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What is This?

"They don't know what it's like to be in my shoes": Topic avoidance about race in transracially adoptive families

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Abstract

Families formed through transracial adoption face communicative challenges not faced by single-race families. Drawing upon communication privacy management theory and research on topic avoidance, this paper explores Korean adult adoptees' reports of racial derogation in their youth and the extent to which they avoided discussing these interactions with their White adoptive parents. Results from qualitative interviews and surveys suggest that adoptee participants reported having received a range of racially derogatory messages, including appearance attacks, ethnicity attacks, and physical attacks. Most participants reported avoiding discussing these occurrences with their adoptive parents due to parent unresponsiveness and/or self-protection. This study extends the work on topic avoidance by offering sub-themes for parent unresponsiveness and sheds light on privacy management in transracially adoptive families.

Keywords

adoption, family communication, racism, Korean adoptees, privacy management, topic avoidance, transracial

> To this day if someone looks at me I get angry and assume they want to make fun of me.
> I gave up telling my parents of these encounters by 2nd or 3rd grade ... my parents had no real

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intelligent method of handling these. There was no preparation for how to deal with these, with the strong exception of providing parental love. They listened but could offer no true solace or solution. (Korean adopted male, age 50)

The above epigraph exemplifies the paradox that Korean adoptees who grow up with White parents may experience; despite their parents' love for them, adoptees may find that their parents are unprepared and unequipped to respond to adoptees' experiences with racial derogation. As a result, adoptees may resign themselves to not telling their parents about these potentially painful and long-lasting experiences.

The current study explores Korean adoptees' reported experiences with racial derogation and, more specifically, their reasons for avoiding disclosure about these experiences with their adoptive parents. Transcribed in-depth interviews and qualitative, online survey responses comprise the data set for this study. Drawing upon communication privacy management (CPM) theory (Petronio, 2002; Petronio & Caughlin, 2006) and the literature on topic avoidance (Afifi & Guerrero, 2000; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a), this paper aims to examine how self-disclosure about racialized experiences operates among family members who are racially dissimilar. A discussion of the debate surrounding transracial adoption serves as a useful starting point for understanding the complex social dynamics surrounding race in these families.

The transracial adoption debate

The debate surrounding transracial adoption (also known as visible adoption, interracial adoption) centers upon critics' concerns that White parents cannot prepare minority children to live in a society where racism remains operative. Proponents of transracial adoption argue that moving children out of institutionalized care into permanent families is in the best interests of the children, regardless of race (Simon, Altstein, & Melli, 1994). In contrast, critics assert that being adopted by White parents may cause minority children to have difficulties in developing a sense of ethnic identity (Andujo, 1988), be ashamed of their birth culture or race (see Hollingsworth, 1997, for review), and not be able to experience life apart from dominant White culture (Townsend, 1995).

Although the debate about adopting outside of one's race concerns domestic adoption primarily, international adoption also receives a fair share of criticism. Third-world advocates, who argue that international adoption is essentially a new form of colonialism and cultural imperialism, believe that the practice perpetuates unjust social structures in countries that send children (Hollingsworth, 2003), exploits women and children in underdeveloped countries (Herrmann & Kasper, 1992), and removes children from their culture.

The significant presence of Korean and, more recently, Chinese, adoptees in the United States suggests that the practice of transracial, international adoption has gained increased acceptance over the past decades. Yet, the above concerns about these types of adoptions remain. Recent research by Suter (2008), Suter and Ballard (2009) and Docan-Morgan (2010) suggests that adoptive parents and adoptees face interactions with strangers and family members that suggest the widespread assumption that ideal nuclear families are comprised of members who are biologically related and racially

homogenous. Together, this literature suggests that race is an important topic for transracially adoptive families, both within the family itself and when communicating with those outside the family.

Korean adoptive families

The current study focuses on families with at least one child adopted from Korea. This adoptive family composition is worthy of study for several reasons. First, a very large number of families have been formed through Korean adoption. The Korean War (1950–1953), the economic hardship South Korea experienced in the war's aftermath, and Koreans' value of blood kinship resulted in 156,242 Korean children being sent overseas for adoption between 1953 and 2004 (Kim, 2007). The vast majority of these children were adopted into White American families. Today, U.S. adoptions from Korea continue; between 2004 and 2006, 4722 Korean children were adopted into American homes (U.S. Department of State, 2009).

A second reason for this study's focus on Korean adoptees is that because adoptions from Korea peaked between the mid-1970s and the mid-to-late 1980s (Kim, 2007), many Korean adoptees have reached adulthood and are capable of reflecting on their experiences growing up with parents whose race differed from their own. They thus serve as the ''first generation'' of international, transracial adoptees and may provide insight that younger generations of adoptees (e.g., Chinese) may not be old enough to provide.

The third reason for this study's focus on Korean adoptees is that the racial differences within families with Korean adopted children present challenges that that same-race adoptive families or non-adoptive families (i.e., biologically related) might not experience. Overall, the racial characteristics of these families allow for the study of the complex interplay between race, ethnicity, and family communication.

