oppression. This approach also centers the experiences of transnationally, transracially adopted Korean Americans, emphasizing the agentic nature of these individuals in constructing their lives. Therefore, we use this integrated framework to serve as the interpretive lens for our program of research throughout this chapter.

The historical and cultural context of Korean adoption

Transnational adoption from South Korea began in the wake of the Korean War as a way to care for children born to Korean mothers and foreign military fathers (Pate, 2014). Due to a combination of economic, political, and social factors, adoption from Korea became a routine child welfare practice. Simultaneously, demand for infants in countries such as the United States outpaced the availability of domestic adoptions, leading many families to pursue transnational adoption (Kim, 2010). In total, more than 160,000 Korean-born individuals have been adopted by parents outside of South Korea (Kim, 2010), the vast majority of whom were adopted by White parents in the United States (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014).

The transnational and transracial context of these adoptions positions adopted Koreans at the intersection of two distinct paradoxical experiences as ethnic and racial minorities. The transnational adoption paradox describes the loss of birth culture that accompanies adoptive family socialization (Lee & Miller, 2009). The early socialization experiences of adopted Korean children and youth are largely based around a White cultural frame, and so they quickly lose contact with their ethnic heritage. This replacement of birth culture with White American culture can create a feeling of otherness from non-adopted Koreans. One adult adopted Korean American noted, “there is discrimination that we [adopted Koreans] are second-class Koreans because we have been raised in White society, in American society. We don’t know about our own heritage, and we don’t know our language” (Meier, 1999, p. 28). Consequently, some individuals report feeling excluded from the broader Korean American community (Hoffman & Peña, 2013; Kim, Hynes, & Lee, 2017).

The transracial adoption paradox (distinct from the transnational adoption paradox) describes a set of experiences wherein the non-White adopted individual is treated as being White by their adoptive family and their experiences as racial minorities are downplayed (Lee, 2003); yet this treatment of the adopted individual as White does not extend beyond the family (Hoffman & Peña, 2013). Instead, adopted Korean Americans are situated within a racist system in which they are subject to the oppressive narratives that are applied to Asian Americans, including the
assumption of being a foreigner and the expectations of being a model minority (Kim, 1999). This process, known as racialization, manifests early on in life (e.g., Meier, 1999). These contradictory racialized experiences are particularly troubling as adopted Koreans are often not taught how to deal with race-based bias and are not adequately supported in the wake of discriminatory experiences.

These two paradoxes provide the context for why cultural socialization, discrimination, and identity often become important developmental issues to adopted Korean individuals across the lifespan (e.g., Kim et al., 2017). With this historical, cultural, and developmental context in mind, we review research on the experiences of adopted Koreans. This review is split into four overlapping themes: discrimination, ethnic-racial identity, cultural socialization, and self-directed cultural engagement.

### Review of research

**Perceived discrimination**

We start our review by focusing on the role of discrimination on the mental health and adjustment of adopted Korean Americans. As noted above, adoption scholars have largely focused on pre-adoption adversity, such as institutionalization, as the explanation for later life developmental and adjustment problems. However, these approaches objectify adopted individuals to reinforce narratives that frame adoptive parents as saviors and that require adopted individuals to be grateful (Homans et al., 2018). Further, these approaches perpetuate a racial colorblindness ideology by denying the salience of race for adopted Koreans raised by White parents. In our research, we shift the narrative to acknowledge the relevance and impact of race on the development and adjustment of transnationally and transracially adopted children and youth.

We have demonstrated in a series of studies with multiple samples that race-based discrimination experienced by adopted Korean Americans is associated with child developmental outcomes above and beyond pre-adoption adversity. In a study of the impact of discrimination on the adjustment of transnationally adopted children and adolescents, we found that American adoptive parents of children and adolescents who were adopted from Asia (63 percent of whom were adopted from Korea) and Latin America reported that their children experienced more discrimination than individuals adopted from Eastern Europe (Lee, 2010). Further, internalizing and externalizing problems were predicted by discrimination over and above pre-adoption adversity, but only for individuals adopted from Asia and Latin America. While this study was one of the first large-scale studies to empirically document the detrimental impacts of discrimination in transnationally adopted youth, it was limited by a reliance on adoptive parent-report of the adopted individual’s experience.

