

# Children's and parents' thoughts and feelings about adoption, birth culture identity and discrimination in families with internationally adopted children

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## ABSTRACT

We examined the perceptions of adoption and related issues in 68 families with internationally adopted children in Spain (48 transracial and 20 same-race adoptions). The adopted children, between the ages of 8 and 12 years, and their parents answered questions about the children's thoughts and feelings about adoption. Descriptive data and scores on four scales – family, adoption, birth culture identity and discrimination – were obtained. Compared with same-race adoptees, transracial adoptees scored significantly higher on birth culture identity and perceived discrimination. High levels of convergence between the children's and parents' viewpoints on the experiences of adoption and related issues were found. Nevertheless, the adopted children scored higher than their parents on birth culture identity, suggesting that at this age adoptive parents may underestimate their children's connection to their cultural origins. In contrast, the same-race adoptees scored significantly lower on perceived discrimination than their mothers. We conclude that at this age adoptive parents should acknowledge their adopted child's daily-life experiences regarding cultural identity with the birth country and discrimination.

## INTRODUCTION

While psychological outcomes of internationally adopted children have received a great deal of attention (for a review, see Palacios & Brodzinsky 2010), relatively few studies have examined their experiences related to their adoptive status. How do adoptees come to terms with being adopted and looking different? In this study, we examined children's and parents' thoughts and feelings about adoption and related issues. The children, aged 8–12 years, were all internationally adopted to Spain.

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As Brodzinsky *et al.* (1992, p. 7) stated, 'Being adopted can be something that colours a person's relationship with their adoptive parents, their emerging sense of self, and the intimate relationships they forge for the rest of their life'. The issue of being adopted is one that will be returned to, consciously and unconsciously, at various points in an adoptee's development. In middle childhood, adopted children's understanding and appreciation of the implications of adoption grow at a profound rate. Children enter what Piaget (1954) called the period of concrete operations, which enables them to understand the world in a logical manner. This is when adopted children begin to appreciate the uniqueness of this family status and to consider the meaning of being adopted (Brodzinsky *et al.* 1984, 1992). They start to recognize that adoption implies not just building a family (their adoptive family) but also losing a family (their birth

family). In this developmental stage, they may experience a profound sense of loss and difference with regard to others, and it is this consciousness that may set the stage for some of the adjustment problems seen in adopted children.

Although originally developed for domestic adoptees, this theoretical model seems to apply to international adoptions as well, with the addition of some specific challenges. In most cases, children have been adopted into a family of different race (transracial adoption) and have a different physical appearance and cultural heritage compared with their adoptive parents. And when they grow older, they develop increasingly complex and integrated perspectives on their ethnic/racial experiences (Lee & Quintana 2005). They may also begin to experience feelings of loss of their birth culture and family history, and a growing awareness of possible racism and discrimination in their daily lives (Meier 1999; Powell & Affi 2005). Identity development, therefore, might be particularly difficult for internationally (transracially placed) adopted children as they may struggle with racial and ethnic issues (Hollingsworth 1997).

Because of these specific circumstances, it has been assumed that international adoptees may show more adjustment problems compared with domestic adoptees. Nevertheless, meta-analytic research has demonstrated that international adoption itself does not necessarily place a child at higher risk for maladjustment (for overviews, see Van IJzendoorn & Juffer 2006; Juffer *et al.* 2011) and no significant differences between international and domestic adoptees have been found on cognitive development (Van IJzendoorn *et al.* 2005), self-esteem (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn 2007) and attachment (Van den Dries *et al.* 2009). In contrast, international adoptees showed fewer behaviour problems and mental-health referrals than did domestic adoptees (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn 2005). Additionally, results revealed no significant differences between transracial and same-race adoptees in terms of attachment and self-esteem (Juffer & Van IJzendoorn 2007; Van den Dries *et al.* 2009). Lee (2003) stated that there are no inherent psychological risks in transracial adoption, with the majority of these adopted children showing adequate adjustment, but there seems to be a risk associated with the complexity of their status. This complexity may explain the still vivid debate on the implications of transracial adoption (e.g. Simon & Alstein 1996; Hollingsworth 1997).

The challenges of international (transracial) adoption that children are going through during middle childhood and adolescence might be quite difficult for

adoptive parents too. They may experience increased stress related to the unique tasks associated with adoptive family life, such as telling the children about their adoption, discussing their dual connection to two families and remaining empathically attuned to their children's feelings (Kirk 1964). Likewise, adoptive parents need to decide when and how to appropriately address ethnic and racial differences with their transracially adopted children (Lee 2003), and whether and how they want to incorporate the child's birth culture into the family's life (Friedlander 1999; Thomas & Tessler 2007; Scherman 2010). In all these processes, for healthy adjustment to occur, the importance of open communication within the adoptive family has been widely recognized (Brodzinsky *et al.* 1992; Grotevant 1997; Brodzinsky 2005, 2006; Neil 2009, 2010).