Communication about race in adoptive families

Concerns surrounding transracial adoption, whether domestic or international, may be summed up in the question, ''What could White parents possibly know about raising minority children?'' This question has persisted over the past decades as researchers have attempted to assess transracial adoptees' adjustment (Feigelman, 2000; Kim, 1995; Kim, Hong, & Kim, 1979) and ethnic identity (Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2000; Lee, 2003) in order to draw general conclusions about the extent to which transracial adoption is a recommendable practice. One shortcoming of such research, however, is that it tends to focus on adjustment and ethnic identity as static outcomes, rather than on the dynamic communicative exchanges that might render race and ethnicity as problematic aspects of an adoptee's identity.

Despite the somewhat long (40 years) history of transracial adoption research, there has been little research that focuses specifically on transracial adoptees' experiences with racial derogation. Yet, past research suggests the importance of this topic. Feigelman (2007), for example, found that racial antagonism was associated with adjustment problems for transracial adoptees. Based on parents' reports of adoptees' experiences and behaviors, the research showed that adoptees who had encountered

more discrimination, more negative comments about their background, and more discomfort related to their appearance were more likely to have run away from home, seen a professional for emotional or behavioral problems, had problems with alcohol or drugs, been arrested, or been expelled.

Galvin (2003) placed the study of adoptees' experiences with racial derogation as one of the *key elements* of her communication research agenda for international and transracial adoption. It is surprising that little research has been done in this area, given that transracially adoptive parents and adoptees report the occurrence of communication about race consistently (e.g., Bartholet, 1993; Fujimoto, 2002; Suter, 2008; Tessler, Gamache, & Liu, 1999). In addition, Rojewski (2005) notes that little is known about how adoptees experience and react to racial communication, and Lee (2003) notes that there are no known published studies on how transracial adoptees respond to racism.

One goal of this study, then, is to gain insight into adoptees' experiences with racial derogation, which I define as instances where the adoptee is the victim of malevolent and/or essentializing comments or questions related to his/her race. Experiences of racial derogation are not unique to transracial adoptees; however, the composition of transracially adoptive families – in contrast to single-race families – may create a situation wherein racial derogation elicits in adoptees a sense of isolation and difference from one's family. Indeed, transracial adoptees Oprarah, Shin, and Trenka (2006) note that adoptees of color may protect their loved ones by not telling them about their experiences with racism.

Due to the tendency of past transracial adoption research to study adoptees during childhood, as well as the possibility that adoptees might avoid disclosing their experiences of racial derogation to their adoptive families, little is known about the types of racial derogation that transracial adoptees experience. Thus, the first research question is posed:

RQ1: What, if any, are Korean adoptees' reported experiences with racial derogation?

Communication privacy management and topic avoidance in families

Results from a study conducted by Matsunaga (2008) suggest that parents are not always aware that their children are being victimized by bullies. Such a finding is important in the context of racial derogation, because it suggests that racially motivated teasing or bullying may occur without parents' knowledge. In this type of scenario, it is the child's decision whether or not to disclose to his/her parents that racial derogation has occurred. Transracially adopted children may feel particularly reluctant to disclose such experiences to their parents, given that their parents are not likely to be able to identify with these experiences first-hand.

Petronio's (2002) CPM theory provides a useful foundation for understanding the extent to which adopted Korean children might disclose (or avoid disclosing) encounters involving racial derogation. CPM theory asserts that people believe private information is something that they own and that they wish to control (Petronio, 2002). For example, if a Korean adoptee is the victim of racial teasing at school, she is the owner of information and feelings about the encounter. Information about such an encounter may be kept

private if an adoptee wishes to blend in with her family or community and not have her difference highlighted and/or if she feels resulting negative feelings such as shame or vulnerability. An adoptee may feel a simultaneous opposition between wanting to tell her parents and wanting to keep the information to herself, experiencing what Petronio and Caughlin (2006) characterize as the *dialectical nature of private disclosures*. In making a decision about sharing private information, individuals find themselves balancing their desires for privacy on one hand, with their need, as social beings, to share and perhaps receive support, on the other (Petronio, 2002; Petronio & Caughlin, 2006).

CPM is a particularly relevant theory for examining family communication, because, as Petronio and Caughlin (2006) write, "Both keeping and telling information in different situations may be either beneficial or detrimental to the individual family members and the family as a whole" (pp. 35–36). According to CPM theory, individuals learn and develop privacy rules for the revealing of information. These rules include criteria for who one discloses to, how much is disclosed, and where and when to disclose (Petronio, 2002). The rules are acquired through socialization and negotiated collectively, yet they can be open to growth and change. Oftentimes privacy rules are learned through interaction rather than stated explicitly. Because parents tend to be viewed as the leaders (and thus, rule-makers) in families, they set boundaries for what is considered private information. When parents of transracially adopted children do not broach topics such as race, adoption, or difference within their families, they might unknowingly be instituting a privacy rule for their children.