Focusing on the perspective of the adopted individual, we found support for the impact of discrimination on the adjustment of adopted Korean Americans in childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood. In one study, discrimination was negatively related to the well-being of adopted Korean adults (Lee, Yoo, & Roberts, 2004). Further, two studies using separate samples of adopted Korean American adolescents found a positive correlation between adolescent-report of discrimination and measures of distress and maladjustment, over and above pre-adoption adversity (Lee, Lee, Hu, & Kim, 2015) and parent-report of childhood distress and maladjustment (Qin, Kim, Su, Hu, & Lee, 2017). These findings are consistent with past work on non-adopted minority populations (e.g., Lee & Ahn, 2011; Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009).
In order to understand developmental effects, we examined the effects of racial discrimination on adolescent adjustment after controlling for childhood behavioral problems (Qin et al., 2017) and the effects of racial discrimination on behavioral development across three waves of data from adolescence to emerging adulthood (Schires et al., 2019). In this latter study, we used cross-lagged analyses to show that depression and externalizing behaviors at wave three were predicted by discrimination at wave two. Further, discrimination at wave two was not related to depression or externalizing behaviors at wave one, suggesting a causal impact of discrimination on future maladjustment.

**Ethnic-racial identity**

First-person accounts by transnationally, transracially adopted Korean Americans highlight the many ways in which culture, ethnicity, and race inform their identity development. Early work by adoption scholars acknowledged that adopted Koreans were likely to experience ethnic-racial teasing, identity confusion, and questions about their ethnic heritage and racial background (e.g., Cederblad, Höök, Irhammar, & Mercke, 1999); yet these issues are often viewed as secondary to abandonment-related trauma and the individual’s relationship with their adoptive family, and overlooked completely (Lee, 2003). Instead, we argue that these narratives from adopted Koreans illustrate that ethnicity and race play a central role in their sense of self. Notably, these individuals recognize early on that they are ethnically and racially different from their parents and peers, and negotiate the meaning of these differences as they develop a sense of self (Meier, 1999).

This understanding of the self in relation to an ethnic-racial group has been described as an ethnic-racial identity (ERI; Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014). ERI captures the cognitive, affective, and behavioral components of belonging to an ethnic-racial group. The cognitive dimension taps into clarity and understanding around the meaning of group membership. The affective dimension taps into pride in group membership and positive emotions toward the group. These two dimensions of cognition and affect are often combined to capture identity commitment (e.g., Roberts et al., 1999). Finally, the behavioral dimension includes actions that help an individual learn more about their group and its relevance to the individual, as well as participation in group-based actions.

Our early studies on ERI examined the direct effect of ERI on adjustment for adopted Koreans across a variety of operationalizations of ERI and outcome measures. For instance, using a unidimensional measure of ERI that captured a combined sense of pride, clarity, and searching behaviors, we found ERI was unrelated to well-being in a sample of adopted Korean American college students (Lee, Yun, Yoo, & Park Nelson, 2010). In another study that operationalized ERI as consisting of individual dimensions of pride in being Korean, active engagement in learning about being Korean, and a sense of clarity about what it means to be Korean (American) (see Lee & Yoo, 2004), we found that ERI engagement was positively related to well-being in a sample of adopted Korean American adults, while ERI pride and clarity were unrelated to well-being (though the effect sizes suggest a possible positive relation between ERI pride and well-being) (Lee et al., 2004). These mixed findings suggest that the dimensions of ERI may differentially relate to adjustment. Therefore, we focused specifically on the ERI dimensions of pride, clarity, and engagement in order to further explicate our understanding of the ERI-adjustment relation (Lee et al., 2015). Controlling for pre-adoption adversity, ERI clarity was negatively related to internalizing problems, ERI pride was negatively related to externalizing problems, and ERI engagement was positively related to internalizing problems and substance use.
Recognizing that their adoptive status is also likely to be salient to adopted individuals, we examined how an individual’s adoptive identity (AI) – clarity and understanding around being adopted – might relate with their ERI, and how those patterns might relate to adjustment (Beaupre, Reichwald, Zhou, Raleigh, & Lee, 2015). We used a person-centered approach with a sample of adopted Korean adolescents to derive six identity profiles based on combinations of ERI commitment and AI commitment: (1) strong ERI commitment, weak AI commitment; (2) weak ERI commitment, strong AI commitment; (3–6) four profiles that ranged from very uncommitted to very committed on both identity domains. Next, we examined how these profiles predicted mental health and adjustment. The profiles generally did not differ from each other across a wide variety of outcomes. However, individuals who were especially weakly committed to both their ERI and AI reported less life satisfaction and less school belonging. These findings highlight the heterogeneity of the experiences of adopted Koreans and suggest that extreme disidentification may be problematic.