Only a few studies have addressed internationally adopted children's feelings associated with being adopted and looking different (Juffer 2006; Juffer & Tieman 2009, 2012). Results showed that sizable numbers of children had expressed the wish not to be or to look different. Likewise, several children had experienced negative reactions from others with respect to their physical appearance or their origin. Most children were interested in their adoption, especially in their individual photo album, while most parents started talking about adoption immediately after their child's arrival in the family (Juffer & Tieman 2009). However, these findings were based on parent (mostly mother) report and children were not interviewed themselves.

In recent years, Spain has become one of the receiving countries with the highest numbers of inter-country adoptions. According to the Spanish Ministry of Health and Social Policy, between 1998 and 2010, a total of 45 696 children were adopted from abroad (see also Palacios & Amorós 2006; Selman 2009). Notwithstanding these substantial figures, empirical outcomes of this population are still scarce (but see, e.g. Palacios *et al.* 2009; Reinoso & Forns 2010). As far as we know, the views of the children themselves and the views of their adoptive parents regarding the adoption experiences have never been taken into account. A lack of measures to address this issue is noteworthy as well. However, as a large number of international adoptees are growing up in Spanish society, their experiences of adoption should be investigated.

In the present study, we address this question by assessing international adoptees in middle childhood, and their mothers and fathers, in Spain. The aims of this study are as follows: first, to explore children's and parents' thoughts and feelings about adoption, and,

second, to test for differences between child and parent reports. For this study, we designed a questionnaire for internationally adoptive families about the child's thoughts and feelings of being adopted and related issues. We hypothesized that children and parents manifest a wide range of opinions concerning the adoptive status of the child, and that at this age children's and parents' views are not significantly different from each other. Furthermore, we examined possible differences between transracial and same-race adoptions, and expected to find more perceived discrimination in transracial than in same-race adoptees. We also hypothesized that children and parents from the transracial group converge more in their perceptions of discrimination than the same-race group.

## METHOD

### Participants

The sample consisted of 68 children, 26 boys (38%) and 42 girls (62%), internationally adopted in infancy, and their respective parents (64 adoptive mothers and 37 adoptive fathers). Although fewer adoptive fathers than adoptive mothers participated in the study, this was not because of the fathers' low involvement but rather because of single motherhood (there were 24 single mothers). Children, aged between 8 and 12 years, were adopted from various countries by white parents in Spain. Seventy-one per cent of cases were transracial adoptions (children from Asia, Africa or South America) and 29% same-race adoptions (children from Eastern Europe). The main child and family demographic characteristics are reported in Table 1.

### Procedure

Participants were recruited from various settings, such as adoptive families' associations, schools and health/education professionals (estimated participation rate of about 50%;  $n = 46$ ) and through snowball sampling method ( $n = 22$ ). Stamped recruitment letters were forwarded to the adoptive parents, and families were invited to participate in the study and to contact the investigator by telephone or e-mail.

Scheduled appointments were made at the family's convenience either at the university/professional centre ( $n = 56$ ; 82%) or at their own home. The researcher described the study to the families. Participants were informed that their responses would not be shared with each other (that is, children's responses would not be disclosed to their parents, nor would be

**Table 1** Child and family demographic characteristics

	Mean	SD	Range
Children's current age (years)	9.59	1.28	8–12
Children's age at placement (months)	39.51	26.05	0–108
Time with adoptive families (months)	75.97	27.32	12–139
Mothers' age (years)	48.52	5.47	35–57
Father's age (years)	49.46	6.67	41–67
Mothers' academic level reached*	4.14	1.14	1–6
Fathers' academic level reached*	3.81	0.78	1–6
Family income†	4.82	1.12	1–6

  

	<i>n</i>	%	
Children's sex	Male	26	38
	Female	42	62
Children's area of origin‡	Asia	29	43
	Eastern Europe	20	29
	Africa	10	15
	Latin America	9	13
Type of placement	Transracial	48	71
	Same-race	20	29
Pre-adoption residence§	Orphanage	60	88
	Birth family or relatives	31	46
	Foster family	7	10
Number of siblings	0	23	34
	1	34	50
	2 or 3	11	16
Family type¶	Adopted children	56	82
	Mixed families	12	18
Family structure**	2 parents	43	63
	1 parent	25	37

Note: The sample was composed of 68 children, 64 mothers and 37 fathers.