Related to CPM theory's tenet that individuals make decisions and develop rules about sharing their private information, research on topic avoidance suggests that avoidance of certain conversational topics may serve to preserve intimate relationships (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004; Guerrero & Afifi, 1995a). With regard to families, Guerrero and Afifi (1995b) outlined four general reasons why parents and children tend to avoid discussing certain topics with one another. These reasons include the following: (1) *self-protection* (i.e., wanting to avoid judgment, criticism, embarrassment, and vulnerability); (2) *relationship protection* (i.e., the desire to avoid conflict, eliciting anger, or de-escalating the relationship); (3) *social inappropriateness* (i.e., the tendency to avoid topics that one perceives as socially inappropriate for discussion); and (4) *parent unresponsiveness* (i.e., avoiding a topic because of the perception that one's parent will be unresponsive, think the issue is trivial, or lack relevant knowledge necessary for handling the problem).

All four of the above reasons for avoiding discussion of certain topics are applicable to why transracial adoptees might avoid disclosing instances of racial derogation with their White parents. They may engage in *self-protection*, because sharing instances of name calling or harassment might cause vulnerability, embarrassment, or the reliving of negative or painful experiences. Second, adoptees might avoid disclosing their struggles for the purpose of *relationship protection* with their friends, family, and colleagues. Adoptees might fear that reporting instances of racial derogation may estrange them from their families. Third, because of the color-blind assumption of race in the United States and in transracially adoptive families (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Oparah et al., 2006), race and racism are often viewed as *socially inappropriate* topics for discussion, particularly by White people. The fourth reason, *parent unresponsiveness*, seems to

resonate with critics' concerns about transracial adoption: that White parents are incapable of either preparing their children for racial derogation or responding effectively when it occurs.

Little is known about transracial adoptees' experiences with racial derogation, and much less is known about the extent to which adoptees avoid discussing issues related to race with their White parents and, if they do, why they do so. Thus, the remaining two research questions frame the final goals of the current study: to gain insight into the extent to which adoptees avoid discussing racial derogation with their parents and the reasons for avoiding this topic. These questions are as follows:

RQ2: To what extent do Korean adoptees report avoiding the topic of experiences with racial derogation with their adoptive White parents?

RQ3: What reasons, if any, do Korean adoptees report for topic avoidance with regard to experiences with racial derogation?

Method

The data for this study were drawn from two sources: qualitative interviews and surveys. Qualitative, in-depth, face-to-face interviews comprise the primary source of data. Interviewees were recruited in three ways. First, a recruitment email was sent to communication majors and leaders of Asian American student groups at a large, public university in the Northwest, asking for adult (18 and over) Korean adoptees with White parents. Interested persons responded via email, yielding 12 interviews. Second, the author's membership in a local organization for Asian adult adoptees allowed the posting of a recruitment email through the group's listserv, yielding three interviews. Third, interviewees were recruited at the International Korean Adoptee Association (IKAA) Gathering in Seoul, South Korea, through announcements and fliers. The IKAA Gathering brought together over 600 Korean adult adoptees from the United States, Canada, Europe, and Australia. Five interviews were conducted at the gathering. In addition contacts were made with three additional participants who lived in the U.S. and were willing to be interviewed post-Gathering. All together, 23 interviews were conducted, audio recorded with permission, and transcribed verbatim for the purposes of qualitative analysis.

An online survey, the secondary source of data for this study, was created for potential participants who the author met at the Gathering but who did not have time to be interviewed while in Seoul. After the Gathering concluded, and Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was received, a survey was created and a link was sent to those who had expressed interest in participating, as well as to several Korean adult adoptee listservs. This method of recruitment yielded 11 survey responses. The survey questions were identical to the questions asked in the interview, with the exception that the semi-structured interview format allowed for probing or clarifying questions whereas the survey did not.[1]

Participants

Interview participants ranged in age from 18 to 40 with a mean age of 26.17 (SD = 6.57). It is important to note that several participants mentioned that their actual birth date is

only presumable, due to the lack of records surrounding their births in Korea. Based on IRB suggestion, the confidentiality of online survey respondents was protected by gathering only approximate age data. Of the 11 respondents, six were over 33 years, two were between 30 and 33 years, one was between 27 and 29, one was between 23 and 26, and one was between 18 and 22.

Overall, the sample for this study (including interview and survey participants) included 26 females and eight males. All participants reported that they were adopted from Korea and were raised by White parents, with the exception of one participant who was adopted by a father who was also a Korean adoptee but who, due to divorce, was raised by his White mother and her parents. Participants' family compositions varied widely: 18 (53%) participants reported having at least one other sibling who was adopted from Korea (in three instances, participants had been adopted with their biologically related sibling), 11 (33%) participants reported having only non-adopted siblings, three (9%) had siblings who were adopted from countries other than Korea (e.g., Vietnam, the US), and two (6%) were the only child in their families.

Twenty-six (76%) of the 34 participants in this study described the community in which they were raised as predominantly White. Several other participants ($N = 3$, 9%) described their communities similarly, but noted that there had been a large and active group of Korean adoptees in their community with whom they gathered regularly while growing up. Still others ($N = 2$, 6%) portrayed their communities as predominantly White but indicated a strong Asian American presence as well. A total of three (9%) participants described their home communities as racially or ethnically diverse.

Data analysis

In order to best explore adoptees' experiences and perspectives on communication processes, an interpretive approach was used for examining the data. This approach assumes multiple realities, based on individuals' subjective positions, and values the speaker's perspective and language choices (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006).