These studies highlight the general relevance of ERI to many adopted Koreans. The mixed nature of these findings also advances a more complicated understanding of adopted Koreans. Rather than existing as a monolithic group with homogenous experiences, adopted Koreans engage with their adoption and ethnic heritage in a variety of ways, most of which are not pathological in nature. Further, these findings indicate the importance of considering the operationalization of ERI in interpreting the extant literature.

**ERI as a protective factor**

Beyond instilling a positive sense of self and relating directly to adjustment, ERI has been theorized to function as a protective factor against the negative impact of discrimination. Therefore, we examined the role of ERI as a moderator in the discrimination–adjustment relation (Lee et al., 2015). We found that discrimination was positively related to externalizing problems for individuals high in ERI pride, but not for individuals low in ERI pride. Additionally, discrimination was positively related to substance use for individuals high in ERI engagement, but not for individuals low in ERI engagement. Therefore, rather than functioning as a protective factor, ERI functioned as an exacerbating agent for adopted Koreans. This aligns with research with non-adopted samples that highlights mixed findings between different identity dimensions, outcomes, and sample characteristics (e.g., Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009), and points to the need for future research to investigate the moderating role of ERI.

**Parental cultural socialization**

Early research on the adoptive family environment investigated the quality of parent–child relationships (e.g., attachment style) (Haugaard & Hazan, 2003), but they overlooked the adopted individual’s experiences as an ethnic and racial minority within their household and society. Those studies that did examine the ethnic and racial experiences of these individuals highlighted cultural assimilation – the internalization of the dominant culture coupled with the loss of the adopted individual’s heritage culture – as the dominant outcome of early socialization experiences (Baden, Treweeke, & Ahluwalia, 2012; Lee, 2003). Rejecting an assimilationist framework, we argue that while it is important that adopted individuals are able to develop positive relationships with adoptive parents and families, it is also necessary for adoptive parents to address the challenges and experiences that their adoptive children might face as ethnic and racial minorities.

Parental cultural socialization refers to the process through which parents teach their children how to function as ethnic-racial minorities within an oppressive context (Hughes &
Chen, 1997). Cultural socialization is conceptualized as addressing two distinct domains: ethnic socialization and racial socialization (Lee, Grotevant, Hellerstedt, & Gunner, 2006). Ethnic socialization emphasizes pride in their ethnic heritage and includes passing on the traditions and belief systems of their heritage culture. Racial socialization efforts focus on teaching the individual how to function as a racial minority. This includes preparing the individual to face discrimination, as well as providing them with tools to negotiate these experiences. While these practices are common among parents of color within the US (e.g., Hughes & Chen, 1997), less is known about how White adoptive parents engage in cultural socialization practices that are oriented toward the adopted individual’s ethnic heritage and racial group (e.g., Korean culture, being Asian American), which the adoptive parents do not experience themselves.

As a first approach to understanding the cultural socialization practices of adoptive parents, we asked adoptive families to discuss a series of topics, including ethnicity and race (Kim, Reichwald, & Lee, 2013). When prompted to discuss the role that ethnicity and race play in their family, we found that adoptive parents had frequently failed to respond to instances of discrimination. For instance, one adopted Korean American adolescent told her adoptive mother, “We’ve mentioned it to you before and you blow it off” (Kim et al., 2013, p. 85). This unwillingness, or inability, to address issues of race coincides with adoptive parents’ colorblind attitudes (Lee et al., 2006; Shiao & Tuan, 2008), as captured by a White adoptive mother telling her adopted son, “See when I look at you I don’t see Asian, or White, or whatever, I just see you” (Kim et al., 2013, p. 80).