\*Academic level ranged from 1 = no studies to 6 = PhD level.

†Family income ranged from 1 = less than 600 euros per month to 6 = more than 3600 euros per month.

‡Asian countries included China, India and Nepal. Eastern countries included Bulgaria, Russia and Ukraine. African countries included Burkina Faso, Cameroon and Ethiopia.

Latin American countries were Brazil, Haiti, Mexico, Panama and Dominican Republic.

§Children might have been in more than one placement before being adopted.

¶Families composed of adopted children only vs. families with both adopted and birth children.

\*\*There were 24 single-mother families and 1 single-father family.

SD, standard deviation.

one partner's responses to the other) and that they could decline to answer any question. The parents gave their written informed consent for both themselves and their child to participate, and the children gave verbal assent. An assessment protocol was then administered, including the questionnaire *My Experiences*. This questionnaire was administered with

the child individually, while parents independently completed their version in another room. Special attention was paid to establish rapport and a climate of trust with the child participant. After the visit, children received a gift in consideration of their involvement in the study. All assessments were conducted by the first author. Ethical approval was granted by the University of Barcelona Bioethics Committee.

### Measures

The questionnaire *My Experiences* was created *ad hoc* with the aim to assess thoughts and feelings about being adopted and related issues in internationally adopted children and their parents in Spain. The items of this questionnaire were based on previous adoption research (Trolley *et al.* 1995; Kohler *et al.* 2002; Müller *et al.* 2002; Tindal 2003; Brodzinsky 2006; Greene *et al.* 2007; Hawkins *et al.* 2007; Donahue 2008; McSherry *et al.* 2008) and practical knowledge of the adoption field. A panel of seven judges composed of researchers and practitioners in Spain examined face and content validity and were positive about it. The questionnaire was first applied in a pilot test in five families; the results were used to revise the instrument, rephrase and delete items, reduce its length and modify the response scale. A bilingual Spanish-Catalan version was then created. It consisted of a combination of 3- and 5-point Likert-type items (e.g. 'Do you speak the language of your birth country?' Yes – No – It's the same language, yes/no items) (e.g. 'Have you visited your birth country?' Yes/No) and open-ended questions (e.g. 'What do you know about your adoption?') (Not all reported here; the original version can be requested from the authors.)

To take into account the different perspectives of the family members, both child and parent versions of the questionnaire were developed. The child version examines the child's view of the adoption experience. The parent version examines the same aspects, and mothers and fathers are asked to answer the questions from their child's perspective (i.e. responding what they think their child would answer). Only one question is different in the two versions: 'Here are photos of some children (the interviewer shows the adoptee pictures of children of different racial groups), which one looks the most similar to you?' (child version) and 'Do you think your child understands what being adopted means?' (parent version). Based on Fargas-Malet *et al.* (2010), the following methodological considerations were taken into account. The child version was presented in a 'child-friendly' format, visually attractive and appeal-

ing to respondents. Questions were asked aloud and, as they involved sensitive issues, the researcher was constantly alert to children's responses.

For the purpose of this study, we constructed four scales by combining related items: family scale (six items), adoption scale (eight items), birth culture identity scale (five items) and discrimination scale (two items) (see the Appendix). The items were scored on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 5 (a lot). Higher scores on the family scale indicate higher satisfaction and identification with family members. Higher scores on the adoption scale indicate larger impact of the adoption. Higher scores on the birth culture identity scale indicate higher sense of cultural belonging to and cultural interest in the adoptees' birth country. Higher scores on the discrimination scale indicate higher levels of perceived discrimination. The reliability (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) for each informant and each scale ranged from 0.61 (family scale, mother report) to 0.79 (birth culture identity scale, father report). Analyses for the discrimination scale were not conducted for the fathers because the reliability was too low ( $\alpha = 0.39$ ).

### RESULTS

The outcomes are presented in three sections. First, we examine possible associations between background variables and the outcome measures. Second, we report the descriptive information obtained from the questionnaire. Third, we analyse the thoughts and feelings about adoption and related issues based on the four scales (family, adoption, birth culture identity and discrimination), and explore differences between same-race and transracial adoptions. In the three sections, children's, mothers' and fathers' perspectives are taken into account.