To examine participants' meanings based on the data they provided in the interviews and the online survey, Owen's (1984, 1985) thematic analysis was used. This analytic tool provides criteria for discovering themes in participants' discourse. These criteria include recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness. Recurrence can be observed when at least two parts of a report have the same thread of meaning, although different words can convey the same meaning. Repetition, an extension of recurrence, occurs when key words, phrases, or sentences are identified using the same wording. Forcefulness can be identified through vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses, which ''serve to stress and subordinate some utterances from other locutions'' in oral reports (Owen, 1984, p. 275).

This method of analysis served as a powerful tool in that it provided a close reading of specific participants' reported experiences, but also for a wider perspective on experiences resonated across multiple interviews or surveys. In addition, Owen (1984) asserts that an understanding of how participant accounts are conceptually organized is an important step toward relational repair, because it allows for an identification of relational problems and challenges. A clearer understanding of the reasons why adoptees

avoid disclosing may allow for knowledge about how difficult interactions may be used for relational maintenance and repair.

Results

Research question 1: adoptees' reported experiences

Research question 1 asked what, if anything, adoptees experienced with regard to racial derogation. All participants recalled experiencing racial derogation at one time or another, most commonly during their primary and/or secondary school years. Three major themes arose in adoptees' reported experiences. These themes suggested three main types of racial derogation: *appearance attacks*, *perceived ethnicity attacks*, and *physical attacks*. Appearance attacks targeted adoptees' racialized (or presumably racialized) features. Adoptees reported having children pull their eyes back in a horizontal fashion to mock the shape of Asian eyes. They also recalled being called names such as "flat nose" or "slant eyes", as well as having their black hair mocked.

In perceived ethnicity attacks, the aggressor referenced essentializing cultural beliefs or stereotypes about Asians. Such attacks included the calling of names, such as "chink", "Chinese", "Jap", and/or "nigger", as well as having children mock karate moves in their presence. In addition, many participants recall having children recite a singsong chant: "Chi-*nese*, Japan-*ese*, dirty knees, look at these". As one female interviewee recalled:

> I got called a Chinese nigger a lot. 'Cause I was really really dark, in the summer I would get really, really dark. So I did look kinda like I was, you know, like a mix of something. And I think because my eyes aren't necessarily um, like slanted in the way that they would presume an Asian's eyes would be slanted, they didn't know like, exactly where I had come from or like, what my racial ethnicity was, or anything so they kind of made up this thing. And you know, like people would like pull their eyes down, like Chin*ese* Japan*ese* (singsong voice), you know, like things like that. You know, they would say things like "Ah so!" or you know like, things like that.

In this quote, one can see that multiple types of attacks – in this case perceived ethnicity attacks and appearance attacks – were used in tandem.

The third theme that arose for adoptees' experiences with racial derogation involved physical attacks, such as the throwing of rocks, tripping the adoptee, and/or fighting. Although male participants were more likely than female participants to report being involved in physical attacks, female participants were not exempt. One female adoptee recalled an instance in junior high:

> At first it was just one [boy], and then it was more, and then it was more, and more and more. Pretty soon I couldn't go from one class to the other without them like, shooting rubber bands at me or yanking my purse or trying to knock me over or um, like pushing me into things, and it never escalated into outright violence, but it was always done with some racial epithet, and it got to the point where I would get sick to my stomach before gym class because that was the time that we were rarely supervised . . . they did something or tripped

me or, or started saying, you know, chink or whatever because I couldn't hit the ball or something.

All male participants mentioned either receiving physical attacks or the possibility of being involved in them. One survey respondent wrote that while growing up, he was involved in "a lot of fights". Another reported an instance where he retaliated against a perceived ethnicity attack:

> After a kid was saying some racial slurs and jokes towards me, I knocked him and had to go to court over it. This happened when I was 17 in a very public place, which was not the smartest thing, but damn it felt good to lay this kid out because I didn't like him anyways.

Rather than being involved in physical altercations, some male participants suggested their possibility. For example, one participant reported that when he would tell his mother about receiving appearance or ethnicity attacks at school, "she would always emphasize not to retaliate physically". Another participant mentioned that a friend served as a shield against physical attacks, saying "He was a really big guy and so hanging out with him, being his friend, it was really helpful . . . They could *say* all they want, but they weren't going to mess with me because Peter was usually standing right next to me".

Perhaps the most striking finding for research question 1 is the repetition across adoptees' experiences. There was very little variation, in terms of the names adoptees were called, the ways in which their appearance was mocked, or the gestures that they received. These experiences might speak to the racialized experiences of Asian American children more broadly, but it is transracial adoptees' experiences at home that differentiate them from children who have parents whose race is the same as their own.

Research questions 2 and 3: topic avoidance

Research questions 2 and 3 asked the extent to which adoptees avoided the topic of racial derogation with their parents and reasons for this avoidance, respectively. Overall, participants in this study said that they tended to avoid the topic of their experiences with racial derogation with their parents. That is, they chose not to tell their parents about instances when they received appearance, ethnicity, or physical attacks. There were several reasons given for this choice.