These discussions also revealed that adoptive parents and adopted individuals often disagreed on the amount of cultural socialization that the adoptive parents engaged in (Kim et al., 2013). Critically, we found that only reports of past cultural socialization from adopted individuals aligned with the in-lab conversations, and that adoptive parents over-reported the amount of cultural socialization that they engaged in. Further, reports of parental ethnic socialization and racial socialization were lower for adopted Korean Americans than their non-adopted peers (Seol, Yoo, Lee, Park, & Kyeong, 2016). Despite these differences, adoptive parents generally report believing that cultural socialization is important (Lee et al., 2006). Therefore, we also examined how adoptive parents do engage in cultural socialization.

Further analyzing the discussions that adoptive families had around ethnicity and race, we found that their cultural socialization efforts tended to focus on explicit, isolated activities (Kim et al., 2013). These cultural socialization efforts typically included going out to eat at a Korean restaurant or attending Korean culture camps. Notably absent from these cultural socialization efforts were the more subtle, daily means of cultural socialization, such as using conversations with others that indicate the importance of Korean culture (ethnic socialization) or demonstrating how to respond to instances of discrimination (racial socialization). Finally, adoptive parents tended to place the onus for these different forms of cultural socialization on the adopted individual, expecting the adopted individual to indicate when they wanted to engage in cultural socialization, or to show positive feedback to parental cultural socialization efforts.

Cultural socialization and ethnic-racial identity

Cultural socialization is meant to instill a positive view of the self as a member of a particular ethnic-racial group. Using a seven-year two-wave study, we found that parental ethnic socialization predicted adolescent ERI participation and resolution seven years later (Hu, Zhou, & Lee, 2017), supporting the theoretical causal impact of cultural socialization. This aligns with cross-sectional studies that found positive ethnic socialization-ERI relations (Ferrari, Hu, Rosnati, & Lee, 2017; Hu, Anderson, & Lee, 2015).
Cultural socialization and psychological outcomes

Beyond instilling a sense of identity, parental cultural socialization efforts are meant to help adolescents be productive and well-adjusted members of society. For instance, we found that ethnic socialization was positively related to a sense of school engagement for both adopted and non-adopted Korean American adolescents (Seol et al., 2016). We also found a curvilinear relation between racial socialization and school adjustment for both samples. Specifically, a moderate amount of racial socialization yielded the highest school adjustment.

In another study, we examined socialization through direct conversations about ethnicity and race that adopted adolescents had with their adoptive families, and found three ways in which they understood their within-family ethnic and racial differences (Anderson, Lee, Rueter, & Kim, 2015). More than half of the families disagreed on whether there were within-family ethnic and racial differences, roughly one-third of the sample acknowledged differences, and a minority of families rejected within-family differences. Further, adoptive parents in families that acknowledged differences were more likely to engage in ethnic socialization. We found that adopted adolescents whose families held discrepant views of racial differences reported significantly more delinquent behaviors (e.g., cutting classes at school) than adopted adolescents in families who agreed about within-family ethnic and racial differences (either acknowledging or rejecting these differences). This highlights the importance of a mutual understanding of the role of race and ethnicity within the adoptive family, and, when considered with the findings from Seol et al. (2016), points to the importance of cultural socialization for positive adjustment.

Cultural socialization as a protective factor

Past research with non-adopted samples has suggested that socialization should act as a protective factor against the effects of discrimination (Hughes et al., 2006). Therefore, we tested the moderating effect of cultural socialization across adopted and non-adopted Korean Americans (Seol et al., 2016). We found a significant three-way interaction between adoptive status, ethnic socialization, and perceived discrimination on school belonging. Discrimination was negatively related to school belonging. However, for non-adopted individuals, this negative relation persisted under low levels of ethnic socialization, but was non-significant under high levels of ethnic socialization; yet this buffering effect was not found for the adopted sample. In contrast, for the adoptive sample, under conditions of low ethnic socialization, the discrimination–school belonging relation was non-significant, yet under conditions of high ethnic socialization racial discrimination was negatively related to school belonging. This difference by adoptive status points to the need for further examination of the moderating role of socialization on the discrimination–adjustment relation for adopted individuals.