#### Preliminary analyses

We analysed possible associations between background variables (gender, age at adoption, current age, area of origin, parents' age and family structure) and the outcome measures (scale scores). Age at adoption was related to the father's reports on the birth culture identity scale ( $r = 0.47$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), meaning that fathers reported a higher sense of cultural belonging to and cultural interest in their birth country for children adopted at older age than for children adopted at younger age. Mother's age was associated with the child's reports on the family scale ( $r = -0.38$ ,  $P < 0.01$ ), meaning that children of younger adoptive mothers expressed higher family sat-

	Child M (SD)	Mother M (SD)	Father M (SD)
With whom do you ( <i>does your child</i> ) talk about your ( <i>her/his</i> ) adoption?*			
Mother	3.43 (1.56)†	3.62 (1.22)	3.51 (1.26)
Father	2.64 (1.68)†	2.35 (1.29)‡	2.97 (1.09)
Siblings	1.94 (1.36)†	2.35 (1.33)†	2.36 (1.27)†
Grandparents	1.58 (1.23)†	1.86 (1.08)	1.76 (0.96)
Uncles/Aunts	1.78 (1.37)†	1.77 (1.00)	1.54 (0.73)
Cousins	1.61 (1.27)†	1.97 (1.21)	1.57 (0.77)
Friends	1.97 (1.39)†	2.30 (1.22)§	2.46 (1.04)
Baby-sitter	1.24 (0.87)†	1.59 (0.96)	1.51 (0.87)
Teachers	1.51 (1.15)†	2.14 (1.14)	2.03 (0.76)
Professionals	1.24 (0.85)†	1.67 (1.06)	1.95 (1.13)
Others	1.00 (0.00)†	1.03 (0.18)	1.03 (0.17)†

Note: Answers were coded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = not at all to 5 = a lot).

\*Parents were asked the question with the italic alternatives included.

†Missing:  $n = 1$ .

‡Missing:  $n = 2$ .

§Missing:  $n = 3$ .

SD, standard deviation.

isfaction than did children of older mothers. Gender, area of origin, father's age and family structure were not related to the scale scores. Therefore, we decided to control for age at adoption and mother's age in the pertinent analyses.

### Descriptive analyses

All parents asserted that their child knew that he/she was adopted and, on the average, they said that their child understood 'quite well' what being adopted meant ( $M_{\text{mothers}} = 4.41$ , standard deviation [SD] = 0.90;  $M_{\text{fathers}} = 4.16$ , SD = 0.99; 5-point scale with higher scores meaning more understanding).

When children were asked where they came from, they mainly mentioned their birth country/city (80%;  $n = 54$ ), followed by their receiving country (Spain)/city (13%;  $n = 9$ ) and both their birth and receiving country (Spain)/city (3%;  $n = 2$ ). There were a few other responses as well, such as 'Depending on the person who asks' or 'I don't answer because it's a personal question' (4%;  $n = 3$ ). For the parents, they mostly mentioned their child's birth country/city (mothers 67%, fathers 62%) followed by both their birth and receiving country (Spain)/city (mothers 17%, fathers 22%) and their receiving country (Spain)/city (mothers 13%, fathers 11%). A few other responses were given as well (mothers 3%, fathers 5%). No differences were found between children's and mothers' reports ( $P = 0.39$ ) and the same was true for the children's vs. the fathers' reports ( $P = 0.56$ ).

**Table 2** Communication about adoption

Most children (73.5%;  $n = 50$ ) had not visited their country of origin after being adopted, although some of them had done so (26.5%;  $n = 18$ ). In all 68 cases, the family members correctly mentioned the child's birth and receiving countries. Likewise, all children chose the photo of the child that was physically the most similar to them (that is, the one from their own racial group).

Adoptees stated they would like to have more siblings (56%;  $n = 38$ ), or they were happy with the number of siblings they already had (44%;  $n = 30$ ). None of them said they wanted to have fewer siblings than they actually had. Conversely, a few parents stated that their child would like to have fewer siblings than they already had (mothers 3%, fathers 3%). Around half of the mothers (47%,  $n = 30$ ) said that their child was happy with their current number of siblings, while the other half (45%,  $n = 29$ ) said that their child would like to have more siblings than they already had. Three mothers (5%) did not answer this question. For the fathers, most of them (57%,  $n = 21$ ) stated that their child was happy with the current number of siblings, followed by those who stated that their child would like to have more siblings than they already had (40%,  $n = 15$ ). Statistically significant differences were found between mothers' and children's reports ( $\chi^2 [2, n = 61] = 6.52$ ;  $P = 0.03$ ), but not between children's and fathers' reports ( $P = 0.09$ ) for this variable.