Parent unresponsiveness. The clearest theme as to why adoptees avoided disclosing instances of racial derogation to their parents reflects what Guerrero and Afifi (1995b) label as *parent unresponsiveness*. Participants in this study expressed a belief that their parents would not be able to respond in a way that they, the adoptees, found to be comforting or helpful. What seemed to differentiate reports of parent unresponsiveness, however, is that some were based on adoptees' past experiences with their parents, whereas others seemed to be based on a *perception* that their parents would inherently not be able to understand adoptees' racialized experiences. Thus, the findings from this

study suggest the need for a division of parent unresponsiveness into two sub-themes: *perceived parent unresponsiveness* and *past parent unresponsiveness*.

Perceived parent unresponsiveness. The first sub-theme arose for participants who chose to not tell their parents about having experienced racial derogation because they believed that their parents would not respond in a way that the adoptees deemed helpful, but these participants did not cite past experiences of their parents being unresponsive. When asked why he chose not to tell his parents about encounters of racial teasing, a male interview participant responded, "I'm sure my parents would've dealt with it in some way, perhaps in some positive way, but I had this impression that they had no idea, at a real, instinctual level, what it meant". In a similar way, a female interviewee pointed out that although she thinks her parents would have tried to be understanding, she did not disclose her experiences with racial difference, saying, "I think they would have tried to be helpful and empathetic at the time if I had told them but I never expressed any of these things to them when I was growing up". When asked why she avoided this topic with her parents, this adoptee believed that it was due to what she called "trust issues". Another male reported that despite many experiences with racial derogation, he did not discuss this topic with his parents:

> I have encountered many acts of discrimination or racism, throughout my life. I never let my parents know about any of them . . . there was never one incident [of racial derogation] that took place when my parents were around me. I don't think my parents could contribute much of any advice to any of my past experiences because they don't know what it's like to be in my shoes.

Another participant recalled that his parents said to him, "Because you're adopted, you're different. So it's okay, so you can talk about it with us". Although at the time of the interview, he recognized this statement as being positive, he said that it felt "wrong". He stated, "And then maybe I felt like, oh yeah maybe I'm, yeah, I'm different. Oh well, yeah maybe I shouldn't talk to you. Maybe I should talk to someone who's the same". This participant's reported experiences warrant attention because, even though he was encouraged to talk about issues pertaining to his adoption or feelings of difference, he made the decision to avoid disclosure.

The above examples show that, even in the absence of parent unresponsiveness, participants perceived their parents to lack knowledge of how to respond to racial derogation, given that they, as White people, had not experienced it. For these adoptees, such perception resulted in keeping potentially and hurtful information private.

Past parent unresponsiveness. Whereas the above participants avoided disclosure due to a belief that their parents would be unresponsive, other participants avoided disclosure due to past negative experiences. These participants recalled disclosing a racially based experience or feeling with their parent(s), who responded in a way that the adoptee did not find to be helpful. One adoptee recalls telling her mother about instances where her peers mocked her eyes, skin color, and nose, and chased her on her bicycle. In response, her mother talked with the adoptee's teacher, who said the adoptee would need to

''learn to defend herself'' and did not do anything further to help her. She continued as follows:

> When I learned the word racism, my parents said a few times that they could have adopted a Black kid but they didn't because Black kids suffer of racism more than Asian kids, that's why they preferred a Korean girl; it could have been worse with a black kid than me. They said that what I suffer was nothing compared to a Black kid. I didn't talk very much with my parents but the few times that I talked to them, I wish that they didn't invalidate my feelings by minimizing them.

Another female participant shared similar experiences, writing of her experiences as a preteen, ''I usually cried in reaction [to racial derogation] and would run away. I usually didn't tell my parents after they happened, because they never said anything that helped''. Yet another female participant was always told by her parents to have ''thick skin'' and to not ''get her shorts in a bunch'' when she was called racial names. As a result, she avoided disclosing her experiences with racial derogation, even when it escalated to four months of daily appearance, ethnicity, and physical attacks.

These examples of past parent unresponsiveness confirm CPM theory's premise that individuals learn privacy rules through interaction (Petronio, 2002). As Petronio and Caughlin (2006) write, ''The decisions to reveal or conceal are predicated on rules that stem from many different spheres of influence'' (p. 38). Indeed, one ''sphere'' that appears particularly influential is past experiences of self-disclosing to one's parents. The participants' words suggest that they internalized a rule advising against sharing information about racialized encounters with their parents, because they (the adoptees) would not necessarily receive helpful or supportive responses. As one male respondent wrote, ''The issue of race was not allowed to be discussed at home. We weren't allowed to talk about our differences''.

Self-protection

A theme for *self-protection* also arose as a reason some adoptees did not disclose their experiences with racial derogation with their parents. Rather than feeling as though their parents were incapable of responding to their problems, these adoptees discussed their desire to ''fit in'' or ''blend in'' with the White family and community surrounding them and how this desire overrode their desire to share their racialized experiences with their parents. One female interviewee reflected in the following way on why she and her parents avoided the topic of race:

> So I think some of it was that my parents didn't bring [race] up and I think the other factor was that I didn't know how to voice that, either, because I didn't have anyone around me that could voice it, despite the fact that my [Korean adopted] sister was there. I think that we were very similar in the sense that we don't have other people telling us it's okay to talk about being different, especially when people are telling you ''you should be the same.'' You kind of feel like it's your fault.