Self-directed cultural engagement

The ethnic heritage and racial erasure highlighted by the transnational and transracial adoption paradoxes prompts another question: how do adopted Koreans personally engage with their heritage culture, ethnicity, and race? We have begun to examine this question across a series of studies. A grounded theory analysis of a sample of adopted Korean adults revealed seven themes describing their cultural engagement (Song & Lee, 2009). The themes ranged from a focus on exploring Korea/Korean culture and developing co-ethnic relationships, to navigating the complexities of birth family, and understanding the racial
and multicultural aspects of living within the United States. Further, we found that these experiences of cultural exploration and engagement were related to ERI if they occurred in adulthood, but not in adolescence or earlier. This aligns with reculturation theory, which emphasizes the role of adopted individuals in being the drivers of their own cultural exploration (Baden et al., 2012). Finally, awareness of race-related issues was the least-reported theme, and was not present at all in childhood accounts, further supporting our finding that colorblindness is a prominent theme in the socialization practices of adoptive families (Kim et al., 2013).

Following up on these dimensions of cultural engagement, we examined the ways in which adopted Korean adults navigate their identity as they develop a coherent life narrative (Grotevant, 1997). Assessing a sample of adopted Korean American adults, we found that participants consistently reported a continual negotiation of intra- and interpersonal connection and understanding (Kim et al., 2017). Individuals reported navigating a sense of authentic connection to “their own story or identity” (p. 240) as well as to their adoptive and birth families. For instance, one individual described feeling like a “living doll” (p. 242) in their adoptive family, while simultaneously feeling an unequivocal sense of belonging to that family. Further, an individual who had reconnected with their birth family described this relationship as “deeply gratifying” (p. 241), yet they also felt insecure about their relationship with their birth family, fearing what they perceived as a second rejection. These vacillations between conflict and resolution represent the work that individuals put into coming to terms with their cultural and familial connections.

As with our quantitative studies of identity (e.g., Beaupre et al., 2015), participants varied in how they incorporated experiences with their adoption and Korean heritage into their sense of self. Some individuals purposely worked to ignore, or even distance themselves from, their ethnic-racial and adoptive identities, while other individuals actively explored these aspects of the self. For some, this exploration led to coherence and connection, with one individual noting that their engagement with the diaspora of transnationally adopted Koreans helped them “[put] the pieces together of my life” (Kim et al., 2017, p. 243). Others noted how exploration had brought about interpersonal and emotional challenges. One individual described feeling “a deep ache and the feeling of anguish and pain” (Kim et al., 2017, p. 242) after visiting Korea. This individual came out of visiting Korea feeling “thrown away” and unwanted (Kim et al., 2017, p. 242).

These two studies highlight the heterogeneity of the adopted experience, and more fully exemplify our integration of an Asian Americanist lens with critical adoption studies. By giving adopted individuals the space to voice their opinions in an open-ended format, we found distinct ways in which they navigate their cultural connection and develop a sense of self. Though these experiences are not without struggles, they also point to unique areas of resilience, such as a sense of belonging with the community of adopted Koreans. Finally, these studies highlight that adopted children grow up and become adults with agency.

Policy and practice implications
Because the goal of adoption is to find permanent, safe, and nurturing family home environments for children, child welfare advocates and practitioners understandably prioritize the needs of the child. An integrated critical adoption and Asian Americanist perspective on transracial and transnational adoption does not dispute this prioritization of the child. Rather, it complicates traditional ways of understanding what the fundamental needs of the child are by re-centering the narrative on the whole experience of the adopted
individual, which includes culture, ethnicity, and race, and reinforces the role and responsibility of adoptive parents to acknowledge and address these issues and experiences. In this section, we highlight a few ways this reframing of adoption affects policy and practices directed toward adopted Koreans and their adoptive families. We specifically build on the policy and practice implications that have been advanced previously by Baden and Wiley (2007) (see also Grotevant, 2003; Lee, 2003).

While adoption can provide children with a full and enriched life, it is critically important to understand and challenge the rescue narrative within adoption, which privileges the actions of the adoptive family (e.g., parents as saviors) and the larger adoption system (e.g., by not acknowledging the economy of adoption). This problematic rescue narrative (Briggs, 2003) overlooks the cultural, racial, and ethnic challenges of transnational and transracial adoption that adopted individuals face, neglects the rights of the birth family, and perpetuates a system of child welfare that does not fully hold accountable the sending country. In the case of South Korea, which now has one of the largest economies in the world, it is no longer a developing country that needs to rely on transnational adoption as a means to address the lack of a systemic social welfare. In fact, it has been argued that transnational adoption has been used to avoid addressing larger human rights issues in South Korea (McKee, 2016). Nevertheless, South Korea remains a sending country for transnational adoption, and is one of the few signatory nations to still not ratify the Hague Convention on Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Intercountry Adoption.