As shown in Table 2, all informants stated that the children mainly talked about their adoption with their parents (mean scores above 2.30; 5-point scale with

**Table 3** Scales regarding the adoption experience

	Child M (SD)	Mother M (SD)	Father M (SD)
Family			
Total group	3.73 (0.66) <sup>†</sup>	3.65 (0.57) <sup>‡</sup>	3.67 (0.59)
Same-race	3.76 (0.73)	3.82 (0.46)	4.04 (0.41) <sup>**b</sup>
Transracial	3.72 (0.63)	3.58 (0.61)	3.47 (0.57)
Adoption			
Total group	2.76 (0.78) <sup>†</sup>	2.72 (0.68)	2.59 (0.56)
Same-race	2.51 (0.60)	2.78 (0.68)	2.80 (0.67)
Transracial	2.86 (0.83)	2.96 (0.69)	2.48 (0.47)
Birth culture identity			
Total group	3.82 (0.91) <sup>†</sup>	2.62 (0.88)	2.58 (1.01)
Same-race	3.46 (0.98) <sup>*b</sup>	2.63 (0.91) <sup>***a</sup>	2.89 (1.10)
Transracial	3.96 (0.85)	2.62 (0.89) <sup>***a</sup>	2.42 (0.95) <sup>***a</sup>
Discrimination			
Total group	1.56 (0.94) <sup>†</sup>	1.85 (0.92)	–
Same-race	1.26 (0.54) <sup>*b</sup>	2.03 (0.96) <sup>***a</sup>	–
Transracial	1.68 (1.03)	1.78 (0.90)	–

Notes: <sup>†</sup>Missing:  $n = 1$  (family scale, adoption scale, birth culture identity scale, discrimination scale, children report).

<sup>‡</sup>Missing:  $n = 2$  (family scale, mother report). In analyses with the family scale, mother's age was controlled for, and in analyses with the birth culture identity scale, age at adoption was controlled for. Parent-child differences within the scales are indicated with <sup>\*</sup> $P < 0.05$ , <sup>\*\*</sup> $P < 0.01$ . Same-race vs. transracial adoptions differences within the scales are indicated with <sup>\*b</sup> $P < 0.05$ , <sup>\*\*b</sup> $P < 0.01$ .

SD, standard deviation.

higher scores meaning more communication about adoption). From the parents' perspective, siblings, friends and teachers were important people for their child to talk about it too (means above 2). For the child, the second ones were friends and siblings (means just slightly under 2). Other relatives and other people were given lower scores than the previously mentioned persons, according to both the parents and the child.

All mothers and fathers stated that their child knew other internationally adopted children, and this was also the case for 94% of the children. Most of the fathers (97%;  $n = 36$ ) and mothers (91%;  $n = 58$ ) answered that some of those children came from the same country of origin as their child did, and this was also the case for three-quarters of the children (75%;  $n = 51$ ).

#### Scales: informants and same-race vs. transracial adoptions

Means and SDs on each scale provided by children, mothers and fathers are presented in Table 3. Separate analyses of variance and analyses of covariance were conducted to determine possible differences between the scores of the informants on the four scales. Covariates included age at adoption and moth-

er's age. Differences between same-race and transracial adoptions were also explored.

There were no significant differences among the three informants on the family scale for same-race families,  $F(2, 45) = 0.83$ ,  $P = 0.44$ , nor for transracial families,  $F(2, 105) = 1.69$ ,  $P = 0.19$ . Type of placement was related to the father's reports on the family scale,  $t(35) = -3.21$ ,  $P < 0.01$ , indicating that fathers reported a higher family satisfaction and identification for same-race adoptees than for transracial adoptees.

For the adoption scale, there were no significant differences among informants (same-race group:  $F[2, 48] = 1.09$ ,  $P = 0.35$ ; transracial group,  $F[2, 114] = 2.28$ ,  $P = 0.11$ ), and we did not find significant differences by type of placement (see Table 3).

However, type of placement was associated with the children's reports on the birth culture identity scale,  $t(65) = 2.07$ ,  $P < 0.05$ , indicating that transracial adoptees displayed higher levels of interest and involvement with their birth country and culture than same-race adoptees (Table 3). Furthermore, a statistically significant difference among informants was found on the birth culture identity scale for both same-race,  $F(2, 47) = 3.88$ ,  $P = 0.03$ , and transracial families,  $F(2, 113) = 41.40$ ,  $P < 0.01$ . Tukey's post-hoc tests revealed that the children from the

same-race group reported significantly higher levels of cultural identity with the birth country ( $M = 3.46$ ;  $SD = 0.98$ ) than did the mothers ( $M = 2.63$ ;  $SD = 0.91$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ; Table 3). Similarly, post-hoc Tukey's test showed that the children from the transracial group reported significantly higher levels of cultural identity with the birth country ( $M = 3.96$ ;  $SD = 0.85$ ) than both the mothers and the fathers reported ( $M_{\text{mothers}} = 2.62$ ,  $SD = 0.89$ ;  $M_{\text{fathers}} = 2.42$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ;  $P < 0.01$ ). These findings indicate that the adopted children themselves perceived a higher sense of cultural belonging to and cultural interest in their birth country than the parents thought they did.