In this quote, the parents' reported lack of dialogue surrounding race and the adoptee's lack of knowledge about how to articulate her feelings about race were compounded by feelings of not wanting to be different. The result was topic avoidance about race, and this avoidance served to minimize difference.

Adoptees who reported engaging in topic avoidance for the purposes of self-protection were concerned with blending into the Whiteness surrounding them. One female survey respondent wrote, "I didn't want to people to notice that I wasn't White". Such a response underscores the strong desire many Korean adoptees felt to assimilate and blend in. The difficulty, however, is that interactions involving racial derogation highlight that the Korean adoptee is, indeed, not White.

Importantly, although participants chose to avoid discussions of race with their parents, they wanted to be able to talk with their parents about these topics. They appeared to feel the dialectic expressed by Petronio and Caughlin (2006): on one hand, they wanted to avoid the topic of racial derogation because it highlighted their difference; on the other, they wanted to be able to disclose their experiences and receive support and guidance. Indeed, adoptees who reported that they felt the need to avoid the topic of race or racial derogation with their parents often expressed feelings of loneliness, isolation, and/or anger.

Non-avoidance

Although reports of adoptees who avoided the topic of derogation were more common in these data than those who broached this topic with their parents, several participants reported non-avoidance of this topic. For example, one participant characterized herself as always feeling "very comfortable" talking with her parents about issues related to adoption, race, and racial derogation. She recalled her father's response when she and her sister, who was also a Korean adoptee, were teased about their eyes on the bus:

> I remember on the school bus, actually both [my sister] and I used to get teased by some of the kids and they would do the Chinese eyes and look at you and go "Chinese, Chinese." And I remember coming home... and telling our parents and we'd be crying you know, "Why did they tease us, why did they do that?" and again them being just amazingly really cool. And I also remember my dad just sitting with us and saying "You know, they just don't know and they just probably learned to tease from their parents," and so he said, "Let's come up with something that you can, you know, how you can respond." . . . I just thought this was so cool (laughs).

One male participant spoke of his interactions with his mother most specifically. After telling her about being called racial names, I asked him if the way that she spoke with him was helpful. He responded, saying:

> Yeah, definitely. Anytime a mother engages you like um, especially when you're upset like that, it's really comforting. I think if she had brushed off the topic and just kinda said "Ignore it," – just give me a really short answer instead of really you know, reminding

me what was around me, I would have had a much more hard time dealing with it. But the fact that she was engaging, kinda, I don't know, comforting just about the whole thing was, was really helpful. Um, she explained it rather than just telling me how to avoid it.

Later in the interview, he mentions his belief that having an ''open'' relationship with his parents has been a ''comforting fallback'' for him.

Adoptees who said that they had positive past experiences disclosing feelings about, or interactions involving, race were less likely to avoid these topics in conversations with their parents than did those who did not report such experiences. If they encountered racial derogation or had questions about their adoption, they reported talking with their parents about these topics and receiving what they perceived as helpful, empathic responses. This finding is in line with Matsunaga's (2008) study on bullying, which suggests that, in families characterized by open and affectionate communication, parents are more likely to be aware of their child's actual experiences with bullying than in families characterized by detached or mixed styles of communication. In other words, parents whose communication is characterized by openness, emotional expressiveness, emotional/instrumental support, and regular routine interaction (Caughlin, 2003) appear less likely to foster topic avoidance than parents who display low amounts of openness and expression of affection, or families wherein the mother is open and the father is detached. This finding is important in that it suggests a meaningful connection between one's family communication orientation (Matsunaga, 2008) and the tendency for children to engage in topic avoidance.

Overall, adoptees who chose to talk about their experiences with racial derogation with their parents found that their parents listened to them and that their parents' responses were helpful in some way. Participants who reported non-avoidance regarding racial derogation based their decision on past, positive experiences of self-disclosure with their parents. In contrast to participants who reported topic avoidance, these participants developed the privacy rule that disclosing these experiences to one's parents is beneficial.

Discussion

Overall, this study makes several important contributions, both to the literature on transracial adoption and on privacy management in adoptive families. Yet, results from this study also raise questions that are worthy of exploration in future research.

Transracial adoption

By advancing understanding of transracial adoptees' reported experiences with racial derogation, this study addresses Galvin's (2003) communication research agenda for international and transracial adoption. Adoption scholars from outside the discipline of communication (Lee, 2003; McGinnis, 2007; Rojewski, 2005) have also cited a need for research in this area. Specifically, results from research question 1 provide a typology of racially derogatory experiences: appearance attacks, perceived ethnicity attacks, and physical attacks. In doing so, the current study makes a unique contribution to body of

transracial adoptee research, which has historically focused on issues of adjustment and ethnic identity development. Rather than focusing on these outcome variables, this study sheds light on specific interactions that seem to characterize the transracial adoptee experience: racial derogation and interracial parent–child communication.