Our scholarship also documents the importance and impact of transracial and transnational experiences and challenges on development across the lifespan. These research findings have been used to inform how adoption agencies work with prospective adoptive parents as they prepare for transracial and transnational adoption and how adoption agencies develop and offer post-adoption services for adopted individuals and adoptive families. Adoption agencies are more aware of the need to inform and educate adoptive families around ethnic heritage and birth family, racism and discrimination, and raising children with positive and strong ethnic-racial identities.

Further, adoptive parents should consider the tact, timing, and dosage of how they address these transracial and transnational aspects of adoption. Adopted youth benefit from everyday conversations and activities that positively promote their ethnic heritage and help them understand how to navigate racial differences and racism. At the same time, these socialization efforts must be developmentally appropriate and responsive to the context. Our research highlights the overall importance of ethnic socialization for ERI development and its beneficial impact on well-being and adjustment. Similarly, racial socialization is developmentally important and impactful, but these conversations about race and racial differences must be constructive, and the ways to respond to discrimination must be modeled and reinforced appropriately by parents. In the end, all members of the adoptive family need to buy into being a multicultural and multiracial family, acknowledging and actively engaging with ethnic and racial differences within the family.

Finally, we highlight two important post-adoption experiences directly affecting adopted individuals and adoptive families that need to be addressed now and in the future by adoption policymakers, practitioners, and scholars. The first is the greater risk for suicide attempts among adopted youth and adults (e.g., von Borczyskowski et al., 2006). More basic science using rigorous study designs is needed to better elucidate the factors (e.g., racism and discrimination) that contribute to and might prevent suicide ideation and
attempts. Additionally, evidence-based preventive intervention tailored to the unique experiences and issues of transracially and transnationally adopted individuals and their families is needed to reduce these high odds. The second is the rapid adoption and use of medical and direct-to-consumer genetic testing to identify health risks and disease and to find and confirm birth family (May et al., 2016). Adoptive families and adopted individuals, as well as birth family, are increasingly interested in genetic testing to address the lack of birth family information. This desire for more knowledge must be considered in the context of the privacy rights and other bioethical concerns (Lee, Kim, & Lee, 2016a).

Discussion

In this review, we presented a framework that integrates an Asian Americanist perspective and a critical adoption studies perspective to review, interpret, and critique the theoretical and empirical literature on transnational, transracial adoption. Individually, these approaches draw on largely distinct bodies of interdisciplinary literature that acknowledge and contest systems of power and oppression as they relate to race and adoption. Our integrated Asian Americanist and critical adoption studies framework highlights how these two forces act on and influence each other through systems of oppression. These systems privilege White prospective adoptive parents and make non-White children from “third-world” countries globally “available” (Ngabonziza, 1991).

We applied this integrated framework to examine research on the cultural, ethnic, and racial experiences of adopted Koreans. Research on race-based discrimination suggests that discrimination has lasting negative impacts on mental health beyond pre-adoption adversity and early childhood experiences. Research on ethnic-racial identity found that ERI is relevant to adopted Koreans, and yet adopted Koreans approach their identities in a wide variety of ways—most of which are not inherently pathological. Research on parental cultural socialization indicates that adoptive parents engage in limited cultural socialization efforts, often relying on a “child-choice” approach that relies on the adopted individual to be an active driver of cultural socialization. Finally, research on adopted individuals as agents of self-directed cultural engagement found that adopted Koreans engaged with their adoption—including navigating birth family—and their relation to Korea in a wide variety of ways. As a whole, these studies suggest that adopted Koreans are not merely kyopo. Rather, adopted Koreans navigate a “third space” (Hübinette, 2004, p. 23) between their countries of birth and adoption, and in so doing create their own sense of self and community.