Type of placement was associated with the children's reports on the discrimination scale,  $t(60) = 2.14$ ,  $P < 0.05$ , meaning that transracial adoptees expressed higher levels of perceived discrimination than same-race adoptees (Table 3). Finally, a statistically significant difference was found among the informants on the discrimination scale for same-race families,  $t(17) = -3.27$ ,  $P < 0.01$ , but not for transracial families,  $t(44) = -0.42$ ,  $P = 0.68$ . Children from the same-race group reported significantly lower levels of perceived discrimination ( $M = 1.26$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ) than did the mothers ( $M = 2.03$ ,  $SD = 0.96$ ), indicating that the same-race adoptees perceived fewer negative reactions from peers or classmates than the mothers thought they did.

## DISCUSSION

In 68 Spanish families with internationally adopted children aged 8–12 years, we examined the views of children and parents regarding adoption and related issues. As expected, children were reported to know they were adopted and to have an adequate understanding of adoption. This outcome may be explained by the developmental stage of these children. Children's knowledge of adoption undergoes clear, systematic changes with their development and between 8 and 12 years children's conception of adoption broadens; they begin to appreciate the uniqueness of their family status, including the many complications that it entails (Brodzinsky *et al.* 1984). This finding may equally reflect the special case of international/transracial adoption, in which children's different physical appearance often makes their adoptive status visible and obvious.

International adoptees mainly identified themselves as being from their birth country, and parents were aware of their view. Nevertheless, the receiving country was also mentioned by substantial parts of

children and parents. These outcomes may reflect the dual connection to both sets of countries: the one where the children were born and the one where the children are growing up. Young adoptees may naturally view themselves as biracial if they are exposed to both cultures and when their parents foster an open dialogue on this topic (see Friedlander *et al.* 2000).

Likewise, the adopted children correctly identified with their own racial group. This was true for both same-race and transracial adoptees, revealing that all of them were conscious of their own physical and racial features. The literature generally suggests that such awareness promotes positive psychological development in children (see, e.g. Thomas & Tessler 2007). This is also coherent with the finding that transracially adopted young children tend to identify racially ethnically with their birth culture, whereas by adolescence and adulthood, some transracial adoptees' sense of race and ethnicity diminishes or becomes more ambivalent (Lee 2003). We do not know, however, whether these children were satisfied with their appearance and whether some of them wished to look like their parents and peers, as has been found elsewhere (Juffer 2006; Juffer & Tieman 2009, 2012).

Most adoptees had not visited their birth country. At the ages examined here, children are still too young to travel by themselves; therefore, the decision to visit the country of origin or not depends more on the parents' beliefs and interest than on the child's choice. As children grow older, integrating an adoptive identity may require more information than is available, and the desire to visit their birth country may then arise. But curiosity about adoption and one's origins is a broad construct and each individual/family may search for different pieces of information through varying processes (Tieman *et al.* 2008; Wrobel & Dillon 2009), not only by travelling to the birth country.

Adopted children expressed positive views regarding their siblings and more than half of them expressed that they would like to have more brothers and sisters than they actually had. Siblings indeed are an important part of children's life and emotional ties among siblings are usually strong (Scharf *et al.* 2005). Siblings can be playmates, caretakers and sources of support, and that is what the children in our sample may have considered. But sibling relationships are also characterized by disputes and competition for parent's attention. Maybe these aspects were taken into account by the parents when considering their child's satisfaction with brothers and sisters, which might explain why fewer mothers reported that their child would like to have more siblings than the children themselves did.

Parents were said to be the most important figures with whom to talk about the adoption, according to the three informants. This should be evaluated in a positive way, given the importance of an open, active and emotionally attuned communication between adoptive parents and their children for healthy adjustment (Brodzinsky *et al.* 1992; Grotevant 1997; Brodzinsky 2006). For the three informants, siblings also seem to be important figures with whom to explore adoption issues. As previously mentioned, because of their emotional closeness, brothers and sisters may be a valuable source of support for adopted children. It is also true that children at the ages examined here spend a considerable amount of time at school, and this is probably why parents considered friends and teachers as other important people for their child to talk about the adoption.