Although previous transracial adoption research suggested that adoptees experienced racial derogation, results from this study suggest the ubiquitous nature of these types of interactions and their striking similarity across adoptees' experiences. The fact that a large proportion of participants in this study described the areas in which they were raised as predominantly White, however, suggests the importance of extending this research to include more adoptees who grew up in racially diverse areas, in an effort to explore Gray's (2007) finding that Australian adoptees who were raised in "predominantly monocultural areas" suffered more severe discrimination than the other adoptees in her study.

The experiences of participants who had at least one Korean adopted sibling did not differ sharply from those who were the only child or the only adopted child in the family. Participants who had least one other Korean adopted sibling seemed to report discussions about racial derogation or race only slightly more often than those who did not. One somewhat surprising finding was that several participants, without being asked, pointed out differences in how they and their Korean adopted sibling responded (emotionally and communicatively) to racial derogation. This finding points to the importance of future adoption studies exploring family communication about race from multiple perspectives within families, including multiple siblings' perspectives.

The results of this study also suggest possible differences in reported experiences based on gender, but are somewhat inconclusive with regard to the effects of age. Male participants were more likely to report being involved (or being expected or tempted to be involved) in physical attacks or fights than were female participants, although female participants were not exempt from these types of interactions. It remains unknown whether male adoptees are more likely than female adoptees to receive physical attacks due to their race, whether they tend to respond with physical attacks when provoked, or both. In addition, although participants of all ages reported experiencing racial derogation, the extent to which these experiences and adoptees' perceptions of them differed based solely on age remains unexplored and worthy of examination in future studies.

Race, topic avoidance, and privacy management theory

Petronio and Cauglin (2006) refer to CPM theory as a "practical theory constructed to permit applications that give us the opportunity to understand everyday problems and events that people encounter in families" (p. 36). As such, this theory is a useful lens through which to examine adoptees' topic avoidance about race and the reasons, or rules, that result in this avoidance. Examining this study's findings in light of this theory allows for a deeper understanding of the rules that guided participants' choices regarding disclosure.

Topic avoidance. Guerrero and Afifi's (1995b) typology of reasons for avoiding disclosure provided a useful heuristic for uncovering themes in participants' responses. Participants

were most likely to report that they avoided disclosing experiences with racial deroga-
tion due to what Guerrero and Afifi (1995b) referred to as parent unresponsiveness and
self-protection. The current study extends this typology by outlining sub-themes for
parent unresponsiveness by distinguishing between *perceived* unresponsiveness and *past*
unresponsiveness. This distinction is significant, given that some adoptees developed a
rather strict privacy rule about racial derogation, even in the absence of direct negative
experiences. One practical implication of this finding is that parents may need to initiate
discussion about race and racial derogation, in order to demonstrate competency and/or
openness, rather than waiting for their children to do so. In addition, this distinction
between *perceived* and *past* parent unresponsiveness has implications for communication
scholars interested in how privacy rules develop in families.

Rule management processes. CPM theory posits three rule management processes: privacy
rule foundations, boundary coordination operations, and boundary turbulence (Petronio,
2002). Examining each of these processes allows for a deeper understanding of this
study's results and contributions.

Privacy rule foundations. Privacy rule foundations involve two features of rules: devel-
opment, which examines how rules come into existence, and attributes, which examines
the characteristics of rules (Petronio, 2002). Most adoptees in the current study described
a privacy rule that classified experiences with racial derogation as their own private
information and thus avoided talking with their parents about these experiences. This
rule developed in two main ways: through previous interaction and through what
Petronio (2002) refers to as *contextual criteria*. For some participants, past parent
unresponsiveness led them to this topic avoidance. Other participants' responses,
however, suggested that the *social context* was an important consideration in deciding to
avoid the topic of race. For these participants, the desire to self-protect and ''blend in'' or
''fit in'' overrode their desire to talk about experiences with racial derogation. Given
U.S. culture, which is characterized by a pervasive discomfort about racial difference
and where being ''color-blind'' is often viewed positively (Quiroz, 2007), the develop-
ment of this privacy rule is not surprising.

   Results from this study also support the idea that privacy rules have certain attributes,
one of which is that they are both static and dynamic. As Petronio (2002) writes, ''Rules
can grow and change, but they can also be a stable factor in guiding privacy judgments''
(p. 27). For some participants, privacy rules that developed in childhood or adolescence
were long lasting, but other adoptees reported trajectories of high levels of disclosure as
children, a tapering off during their teenage years, and an upward progression as young
adults. In other words, the permeability of their privacy boundary surrounding the topic
of race shifted over time. This finding supports the idea that privacy rules may change
developmentally (Petronio & Caughlin, 2006).

Boundary coordination and boundary turbulence. Boundary coordination involves family
members agreeing upon rules surrounding private information, whereas boundary tur-
bulence occurs when there is conflict about how private information should be managed.

Because coordination does not always occur seamlessly or smoothly, it will be discussed together with boundary turbulence.