Future research

We propose four directions for future research inspired by our integrated framework. First, more research needs to consider the adoption experience throughout the lifespan. As adopted individuals age, how do their experiences with, and understanding of, discrimination, ERI, and cultural engagement change? Further, researchers must investigate how the aging process impacts adopted individuals’ relationships with their adoptive and birth families, and with adoption as a whole. This includes the quality and continued development of the adoptive parent–adopted individual relationship, as well as what drives the dissolution or strengthening of these relationships. Similarly, does the process of becoming parents themselves have ramifications for how they think about their birth, relinquishment, and adoption?

Second, future research needs to further consider how adopted individuals understand their sense of self. Narratives from adopted individuals indicate struggling with a personal sense of
belonging and self-understanding that are tied to their transnational and transracial upbringing (e.g., Kim et al., 2017). Extant literature primarily draws on ERI development to study this sense of self. However, ERI and its measurement were developed for and with non-adopted samples. To date, there is no study demonstrating measurement invariance between adopted and non-adopted ethnic-racial minority samples. Given their differential patterns of cultural socialization and feelings of belonging to their ethnic-racial group, we could reasonably expect that adopted and non-adopted individuals might derive meaning from their ethnic-racial group differently, and therefore might read items that tap into ERI differently. That this measurement possibility cannot be refuted by extant literature should be cause for concern.

There is also a general lack of measures that can capture concepts particular to the adoption experience. For instance, ERI – regardless of how it is measured – and AI do not fully capture the adoption-related experiences that adopted Koreans might build their identities around. Future research needs to dedicate resources to ground-up operationalizations of constructs specific to the experiences of adopted individuals, including how they integrate aspects of migration, race, and adoption, and how they relate to their birth family, including imagined understandings of the birth family.

Third, we must consider the unique experiences and well-being of birth families, and not merely as controls to understand the impacts of adoption as a natural experiment. Importantly, as most birth families come from communities that fall outside of the typical focus of modern psychology (i.e., are non-White and non-Western), this work needs to be careful to not impose its own worldview on the communities being studied. Rather, researchers should work with the communities to develop research questions and theories, and should be cognizant about the bias that the research team brings to study.

Fourth, adoption research as a whole needs to recognize that researchers’ identities and positionalities (e.g., adoptive parents, White, male) have a meaningful impact on the research process. This influence includes directing the topics that are studied, the perspective from which they are studied, how the studies are designed, and the interpretations of the findings. Individuals from all positions within the triad occupy unique positionalities that could be related to bias. To date, White adoptive parents have largely dominated the research literature as both advocates and researchers, leading to research that has privileged the voices of adoptive parents and has been limited in scope. As more adopted individuals enter the academy, we need to recognize their positionality as a strength and not as a source of bias. Just as adoptive parent perspectives on adoptive parenthood can be a place of strength, so called “me-search” conducted by adopted individuals can provide a new set of topics, approaches, and interpretations of the experiences of adopted individuals.

In closing, by reviewing adoption research through an integrated Asian Americanist and critical adoption studies framework, we critiqued the ways in which adoption research – and adoption as a whole – has been practiced. Through this critique, we hope to add nuance and a more critical understanding of the psychology of Korean adoption that better serves those individuals living with adoption.

Notes
1 1,552 of the 1,579 parents in the sample identified as White (98.3 percent).
2 The main effects for ERI pride and ERI engagement in Lee et al. (2015) are accompanied by interactions with discrimination and need to be interpreted in this context. See “Ethnic-racial identity as a protective factor” for further discussion.
3 Beaufre et al. (2015) and Lee et al. (2015) used the same dataset, but Lee et al. (2015) only included participants with matched adoptive parent data in their sample (n=136) whereas Beaufre et al. (2015) did not screen for matched adoptive parent data; therefore Beaufre et al. (2015) had a larger sample size (n=189) that overlapped with the Lee et al. (2015) sample.
4 The adopted individuals in this study partially overlap with the samples from Beaufre et al. (2015) and Lee et al. (2015).
5 The adopted adolescents in Hu et al. (2017) were the younger siblings of the adopted adolescents in Ferrari et al. (2017) and Hu et al. (2015).
6 This study used the same sample as Lee et al. (2004).
7 Kyopo is the Korean term for overseas Koreans.

References


The psychology of Korean adoption