The children in our study had contact with other internationally adopted children, usually from the same country of origin. The high number of international adoptees growing up in Spain and the usually intensive parental involvement in adoptive families' associations might explain this outcome. This circumstance not only gave the adopted children the possibility of sharing experiences with other children that had been adopted from abroad, but also with adoptees that shared the same physical features and heritage. With the presence of a reference group with whom to identify, children may find it easier to comprehend the meaning of being, e.g. Chinese or Russian (Friedlander 1999).

The findings on the family scale suggest that the children were generally satisfied with their adoptive family. The adoptees ascribed resemblance to their parents regardless of whether they had the same or a different racial background, while parents agreed with this perception. Even though adopted children may be confronted with (physical) differences between their parents and themselves, at the same time they often feel close to their parents and like to identify with them (Juffer 2006; Juffer & Tieman 2009). Similarly, these positive child–parent relationships and identification converge with attachment theory, which implies that adopted children wish to belong to and resemble their attachment figures (Bowlby 1982). However, the lower sense of family identification attributed by fathers to transracially adopted children suggests that this process may be considered to be more complex in those adoptive families whose members are racially dissimilar. Young mothers are more likely to be healthier, more active and playful and maybe this is why in our study the children

adopted by younger mothers manifested higher family satisfaction than did the children of older mothers.

All three family informants described the child's appraisal of adoption in positive terms, although their scores on the adoption scale were at a medium level. These outcomes converge with Smith & Brodzinsky (1994), who concluded that although adoption was generally appraised as more positive than negative, most children also experience intrusive thoughts and negative or ambivalent affect related to the adoption. A more comprehensive view of adoption including positive and negative feelings in middle childhood (Brodzinsky *et al.* 1992) and growing awareness of being different (Juffer 2006) may explain these findings in both same-race and transracial adoptions.

Children, mothers and fathers reported a strong sense of birth culture identity in the adoptees, but the children in both same-race and transracial adoptive families scored significantly higher than their parents on this scale. Maybe the adoptive parents in our sample underestimated their child's sense of connection with their country of origin. Adoptee's awareness of and interest in ethnicity progresses over time from more objective to more racialized components of culture (Lee & Quintana 2005). These second ones are not so visible but certainly intense, which might explain the differences found between child and parent reports. Parental variations in the perceived importance of the acknowledgement of the birth culture (Trolley *et al.* 1995) may have also contributed to these findings. Likewise, our findings suggest that adopted children from a different racial background appear to develop a stronger sense of cultural identity with the birth country than same-race adoptees. According to Lee & Quintana (2005), transracially adopted children seem to benefit from exposure to their culture of origin. Finally, the stronger sense of cultural identity with the birth country attributed by fathers to children that had been adopted at older ages could be explained by the longer time spent by these children in their birth countries and, therefore, the stronger commitment ascribed to their origins.

Although as children grow up they may have a greater awareness of negative reactions from others (Meier 1999), the adoptees in the present study rarely reported this type of incidents on the discrimination scale. Spanish society is becoming more and more diverse and multi-cultural, which possibly contributes to growing tolerance and openness towards people of different origins. Nevertheless, the adoptive mothers in our study thought that their adopted child had experienced at least some negative reactions from the child's

peers and classmates. Thus, it seems that adoptive parents rearing internationally adopted children are conscious to the potential social stigma associated with their child's adoptive status, origins or appearance. They may even overestimate the child's experiences of discrimination, as seems to be the case in this study for same-race adoptions. Parental perceptions of discrimination may affect the behavioural development of adopted children (Lee & Minnesota International Adoption Project Team 2010). At the same time, this awareness may motivate the parents to help their children in building effective coping skills to deal with potential (future) prejudice and racism. Transracial adoptees, who reported more discriminatory experiences than same-race adoptees in this study, seem to be specially exposed to negative reactions from other children because of either adoption or racial minority status (Scherman & Harré 2008; Lee & Minnesota International Adoption Project Team 2010). However, our findings may change when the children grow older and enter more and different environments.

Some limitations of our study should be considered. We used a rather diverse convenience sample, which may limit the generalization of results. However, at the same time, this heterogeneity may reflect reality and the wide variability existing inside this population. Moreover, like in many other countries, it was the only way to get access to the adoptive families in this study. Another limitation is that we did not use standardized assessments because no standardized measure was available to examine the topics we were interested in. In future studies, the psychometric properties of the *My Experiences* questionnaire should be examined. Also, further research should complement our findings by studying the differences between mothers' and fathers' perceptions on adoption. Other studies could focus on the relations between adoptees' and adoptive parents' views of adoption and children's psychological adjustment.