Boundary coordination can occur explicitly, but sometimes privacy rules are assumed rather than discussed. One challenge to boundary coordination in families is that children often do not have equal voice in negotiating privacy rules with their parents. For example, adoptees who experience racial derogation as children or adolescents are the owners of this information, but their role in coordinating the boundaries surrounding this information once it is shared with their parents may be minimal. Several participants described experiences where, without their approval, their parents responded to their reports of racial derogation by contacting school officials to intervene or discipline the aggressors. This type of response was generally seen as ineffective and for one participant, resulted in retaliation from the aggressors. Clearly, boundary turbulence characterizes this experience. Future research should explore more deeply the manner in which children and parents coordinate boundaries surrounding information that children evaluate as both private and their own.

Another challenge to successful boundary coordination is the implicitness and indirectness of privacy rules. The adoptees in this study used their parents' past responses to reports of racial derogation as contextual information in formulating their privacy rules. Minimizing responses such as "Don't get your shorts in a bunch" seemed to be interpreted as, "Keep this information to yourself". These participants thus formulated a rule about not sharing this information with their parents, suggesting successful coordination: Parents seemed to not want to hear about racial derogation and the adoptees stopped disclosing this information. What is interesting is that although these privacy boundaries appeared to be successfully coordinated, adoptees experienced turbulence in that they wanted to be able to disclose these experiences and receive support. Privacy management theory conceives boundary turbulence as explicit and dyadic, but perhaps boundary turbulence can also be thought of as individual and internal.

Together, results from research questions 2 and 3 suggest that privacy rules are both formulated as a result of previous interaction, but also that they are formed based simply on family members' *perceptions* and *assumptions* about how others will respond to one's disclosures. This finding hints at the importance of families' communication orientation (Matsunaga, 2008), which may influence – and be influenced by – the strictness of privacy rules. Adoptees' formulation of strict privacy rules, or thick boundaries, surrounding racial derogation may be considered problematic, however, given the painfulness of these experiences and communicators' general motivations for self-disclosure. Most participants in this study discussed their experiences with racial derogation as hurtful and potentially isolating. Given research suggesting that communicators tend to be motivated to self-disclose to fill the need for expressivity (i.e., self-disclosure is inherently rewarding and cathartic) and self-knowledge (Davis & Franzoi, 1998; Delerga & Grzelak, 1979, both cited in Petronio, 2002), one can see how self-expression, support, and self-knowledge through disclosure might be beneficial in these circumstances. Perhaps surprisingly, then, discussion about differences within an adoptive family may be an important strategy that fosters the family's internal sense of "family-ness" or cohesion (Galvin, 2006).

Limitations and additional future directions

Although this study contributes to knowledge of Korean adoptees' experiences with the types of racial derogation and reasons why they might avoid discussing these interactions with their White adoptive parents, several limitations are apparent. This study does not provide insight into parents' perspectives on family communication about race and the potential reasons for their own topic avoidance. Avoidance research, such as Caughlin and Afifi's (2004) study, which gleans data from both relational partners, would provide additional insight into adoptive parents *and* adopted children's perceptions of avoidance; this type of relational research seems important, given that some adoptive parents avoid discussing the topic of race and, either knowingly or unknowingly, discourage their children from discussing it as well.

Future research should also examine the circumstances under which adoptees' topic avoidance of racial derogation leads to negative feelings (e.g., loneliness, isolation) for the adoptee. Past research (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004) suggests that perceptions of the other person's communication competence tend to moderate the negative association between one's own avoidance and relational satisfaction. Such a finding suggests that adoptees who avoid due to perceived parent unresponsiveness may experience more relational dissatisfaction and negative feelings than those who avoid for other reasons.

Future studies should also examine the types of parent responses that elicit more or less topic avoidance, and why, as well as the parent responses that adoptees recommend. This type of research may be used to educate pre-adoptive and adoptive families. Parents in de Haymes and Simon's (2003) study requested resources to help them respond when their minority children disclose instances of racism. One parent stated, "I want to hear more about how to deal with racism. I want to know how to be there for my child" (p. 267). This type of education may be particularly important, given Harrigan's (2009) finding that some adoptive parents lose sight of their children's racial difference. The findings of this study may be valuable in their potential applicability to the growing number of Chinese adoptive families in the US. Given that the racially derogatory experiences of Korean adoptees seem to be based on essentialist notions of Asians in general, these findings may serve to inform adoptive or prospective adoptive parents of Chinese children.

Conclusion

The present study sheds new light on transracial adoptees' reported experiences with racial derogation, a topic that, up to this point, has been understudied in the adoption, personal relationships, and family communication literature. This study provides knowledge of the types of interactions and degrees of severity that adoptees report having faced while growing up. Although it is unknown whether these experiences are categorically different from the experiences of other Asian Americans who grow up in the US, the context in which these derogatory experiences occur is different; when they are called racial epithets at school, transracial adoptees return home to parents who are inherently unable to fully understand how they feel. Still, some participants reported parental responses that were deemed as helpful enough to encourage routine

self-disclosure and the receiving of emotional support. In addition to furthering our knowledge of how topic avoidance and privacy management operate in families, this study suggests the possibility of family communication that results in feelings of support and closeness, even when racial difference threatens to create barriers.

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Conflict of interest statement

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Note

1. Both the interview and survey questions are available from the author.

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