This study extends previous research regarding the experiences of internationally adopted children in several ways. First, the children were given a voice by interviewing them about their thoughts and feelings of being adopted. Second, mothers as well as fathers were included as informants, providing a broader view of adoptive family experiences. Third, differences between transracial and same-race adoptions were explored.

This study has several implications for all those coming into contact with internationally adopted children and their families. First of all, it showed that children from a relatively young age are able to give

their own views and reflections on adoption. By giving them a voice, thus developing our understanding of what they think and feel about being adopted, it may be possible for services to be better designed and targeted to meet their needs. However, it must not be forgotten that adopted children form a heterogeneous group and they may vary in their understanding of adoption and willingness to talk about it. Also, adequate support needs to be ready for those who find it hard to address this topic.

The study also shows that the adoptive mothers and fathers have an accurate understanding of adoption from their child's viewpoint, although some significant divergence between adopters and the adoptee existed. Special attention must be drawn to issues concerning cultural identity with the birth country because our results showed that children consider this question as more relevant than parents. Likewise, some parents may overestimate the extent to which children have to deal with discrimination, as adoptive mothers in this sample did. Professionals can assist in bridging these differences between the adoptive parents and the child by helping the parents to gain a better understanding of the adoptee's experience.

The reported findings are also a reminder that families of transracial adoption face unique and inherent challenges. Adoptive parents in this sample perceived it as more difficult for their transracially adopted child to experience a sense of family cohesiveness, while discriminatory experiences and commitment with the birth culture are issues particularly salient for transracial adoptees. These insights can be used in prevention and intervention programmes to support these families tackle these specific complexities.

Finally, the questionnaire *My Experiences* seems to be a useful tool for assessing relevant issues of the adoption experience in middle childhood and identifying possible areas of need or difficulty where support may be necessary. It can be used to open up discussion with family members to explore particular individual and family issues.

## CONCLUSIONS

The current study showed that opinions of mothers, fathers and children on adoption and related issues tend to converge in most domains. Although parents seem to have a realistic view of what it means for their child to be adopted, they should be supported to give enough attention to the issue of cultural identity with the birth country, not only just after the child's arrival but also during middle childhood, as outcomes show

that adoptees found this topic more important than their parents. Likewise, guidance should also be available to them to adequately address discrimination issues. Finally, views of adoptees regarding cultural identity with the birth country and discrimination seem to vary by type of placement. To provide adopted children with sufficient empathy and understanding, it is important that adoptive parents gain accurate insights into their children's thoughts, feelings and experiences related to adoption.

## APPENDIX

Questions from *My Experiences* questionnaire belonging to the four created scales – child version.

### Family

In general, do you feel happy with your family?  
Do you feel happy with your mother?  
Do you feel happy with your siblings?  
In general, do you think you resemble your parents?  
Physically, do you think you resemble your parents?  
In your manners and way of thinking, do you think you resemble your parents?

### Adoption

Do you think of the fact of being adopted?  
For you, being adopted is . . . \*  
In comparison with other children, you feel . . . †  
In comparison with the other families, yours is . . . †  
Do you talk about your adoption?  
Do you like talking about it?  
Would you like to know more issues about your adoption?‡  
In general, are you happy of being adopted?

### Birth culture identity

To what extent do you feel from your birth country?  
Do you talk about your birth country with your parents?  
Would you like to visit your birth country?  
Do you enjoy doing typical things from your birth country? (e.g. food, games, music, festivities, . . . )  
Do you like speaking/would you like to learn the language of your birth country?

### Discrimination

Have your friends or classmates made you felt bad or uncomfortable because you were born in another country and/or have a different appearance? (e.g. skin colour, hair type, eye shape, . . . )?  
Have your friends or classmates made you feel bad or uncomfortable because of the fact of being an adopted child?

Notes: For the parents' version, a few words were rephrased. The parent version examined the same aspects as the child version, and mothers and fathers were asked to answer the questions from their child's perspective. The questions were coded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 to 5 (1 = nothing at all, 2 = not much, 3 = middle, 4 = quite a lot, 5 = a lot).

\*This question ranges from 1 = easy to 5 = difficult.

†This question ranges from 1 = equal to 5 = different.

‡This question ranges from 1 = none to 5 = a lot.

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